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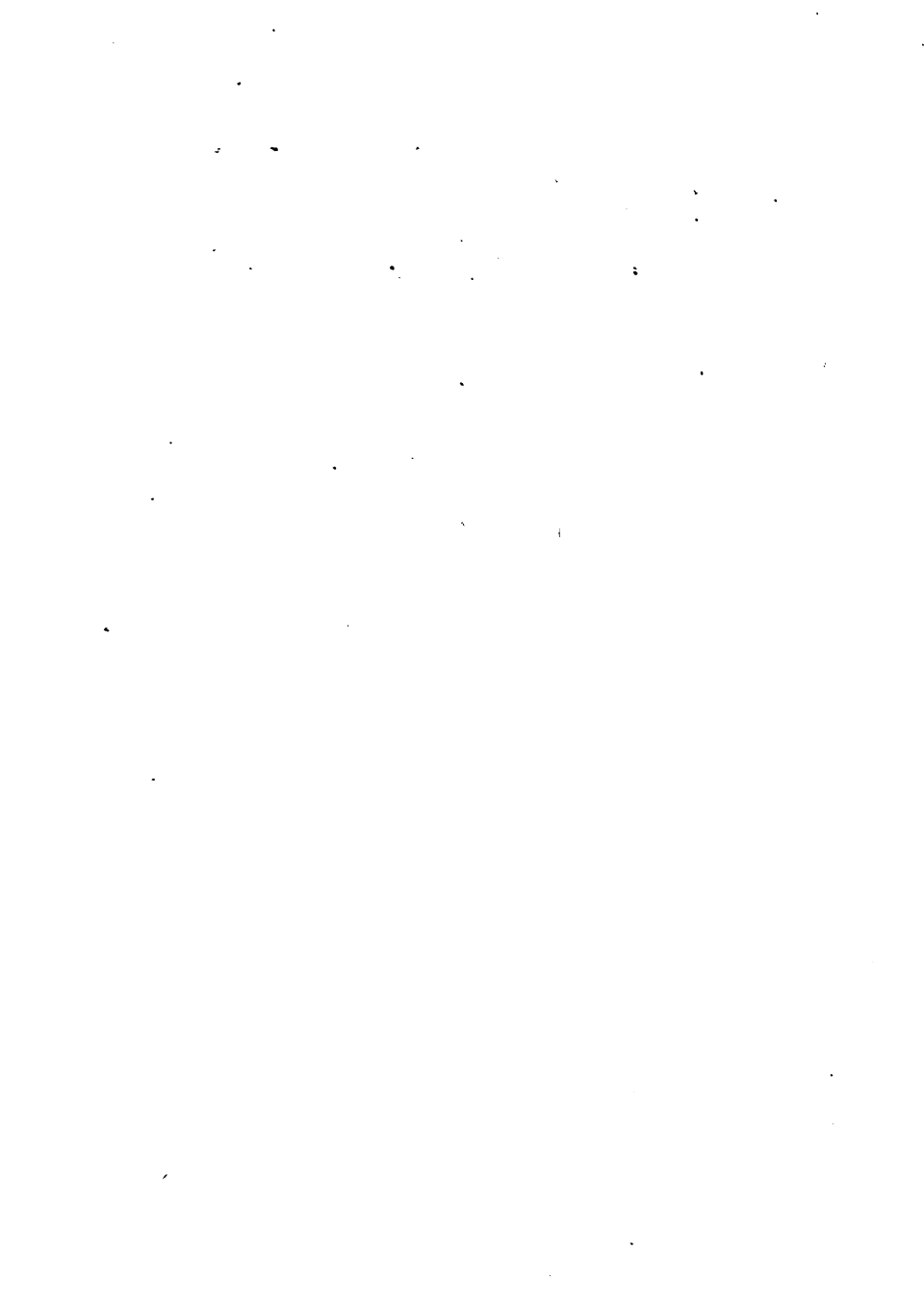


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Silent
White and
Beautiful

Tod
Robbins

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BOOKS BY
TOD ROBBINS

THE UNHOLY THREE
RED OF SURLEY

**Silent,
White and
Beautiful**

AND OTHER STORIES

**TOD
ROBBINS**

**BONI AND LIVERIGHT
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK**

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JANUARY 27, 1933

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TO
CLARENCE H. ROBBINS
WHO SADDLED AND BRIDLED
PEGASUS
AND SUPPLIED GOLDEN SPURS
TO URGE THAT WINGED STEED
UP THE WINDING ROAD OF
IMAGINATION



PREFACE

Boston!

I find myself on a hot August afternoon under the shade of a friendly elm beneath which Sumner and Webster and Holmes and Lowell and other great New Englanders had, in the past, I hope, taken the unprohibited refreshment of the Common.

Commerce has conquered culture; the patriots have passed to make way for the profiteers; there is a jangle of traffic in the air, an echo of money making . . . business is business.

Ponzi, the Cagliostro of Pi Alley, filtering the cash of his investors through their own socks, was by a new process of chemical calculus returning it more or less doubled . . . business *was* business.

* * * * *

An elderly man, mopping his brow with a voluminous silk handkerchief, detached himself from the throng and sat down beside me. He carried on his arm one of those green cloth bags the which, anywhere north of Springfield, is the *croix de guerre* for bravery in battle with literature. Occasionally a lawyer can be seen with one, but it is no guarantee that he is bookish beyond Blackstone.

Returning to the green bag; what did it contain? One may not ask impudent questions in Boston. I

gazed toward Bunker Hill monument hoping for courage from that direction. How could I open the conversation, what could I . . .

He began talking to me, not as stranger speaks to stranger, but with a fine air of cordiality and obvious desire to converse. He revealed himself a dealer in rare volumes.

"I've ransacked every second-hand book store in Boston. That's my hobby," he said, opening the green bag and diving into its mysterious depths.

"First editions?" I inquired.

"By all means; commencing as far back as *Cotton Mather*. A first *Fanshawe* by Hawthorne passed through my hands; also a *New England Primer*—slightly mutilated—ever so priceless now."

"What became of those books?"

A spasm flowed across his face.

"I sold them—at the wrong time. That's the only trouble about this business; one never knows how long to hang on."

"Then you collect only——"

"To sell; that's it," said he, concluding my sentence. "Just to make a living. I've had first editions of most all the American authors: Cooper, Irving, Thoreau, Longfellow——" The hand was withdrawn from the green bag.

"Here, look at these: A copy of *Ekkoes from Kentucky* by Petroleum V. Nasby; Artemus Ward and a copy of the *Overland Monthly* containing Bret Harte's

Luck of Roaring Camp. All in good condition."

"You have read the works of these writers?" I interrogated, gratified to be in the presence of one so well informed.

"Never!" was the astonishing admission. "I buy and sell; nothing more. My preference, when I do read, is for supernatural, weird and fantastic tales. When I get hold of a good book along these lines I keep it. Poe, Bulwer-Lytton, Fitz James O'Brien, Dante, the Poems of Baudelaire, tales of haunted houses, amazing prophecies, spiritualism, the world's unsolved mysteries, and material of that sort. I want to be entertained, thrilled, mystified. I am reading Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* for the tenth time. I first read Bulwer's *Zanoni* when I was fifteen years of age; repeatedly since. Splendid."

He returned Nasby, Ward and Harte to the green bag, pulled the puckering string as one tightens lovingly a money bag, and prepared to take his leave.

"Have you read Tod Robbins?" I hastened to inquire before he escaped me.

"No. What has he written? Who is he most like?"

"Himself! The chief charm about Robbins is that he has developed an entirely new method of treatment for the fashioning of tales which stand upon the pedestal of improbability. While taking the most incomprehensible liberties with reality—he proceeds with such boldness and imaginative courage that the reader accepts the result as logical and conclusive."

"Does he believe in ghosts, and banshees and fairies and"—the green bagger gripped my hand tightly—"grimness?"

"Yes," I assured him, "and writes about them with such conviction that others agree with him. I would suggest that you read the tale, *Silent, White and Beautiful*, from which his latest book takes its title. That story surely is grim enough for any man. Do you play billiards?"

"I did when I was young. A waste of time," he replied with his mind searching the past.

"Then I refer you to *Wild Wullie the Waster*. A capital ghost story full of shadows and dust and hatreds that cannot die, to say nothing of remarkable billiards. One may hear the balls click and carom, shot from cues held in the fingers of the shades." I had made up my mind to Paul Revere his hobby, and so I rode with resounding hoofs.

"Or better still, *Who Wants a Green Bottle?*" I continued, lifting a hand to invoke silence. "Have you an uncle?"

"One," he answered, "very well to do—and aged."

"Exactly! The green bottle story will give you much to reflect upon. There is a real banshee—Scotch extraction—in its pages; and philosophy and humor and reasoning, to say nothing of hints to prospective heirs—especially nephews."

"You entertain me greatly," he said with real Boston warmth.

I permitted that observation to pass without comment, knowing that he would be the more indebted after the book had come into his hands.

"Sir, you have stimulated my appetite. Where can a copy of *Silent, White and Beautiful* be had? If your estimate is correct I shall not only read it, but I may perhaps lay in a few copies and . . . why not be modern? Algernon Blackwood is being collected."

He made a significant gesture—the palms of his hands floating outward and upward.

I informed him that the volume was to be issued in September, that I had read all of the stories in manuscript and in my capacity as an editor accepted and published most of Tod Robbins' fiction in magazines. Also, that I approved of him mightily and found much pleasure in recommending his works to those who select their reading with discrimination, and seek originality in thought and expression. Originality, united with a graceful style and power of delineation, endows a book with immortality.

* * * * *

This volume I do commend to the public with the same fervor that I sang its praises to the old Boston book-buyer, who, occupied only with profits, seldom stopped to examine the contents of the treasures he sold. To collectors, however, I beg to point out the fact that *Silent, White and Beautiful* is valuable twofold: First, because it is at once worth reading, and second, in the to-morrow of Americana it will be much

sought after as a source of historical light, serving to illuminate the life of a writer who is destined to take his place among the uncommons of Grubb Street.

Thus comes to an end these observations which are destined to be, as is not infrequently the case with utterances made in the environs of New England, more or less prognostications.

This attempt at prefacy has become prophecy. Let it stand!

ROBERT H. DAVIS.

*Boston Common,
August 7th, 1920.*

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**Silent,
White and
Beautiful**



SILENT, WHITE AND BEAUTIFUL

I

TOMORROW at this time I shall be dead! I have repeated this phrase over and over since breakfast with the utmost calmness, with the utmost resignation. In no way have I attempted to blind myself to the truth. He who does that is lost. The philosopher alone is wise. Before the clear calm eyes of reason, the imaginary terrors of dissolution become infinitesimal specks of dust. I breathe upon them and they are gone.

And yet I cannot visualize my death. I have tried to many times, but have failed. Sitting down on the left hand corner of my cot, I attempt to picture the execution. My imagination has always been supernaturally acute. I can see the room and the chair—the chair dreaded by so many. And the witnesses? Yes, I can see them—all those sensation-mongers. There is one fat old gentleman in a striped flannel waistcoat—an old gentleman who keeps on smiling and smiling. One would think he were at a wedding, his smile is so

forced and unreal. And the others are like statues, grouped together to represent something.

Yes, I can see them all. But they are not looking at me. No, they are looking at another man—a man who has seated himself in the chair. But this man is not I. No, though he sits in my place, wears the new suit which was given me, bears my dishonored name, he is not I. And although I attempt to analyze this man's emotions, read the secret workings of that brain, understand the feelings of one in the shadow, the blade of imagination bends in my mind, becoming useless and dull.

To-morrow at this time I shall be dead! This phrase no longer conjures up anything. Like a child who has repeated the Lord's Prayer over and over, so have I repeated, "To-morrow at this time I shall be dead," till the words have become meaningless, sinking back into the black unexplored caverns of sound. And that this hand which guides the pencil—this live human hand—will in so short a space be motionless and powerless, cold and senseless, seems as impossible as the wildest dream. The voice of reason pounds dully against my ear-drums, but cannot gain admittance. Perhaps it is better so.

Am I afraid of death? No. Then why have I taken up the pencil? Because, although I am not afraid of death, I am afraid of something which lurks on the invisible frontier—something which is quite apart from both life and death—something which reads my words, my looks, my gestures. And because of this silent

sentinel in my cell, I have become a stranger to myself—an uncouth awkward stranger. The egoist has fled, the artist who crushed conventionality beneath his heel; and in his place stands an unknown, terrible fellow—a fellow who needs watching. I could have pleaded insanity at my trial and escaped the chair. It is so easy for me to act. But now— Why could not the judge and jury see me now?

But I must not peer too long into my soul. Introspection looks down the shaft, and soon sees the grinning face of Madness floating on the black water. The austere countenance of the philosopher casts back a reflection which he recognizes with a shudder. The moon may be—. But I must not wander.

One source of solace has been with me constantly during my days of imprisonment. To a man such as I—a man condemned to death—the daily newspapers are of great value. It is comforting to realize that there are thousands, nay millions, of human beings who are cognizant of my existence, perhaps intimately interested in the outcome of my career. During these last few weeks, as never before, I have felt myself to be an important link in the human chain—a link which daily holds the attention of a multitude of minds. I, the unknown sculptor, the young man of limited means and limited reputation, am now something of a celebrity. What an enduring hold has egotism! I caught myself smiling a self-satisfied smile when I wrote, “something of a celebrity.” Avaunt, False Pride! You are in the presence of the shadow. Back, back

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to the highway of life, where the multitude sit in the sunlight. I have no need of you here.

I realize perfectly what a storm of curiosity my actions have aroused and it is not my purpose to leave this planet without a satisfying answer to the question which I myself have raised. You, who have so often studied my striking portrait in the papers, you, who have so puzzled over my whimsical acts during the ill-fated month of March, you, my friends and admirers, shall learn of everything which prompted me to a series of crimes destined to set the world of sensation agog. And you, my fair readers, you, whose soft cheeks so quickly change from rose to lily, you, who shudder and turn away, look again into the face which you have covertly abstracted from the newspaper—the face of René Galien, your humble servant; René Galien who created that group “The Happy Family.” Respect is akin to fear, is it not? You shall respect me.

II

I come of an old French family. There is the blood of kings in my veins. You smile; but it is a fact, I assure you. Have you not noted in my many portraits, the finely chiseled features, the aristocratic curl to the lips, the small shell-like ears? But my hands! They are what tell the story. The long tapering fingers, the delicacy of wrist and palm—yes, these are the hands of one refined by the gradual process of centuries. Why

do my eyes hold your attention then, when I have such hands as these?

After the Revolution, my great grandfather emigrated to America. Since then the Galiens have been bobbing up and down like corks. You know how it is—one year a mansion, servants, horses, dogs; another year a boarding house, genteel respectability, a single suit shiny at the elbows and knees. That comes from an excess of aristocratic blood in a plebeian age. The male members of my family have never been saving with their money. My father cried out on his death-bed:

“It is glorious to die in debt. One has succeeded in cheating one’s enemy, the world.”

A strange man was he, with a laugh like the cackling of a frightened hen and dry, shriveled hands which rustled in the empty pockets of his frock-coat like bank-notes.

My mother died before I can remember. At an early age I was sent to a school in Paris. Once a year I was allowed to cross the sea and visit my father in New York. He would meet me each time at the pier, looking very somber in his frock-coat. I remember that towards the last his face seemed as yellow as the pale bloodless oranges one buys.

He resided at a small boarding-house in Thirty-third street—a French boarding-house where one encountered all manner of odd characters. Madame Fabien, the landlady, was a woman well on in middle life. At the time of which I speak, she attempted to maintain a

semblance of youth by a plentiful use of cosmetics. Her face, as haggard as a death's head, had a vivid splash of color beneath each prominent cheek-bone; and above it, her hair, yellow and fuzzy, reminded me of sundried weeds. Her eyes were a bitter blue, but they softened when they looked upon my father.

In some way—perhaps by his glib tongue and polished manners—he had wormed himself into the landlady's good grace. The pitcher of cream always stood beside his place at the breakfast table; and, when he came to die, for many nights she went about the house mewing like a sick cat. No doubt with him was buried the last romance of her checkered career. Perhaps the realization of this added to the poignancy of her grief.

Madame Fabien had a daughter of about my own age who did much to make my visits to New York agreeable. She was a pretty vivacious child, with a mind far too precocious for her years. Looking through keyholes had given one of her eyelids an unconscious droop. She had made herself the bane of the boarders' existence. It is needless to say that what youthful innocence a French boarding-school had left me, vanished after a month's sojourn at Madame Fabien's.

After my father's death, I returned to Paris with a letter of introduction to an old friend of the landlady's—a certain Paul Montaigne. He was a successful sculptor of the period—a man, who, if he had not been addicted to drugs, might have reached high places.

From the first I loved him. There was something restful in his companionship—something which reminded me of a calm autumn day. He gave me the key which opened the door to a new resplendent world. Art was his mistress. She soon became mine. Before long I, too, could see the beauty in ugliness, the joy in tears. If he had lived, what might I not have done?

Paul Montaigne adopted me. I posed for him; I swept up the studio; I enlivened him when he was plunged into one of those fits of melancholy which followed his excesses. In return for this, he taught me his art. I was an apt pupil. Soon I conceived several small pieces of my own, which I sold on the Paris streets. Once a week I took my stand on the Rue Montmartre and peddled my wares to any passerby.

One afternoon I returned to the studio and found my benefactor dead. He was lying at the feet of a statue upon which he had been working—a statue representing Justice. His body seemed to be in an attitude of supplication. A thin ribbon of blood crawled towards the door like a miniature river of red. He had cut his throat. It seemed unbelievable at first. When I saw him lying thus, I felt that I had lost everything in the world. Dropping the bag which contained several tiny statues I had not sold, I sank to my knees and began to blubber like a baby. There the concierge found me an hour later, sobbing as though my heart would break.

After Paul Montaigne's death, I returned to America. It seemed to me that I could make my fortune

there much more readily. Surely in the United States competition was not so great. My four years with the sculptor had given me a foundation few could boast of. Montaigne had often told me that I possessed a talent which was in no way inferior to his own. It was with high hopes that I set sail from France.

On arriving in New York, I took a cab to the familiar boarding-house. Madame Fabien opened the door for me. I scarcely recognized her. In the four years which had elapsed she had become an old hag and looked every day of sixty. After my father's death she had evidently buried her cosmetics. Her face, wrinkled and yellow, was so thin that the sharp protruding cheekbones seemed at any moment about to penetrate the skin; her scanty hair was now a splotched grey; and she leaned heavily on her cane in the doorway, reminding me of the witches in Macbeth. But her eyes had not changed. No, they were that same bitter blue. Now they looked at me suspiciously from beneath a ragged boudoir cap.

"Well?" said she.

"Is this Madame Fabien?" I asked, suspecting that my memory had played me tricks.

"Yes, this is Madame Fabien. What is it you wish of me, young man?"

"I am René Galien," I answered, stepping forward. "Do you not remember me?"

"*Mon Dieu!*" The old woman's expression changed from suspicion to joy. She tapped me playfully on the shoulder with her cane. "Come in, come in! Of

course it is René. Why, you are your father over again! The same carriage of the head, the same air distingué. Only the eyes are different. But come to these old arms. I have heard such things of you from Paul! *You* are the great sculptor now, is it not so?"

In spite of an inner qualm, I submitted myself to the old hag's embraces. She pinched my cheeks with fingers as yellow as sticks of cinnamon; she rose on tiptoe to press her lips to my forehead; she smoothed my silky hair with the palm of her hand—a palm which was as rough as a nutmeg grater. She was like the cracked dusty vase in which lies buried the trampled rose-leaves of the preceding spring. Once a vessel of desire, she had been quaffed to the very dregs.

"Louise will be delighted to see you, René," she said, leering up at me. "Ah, you blush, eh! You remember her—the little cat that she was. But now! How she has changed! Like you, she has grown tall and beautiful. And such a figure! The art students draw her twice during the week. How the pencils shake in their hands, how their eyes stare and stare! They are like men in a trance—so beautiful is she!"

"Is she a model?" I asked.

"Yes; but there is none other like her in New York. When my last boarder left, it was necessary that she do something. We must live, is it not so? But I will tell her that you are here. She will be overjoyed."

Madame Fabien hobbled down the passageway, leaving me standing in the hot stuffy hall. As I watched her figure receding in the shadows, I made up my mind

to remain in her good graces. I had been barely able to scrape up enough money in Paris to pay for my passage; I was now in a wellnigh penniless condition. Of course I would soon be successful, but in the meantime I must not neglect any slight smile of fortune. Before the old woman returned with her daughter, I had made up my mind to be enthusiastic.

Louise did not make my rôle difficult to play. She had, indeed, matured into a kind of rare if sulky beauty. Her full lips, although pouting and discontented, were still inviting; and, although her figure was rather buxom according to my standard, still there were men who would have thought it perfect. My raised hands and upturned eyes therefore, while delighting both mother and daughter, even to myself had no savor of the ludicrous.

"Is she not changed?" asked Madame Fabien.

"Changed!" I cried. "*Ma Foi!* she is transfigured!"

Louise blushed and smiled. Evidently I had pleased her.

"You, yourself, have altered for the better," she said, looking at me quaintly. "You are no longer the ugly duckling."

I murmured a graceful acknowledgement, then, turning to her mother, immediately reverted to the point in hand.

"Do you still take boarders?" I asked. "If so, I would consider myself fortunate in securing—"

"Most certainly you may board here," the old woman

answered. "At present there is no one, and we can give you the better attention. My fees are moderate to the son of an old friend."

Again Louise smiled, disclosing two rows of large white teeth.

"Follow me," she said, picking up my valise in spite of my protests. "I will show you to your room."

Madame Fabien leered at me as I passed her. She again reached up and pinched my cheek. It nauseated me. Without the slightest compunction, I could have put my hands on her weed-like throat and choked the life out of her. Even then I felt that she and I could not live under the same roof without disastrous results. I hesitated for a moment on the landing before I followed Louise up the creaking staircase.

III

I must break off for the time. Father Flynn has been shown into my cell. Why does he insist on offering ghostly consolation to me? Can he not realize that I am a man of adamant will, of unshakable determination?

This priest in the sunshine dares to come to me in the shadow—dares to come to me and cry:

"See, there is everlasting life!"

Everlasting life? Bah! Rather everlasting death—everlasting death with its calm immobility—everlasting death with its enigmatic smile. Yes, there I will be

reigning like a mountain peak, cold, still and thoughtful.

But now Father Flynn is approaching. His long black robe brushes over the floor of my cell with a swishing sound. His solemn eyes are fixed upon my face. About his neck a crucifix is suspended. Christ hangs on this crucifix, tiny, weak, and helpless—Christ made into a doll. When he speaks of life everlasting, I shall point at his toy Christ and laugh.

IV.

Father Flynn has left me. His brain, heavy and ponderous as a mediæval battle-ax, was no match for the lightning thrusts of mine. I have hurt him in a sensitive spot beneath his armor of religion; I have penetrated his self-esteem. He now doubts himself, which is far worse than doubting God. Like an old woman who suddenly encounters a mouse in her bedroom, like an old woman with dragging skirts and downcast eyes, he has hurried from the cell. In his opinion, I am eternally damned—a man for whom the jaws of Hell are yawning. I have refused to reverence the doll dangling from his neck, therefore I am as one lost.

Poor old man! I pity him for his childish credulity, while I envy him his simple trust. But if I had had a Christ, if I had had a sacred symbol of something greater than myself, I would not hang it about my neck

and be content. Ah no! I would build for it a pedestal; and on this pedestal I would place it so that it could sneer down on the passing people, sneer down on the passing people in the dust. And in its eyes would be hot anger; and in its hand, a reeking sword. Away with your tiny toy Christ, Father Flynn. Mine would be gigantic and terrible—gigantic, terrible, and red!

But I must compose myself. Already night stretches out her ebony wings over the world. When the first rays of dawn creep into my cell, they will come and take me away. Meanwhile Death is waiting in the corner. He, alone, does not fear me; He, alone, can return the look in my eyes. Before that grim sentinel my glance wavers and falls. I will take up the pencil and finish my record; yes, although the pitiless spectre continues to stare at me with his dull lack-lustre eyes.

V

When I took up my residence with Madame Fabien, I intended remaining there only a short time. It seemed to me that my genius would find recognition before many weeks went by. In the meanwhile it was necessary for me to live—and where could I live on credit except at Madame Fabien's?

The old Frenchwoman ensconced me in a large room on the topmost floor—a room which had once served as an artist's studio. It had a north light; and was in every way suitable for a work-shop. I had brought over with me from Paris the tools of my trade; and it was

not long before I started working in dead earnest. Ere a month went by, I had created several miniatures which I thought I could dispose of for a fair sum.

My moments of leisure were spent with Louise and her mother. I felt it necessary to keep in the good graces of both women. But what a bore it was! My flesh fairly crawled when Madame Fabien touched me. It was as much as I could do to submit to her caresses. And then the atmosphere of the house began to get on my nerves. It was so hot and stuffy downstairs, and a sweet sickening odor hovered about everything. In the parlor there were a multitude of photographs, representing Madame Fabien in her youth. She had evidently been a vaudeville performer of versatile repertoire. There were pictures of her walking a tightrope, a parasol above her head, smiling sentimentally at space; pictures of her in knickerbockers, riding an old-fashioned bicycle; pictures of her in tights, toe-dancing on a horse's back. And in all these photographs she resembled Louise. Yes, there was the same haggard face with high cheek-bones and petulant lips, the same full-bosomed, broad-hipped figure, the same sensual drooping eyelids. Thirty years ago my landlady had been another Louise. And, when I realized this, what little affection I had for the girl faded. Although I continued to ply her assiduously with compliments, my words no longer had the slightest ring of truth.

And as the weeks went by, I came to realize that it would be difficult to escape my environment. Daily a web of attachment took shape. Both these women re-

garded me now with an air of ownership. To Madame Fabien, I was a living embodiment of one to whom she had given the last dying sparks of passion; to Louise I was a companion of childhood suddenly transformed into a fairy prince who had crossed the seas to win her.

And I? Why, struggle as I might to free myself, my feet were sinking in the quicksand. A month passed, and I had not sold a single piece of work. Where else could I go? I was penniless and in debt. Contrary to my expectations, my miniatures went begging. These imaginative figures which I had sold so easily in Paris—these weird gargoyles, nymphs and satyrs, were shuddered at, but never bought.

I found myself battering my head against an obstinate senseless wall of optimism. The beauty which lurks in ugliness, the transcending horror depicted in my work, the morbid terror which enwrapped those tiny figures—all was quite lost on the stupid smiling people who passed me by. They hurried on, these people; hurried on through the tunnel of life unheedingly, looking neither up nor down, quite immersed in their own bright dreams and unwilling to contemplate the stern austere countenance of Art. I might have gone on for centuries in my garret, striving, creating, and quite unnoticed, were it not for that group "The Happy Family."

At last my affairs reached a climax. I could no longer avoid Fate. I married Louise. Yes, loathing her with all my soul, seeing in her a future Madame Fabien, I married her. It came about like this:

One afternoon, while I was at work, a knock sounded on my door. It was Louise. The night before she had heard me express a wish for a female model. She had come to offer her services. Yes, she was quite willing to pose for me. It was no trouble at all. She would be ready in a moment now.

With brazenness, even for a professional model, she began to disrobe. I attempted to detain her. I put my hand on her arm, but she only kissed me and called me a foolish boy.

"Are we not already as good as married?" said she.

I did not realize how truly she spoke until I looked over her shoulder and saw Madame Fabien standing in the doorway. I was positive that something was about to happen. My landlady, among her other accomplishments, had at one time been a melodramatic tragedienne. On her face was mirrored the rôle which she was about to play.

"So!" she cried in a voice which squeaked like a violin out of tune. "So! I find you thus! Is this how you repay me, René? Has it not been enough to live here week after week, to take board and lodging from me gratis, to receive from my hands all the attention of a mother, without attacking the virtue of my daughter? No, don't attempt to explain away your guilt. Thank God my eyes can still be trusted! Louise, go to your room! I will talk to this young man alone."

Fifteen minutes later, all was over. I had agreed to marry Louise on the following day. That old virago had so battered me with words that my brain was reel-

ing. I would have signed my death-warrant to have gotten rid of her. And she, when the victory had been won, when my promise had been gained, immediately relapsed into a sickly sentimental air. She pinched my cheek and lavished me with endearments; she called me her own beautiful boy; she bade Louise fetch a bottle of Madeira from the cellar, and pledged my health in the sweet wine till her eyes grew misty and her voice sounded dull and indistinct.

And I? Why, I bowed and smiled, and kept on bowing and smiling till I felt like a mechanical doll attached to a giant's finger. And the smile seemed to grow and grow till it covered my face with painful agitated wrinkles; and my head grew heavy and bulbous, so that it became difficult to raise and lower it in time to the old woman's eager, querulous questions.

At last they left me to myself.

VI

On the following day Louise and I were married. What a mockery! As the words fell slowly from the priest's mouth—words which weighed me down as though they had been so many pellets of lead—I had a wild impulse to leap to my feet, to shake the girl's hand from my arm and dash out of that church never to return. My one cowardly trait, my dread of penury and hunger, forced me to remain. And as I knelt before the altar, looking up into the

priest's wrinkled face, I became unpleasantly conscious of Madame Fabien's proximity. I felt her breath fanning the back of my neck. Involuntarily I shuddered and yet beads of perspiration dotted my forehead. At last the ceremony was over, and we returned home.

Home! What a blasphemous title to apply to such a place! And yet the roof sheltered my head, the walls shut out the darkness and the cold. Where else could I find as much, I asked myself. Think of the irony of it! I, a young man of talent, an individualist, an artist, and yet forced to acknowledge such a defeat. It was then I came to the realization that there was something wrong with the world. Surely it had been rolling downhill for ages—a wicked ball bent on destruction. In vain we Supermen seek to push it up, to place it on the heights—it evades our eager hands and descends into the black depths. To this day, I cannot contemplate its final degradation without a feeling of regret, even of horror.

It is not my purpose to dwell too long on my married life. Suffice it to say, that it soon became unendurable to me. Living with one woman constantly is prone to wear on the nerves of the sensitive man; but, when this woman is lacking in both mentality and feeling, artistic appreciation and higher aspirations, she becomes a burning coal of agony which one is forced to hold to one's bare breast. Before a week had passed, I hated Louise as I had never thought to hate any human being.

What made it worse, the girl positively adored me.

She gave me no peace. She would break into my studio while I was at work, and shower me with loathsome caresses. I had no solitude of the soul so necessary to an artist. She sought to occupy every cranny of my life. If I reprimanded her, if, driven to desperation, I struck her, waves of hysterics would follow—hysterics, that abomination of woman—and to avoid this shrieking inferno it was necessary for me to calm her with kisses and protestations of affection.

Then there was Madame Fabien—Madame Fabien with her fishy eyes! How her tongue clattered! I have often thought that she must have assassinated my father with it. And life was still strong in this bag of old bones! It shown evilly out of her bitter blue eyes; it spoke volubly through her dry, shriveled lips. She might live twenty years more—live and persecute me.

One night inspiration touched me—the inspiration of “The Happy Family.” True perception springs from contrast. It has always been my experience that in the city one can visualize the country with an acute clarity. So it is with all things. The musician composes a dirge on a bright spring day; the starving poet writes an ode to sparkling wine and luscious fruit. Thus it was in my case. From a confirmed unbeliever in marriage, I could now see the joys of wedlock. My own unfortunate affair had conjured up in my mind an ideal picture of wedded bliss—a happy family, united in thought and deed; a silent, happy family who found mere speech unnecessary to a complete mental understanding.

And as I sat at dinner, listening to the shrill voices of the women, watching their distorted mouths and glistening eyes, in an instant it became apparent what made them so hideous, so revolting. It was life that marred them; hot, noisy life which twisted them into repellent shapes; life which made them detestable and unforgivable. As statues—deprived of breath, motion, speech—they would no longer cause me any pain. On the contrary, I might be proud of them. Madame Fabien could very well have been Rodin's "Courtesan," alive, clothed and speaking. Such ugliness was beautiful in art. It was only when it stepped down from its pedestal that it became loathsome and degraded. And Louise? If she would not speak in that whining tone, if her face could always remain calm and placid, if she could be placed in an artistic posture with her chin resting on her hand—why, she would be beautiful!

And then in my imagination I saw them as statues; saw them sitting there, silent, white and beautiful; saw them sitting on a pedestal, united and peaceful, cleansed of life's impurities, quietly waiting for the children yet unborn—I saw "The Happy Family"!

Why was it not possible to make them so? A few drops of poison in their coffee, and life would quickly fade away. And then? Why, then I would carry them up to my studio where I had so often worked before. But this time I would not work in vain. No, I would make statues of them—enclose them in a special preparation of clay which might last through all the centuries. Their bodies would not decompose in such a cov-

ering. It would be easy—easy! Perhaps I could sell them to an art dealer. At this thought, I laughed aloud.

“Why are you laughing, René?” asked Madame Fabien with one of her quick, suspicious looks.

“I was thinking of what an excellent statue you would make, mama. May I use you for a model?”

She shook her bony head at me like an old vulture.

“Careful, René, careful,” she mumbled. “Don’t bite the hand that feeds you. Youth should respect age.”

“But I was in earnest, mama,” I assured her.

“Bah!” She rose and hobbled off on her cane, leaving Louise to wash up the dinner things.

For the moment I was free.

Telling my wife that I had to post a letter, I put on my hat and left the house.

When I returned I had a small vial of poison in my waistcoat pocket.

As I lay beside Louise that night, I dreamed peacefully of “The Happy Family.”

VII

Have you ever considered what a childish simple thing it is to take a human life? We are all so trusting with our fellows, so guileless and trusting, that, when the murderous hand reaches out to cut the cord of existence, we stand blinking our eyes stupidly, quite unable to realize the danger. If it

were not for the bodies of his victims—bodies which, although silent, bear unfaltering testimony to the truth—the assassin might stalk unmolested through the world. Our immortality seems so assured to us, that we seldom question the eyes of those who may have it in their keeping.

Louise and her mother suspected nothing. On the following evening, when I suggested that I prepare their coffee in a manner new to them—a method which I had picked up in Paris—they assented readily. It was only when I placed the two steaming cups upon the table that any difficulty arose.

“I should not drink any coffee,” said Madame Fabien, shaking her head sorrowfully.

I felt a sudden flicker of fear.

“Why not, mama?” I murmured, bending over her solicitously.

“It keeps me awake at night. I cannot sleep when I drink coffee.”

I could not refrain from smiling.

“Never fear, mama,” I answered reassuringly. “This coffee is so prepared that you will not be troubled by insomnia. I guarantee that you will sleep soundly to-night—very soundly.”

And then, without hesitation, without fear, almost without taking breath, these two women drank their poisoned coffee. I watched them with a calm, impersonal curiosity. And yet the next few moments were the most embarrassing moments of my life. I felt that I was conversing with spectres. Everything I said

rang out of tune. I attempted to joke, and my witticisms fell far below humor. I attempted to laugh, and my own familiar laugh sounded as hoarse and guttural as the cawing of a crow. And these two women seemed like stiff formal strangers who could not in any way be amused.

Madame Fabien was the first to go. One side of her shriveled face drew up into knots, as though a cord in her cheek had been suddenly pulled. She clapped her hand to her stomach.

"Oh!" she cried. "I suffer! I—I—. Get the doctor. Get the——"

She rolled to the floor, and lay there kicking and clawing like a wounded wildcat.

Louise rose and bent over her.

"René, run out and get Dr. Milburn," she called over her shoulder in an agitated voice.

I had no desire to see them die. A wanton taste for cruelty has never been one of my characteristics. I quitted the room, and, mounting the stairs to my studio, spent a few peaceful moments over a cigar. When I returned to the dining room, I found both women dead. Louise's body lay across her mother's. Her upturned face wore an expression of amazement. It was as though I had given her a sudden surprise.

Then the real work began. That night I toiled like a galley-slave. I carried the bodies up to my studio; I disrobed them; I burned the clothing piecemeal; and then I commenced my famous group, "The Happy Family."

With the firm, sure hand of an artist, I enclosed them in clinging garments of clay; I gave them immortal skins which might last through all eternity. And now that the life had gone out of them, these women were no longer repulsive to me. No, on the contrary, I felt a sensation of ennobling pride as I busied myself about them, placing them on the pedestal, making of them enduring works of art. When the sun finally peered in at me through the blind, two statues confronted me—two statues so lifelike, so virile, that the hand of Rodin himself could not have done better.

My work enraptured me. At last I had created something which might live. What a contrast was this!—Madame Fabien so thin and withered, cowering in the early light; and beside her, Louise, so strong and buxom, her chin resting in the hollow of her hand. This was art! For the first time in my life I loved them. I was so proud of them that it was all I could do to refrain from running out into the street and bringing back with me the first passerby to see what I had done. For the moment I was living on the sunlit heights of great achievement.

VIII

Unfortunately the artist is never satisfied with his first creation. He must go on and on, enlarging his original conception, until sometimes it winds itself about him like a many-membered octopus and sucks the life out of him.

So it was with me. For a week I busied myself in the studio, constructing a large pedestal for my statues; but at the end of that time, I found myself longing to add to the group. What was a happy family without children, I asked myself. A mother-in-law and a wife were all very well; but surely, without tender human plants sprouting up about them, they were meaningless and thrown away. Yes, both were lonely and must have childish companionship. The longing look on Louise's face touched my heart.

It was shortly after this that I began to visit the park. With bags of candy in my pocket, I soon made friends with a multitude of children. Finally I selected two rosy-cheeked little dears—a boy and a girl of four and five, who seemed worthy to join "The Happy Family." By promises of sweets beyond their wildest dreams, I enticed them to my house one afternoon. The rest was easy. Two sticks of peppermint, the vial—and that night, cleansed and beautiful, white and spotless, turned into tiny statues, they knelt at Louise's feet.

Another week of blissful contemplation went by; and then the loneliness on Louise's face again caused me an acute pain. Madame Fabien, of course, was perfectly content to sit silent in the sunlight with her grandchildren about her; but Louise was still young, still imbued with thoughts of love, still desirous of male companionship. She must have a husband. It was necessary that I procure her one. Then indeed "The Happy Family" would be complete.

One afternoon, as I sat pondering in my studio, the door-bell rang. When I answered it, I found a tall good-looking young man on the stoop. Evidently fate was again playing into my hand. This young man would make an ideal husband for Louise. I could not refrain from smiling, as I stood aside and bade him enter.

"Is this Madame Fabien's house?" he asked, stepping into the hallway.

"Yes."

"Is she at home? May I see her?"

"No, she has gone to the country for a month," I murmured. "She may be away even longer." I shrugged my shoulders.

"Well," said the young man, eyeing me suspiciously, "I have a warrant to search the house. I am a police officer. See this." He threw back his coat, disclosing a metal badge.

In spite of myself, my voice was a trifle unsteady when I spoke.

"But why do you wish to search the house?"

"For evidence," the young man answered. "Several children have been kidnapped lately. Two of them were seen entering this house."

He pushed past me and began mounting the stairs. I followed him. My heart was beating wildly; but my face, I feel convinced, was as expressionless as a bare wall. As he searched the different rooms on the second floor, it became quite clear to me that I was perfectly safe. How could he suspect my statues of concealing

what he sought? Soon I would lead him to my studio and thus divert all suspicion from "The Happy Family." And afterwards, when he had found nothing, I would offer him a cooling drink of my own concoction—a drink which would contain an everlasting sleeping potion. Already I could see him on the pedestal beside Louise—a silent, loving husband.

"If you are ready," I said to the young man, "I will show you my studio. I am a sculptor. You will find children there, but they are only statues."

He ignored my pleasantry and merely nodded. He was a very brusque young man.

"Show me your studio," he said.

I conducted him to it in silence. Opening the door, I stood aside and motioned him to enter. My heart was now beating calmly and evenly. No fear lurked in my soul. I would show this young man my statues, and perhaps he would appreciate what art could do. I was introducing him to his future family. Soon he would be sitting there, white, motionless, and smiling.

He looked about the room carelessly, and finally his eyes became fixed on the statues.

"They're good," he muttered, "—damnably good!"

And then turning to me with a new respect, he said:

"I had an ambition to become a sculptor myself. I studied at the school, but couldn't make a go of it. I know enough about the game though, to realize how good these are. Rodin himself wouldn't be ashamed of that old woman. What do you call this group?"

"The Happy Family," I answered.

"'The Happy Family'?" he repeated thoughtfully. "They don't look very happy—any of them. They look as if they had just been surprised by something—unpleasantly surprised. Take that old woman, for instance. She looks——"

"Nonsense!" I broke in angrily. "They *are* happy—happy." This young man's stupidity began to aggravate me. "In life they would have been loathsome and repulsive. But here? Look at this old woman!"

I approached and put my hand proudly on her shriveled shoulder. "She is a masterpiece. She——"

"Look out!" cried the detective suddenly. "Look out! She's falling!"

I uttered a cry of horror and clutched at Madame Fabien. But it was too late! Unconsciously I had leaned my full weight for an instant on her shoulder; and now, swaying once or twice, she was falling forward. In vain I sought to clasp her in my arms, to shield her body with mine, she bore me over backwards and we both came toppling to the floor. The plaster, covering her face, was broken into a thousand bits; and then the head of Madame Fabien—the head with its ghastly grin and glassy eyes—like some evil Jack-in-the-box, popped out into the sunlight.

I remembered nothing more. The room, the detective, the statues, were swallowed up in blackness. I fainted. When I regained consciousness, it was to find myself jolting through the streets on my way to prison.

IX

It is morning. Already the grey light of dawn is sifting through the window. My task is over. I have told you faithfully the story of "The Happy Family." And now that the tale is told, now that the time grows short, I want to impress upon you, the reading public, you who have become so interested in my fate, that I, René Galien, am not afraid of death.

To-morrow they may lie about me in the papers; they may say I had to be carried to the chair, that I wept, that I pleaded, that I even prayed. But you, my admirers, my friends, my brothers, shall not believe them. No, I only fear something which lurks on the invisible frontier; something which is approaching steadily and relentlessly. What is this something? I do not know. But it is not death. . . . No, it is not death.

WHO WANTS A GREEN BOTTLE?

I

SUDDENLY there came a flash of lightning, so brilliant, so dazzling, that all the wild countryside was lit up for an instant as though by an immense conflagration. Then, far off, from the other side of those threatening, hump-backed mountains, I heard a low, rumbling sound as night once more closed and barred her ebony doors.

But in that brief moment I had caught a glimpse of what I sought. There, not a hundred yards away, on a rise of ground overlooking the road and the valley, was the long, low building which a second before the lightning had traced on a madly galloping background of clouds. Now, although my eyes were still straining in that direction, I saw nothing. Not a light beckoned. The house, the hill, the sky, had been blotted out.

Nevertheless I had the general direction. Backing the car into a nest of bushes beside the road, I took out my small electric flashlight and began to ascend the slope.

It was a stiff climb for a corpulent man well over fifty; soon I was breathing like one of my asthmatic patients. What little breath I had left was swept away

by a gust of wind which struck me full in the face, just as I breasted the slope. It took me quite by surprise—for down below I could have held a lighted match till it burned my fingers—and snatched off my soft hat, spinning it away somewhere into space. My legs were not too steady under me when I reached the house. For a space I leaned against one of the large, white pillars on the veranda to regain my breath and my dignity.

As I waited, another gust, straight from the lake, went howling by, stirring the tall pine-trees about the house into a muttering, mutinous revolt and causing a loose shutter somewhere in the upper blackness to beat out a devil's tattoo against the ivy-covered wall. Then suddenly all became silence again—a brilliant silence lit up by a flash of lightning which showed me the rounded bowl of the valley and the white stretch of road. And on its heels there followed such a crash of thunder that the whole landscape seemed to turn sick and dizzy.

"This is no night to be out," I thought, and, wasting no more time, rapped sharply on the door.

Scarcely had the echo of my knocking died away when the windows on the lower floor winked out at me; and, before I could so much as brush the wind-tossed hair out of my eyes, the door swung open and I came face to face with the Laird of Lockleaven.

After the blackness which had followed the flash of lightning, that hallway seemed blazing. And there he stood, as long and lean as a fishing-pole, looking out at me with the great terror-stricken eyes of a startled deer.

He wore some kind of fuzzy bathrobe which made him seem even taller; and he had a mad tuft of grey hair on his chin which twitched oddly—or maybe it was the wind stroking it. That was all I caught at a glance.

"Come in, Dr. O'Brien," he said with a bow like a dancing-master. "You're late."

Now what from the battering of the wind, the loss of my best hat, and perhaps a glass too many at the Claymore, I was too fuddled already to marvel much at his words. Not a thought did I give to how he knew my name or why he expected me at all, till after the door had closed on the night.

"You'll pardon my intrusion, sir," I said as soon as I got my breath. "The fact is that I was motoring home, and a half mile up the road my headlights flickered out. Now, if there had been a moon, or——"

But he cut me short with a wave of his hand. "Nonsense, Dr. O'Brien!" he said as sharp as the crack of a whip. "I was expecting you; and this lady and gentleman—*they* were expecting you, too." He jerked his thumb toward the wall.

Wheeling about in some confusion at that, I came face to face with a hard-featured old chap in a periwig glaring down at me from a mildewed picture-frame. To his right was the portrait of a very determined old lady with a pointed chin that curled up like the toe of an old slipper. She had a fan in her hand, but she held it as I have seen boys grip their shillalabs on the way to the county-fair.

"Ancestors?" I asked with a half-hearted chuckle, for

the stony eyes of the painted lady had somehow or other gotten under my skin.

"My great grandfather and grandmother, Sir Robert Lockleaven and his lady," he says rather proud. "Now step this way, Dr. O'Brien. There's a fire in the library and a bottle of good old port uncorked. And I'm thinking you'll be needing both before the dawn breaks."

With that he ushered me into as cheery a room as I ever want to see. In the days when this house had been built, they knew the meaning of fireplaces. It did my heart good to see the great log flaring up on the hearth, a log the size of a well-grown tree-trunk; in front of it, a semicircle of easy-chairs that tired men could sleep in; and, last of all, the mahogany table with two glasses and a decanter of wine which glowed ruby-red where the light touched it. And even the glimpse I caught of other sour-faced portraits on the wall failed to overshadow my good spirits.

He motioned me into one of the easy-chairs and, pouring out two glasses of port, handed me one and raised the other aloft. "Here's success to you, Dr. O'Brien!" he cried, while his frightened eyes flashed and once again the mad wisp of hair on his chin twitched oddly.

"And here's success to you," said I, draining my glass at a swallow, for the dust of the road had got into my throat.

"That goes without saying," said he. "If *you* win, I

win. Do you happen to have a green glass bottle in your pocket, Dr. O'Brien?"

"A green glass bottle?" I said dumfounded. "Whatever would I be doing with a green glass bottle, Mr. ——"

"Lockleaven's the name," he muttered, seating himself and adjusting the folds of his bathrobe as I have seen old ladies do with their skirts after getting into a bus. "I was christened Robert Lockleaven after my great grandfather." He bent his head and began to pick nervously at a loose strand of worsted. "I'm pretty well known in the village," he finished with a haughty tilt to his chin.

At that I started so that I nearly dropped the glass. I was new to that country, but already the name was familiar enough. Indeed it had more than once figured in Scottish history. But gradually that fiery stream had slackened; and now, if report could be believed, the last of the line was a man weakened in both body and mind. In the village he was known as "The daft Laird of Lockleaven;" and scandalous stories were still told of his escapades before old age had taken the marrow out of his bones.

Now, as he refilled my glass, I studied the man. He had the high, broad forehead of a thinker, the deep-set, fiery eyes of a dreamer, the firmly arched nose and expanding nostrils of a warrior. But the lower half of his face was deplorable. Here all the weaknesses of his soul were laid bare. The pitiable indecision of that twitching chin, the animal pout of the thickish

red lips, the long, yellow tooth poking out at each side of his mouth—all these were enough to give a Christian the shivers.

"How did you know that I was coming to-night, Mr. Lockleaven?" I asked.

"Know it!" he cried with an unpleasant snicker. "Why, I know everything." He paused, and a look of caution creased his jowls. "Besides, didn't I send Meg for you?" he finished.

"I've been away for the week, and——"

But again he cut me short with a quick motion of his hand. "Never puzzle your head over that, man," he cried peevishly. "There's more pressing matters afoot. What's crystal-gazing and such bairns' play when it comes to the saving of a live, human soul?"

"Is there some one sick here?" I asked.

"So there is," he said soberly; "so there is—unco sick. But sh! What's that?"

Usually I am as steady as the next man. But there was something in the Laird of Lockleaven's eyes, something in the Laird of Lockleaven's voice, which grated on my nervous system like sand-paper. I felt goose-flesh rippling up my back.

For several moments we both sat silent, listening to the reverberating thunder which still echoed faintly far off in the hills, to the crackling of the fire, to the scampering of the mice behind the wainscoting in the wall.

"Do you hear them?" he asked.

"I hear nothing," I answered sharply enough;

"nothing but the thunder and the fire and the mice in the wall."

"The mice!" cried the Laird of Lockleaven with a quick, low laugh. "Did you ever hear tell of mice that could sing and talk and cry? Put your ear to the wall and listen."

To humor him I did as he told me. At first I could hear nothing; but soon a low, suppressed note, very much like a muffled sob, made my eardrum tingle.

"Poor Aunt Mary!" said the Laird of Lockleaven solemnly. "She wouldn't stop mourning in life and now she cannot. Night and day I hear her, night and day."

With a mighty effort I shook off the strange, numbing fear which was creeping over me like a coverlet of snow. "Mr. Lockleaven," I cried with a forced laugh, "you are to be congratulated—you have singing mice in your wall! They're not too common, but there *are* such things. Look, there goes one now!" I pointed to a little, brown speck which scurried across the room and vanished somewhere in the shadows.

The Laird of Lockleaven raised his head. "My grandfather has just let his cattle out to graze," he murmured.

"What did you say?" I asked, making no sense out of his words.

For a moment he was silent, and then he cried out in a loud, authoritative voice: "Will you listen to me, Dr. O'Brien, or will I just have to be trusting my soul

to Meg's withered hands and dim eyes? Will you listen to the tale I've got to tell, Dr. O'Brien?"

I took a long pull at the port before I spoke. My nerves were trembling like fiddle-strings. I had an odd fancy that the portraits on the wall—all those hard-featured, sour-faced Lockleavens—had poked their heads out of their frames to lend an ear to our talk.

"I am awaiting your pleasure, sir," I said very slowly.

II

"The Lockleavens are an ill-starred race," my host began. "The balance of sanity is not in them. Each one of my house must either ride or be ridden. They saddle and bridle a hobby, then spur it till both horse and man are foundered. Whether it be generosity or greed, swashbuckling or psalm-singing, drunkenness or sobriety, each of us travels too far on that road.

"My uncle, the tenth Laird of Lockleven, like others of our blood, spurred his hobby a wee bit too far. As a young man he had the name in the countryside of being a canny laddie; at middle age, when I first remember him, he was as withered as a dead branch, with a pinched, frost-bitten face and bitter blue eyes. He had begun by being careful with the small fortune his gambling father had left him; he ended by nearly starving his household to death to fill the great money-chest at the head of his bed."

"One by one he got rid of the extra mouths to feed,

till at last there was only Meg and me to minister to him. What a spider of a man he was—going about the house, soft-footed, in his list slippers and cocking his eye at us if we so much as blinked at his iron-bound chest. I can see him now with his sidelong gait, his long thin fingers stroking his beard like bent twigs in a hedge, and his silly, solitary smile wrinkling the loose skin of his jowls.

“When he came to die there was little mourning in Lockleaven Hall. I was a lean lad of eighteen on the night when the great sickness gripped him. Meg set me to watch at his bedside, while she scuttled off to the village for Dr. McLean. Before she left she lighted the old-fashioned tapers above his bed; and I sat all hunched up in one corner, watching the light flickering over the sick man’s face and the heaving of the bed-clothes at each long breath.

“How long I sat there, to this day I don’t know—it might have been an hour or more—but after a time I grew drowsy and closed my eyes for a bit. When I opened them again, there had come a change. The laird had been lying flat on his back, his eyes on the ceiling; but now he lay on one side, his face to the wall. The frayed fringe of his whiskers trembled slightly, but his loud breathing had ceased.

“I rose and approached my uncle with a feeling of awe that death should have hovered so near while I slept; and then, as I put my hand on the footboard of his bed and looked down, horror gripped me by the hair. Horror did I say? It was more than that. It

was just as though my brain had been turned into soft, quivering jelly.

"My eyes had wandered to my uncle's grey beard. There, through the tangled meshes on the pillow, I saw a tiny crouching form and a pair of flaming pinpoint eyes. For an instant it glared up at me like a cornered rat under a wisp of hay; and then, with a shrill squeak, away it swished under the rumpled bedclothes and was gone."

The Laird of Lockleaven paused to wipe gleaming drops of perspiration from his forehead. Through the silence which followed his words, I heard a great commotion behind the wainscoting—a galloping as of a troop of horse, a shrill piteous squeaking, and then a sound which might have been a distant bugle-call.

"You hear them?" he said with a haggard smile. "That's Mad Anthony and his hounds. They've sighted a buck, or I'm much mistaken."

"There's an army of rats and mice in your walls," I broke in with an involuntary shudder, for the knowing, listening tilt of his head was an unhealthy thing to see.

"Rats and mice there *are* for those who hunt and ride," he said. "But it's not these I have in mind, nor one of them I saw that night through the tangle of my dead uncle's beard."

"What was it then?" I asked, taking another long drink of port to steady me.

"I'm coming to that," said he. "After my uncle's death, the chest of money was mine. You can readily

surmise that I lost no time in opening it. Having no taste of pleasure up to this—for the most part going about in rags with a belly as empty as a toy balloon—it was no wonder that I played pitch and toss with the ten commandments.

“I can give you my word that I lived the devil of a life for a round dozen years, with never a breathing spell on the Sabbath, till my uncle’s old chest sounded as hollow as a drum when I gave it a tap with the toe of my boot. And Meg grew soft and yellow as a tub of butter from good living and gin; and tales were told in the village of how she was seen taking a glass with the devil on Black Friar’s Heath.

“Well, time went on with a jig-step till one All-Soul’s Eve—twenty years ago to-night. I had had a few gentlemen playing cards with me up at the Hall, but they had ridden off before midnight in a black rage with some cock-and-bull story of how I had slipped a card up my sleeve.

“I was sitting in this very chair, nodding a bit, an empty glass in my hand, when what should I see but a gold piece lying on the carpet at my feet. I was about to reach down for it—for I was always a careful man even in drink—when out of the corner of my eye I spied something which made the hair on my head ruffle up.

“You can believe it or not—but there, creeping out from the wall, was a wee man no bigger than my thumb; a wee man in a yellow gown and nightcap, with a few threads of beard hanging from his chin. On

all fours he was creeping toward me, wagging his head as he came.

"‘A fairy!’ I said to myself, remembering what Meg had told me of the tiny folk who dance in the moonlight. ‘If I can catch him, he’ll give me a wish.’ So I waited as patient as Job with my eye-lashes lowered, snoring a bit just to put heart in him, till up he came and laid hold of the gold piece. Then you should have seen the sweating time he had over it! First he’d bend his crooked old back and hoist and hoist till he had lifted it up a pin’s breadth on one side; and then, just as he thought he had it fairly started, down it would come on his knuckle-bones and he’d let out a shrill squeak like a mouse. It was all I could do to watch him and not roar with laughter.

"‘So!’ I thought to myself. ‘After all the good things I’ve heard tell of you from Meg, you’re nothing but a pack of thieves when it comes to that! Break into my house and steal my gold, will you’? As quick as a flash, I leaned down and clapped my glass over him—and he with his back still bent over the coin.

"But he wasn’t quiet long. No sooner did he have the bottom of the tumbler as a roof for his head, than up he jumped as spry as you please. And what a commotion there was! First he leaped straight up like a startled buck, and the top of his head clinked against the glass; next he whirled about with outstretched arms, making a noise all the time like a beetle caught between two window-panes; and then, when there came no hope from Heaven or Hell, down he flopped on his knees and

whimpered and whined till all the tumbler was tinkling with it.

"By this time, as you may guess, I was near dead from laughing so. But soon I remembered that it was All-Soul's Eve and that, if Meg did not lie, a wish might be had for the asking. So I got down on all fours and squinted through the tumbler. Then, of a sudden, I knew the wee man and I clapped my hand to my mouth to keep back a yell."

III

The Laird of Lockleaven paused. All his face was twitching till it seemed to me that he hadn't one face but a dozen. But his eyes were still; they looked like two frozen lakes in the moonlight.

"And who was the little man?" I asked.

"There was only one mortal man could cock his eye like a Kelpie," he answered solemnly. "'Twas none other than my dead and buried uncle.

"Yes, there he sat in his old yellow robe and slippers, his nightcap clapped on his head all awry, his bitter blue eyes eating holes in my self-esteem. It was a sight to make your blood run cold. And he was champing his lean old jaws at me like one who has the taste of bitter words on his tongue.

"Well, Uncle Peter," said I, "though my teeth were clicking together from fright, 'it's a pleasure to welcome you home to the Hall. And to see you so spry for a

man of your years,' I added, for he had made a spring against the glass like a spider at a fly.

"'Robbie Lockleaven,' my uncle cried, 'I'll have the hide off you for this!'

"'You will not, Uncle Peter,' said I. 'You'll stay right where you are as a disgusting example of an old man in his cups!'

"At that his eyes glowed like two fireflies and his beard curled up, till I would have taken to my heels had it not been for the good liquor in me. As small as he was, I couldn't forget the fear I had of him.

"'Robbie Lockleaven,' he cried again in a voice like a pin scratching against the window-pane, 'you're a spendthrift and worse! You're building up a mountain of trouble in the life to come. But just lift up the tumbler, laddie, and I'll let bygones be bygones. Ye'll no be adding disrespect to your ither sins? You'll no be sic a fule, Robbie?'

"Now as his speech began to soften into the dialect of the countryside, I saw plain enough that I had the upper hand. Besides, when it came to that, how could a mite of a man do me bodily harm? Thinking in this wise, I spoke up bravely enough.

"'I'll lift up the glass under one condition, Uncle Peter,' I said. 'It's All Soul's Eve; it's only fair that a body should wish a wish. Grant me a wish, and I'll let you go free.'

"Well, he grinned a bit in an uncommonly nasty way, he stroked his beard a bit, and then he lifted his voice in a whine. 'Hae ye no had my bonny treasure-

box?' he squalled. 'Hae ye no scattered my siller to the four winds like chaff? Hae ye no made me come oot o' the wall to lift precious guineas till my back is no more than a broken reed?'

"Now I knew that I had won the victory, and I laughed aloud. 'You old foxy-eyed thief?' I cried. 'I've caught you fair; and a wish I *will* have. You can't go prowling about Lockleaven Hall when you should be six feet deep in the kirk-yard, stealing my money and playing pranks altogether unseemly for a man of your years, without just paying the piper. A wish I *will* have.'

"'Weel then, have your wish and be damned!' Uncle Peter cried in a rage. 'Wish quick now, for the fumes of vile liquor in this glass are making my auld head spin around like a whirligig.'

"Well, I thought for a while before I spoke. Finally I said: 'There's only one thing worth knowing to a worldly wise man like me. I'm going to ask you for that which has no weight in the hand, but is more precious than jewels. I'm just seeking knowledge of Heaven and Hell. What's the human soul like, Uncle Peter; and what follows life for the good and the bad?'

"Now the old man again cocked his eye at me and stroked his beard like I'd often seen him do while driving home a good bargain. 'So that's your wish, Robbie?' he says, smooth as syrup.

"By the tone of his voice, the manner he had of stroking his beard, and most of all by the glint in his eye, I knew well enough that trouble was brewing.

But I couldn't retract, having once stated my wish in the Kings' English. So I answered, 'Just that,' and held my breath like a man under water.

"'Weel then, to begin,' said Uncle Peter with a twitch of a smile, 'the human soul is just a wee mite o' a man like me. I am the human soul of Peter Lockleaven, deceased.'

"'Did you take shape after death?' I asked.

"'Na, na,' says he. 'I was always in the man like the core in an apple. You have one as weel, Robbie Lockleaven—a canny wee man, hidin' within, as 'like to yoursel' as two peas. Hae ye no felt him tinkerin' awa at your brain?'

"'Nonsense!' said I. 'Such a theory is contrary to science.'

"'Is it so?' he cried. 'To modern science, ye mean. There were wise men of old who knew well enough that the human soul had a body to it. Did they no debate lang syne on the matter—growin' red in the face ower the question of how many souls could be dancin' a Hieland fling on the point of a needle? Robbie, will ye be denyin' that the human body weighs a wee mite less when the soul has sped?'

"'So I have heard,' I answered with a flicker of fear. 'Yet surely it can be accounted for by——'

"'But Uncle Peter brushed my words aside as though they had been so many dead leaves. 'Na, na,' he piped. 'It canna be accounted for—except ye believe lees. There's nae doot about it—a human soul there is, with a body to it and all.'

"‘Then, Uncle Peter,’ I said, ‘will you explain to me how it is that doctors don’t see it when they operate; or why we don’t get a glimpse of it when we see a man die?’

"‘I will that,’ said Uncle Peter with a smile and a sneer. ‘We souls are no ower anxious to be poked at and handled. When a doctorin’ man cuts into our hame, we just scuttle awa to anither room till he’s done with his work. Say he’s tinkerin’ at the brain; weel, we take to our heels and hide in the belly.’

"‘And when a man dies?’ I broke in.

"‘When a man dies, we just bide our time till naeboddy’s heedin’; and then awa we go to Heaven or Hell. It’s simple enough, laddie, when they’re bendin’ ower the deceased, half-blinded by tears—or maybe the fule doctor’s feelin’ for heart-beats and not carin’ ower-much what the soul may be at—to scuttle awa to the foot of the bed, to slip to the floor and go tiptoin’ off in the dark. But, mind ye, I’m no sayin’ that we hae no been seen one time or anither. There was yoursel, Robbie, poppin’ your een at me when I was bidin’ my time in the dead Laird of Lockleaven’s beard.’

"‘In spite of myself my knees began to shake from fright. Uncle Peter had begun to chuckle; his merri-ment came through the tumbler like the chirping of a sick canary.

"‘And where does your soul go to when it leaves the body?’ I asked.

"‘Heaven or Hell lies in the walls of ilka hame,’ said he. ‘Lockleaven Hall is well stocked with souls,

Robbie. Dinna ye hear 'em scramblin' aboot in the wainscotin', chatterin' and whimperin', blowin' on horns and pipin' on bagpipes? Rats and mice? Na, na. Though some of 'em we hae for Mad Anthony, who is never content till he's thrown his leg ower the back of a nag and is awa to the huntin'. Twascore Lockleavens hae died in this house—twascore souls are in yonder wall. You'll be joinin' us soon, Robbie, I'm thinkin'.

"But still I wasn't convinced that Uncle Peter was telling the truth. 'If I let you out of the tumbler,' I said, 'you'll just have to show me Heaven and Hell.'

"'I canna do that, Robbie,' he whined. 'Heaven is no for me. They wouldna hae us prowlin' aboot through that blessed wall. Now will a visit to Hell content ye?'

"Well, I thought so hard for a minute that my head ached; and then, all of a sudden, I made up my mind like a man jumping off a high cliff. 'I'll just have to be contented with Hell, Uncle Peter,' I said, 'seeing that you're not over-anxious to take me to Heaven.'

"'Dinna think that!' he cried with a shake of his head. 'The will is there, but the godliness is missin'. Now just lift up the tumbler, Robbie, and we'll be startin' in twa shakes.'

"'And you will not take to your heels?' I asked.

"'Na, na,' he muttered. 'I couldna do that on All Souls' Eve.'

"'And you'll bring me back safe out of Hell, Uncle Peter?' I said, not liking the grin that twitched his flea-bitten beard.

"That I will, laddie,' he says very solemn.

"Well, Dr. O'Brien, I took a long drink out of a bottle of Scotch which stood on the table and then I bent down and lifted the tumbler. And my dead uncle sat still as a toad the while, and never so much as blinked an eye.

"Now sit ye down beside me, Robbie,' he said. And when I had done as he wished, he began to sing a snatch of a song which ran something like this:

"Dinna ye hear the pipes of Locklear
 Aweepin' and whimperin' oot there in the night?
 Dinna ye greet for souls that maun keep
 A watchin' and waitin' for threads o' the light?
 Come oot o' the body
 Wee souls while ye can,
 There's buckets o' toddy
 For ilka wee man.'

"Hardly had his voice died away, when everything seemed to vanish into space. I felt that I was enclosed in some kind of shadowy dungeon—or rather at the bottom of some pit down which a faint light sifted. And with this feeling, there came a wild desire to escape. I climbed up and up and soon came to the mouth of the tunnel. Squeezing between two jagged lines of ivory pillars which blocked my path, I leaped out into the open.

"At the next moment, I was rolling down a steep declivity with the speed of lightning. Soon I collided violently with Uncle Peter at the bottom—an Uncle

Peter who had suddenly regained his full stature and who was regarding me sourly.

"'Ye daft fule!' he cried, rubbing his back. 'Is that any way to be runnin' against a man? Ye should look afore ye leap oot o' sic a tall hame.'

IV.

"Well, Dr. O'Brien, I looked up and saw that I was standing in the shadow of a gigantic statue—a statue which I thought must be at least two hundred feet tall. It sat cross-legged with bowed head and its huge tunnel-like mouth was open.

"'What's that, Uncle Peter?' I asked.

"'That's naething more nor less than your ain body, Robbie Lockleaven,' he said very solemn. 'I've charmed your soul oot o' it.'

"'I see you've grown to full size!' I cried.

"'Na, na,' said he. 'It's *you* that's grown small as a match. But we'd best be on our way, Robbie, for it's a lang walk to the wall of Hell and I'm no so spry as I was.'

"Well, as you may guess, my head was spinning around from all I'd heard; so I thought it best to say no more, but to follow his lead. When he started ambling off with a jerk of his head at me, I put my best foot forward and was at his heels in no time.

"First we skirted a small tower of glass, which Uncle Peter said was the tumbler—not that I believed

him or could—and off we started across a level space where long red grass sprouted up above my slippers.

“‘Ye should tear up this carpet, Robbie,’ Uncle Peter called back over his shoulder. ‘It’s most unco wearisome when a body’s leg-weary.’

“But I made him no answer, for I was looking about and wondering at all I saw. I seemed to be on a kind of desert. As far as the eye could reach, the landscape was level, except for the statue and several weird wooden structures which rose up on each side of it. The sky was a threatening grey. Not a star glimmered. But somewhere in the remote distance, I saw a gigantic sun which lighted the whole landscape with blazing effrontery.

“‘So this is Hell!’ I murmured.

“‘Na, na,’ said Uncle Peter, uneasily. ‘We hae no reached it yet. This is naething more than the library of Lockleaven Hall.’

“‘What’s Hell like, Uncle Peter?’ I asked, coming up alongside of him.

“‘Hell?’ he cried with a start. ‘Why, Hell is just Hell! Ye can be takin’ notes soon enow, Robbie. It’s an unco wearisome place.’

“‘Then why were you so anxious to go back to it?’ I couldn’t help asking, for the drink and curiosity were still strong in me.

“‘Anxious to gang back!’ cried Uncle Peter. ‘Are ye daft, Robbie? If ye had a wee mite of sense, ye’d have just kept me in that bonnie glass till Judgment-day. And I’d have thanked ye for it on my bended

knees, Robbie; though I'm a temperate man with a distaste for the smell o' strong drink.'

" 'You were clammering loud enough to get out of it,' said I.

" 'Nae doot,' he muttered. 'But ye shouldna hae given me heed. 'Twas not me that was clamorin', Robbie, but the spirit of Hell which gives me no rest. After we leave our mortal bodies behind us, we can no longer do just as we please. We've just got to scuttle awa on the devil's errands, and pay with sweat for our sins.'

" 'And how do you pay, Uncle Peter?' I asked.

" 'Why, just by livin' under the same roof with a fule like *you*,' he says very sharp. 'Do ye no think I sweat tears o' blood when I see ye throwin' my gude siller awa like it was chaff? Twascore times hae I seen my bright gold pieces lyin' on the carpet; twascore times hae I bent my auld back to 'em—just to find them ower heavy to lift. *Me*, who they say was a wee bit too canny, to see sic wastefulness in Lockleaven Hall!'

"Uncle Peter had worked himself up into such a fury that I thought it best to say no more for the present; so once again I glanced about me.

"We had been walking at a brisk pace for upward of a half-hour, yet, on looking over my shoulder, I could still see that gigantic seated colossus which my uncle assured me was my own body. Indeed, from this distance, I noted a certain resemblance to myself. Of course, when I had been standing directly under it,

it had seemed all out of human proportion; but now, from a mile or so away, I noted with an odd sensation of fear that it had something strangely familiar about it. Perhaps it was the incongruity of a statue wearing dressing-gown and slippers which caused great beads of perspiration to spring out on my brow.

"As I continued to stare back, I suddenly heard a threatening roar above my head and, looking up, saw a flock of strange birds flying swiftly past. Larger than eagles and inky black, they emitted a thundering sound like a thousand steam-engines going at once. Soon they became black specks in the distance, specks which hovered over the statue. Finally I saw one of them descend on its nose.

"'Never fash your head ower them, Robbie,' said Uncle Peter. 'They're naething more nor less than house-flies taking a wee flight. Come awa, laddie.'

"I turned about. As I did so, I saw, very dim and hazy in the distance, a black, towering cliff which seemed to rise straight up into the somber sky.

" "'Tis the wall of Hell,' said Uncle Peter sadly and started off at a brisk pace.

"Now, as I followed him, pushing through the tangle of red grass, I fell to wondering what the old gentleman meant when he said that he'd have been happy to live out his days in my whisky glass. Perhaps, if I found Hell to be such an unpleasant place as he hinted, I could cheat it in time, had I once the secret.

" 'Were you safe from Hell in that glass, Uncle Peter?' I asked.

"Not altogether," he said kind of careless over his shoulder. "They couldna hae got me out, but they would hae tormented me sore. Had it been a green glass bottle, Robbie—as green as the sea—why, I'd hae been as safe as a bug in a rug."

"At that I burst out into a laugh. 'Thank you kindly, Uncle Peter!' I cried. 'So a green glass bottle is the refuge from Hell? I'll be minding that when my time comes to die.'

"And then, as I saw plainly, the old gentleman could have snapped his own nose off in rage. But all he said was: 'Ah weel, Robbie, there's mony a slip twixt the cup and the lip. Ye canna hide awa in green glass bottles when Hell is beckonin'."

"But now we were in the shadow of the cliff. And well might Uncle Peter call it a wall, for it shot straight up with no foothold for man or beast. And away to the left, a great cave had been scooped out of it; and in this cave, roaring and thundering, was a many-headed sheet of flame fully a hundred feet high.

"'Is that Hell?' I asked.

"'Na, na,' said Uncle Peter with a snort of contempt. 'That's naething but your ain fireplace and a wee birch log sputterin' a bit. Come this way, Robbie, if ye are seekin' Hell.'

"At that, Uncle Peter took my hand as though I were a bairn and led me right up to the face of the cliff. Then I saw that it was no cliff at all, rightly speaking; but just a great wall of dark-colored wood which ran up and up till it lost itself in the sky. And down at

my feet was a round hole in this wall, just large enough for a man to put his head and shoulders through.

"'I'll gang first,' whispered Uncle Peter. And he got down on his knees and popped into that hole as smooth as a rat.

"Before I followed, I turned and took a last look at the world I was leaving.

"There, that strange desert stretched away as flat as the palm of your hand; and there, like a giant brooding over the universe, sat that great statue of me in its gown and slippers, its jaw dropped low on its chest. How I pitied it then, Dr. O'Brien—yet, for the life of me, I couldn't tell why. There it sat, staring out over that crimson grass with its sightless eyes. 'You are leaving me forever,' it seemed to be saying, 'me who has carried you in sickness and health, in joy and in sorrow! Shame on your soul, Robbie Lockleaven!'

"'Now that ye are at Hell's gate, do ye fear to enter?' said Uncle Peter, popping his head out of the hole and sneering at me. 'I misdoot ye have heart for the venture.'

"For answer, I flopped down on my hands and knees and, after a tight squeeze of it, crawled after him through the gates of Hell."

V

Again the Laird of Lockleaven paused to wipe glistening drops of moisture from his forehead;

while I took advantage of his silence to stir the fire a bit. Indeed, I was needing the warmth and cheer of it. What from my host's wild words, the distant rumble of thunder and all, I was never before so much in want of creature comforts. I have seen mad men enough in my day, but never one with such a plausible way of telling a tale as this same old chap in his gown and felt slippers.

And to make matters worse, as the saying is, the rats and mice in the wall were never still for a minute. I could hear them tripping and trapesing about as though they were dancing; and, every now and then, a thin, quavering squeak which sounded uncommonly like a poorly played fiddle.

"It's the Highland fling they're dancing," said the Laird of Lockleven with a ghastly grin. "Do you get the lilt of it, Dr. O'Brien?" And he began to sway his head from side to side and tap out the tune with the toe of his slipper.

"You were about to tell me of Hell," I said, thinking the man was better talking.

"To be sure," said he with a start. "I had just entered the jaws of Hell, had I not?"

"You had," I answered, wishing with all my heart that he had stayed there.

"Well, Dr. O'Brien, it was a tight squeeze at first; and so black that you couldn't see hand before face. But after a few minutes of crawling, we got through the neck and into the belly of Hell, so to speak. The tunnel grew bigger and bigger till a man could stand

on his feet. And then a strange, green, quivering light came creeping along the black roof like a snake.

"Where does this unwholesome light come from?" I asked in a voice which I intended to make low, but which echoed through the vault like the boom of a cannon.

"Uncle Peter chuckled at that, and it made a most horrid din. "'Tis naething more nor less,' said he, 'than the sulfur ta'en from matches. Hae ye no heard Meg complainin' about findin' wee broken bits of 'em lyin' on the carpet? Weel, for all her witchcraft, she had no suspicion 'twas her auld master had a hand in it.'

"He turned and started on again, still cackling to himself over his thieving, while I followed uneasily beneath the band of quivering light. At first the passage was so straight that you might have shot an arrow down it, but soon it began to twist a bit from side to side like the trail of a man coming home from the alehouse. And then, on a sudden, a wind arose, hot as the breath of a furnace—a strange wind made up of a multitude of voices, indistinct, muffled, vaguely reproachful and filled with a great longing to be heard. But there were so many of them and so intermingled that they were like drops of water in a swiftly moving stream.

"Where does this wind come from, Uncle Peter?" I asked.

"Death-bed repentences, Robbie,' he answered. 'Breath wasted lang syne by puir fules who knew no better. They thought nae doot that God would be

lendin' an ear to their skirlin'. Dead men's lees, laddie, choaked in dust.'

"For some time we plodded on in silence, while that melancholy wind swept past us like a perpetual lament. A cold sweat broke out on me from the heat of it, and all the time I was shaken by fear. And then, on a sudden, Uncle Peter spun around on his heel and pushed me up against the wall.

"'Hush, laddie!' he whispered hot in my ear. 'The hunt's on, or I'm much mistaken. Mad Anthony is ridin' hard to-night; he's no the man to turn aside for anither soul. Flatten yoursel to the wall, Robbie! Dinna ye hear the thunderin' and screechin'? All Hell's let loose when Mad Anthony rides!'

"And now, Dr. O'Brien, I heard a great hubbub. First, there came to my ears the clear note of a hunting-horn; next, a shrill scream and a thundering as of horses' hoofs; and then, as I peered fearfully into the gloom, I saw the huge figure of a man astride some strange round-eared beast.' Down this wild rider swept on me like the wind, with never a look to right or left, leaning low on the neck of his steed like a man winning a race. And not four jumps behind, were a dozen grey monsters with long dragging tails.

"But before I had time to draw breath, before I could so much as let out a groan, they were past me and vanishing in the shadows. And now I heard Uncle Peter's unpleasant snicker.

"'Ha, ha, Robbie,' he says, nudging me with the point of his elbow, 'ye're no owerpleased with Hell, I'm

thinkin'. But never ye fash yoursel about Mad Anthony. *He*, who was for always huntin' the puir beasties, must now be hunted by 'em. There's a kind o' justice in Hell, Robbie. 'Tis only with me they've been owersevere.'

"What's he being hunted by?" I asked with a shudder.

"Just a half dozen o' rats, Robbie," said Uncle Peter. 'And Mad Anthony's ridin' a wee gray mousie. But step along, laddie; we hae muckle to see ere the dawn breaks.'

"Uncle Peter started off again at a kind of ambling trot. Although I was trembling in every limb, I followed close at his heels. We went on down the passage for a hundred yards or so and then took a sudden turn to the right which brought us up sharp in a large chamber which had no less than four phosphorescent ribbons of light on the ceiling. There were a score of dark figures in the center of this chamber; and a monotonous stream of talk rose from them, as though the floodgates of reason had been swept away.

"What manner of place is this?" I asked.

"'Tis just the council-room of those puir souls that went about the world tryin' to make ithers understand them,' said Uncle Peter very solemnly. 'Step up, Robbie, and lend an ear to their talk.'

"I strode up to the group. Although I was nearly deafened by their uproar, I managed to overhear a few words of a man and a woman who stood on the outskirts. Looking up into his face piteously, she was

saying, 'Hector Lockleaven, canna ye no understand me? My soul is——' And he was saying at the same time, giving no heed to her, 'Anna, my dear, canna ye no understand me? When I do this it is not because——' And then both his words and hers were swept away in a furious torrent of words from the others—words which battered against the ceiling and fell back again, hollow and dead. I heard a loud buzzing about me of 'Won't you listen?' 'Can't you understand?' 'I've got something to tell you,' till I couldn't bear it any longer and, shoving my thumbs in my ears, hurried back to my uncle.

"'Not one of them hears what the other is saying!' I cried. 'They're all talking at once, Uncle Peter! What's the meaning of it?'

"He grinned at me in his queer way and turned to go. 'All those souls,' he mumbled over his shoulder, 'hae pestered the lives oot o' ithers by bein' ower-communicative. Tak warnin', Robbie. If ye want to be understood in the world, say naething about yoursel.'

"Uncle Peter led the way out of that chamber and into another, several hundred yards further down the passage. This was larger than the first, and even more noisy. Before we reached it, my ears were deafened by a thundering sound as though a thousand hammers were beating on iron, intermingled with loud shouts and deep groans.

"'Here ye will find the chieftains of Lockleaven who were owerfond of blood and rapine,' said Uncle Peter

when we reached the threshold. 'These gentry were quick to draw steel.'

"I saw a dozen figures in armor, slashing at each other as though their blood were up. The clashing of their claymores, the clanking of their shields, their shouts and groans, made the hollow chamber echo like a drum.

"I watched them for several moments with a beating heart. 'No one falls, Uncle Peter!' I cried at last.

" 'Quite right,' said he with a bitter smile. 'We hae no victors and no vanquished here—and no rest. They must just keep at it, with aching backs and wheezing lungs, till the end of time. This is Hell, Robbie.'

" 'I think I'll be stepping back into the library, Uncle Peter,' I said. 'You've shown me more than I wanted to see.'

" 'Ye'll no be ganging hame till ye've had a peep at your ain chamber?' murmured Uncle Peter in his most persuasive tone. 'I'll no rest content till I've given ye a glimpse at Pleasure Hall.'

" 'Pleasure Hall?' said I.

" 'Pleasure Hall,' said he. 'Tis the room we hae gi'en to those jolly souls who hae frisked about. Ye'll find gude company there, Robbie.'

"Now by this time I had had a belly-full of Hell. But I could not offend Uncle Peter on his own hearthstone, so to speak; so I just followed where he led. Well, we may have walked for a dozen score yards or more, when suddenly I heard such a howling and screaming and sobbing that it was enough to make

your blood run cold. I can hear that hubbub yet in my dreams. And pretty soon we came to a bright light, and then——”

The Laird of Lockleaven broke down and clasped his hands over his eyes. And then he began to tremble in his armchair like a leaf in a gale.

For my part, I finished the wine in my glass and stirred the fire and wished for the dawn to break. If the rats and mice had only kept still, I could have stood the shadows in Lockleaven Hall. How they did creep out at me from the corners! And the portraits seemed to be nodding and winking on the walls.

At last my host dropped his hands from his face. “I cannot tell you of Pleasure Hall,” he said very solemn. “What I saw there is locked in my breast for all time. But this I will say: No man could have seen what I saw and gone about thereafter like other men. It left a red mark on my brain like the touch of a bloody hand.”

“There’s no doubt about that,” I thought to myself. But aloud I said: “Did your uncle guide you safely back out of Hell, Mr. Lockleaven?”

“Yes, he did that. But he kept chuckling all the way like a man who is well pleased with a stroke of business. I didn’t pay him much heed, for my mind was on other matters. We got out of Hell, some way or other, and waded back across the miles of red grass till we came to the big statue of me which sat with its chin on its breast. Now he chanted some devil’s rhyme and up I popped into the statue’s mouth and

squeezed through the ivory pillars. Then, before a man could call for hot Scotch, I blinked my eyes open and saw Uncle Peter scuttling away, turned into a wee man not as big as a pencil."

"And you let him go back to Hell?" I asked.

"I did so," said the Laird of Lockleaven with a weary gesture. "After the unpleasant time he'd given me, I wouldn't have saved Uncle Peter had I been able. Besides, there was no green-glass bottle handy."

VI

After the Laird of Lockleaven had told his tale, he closed his eyes like a man who is tired. The lamp on the table was going out in a fretful, flickering way; and had it not been for the lusty log in the fireplace, the room would have been as black as a cellar.

"I'm afraid I'm keeping you out of bed, Mr. Lockleaven," I said at last. "There's the dampness of morning in the air. Why not turn in and leave me here? I'll be off when the light is strong enough to see the road by."

But he wouldn't listen to that. "No, no," he said, sitting up with a start. "There are many matters we've got to face ere daybreak."

"Matters to face, Mr. Lockleaven? What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I'm saying!" he cried, wiggling his beard at me in an excited way. "First we'll drink a toast to

the confusion of Hell; then we'll prepare our plans."

He rose to his feet and poured out two glasses of wine. Then he handed me one with a courtly bow, but he hid the other for an instant in the folds of his gown ere he lifted it on high.

"Here's confusion to Hell!" he shouted, and drained the glass without once taking his lips from the brim.

"With all my heart, Mr. Lockleaven," said I, following suit. "From what you've told me this night, 'tis not a country I'd like to be traveling in."

"Then get yourself a greenglass bottle when your time comes to die," he muttered. "That's what I'm doing this night."

"But, Mr. Lockleaven," I put in, persuasive enough, "your time's not come yet. There's a round score of years to run before you'll be tipping your hat to the devil."

At that, he laughed as wild as a loon on the lake. "So you think so, Dr. O'Brien?" he cried. "And do you suppose that I'd be willing to live those years with the devils of doubt gnawing away inside, not knowing at what moment my soul might pop out and be off to the wall of Hell? No, no, I've had enough of this life; now I'm just longing to rest in a green glass bottle."

"Don't tell me," said I, "that you've——"

"Just that," said he, very calm. "I've taken a wee nip of poison. It was in that glass of port. No, don't trouble me, man"—for I had leaped to my feet—"just give heed to my words."

"If you've taken poison, I'll have it out of you!" I cried.

"You'll not," said he, "for it's——" And he mentioned the name of the deadliest drug known to man. "But there are matters of more importance on hand. Come close, for already I'm feeling its grip on me."

As I bent over the dying Laird of Lockleaven, he raised his voice to a shrill halloo. "Meg!" he cried, "Meg! You bag of old bones, where are you?"

Now hardly had the echo of his voice died away, when I saw the library door swing open. And there, on the threshold, curtsying and grinning, was a scrawny old woman with the long white whiskers of a cat. In one hand she held something which flashed green where the light touched it.

"Have you got the bottle, Meg?" cried the Laird of Lockleaven.

"Aye, that I have, Robbie," she cackled, stepping up to him like a walking broomstick. "'Tis the bonnie one oot o' the cellar with the wee angels stamped all ower it. Ye can rest quiet betimes, Robbie."

The Laird of Lockleaven heaved a deep sigh of relief and the twitching of his beard ceased as though by magic. "Well done, tried and trusted servant," he muttered, and his chin sank down on his breast.

But soon he bethought himself of something and raised his great eyes to my face. "'Tis your duty as a medical-man, Dr. O'Brien," he said with a catch in his breath which I knew meant the beginning of the end,

"to tell Meg the exact moment when the spark of life flickers out; and then to help her find my soul and pop it into the bottle."

"Whar think ye it'll be hidin' when it's weel oot o' your body?" piped Meg, champing her nutcracker jaws. "I dinna ken rightly whar to be searchin'."

"Just search my body from top to toe!" cried the Laird of Lockleaven in a breaking voice. "And Dr. O'Brien, here, will be lending you a helping hand. Oh, but the pain grips me!" And his face seemed to writhe up into ridges and knots, while the knuckles of his hands stood out white from the grip he had on the arms of the chair.

Now, being a doctor of long experience, I had seen many men die in my time—some with a smile and a sigh like tired children going off to sleep, some fighting hard for their breath with the black dread of Hell deep down in their eyes, some making a great hubbub for fear St. Peter was taking a nap and wouldn't open the gate to their rapping—but never one of them all had played such a tune on the strings of my heart as this long, lean Laird of Lockleaven.

We carried him over to the couch by the window where the light from the fire could scarce reach us. And we propped a pillow under his head, then sat ourselves down and waited for death and the morning. But how long the man took to die! A dozen times I thought his soul had sped; but when I'd bent down, I'd see the mournful gleam of his eyes and the twitch of his beard which meant that life was still in him.

Once he murmured low: "Have you the greenglass bottle handy?"

And Meg, who held it tight to her breast, piped up: "I hae it, Robbie."

Well, the gray of morning was sifting through the blind like the mildewed shreds of a rotting pall, when the Laird of Lockleven sat up on a sudden as quick as the blade of a jack-knife. "I'm a dead man!" he cried in a voice which seemed to come from far down underground. "I'm a dead man! Take heed, for my soul is ganging awa!" And at that he fell back with a gasp and a sigh.

But before I could so much as reach out to feel for his heart beats, Meg, that withered old witch, had sprung on him like a cat on a mouse. "I'll find your bonnie soul, Robbie!" she mumbled. And she began to paw him in a manner I thought unseemly.

"Away with you, old she-cat!" I cried, for it made my blood run cold to see her antics. "Have you no respect for the dead?"

But she paid me no heed—just began to cackle away like a dozen hens disturbed in the night.

"Get out of this!" I shouted. "Get down from that perch, or I'll give you the back of my hand!"

Now she let out a squeal like a Banshee; and I saw both her withered old hands slip under his robe and grip hold of something. Then she turned her head over her shoulder; and, though the light was still dim enough, I could see that her eyes were as bright as a

toad's and that the long grey hairs on her chin were trembling.

"I hae it fast!" she cried. "The soul of Robbie Lockleaven will no sup in Hell this day! Will ye just hand me the bottle, Dr. O'Brien?"

"I will not, Meg," I said, for the light of dawn was giving me commonsense. "All night I've been lending an ear to the most scandalous lies that ever were told. You're mad, like your master before you; and I'm through with dancing attendance on goblins and fairies."

"Mon, mon," cried Meg in a voice shrill with alarm, "don't be standin' there blasphemin'! If ye winna bring me the bottle, just grip Robbie's wee soul tight—it's owerstrong for these auld fingers!"

Well, as you've found out by this for yourselves, I am an accommodating, easy-going man. In an instant I realized that the only way to get Meg off her master's chest was by humoring her a bit. Madness is kindlier disposed when you pat it on the back. So I nodded my head, without any more to say on the matter, and leaned down and put my hands where she showed me.

"Do ye feel the wee body o' it?" she mumbled, cocking her eye at me.

"Yes," said I—for at the moment I had felt something through his robe which might have been a chamois-bag where he kept a charm against evil.

"Weel, hold tight to it," she said, "while I'm gettin' the bottle. A human soul is an unco canny beastie when it's fairly oot o' the body."

"Never you fear for that," said I. "I'll never I go of it this side of Hell."

I've often noticed that when a man throws big brave words up into the air they're as like as not to con down on his head. So it happened to me. No soon had I said my say, thinking that I had a bag of beads in my fist and nothing more, no sooner had Meg come down from her perch and hobbled off for the bottle than I let out a yell and loosened my grip. And we might I stagger back from the fright of it, for the bag had come alive in my hand.

Alive did I say? Yes, and more than that. It had kicked out like a beast caught in a net; it had wriggle and turned; and, last of all, it had set its teeth in my thumb. And I have the scar to this day to prove that my story is true.

"Mother of God! What's that?" I cried as soon as I could speak at all.

Then Meg spun around on her heel. "Ye fule!" she cried. "Ye have let Robbie's soul slip frae your fingers!" And then, as I stood silent with a great fear at my heart, she scuttled back to the Laird of Lockleven. "Quick!" she cried. "Dinna be gapin' and gabblin' there! On your knees, mon, and be searchin' the floor; while I give a look to the couch."

Well, I did as she told me—for, somehow or other I believed all she said. But it was a black business crawling over the carpet, with not light enough yet to make out what lurked in the corners. Once I caught sight of something near the fireplace which scampered

away into the wall when I reached out a hand. Whatever it was, it was too quick to be caught by a portly old chap on all fours. At last, winded and dusty, I climbed to my feet.

Meg, too, had given up the search. She now sat beside her dead master, rocking back and forth, her face in her hands. Never will I forget that scene if I live to be a hundred—the pallid light of dawn resting on both the quick and the dead; the Laird of Lockleaven rumpled and shaken like a pillow in the search for his soul; and that old hag, crouched down beside him, swinging back and forth like a gate in the wind.

“The Laird of Lockleaven is ganging awa!” she moaned.

“Nonsense, woman!” I cried sharply enough. “Twas nothing more nor less than a mouse in his gown. Now I’m off to the village for help. He’s in no fit state to go into his grave.”

But Meg never so much as lifted her face from her hands. Bending backward and forward, giving no heed to my words, she mournfully chanted that dismal refrain: “The Laird of Lockleaven is ganging awa! the Laird of Lockleaven is ganging awa!” And to my overstrained nerves it seemed, that behind the wainscoting in the wall, I heard an echo of her lament rising and falling with the melancholy cadence of the wind: “The Laird of Lockleaven is ganging awa!—The Laird of Lockleaven is ganging awa!”

* * * * *

You have heard my story. Now, what do *you* think? Was it a mouse I held in the fold of his gown, or was it—— But why should I put such thoughts in your head? They've worried me now for ten long years——worried me so that each night I put my ear to the wall, listening and wondering, till I seem to hear voices and music and the treading of feet.

Perhaps it was a mouse after all. Don't let such thoughts work into your mind. If they once get in, they'll rattle about like dice in a cup. And they'll make you do very strange things—things which you wouldn't confide to your neighbors.

What sort of things? Why, soon you'll be collecting bottles of every shape and size known to man—little ones and big ones, thin ones and fat ones, round ones and square ones.

And here's a queer thing! They may be all shapes, and they may be all sizes; but there's only one color you'll want. And that color will be green—pale green like the sea. Isn't that strange, now?

WILD WULLIE, THE WASTER

I

I MUST bridge the River Styx and retrace my steps to the other shore. It is difficult for me to once again inhabit the worn-out shell which for so many years I called *myself*; to mentally conjure up the petty human emotions which spurred me to rash words and still rasher deeds; to describe to you, my gentle ghostly readers, the lamentable and inexcusable quarrel which ended so disastrously for Roderick Dingwall and myself. However, I must not dodge the issue. I have taken up the pen, and I will not turn back. Unfortunately for my natural egotism, this chronicle opens at a period when I was still alive.

As I sit beside the library window in a pale shaft of moonlight, what a pitiful atom of dust my former mortal self appears! Blown hither and thither by every earthly passion, it yet had the colossal conceit to consider itself a reasonable being living according to a reasonable plan. Roderick is sitting near me, his chin resting on his hand. The white linen about his throat glimmers faintly. Poor Roderick! He was another such

as I—both blind atoms whirling in the wind. And now he must wear that stock always or else—— But I must begin at the beginning or there can be no end.

When my brother, the twelfth Laird of Brangler, died I was living a shabby, out-of-elbows existence in a small boarding-house in London. Since my father's death, forty years before, Alexander and I had scarcely laid eyes on one another. Perhaps I was to blame for this; for, although I had run through a considerable part of the family fortune, I had never squandered a grain of the family pride—but I rather think it was my memory of him which held me back like a ball and chain.

He was a mean man even when young—mean and cunning with a white film over one eye like a patch of frost on a window-pane. They say he had a bag of gold pieces still clutched in his fist when they fished him out of the lake back of the house; and that, if he could have made up his mind to let go of it, he might have weathered it through to the other bank. However, that's beside the question.

When I received word that Alexander was dead, my first thought was of Roderick. He and I had grown old together. Starting out as wild lads, we had had vices enough to fill a stable. But a vice is a poor nag to ride when a man has no gold spurs strapped to his heels. Then old age and old wine had taken the marrow out of our bones. Two doddering fossils now, all we cared for was our Saturday-night game of billiards.

Once a week we met in a rowdy basement just off the Strand and played with cues like shillalahs and billiard-balls like the eggs of some unsystematic mother goose.

Now, of course, all this could be changed. Roderick and I would pack up and leave London for good. We would settle at Brangler Hall and there regale ourselves in a manner becoming elderly gentlemen of means. I remembered with a kindling of the blood the well-appointed billiard-room my father had installed shortly before his death. Surely the rats and spiders had not been able to completely destroy this sanctum during my brother's unsympathetic reign. And then there was the old gentleman's wine cellar. Surely between those hallowed walls the mellow port and burgundy had gained the subtle tang which only longevity bestows. Although, as I have already said, my friend and I had pawned most of our vices, still a glass of rare old wine could enhance the moments we spent tête-à-tête. Say what you will, it is only the old who can appreciate the old.

Roderick entered into my plans for the future with enthusiasm. The prospect of a happy old age spent in the seclusion of Brangler Hall, with unlimited leisure to bestow on his favorite pastime, brought a glint to his eye and a flush to his cheek. He even trod a few steps of the Highland fling, his old knee-bones clattering together like castanets.

Well, to cut a long story short, we sailed for Scotland

that very week with never a thought of the black trouble in store for us. Indeed, as we drove up the broad driveway, we were more like two schoolboys out on a jaunt than two gray-bearded old sinners with not many more years of life in our bones at the most. Every tree and bush, every thicket and hedge, seemed to hold out a hand in greeting. And the old house itself, with the red ivy clinging to it like the rusted armor of my forebears, had all the look of a proud mother.

"Welcome home!" the wind seemed to be singing through the fir-trees. "Welcome home to Brangler Hall!"

As soon as Roderick and I had removed the stains of travel, we hurried down to the banquet hall. Here it was, in this great wainscoted room—a room where the gentry for miles around had so often wined and feasted till the break of dawn—that we met with our first mischance. Two steaming bowls were waiting for us, one at either end of the board, and they contained nothing but a meager mess of porridge. I give you my word, the very portraits on the walls curled their lips at the sight of it.

"Like master, like man," I thought to myself and clapped my hand down on the bell. And then old Tam—serving man in the family for fifty-odd years—hobbled in, soft-footed in his list slippers.

"What's the meaning of this?" said I, cocking my eye at the bowl of porridge. "Is such hogs' swill fit for the Laird of Brangler Hall and his guest?"

At that, Tam grinned at me in a most disrespectful

fashion. "Aye," he mumbled. "It's been gude enow for the Laird of Brangler Hall and his guests for mony years. 'Tis better for the saul when the belly's no ower full o' flesh and fowl and ither puir murdered beasties—so at least my dead master was thinkin'."

"He and his thoughts are buried together," I broke in sternly. "There's a new master in Brangler Hall, and you'd best be minding it. Now be off to the kitchen and tell the cook to serve us something fit for a gentleman's stomach. And you can be bringing back with you a bottle of wine from the cellar."

"But I dinna ken rightly whar to be lookin' for the wine, Master Wullie."

"You need not be looking," Roderick broke in very sharp. "By the shade of your nose, it should lead you aright."

Tam left the room with a grieved air.

"Daft fules both!" I heard him mutter under his breath. "A puir body's no safe wi' 'em." But for all his dolorous shakes of the head, his prolonged sighs, when next he appeared he carried with him cheer for two hungry and thirsty men—a nice cut of venison and a bottle of wine gray with cobwebs.

You may be sure that Roderick and I did the provender ample justice. Between mouthfuls, I cross-questioned Tam about my dead brother. As yet the mystery attached to his sudden and ungentlemanly demise had not been cleared up.

"What induced the laird to go out of the house at that time of the night?" I asked.

Tam's wizen face drew up into knots of cunning.

"'Tis no so difficult to understand," he mumbled.

"'Twas just the fear of his ain brother spurred him on."

"The fear of *me*?"

"Just that. Dr. MacPherson told him a month back that his days were numbered. He got thinkin' o' the ill use ye'd be puttin' to all the gude siller he'd saved betimes. The thought o' that was like fire in the puir body's brain. 'Wild Wullie, the Waster,' was his name for ye in his best moods. Soon he got wanderin' awa' from the Hall, searchin' naedoot for a hidin'-place for his treasure. Midnight was his favorite hour for prowlin' about the grounds. One dark night he slipped into the lake by mischance. Alec was a gude lad, but one who wadna let a bag o' siller slip frae his fingers once he gripped it. I misdoot this wee vice led him to his watery grave—*him*, who should hae died like a Christian between white sheets, with God lookin' on and smilin' or maybe droppin' a tear from His een. It's great and wonderful what the power of prayer——

"Roderick," I broke in, rising, "let's you and me seek the seclusion of the billiard-room. Religion is the one subject which Tam and I agree upon."

The old man gave me a disbelieving stare as I turned to the door.

"'Wild Wullie, the Waster' a Christian!" he mumbled. "Na, na! I'll no believe that till the puir sauls in the kirk-yard rise up and confirm the glad news. 'Wild Wullie, the Waster' is kin to the prodigal

son. First he maun lie down with hogs and eat husks. So 'tis written in the gude Book."

II

Soon Roderick and I settled comfortably into the groove of our new existence. Fortunately the billiard-room, although in disuse for so many years, had been kept scrupulously clean. Tam did not number laziness among his faults. Each morning, with a gray duster wound tight about his bald pate, resembling a decrepit old pirate retired from the high seas, he superintended the maids at their work. And what a taskmaster he was with the lasses!—his sharp, old tongue snapping behind their bent backs like the lash of a dog-whip, his bitter blue eyes roving here and there for a speck of dust overlooked. Like many another old bachelor, he considered that the opposite sex owed him a lasting debt, and was not slow in taking his payment in threats and gibes.

But Roderick and I gave Tam little heed, except to see that he provided us with the wine and food due our station. All our time was spent at billiards. Winter set in before we had been a week in Brangler Hall—great falls of snow which made the driveway impassable and a steady wind from the northeast which cut the face like sharp, snapping twigs. So we had no mind to go out, but just stayed in the house as snug as two fleas on a sheep-dog, and played billiards from morn till night.

Now, say what you will, it's a difficult thing to see but one face day after day and not in time grow to hate it. And it's aggravating for two men to sit by the fireside with nothing to say to each other but just the threadbare topics of speech grown thin from overhandling. There's madness in solitary confinement, yes; but there's madness and there's murder when two are locked up in the same cage.

It was not long before Roderick began to get on my nerves. He had a slow, hesitating way of speech which set my eardrums tingling as though a handful of nettles had been thrown into them, a wart just beneath his right cheek-bone which seemed to grow larger as the days went by; but what aggravated me most in the man was his Adam's apple. It was a gymnastic Adam's apple, popping up and down like a Jack-in-the-box; and it was as large and round as a billiard-ball, making the wrinkled skin of his neck all tight and shining where it bulged out like an orange through a paper bag. Toward the last, the sight of it would unnerve me so that I would often miss a simple shot.

Now, do not judge by this that my nerves alone were chafed raw. Roderick has since confided in me that there were little mannerisms of my own which touched him on sensitive spots like a lash. The way I had of clicking my tongue when I had made a difficult shot, the leisurely fashion with which I took aim, the jubilant air in which I called out the points I had scored—all these trifles at the time made him see red.

Well, matters went on from bad to worse between us.

Soon we had no civil word for one another. Silent we were for the most part, sitting with averted eyes while Tam poured out the wine with a sour grin. The friendly rivalry of old times had disappeared entirely, giving place to a dour determination to win at all costs, a sweating anxiety over each shot. As Tam said—we were ganging clean daft over that deil's game.

At last our smoldering resentment flared up into open hatred and even bloodshed. What a disgraceful scene it was for two doddering old men who should have long since put worldly matters out of their heads! It came about like this:

One bitter cold night in December—a night when the wind was waltzing around the house like a mad old lady, beating out time to her antics by clapping the shutters together like castanets—Roderick and I, as usual, repaired to the billiard-room in grim silence. Each man drew his cue from the rack as though it had been a sword, and then our final game of billiards in the flesh began.

Roderick won the toss. With frowning brows and stealthy-sliding Adam's apple, he bent over the table and made a very pretty three-cushioned shot. He followed that up with another which very nicely bunched the balls in one corner. At that, he paused to shoot a scornful grin at me over his shoulder. Then he bent forward again with the air of a man who intends making the most of a good opportunity.

Now, as the cue moved slowly back and forth between his finger-bones, just as he was about to shoot,

a great gust of wind dropped down the chimney and blew a handful of ashes into my face. I sneezed—God bless me, how could I help it?—Roderick's bent elbow twitched and the cue-ball slipped to one side, missing both the others as neat as a whistle.

"I see you've missed your shot," said I, speaking pleasant enough.

"Missed!" says he, looking up with a fiery red face. "By God, Mr. Campbell, your ancestors should be proud of you this night!"

"How's that, Mr. Dingwall?" I asked, cold as ice. The jerking Adam's apple of the man made my gorge rise.

"By that, Mr. Campbell, I'm meaning that 'tis not a gentlemanly way to resort to such tricks and contrivances while engaged in sport. In short, Mr. Campbell, to sneeze at such a critical moment is proof enough for me of what I've long suspected."

"And what may that be, Mr. Dingwall?"

"That there's very little of the gentleman about you but the name, Mr. Campbell," he says very short, turning his back on me. "A clip-eared, bob-tailed kind of gentleman were you always, although I was fool enough not to heed it."

Now, there's a strain of the wild MacGregor blood in me—blood which makes me see red at an insult. Roderick's words and his lifted lip stirred up a raging Rob Roy. Without a thought to our lifelong friendship, I strode up to the man and struck him with my open hand which brought the crimson to his cheek.

"You'll keep a civil tongue in your head when speaking to your betters, Mr. Dingwall!" I cried.

At that, being a man of some temper himself, he went wild, and was at me with the cue in his hand. Up and down the room it went—blow for blow, cues rattling like the devil's dice-box, and with no thought in either of us but to kill. At the best, it was no Christian sight to see.

What with the rattling of cues and roaring of oaths, it was no time before old Tam and the waiting lasses were peering in at us through the open door.

"Gude save us!" cried Tam, wringing his hands for all there was a wicked light in his eye. "Gude save us! What's all this to do? Put by your weepons, gentlemen! Think on your ain gray hairs!"

But we gave him no heed. We had warmed to our work by now, and the devil himself could not have parted us. Both skilled swordsmen when young, some of our former prowess had returned to us. Two nimble old bucks we were, leaping about like chestnuts on the hob. Soon Tam's tune changed. Some of the fire of combat had oiled his old joints. Out of the corner of my eye I could see him hopping about.

"Gude stroke, Master Wullie!" he cried as I laid my cue across Roderick's shoulders. "Gude stroke, Master Wullie! Gie it to him again! Dinna step back, Master Wullie! It's no the way o' a Campbell! Watch his een—that's aye the fashion wi' swordsmen. Hoot, mon! Guard your head, Master Wullie! Ah, the deil's in it!"

At that moment my cue slipped from my hand. Before Roderick realized what had happened, he struck again—this time at my now unprotected head. A great flame leaped up before my eyes, followed almost immediately by silence and blackness. I felt that I was dying—I died.

III

As all true ghosts know, the transition from one life to another is instantaneous. And yet what momentous transformations take place in the mind! All our meager human thoughts are enlarged a thousand times. The puzzling enigmas of human existence immediately become childishly simple. A great tide of understanding sweeps through us, making us blush for our former blunders. The knowledge of the infinite—that enduring mental peace of clarified vision—unites us forever. We are a great brotherhood of spirits in which both competition and jealousy are unknown.

Hardly had I died before I opened my eyes and lived again. I was standing immediately above my discarded, mortal shell. Now I looked down on it with contempt. I had thought rather highly of my body only a few short minutes ago, now I viewed it with disgust. So this was the thing which I had been pampering all these years, feeding it lavishly, obeying its vicious caprices, and even studying it with adoring eyes in my shaving mirror. What a fool I had been!

Surely there was nothing lovable in this fat old man lying dead on the carpet—in this waxen puppet with the lack-luster eyes and protruding paunch. For the first time I caught a true vision of myself, and it was far from flattering.

“Gude save us! Ye’ve slain Master Wullie!”

It was Tam who thus broke the silence. He was on his knees beside the corpse with his hand on its breast. His withered old face was ashen, and his head shook from side to side as though he had the palsy.

My eyes sought Roderick. He was standing in identically the same spot as when I had seen him at my last gasp—his feet wide apart, his right hand grasping the billiard cue. But the expression of his face had changed. On it now was written a great horror and self-loathing.

“I’ll just be gangin’ awa’ to Dr. MacPherson,” said Tam, rising unsteadily to his feet and stepping through me as though I had been so much air. “Not that there’s ony hope at all,” he added sourly. “Master Wullie’s puir saul hae sped.” At the door he paused, and I knew that he was whispering to the scared lasses: “Mary, just slip awa’ to Squire Templeton’s ower the hill and tell him murder’s been done at the Hall. Peg, bide here a bit and keep your een on that Dingwall man. Justice will no owerlook this, I’m thinkin’.”

When Roderick and I were left alone together, he went down on his knees by the corpse. He was shaking all over like a tree in a gale, and his Adam’s apple was leaping about as though demented.

"God help me!" he muttered. "God help me!"

Well, I put my hand on his shoulder then, so great a pity I had for the man, and I spoke kind words in his ear—but neither my touch nor my voice was consoling at all. You see, he could neither feel my hand nor yet hear my voice; and I knew it well enough at the time, but habit was too strong for me.

And also I knew what was going on in his brain. Self-destruction was plotting there. And how was he to know that it is only the blow which a man strikes himself that leaves a telltale mark in his second life? But *I* knew, and I feared for my friend.

After a time he stood up again with a wild light in his eye. "They'll never take me alive," he says very solemn, and tramps out of the room without so much as a look behind.

Down the great hall he went, while I flitted at his heels—down the great hall and out into the moonlight and cold. Then away through the snow he plodded, taking long steps like a man walking a race; and I still at his heels, like a spaniel.

Well, there was a full moon that night—a calm moon with a patient, sorrowful face. Across the glistening snow she beckoned us on to the lake which shone like a black diamond through the trees. Roderick never paused or faltered. He was a firm man, once he had made up his mind; and I knew there was no stopping him. Soon we were standing on the bank, all glistening now as though encrusted with tiny sapphires. And it was here I met my brother.

Yes, there he sat as lonely as a scare-crow, his blind eye squinting up at the moon and all frosted with cold, a bag of gold pieces gripped tight in his fist. All in all, he was a deplorable sight to see.

"So this is what comes of taking your own life!" I thought as I seated myself beside him. "Will Roderick be such another?"

After a moment Alexander spit a piece of ice out of his mouth and spoke. "Wullie," he says very pleasant, while the icicles in his beard tinkled faintly like tiny bells, "Wullie, are ye bringin' me company?" And he jerked his thumb toward Roderick, who stood very tall and straight on the bank.

"God forbid, Alec!" said I, slipping into the familiar speech of our boyhood. "It's no the sort o' death I'd be wishin' a friend of mine. Nor the sort o' life after," I added, with a look at his frosty eye.

"Ye'll no be haunting him then to his end?" he says with a kind of sigh. "Weel, that's a pity. It's lonely here on winter nights—unco lonely! But in the summer it's no so wearisome. We hae the music o' frogs and whippoorwills and wee hoot-owls. Ye should see the bats frisk aboot to it. It's a merry spot in the summer."

"He'll no join ye wi' my consent," I broke in sharply.

"But, mon, I tell ye he'd *like* it in the summer," Alexander says as smooth as oil. "There's life here then—weasels and ferrets and snakes ye can wear aboot your neck like a chain." He bent forward, and I felt

his breath like a cold draft in my ear. "And there's money, Wullie—muckle gold pieces to spend."

At that I laughed aloud. "I misdoot ye'd be only too glad, Alec, to have him share your load. But he'll no do that, for I'm thinkin' this lake has a good foot of ice above water. He canna very weel drown himsel' to-night."

"But he can *try*," says Alexander, still hopeful. "He can *try*, Wullie. Now, should he dive from that bank yonder, he'd crack his skull like a hickory-nut. Canna he no *try*, Wullie?"

"Na, na!" I cried in anger. "Ye hae no changed muckle since lang syne. Ye are ever thinkin' o' yersel', Alec. But ye canna hae Roderick—even now he's awa' to the house."

Indeed, Roderick had turned away with a doleful shake of his head, and was plodding back wearily over the snow. His black shadow lay at our feet.

"'Tis a pity," says Alexander then with a shake of his head and a hypocritical smile. "I'm thinkin' he'll be findin' a worse way to shake off his skin—some coarse, bluddy way, nae doot. Weel, 'tis yer ain business, Wullie."

With that, my brother turned his back on me and closed his eyes. But I could see by the way he munched his jaws that he was out of sorts with the world. He never even wished me good night as I flitted away.

Well, as I followed Roderick back to the house, Alexander's unpleasant prophecy haunted me. What could I do to keep my friend from some rash act which

would leave a lasting mark in his life to come? Then, for the first time, I realized the pitiful impotence of a ghost to shape the affairs of the living. I wrung my hands in despair as I flitted over the snow.

But soon a ray of hope came to me. Surely there was one thing I could do—I could appear before Roderick in my old bodily shape at twelve o'clock. It was the unwritten law of the spirit world. At twelve o'clock, then, if he lived till that hour, I would appear before him and make him understand by gestures the severe punishment which attended the crime of suicide.

By now we had reached the house. Roderick, without a glance to right or left, mounted the stairs to his own room. In gloomy silence he approached his dresser, pulled out one of the drawers, and took a razor from it. As he opened it, the blade shone blue in the moonlight.

You can imagine my feelings, then, my gentle ghostly readers. Horror overmastered me. I called to him, but he did not hear me; I seized his arm, but it passed through my fingers. And now my only hope rested in the grandfather clock which stood in the hall. Would it strike twelve before this crime was perpetrated?

One fact gave me hope. Roderick did not seem to be in any hurry about cutting his throat. On the contrary, he went about his preparations with marked deliberation. Several times he felt the edge of the razor with his thumb, and once he stropped it carefully to a fine edge. Finally he raised it to his throat, but

even then he hesitated. Evidently he wished to taste the unlawful sweets of suicide to the dregs.

Lowering the razor, he was plunged into a profound reverie. I heard him murmur: "If I don't get it over with, they'll swing me up as high as a church steeple. Think of the disgrace in a Dingwall dangling from the gallow's-tree. I maun do it."

Again he lifted the razor till it hovered just beneath his Adam's apple. But at that very instant, to my joy, the clock below stairs began to strike twelve. "I'll wait till it's done," he muttered peevishly. "It's——"

But I gave him no time to finish his sentence. With a glad cry, I leaped out of the shadows and confronted him in my bodily form. Pointing at his throat, I shook my head angrily.

Alas, poor Roderick! He thought that I'd come out of my grave to see that he went into his. At my sudden appearance, his hand shot backward and the blue steel blade sheared his throat from ear to ear.

And as I bent over him, as I tried to quench the flow of his blood, he cowered away with fear and loathing in his eyes. "Gang awa, ye warlock!" he gasped through foam-flecked lips. "Gang awa—the deil and ye hae done for me!" Then his head slithered back on the floor, and he died with the black curse of suicide on him.

IV

Now it wasn't longer than the space of a deep breath before Roderick lived again. But it was

as I had thought—the poor man bore the mark of his last earthly misdeed. His throat, where the razor had bitten home, was not a pretty thing to see. Red it was, and gaping like a toothless laugh. But poor Roderick did not heed it at first. He was all for shaking my hand and thanking me for what I had tried to do.

“To think,” said he, with a tear in his eye, “that you should have bothered so over a man who had just taken your life! That bespeaks a kind heart, Willie Campbell. A misdirected good action is none the less a good action.”

“Misdirected?” I cried. “What may you be meaning by that?”

“It’s as plain as the nose on your face, man,” says he, giving his corpse on the floor a scornful look. “Am I not better out of that ugly carcass when all’s said and done?”

“Perhaps,” said I, realizing that the man had not as yet grasped the truth. “But will you be saying that, Roderick, when you know the worst? Step up to the mirror on the wall and just be taking a look at yourself.”

At that his face fell, and I could see that there was fear in him. He wheeled about on his heel and stepped up to the mirror, which shone gray in the moonlight. For a long moment he stood there without a word—then I heard a click in his throat like a clock running down.

"Good God!" he cried, putting his hands over his eyes. "Good God!"

And that was all I could get out of him for a long time. Poor Roderick! A neat man he had been in life, a man who had ever kept an eye on his personal appearance; and now in death he was a neat ghost by temperament and training, supersensitive to anything which might mar his good looks. No wonder the sight of that red, smiling throat was enough to turn the joy of resurrection sour in his mouth.

Well, I did my best to console him. But it was hard going at the best. Finally I hit on a scheme which made him brighten up a bit.

"You'd best wear a white stock from now onwards, Roderick," I suggested. "It's becoming enough to a ghost with your cast of feature. And it's neat as a pin, Roderick."

"Neat it may be," he says with a sour smile, "but it's an article of dress I never much fancied. It's suggestive of boils. However, when the deil drives—" He shook his fist at the mirror. "Well, Willie man, I'll be doing just as you say."

The stock worked miracles with my friend's peace of mind. It wasn't long before Roderick was his old merry self again. And also it had a quieting effect on my own nerves. To say nothing of his cut throat, he had always had a gymnastic Adam's apple which, in my opinion, was better hid. With the stock nicely tied, his long, curly locks all silvery in the moonlight, he

was as handsome a ghost as a man could find in a night's walk.

We soon settled back into our midnight game of billiards—only now there was no bitterness at all, but just pride in our skill and mutual understanding. And we discarded the cues altogether, just guiding the balls by the strength of our minds. A calm, thoughtful game it was, with the moon as a marker—the balls clicking gently together, and now and then the sad sigh of the wind in the fireplace.

And we were careful not to let Tam and the waiting lasses get sight or sound of us. We knew well enough that if they once caught a glimpse of us standing about in the corners, they'd be out of the house in no time. Then who could we get to tidy the billiard-room and brush the dust from the table? It's been my experience that only a silly, childish ghost goes about trying to impress humans by maybe a groan or two or by the glimpse of his face in the moonlight. What's to be gained by it?—just silence and dust and loneliness. A deserted house with the cobwebs dangling from the ceiling, and the rats playing hide-and-go-seek in the walls, is no proper home, as I have found by bitter experience.

Well, as I have already said, Roderick and I were silent and wary. But we hadn't taken into consideration Tam's prying, thieving ways—his old ears religiously pricked for the devil's gossip, his old eyes squinting through keyholes and around corners. One night he caught us red-handed.

It was well past twelve o'clock. Roderick and I had been playing billiards for upwards of an hour. Absorbed in our game, and thinking the servants safe in bed and snoring, we were little prepared for the sudden opening of the door and the flashing on of the lights. In fact, Roderick had just made a shot, and the ball was still rolling.

"What hae I told ye?" cried Tam, hopping about like a Punch and Judy. "The deil's playin' billiards in Brangler Hall!"

He spoke to a solemn man who had come in with him, a man wearing glasses whom I recognized as Lawyer McTavish, of Edinburgh. The two of them were staring at the billiard balls with their eyes nearly popping out of their heads.

"A very pretty shot," said McTavish at last with a kind of sick smile. "Three cushions and never a hitch to it! A well-planned shot. What's the trick to it, Tam?"

"There's no trick at all!" cried Tam in anger. "'Tis naething more nor less than Master Wullie and his friend playin' at billiards. Mony's the night I've stood out in the hall in my night-cap and slippers, drawn frae my bed by the click o' the balls. I canna rightly dance attendance on ghaists. It's no seemly for a mon o' my years."

While Tam thus expressed himself, McTavish examined the billiard-table carefully. First he picked up the balls and held them to his short-sighted eyes; next he rolled them across the green cloth; and finally he

bent down and looked under the table. Roderick and I, swathed in our garments of invisibility, interchanged smiles. All he could get would be a crick in the neck for his pains.

"Ye'll find naething o' interest," Tam continued. "Weel enow I grasp that ye lawyer bodies hae little or no respect for the ways o' the deil. Ye think ye've improved on 'em, nae doot. Howsomever, here's real witchcraft afoot, and ye may as weel confess it."

At that, McTavish looked up and straightened his back. "I can't understand it, and that's true enough," said he. "Now, if the window had been up, I'd say the wind might have done it. Or if we had not switched the lights on, I'd say a rat had started the ball rolling with the swish of his tail. But as it is, perhaps——"

"Hoot, mon!" cried Tam peevishly. "Gie the deil credit and hae done! 'Tis no muckle matter when all's said—just a wee three-cushion shot like I've seen Master Wullie contrive mony's the time."

McTavish ran his hand through his hair. "I think the least said about this the better," he muttered. "Keep a quiet tongue in your head when the new owner of Brangler Hall arrives in the morning."

"I'll no be about the premises," said Tam. "'Tis time I was restin' my auld bones. I'm awa wi' the sunrise."

"Well, I wouldn't talk about it to the neighbors," McTavish continued. "Silence is golden." He put his hand in his pocket and drew out a guinea. "Here's

for your trouble, my man," he says very lordly. "Now, you can just be showing me the upstairs rooms before I take my departure."

With that, the two of them stole out of the room, peering back warily over their shoulders, and leaving Roderick and me to our thoughts and our billiards. But I could not give the game my undivided attention for wondering about the new owner of Brangler Hall.

V.

Tam was as good as his word. At the first peep of dawn, just as Roderick and I were off to the attic where we rested for the day, we saw him hobbling away across the snow. There was a great sack on his back, containing his worldly goods, and a round dozen bottles of my father's best wine besides; and a stout staff in his hand like the holy men of old time leaned their weight upon. As he breasted the hill, a shaft of sunlight turning his bald pate to a halo, he seemed more like a saint than a sinner.

"Now who'll be dusting up after us?" says Roderick very solemn. "A neat man's been lost to Brangler Hall, Willie."

"Neat he may have been," said I. "But he was not too well disposed toward us, I'm thinking. Peeping through keyholes at an hour when decent bodies are in their beds, pricking his ears to catch an echo from hell like an old woman living over an ale-house! No, Roderick, I think Brangler Hall's well rid of him."

"It may be," says he with his eye at the broken lattice. "But he was neat, for all that—and neatness comes next to godliness. He kept the billiard-table in grand shape, Willie. But who's this coming up the driveway! I'm thinking it's the new master of Brangler Hall."

At that, I wheeled about on my heel and took another long look through the shutter. A carriage had drawn up in front of the house; and out of it presently stepped two handsome young lads, dressed in the height of fashion. One was tall and dark as the night, with a cast of feature which proclaimed him a Campbell; the other was short and broad, with flaxen hair and a bold blue eye. They could have scarcely numbered twoscore years between them.

"I'm thinking the taller one is my own cousin's son, Hector Campbell," I said with a sudden warmth in my heart. "By right he falls heir to the Hall. Is he no a bonnie laddie?"

"Aye," says Roderick, with his face to the lattice, "he's got the Campbell looks. But the other, Willie! Man, man, who do you think that fair-haired laddie is?"

"Surely no kin of yours, Roderick?"

"He is that!" cried Roderick. "My own brother's son. He was in Oxford the last time I heard of him. The world's a small place, Willie."

"So small we're always rubbing elbows. Hector was at Oxford, too. They're fast friends, no doubt; and

here for the vacation together. Well, we'll give them a warm welcome to Brangler Hall."

"Welcome?" says Roderick, with a sad smile. "Alas, but we cannot! If they see hide or hair of us, they'll be off like startled bucks. We'd just better be hiding ourselves as much as possible. 'Tis the only way for two ghosts to keep their guests satisfied."

"But we can hover about unbeknownst to them," said I. "And maybe we can get joy from their company—listening to their young voices and perhaps directing their tastes in wine, or entering into their sport without so much as by-your-leave."

"Be careful, Willie," says Roderick very solemn. "You must not forget for a moment that a ghost is a ghost and a laddie a laddie. They're not altogether companionable."

Well, neither Roderick nor I could sleep that day for thinking of the two lads beneath stairs. Although we had been contented enough up to this, now the great ache of loneliness was in our bones. The sight of these two young kinsfolk of ours brought up a thousand recollections of our own youth—not nice tales for a Sunday-school perhaps; but still diverting enough to keep our sides shaking till dusk.

No sooner had night fairly settled in than we flitted out of the attic and down the great stairs to the banquet-hall. The young men by now were seated at table, doing justice to every dish put before them. And what merry lads they were, laughing and joking, with ~~never~~ a care; drinking their wine as gentlemen should

and giving no heed to the shadows of Brangler Hall! It was a joy to watch them. Soon Roderick and I were grinning in spite of ourselves; and once, try as I would, the dry humor of my young kinsman was too much for me, and I ventured a laugh.

"What's that?" cried Hector, with a start. "Have they got ghosts hereabouts, Jamie?"

"So they tell me in the village," said young Dingwall with a grin. "But I'm thinking that noise you heard was just the wind wheezing a bit in the chimney."

"It sounded uncommonly like a laugh," says Hector. "But what did they tell you in the village, Jamie?"

"I was strolling down there this afternoon, and I ran into an odd-looking old chap with a head as bald as a billiard-ball. I hadn't more than passed the time of day with him before he began a wild tale about the ghosts who played billiards at Brangler Hall. It seems he was a servant here when your kinsman, 'Wild Wullie, the Waster,' and my daft Uncle Roderick fought each other with billiard cues. He remembered it all; and it was a rare tale, I can tell you."

"And did he say their ghosts walked?"

"He did that," said Jamie. "It seems that the two of them steal out of the graveyard each night to play billiards. You're in rare luck to own a haunted house."

Hector drained his glass at a swallow and laughed. "I am so," says he. "But it's a pity the lasses did not

figure in his tale. I have no aversion for them, be they of this world or the next."

"Nor I," says Jamie. "But we'll just have to be contenting ourselves with what's here. What do you say if we play billiards ourselves to-night and cheat the ghosts of their game?"

"I'm your man!" cried Hector, jumping to his feet. "It's a long time since we've crossed cues, Jamie."

Well, without any more words on the matter, the two lads strode into the billiard-room, Roderick and I close at their heels. As luck would have it, Hector Campbell picked up my old cue, while Jamie chose his dead uncle's. Then the game started—if you could call it a game, which I much misdoubt.

I give you my word, those two made us blush for them. The way they handled their cues was enough to sicken a man. They had no skill in their fingers and less in their heads. The simplest shot was too much for them. It was all Roderick and I could do to hold our tongues and our tempers in check.

Well, time went drearily on till the stroke of twelve, with never a flash of excitement. They'd shoot and they'd miss, and they'd shoot again till my back teeth were all of an edge. Here they were, the young fools, keeping Roderick and me from our game—and they with no more right to be playing than two scarecrows in a wheat-field. My old fingers were fair itching for the cue.

At last Roderick could stand it no longer. "Willie,"

he whispered, "this fool game is near driving me daft. Let's you and me take a hand."

"And how may we be doing that?" I murmured. "The way it looks now, these lads will be playing till morning."

"Never worry your head over that, man," says Roderick in my ear. "*They* shouldn't count. It's only by sheer luck that they ever score a point. Eliminate them from the game altogether. Or better yet, you play your kinsman's shots for him by the strength of your mind, and I'll just be helping Jamie."

"But will it work, Roderick?"

"At least there's no harm in trying," says he. "Now, concentrate, Willie. It's your shot, for Hector Campbell's juggling the cue between his fingers."

Well, I did as he told me. With the full force of my mind, I planned a very neat shot with a reverse English to it. Around the table the cue ball went and clicked against the others, like a mother kissing her children.

"Well played!" cried Jamie, with a laugh. "I suppose you planned that shot, Hector?"

Young Campbell looked up with a startled face. "I'll not say so much as that," says he. "However, here goes for another try." Once more he bent over the table.

Instantly I focused my mind on a draw shot which might gather the balls together like sheep in a hurdle. It worked to the queen's taste, and this time Jamie let out an oath of astonishment. But Hector was too

amazed to speak at all and just stared at the balls, pop-eyed.

"Go on!" says Jamie, with a wry smile. "The deil's in your finger-bones."

So Hector went on; and before he was through he chalked up a hundred points or more. I was in rare form that night, and I could see that old Roderick was on pins and needles to be playing. At last his chance came. Hector shot before I had time to think, and missed the two other balls entirely.

Jamie had been silent for some time back, but now he spoke up. "Hector Campbell," he says very solemn, "if I had not known you since we were bairns together, I'd be thinking that you'd been laying for bets. As it is, I see there's only one answer for this scandalous conduct—man, you're bewitched."

"It's your turn, Jamie," said my kinsman, putting the best face he could on the matter.

"My turn, is it?" cried Jamie, with a laugh. "Well, I'll not profit by it much, I'm thinking. However, here's hoping I get a grip of the deil's tail."

Now, as Jamie got ready to shoot, I could see Roderick's face twitching with excitement. His eyes were glowing like live coals as he bent over his kinsman's shoulder. I could see that he was planning the shot.

Well, it worked admirably. Around the table the cue ball went, taking the cushions at just the right angle, and then *click, click*, and the thing was done.

"Well played, Jamie!" cried Hector, clapping his hands. "Say what you will, the deil's not partial. He's

come here to lend us both a hand with our game. Shoot again, Jamie."

So Jamie shot again and again with never a miss at all till the day was breaking—shot with a white face of fear and a glance from time to time over his shoulder. Roderick was in fine form. Never had I seen him take such care with each play. Something of the old sweating pride in his skill was written on his furrowed forehead; and there was a twitch of a smile to his lips which I didn't quite fancy.

When the dawn finally broke like a bubble of blood, we flitted up to the attic after seeing the lads to their beds. Roderick was still grinning like a sick cat—a nasty grin which set all my nerves on edge.

"I'm thinking Jamie had the better of your kinsman," says he, just before we closed our eyes for the day.

"You'll not say that to-morrow at this time, Roderick Dingwall!" I cried hotly. "I'll see to it that Hector holds his own!"

"You mean you'll *try*," he says with a grin. "But if I were you, Willie, I would not set my heart on it."

VI

Now, the life of a ghost is hard sometimes, and none knows it better than I. Just as long as a body keeps to his own and doesn't go mixing himself up into human affairs, he's as safe and happy as a bug in a rug. But just let him once start being

too companionable with flesh and blood, then all hell's let loose.

And the same is true of a mortal. If he once consorts with ghosts by even so much as a prayer to the devil, as likely as not he'll be marked for life like an apple which hangs too long on the tree. Many a man has been ruined by just a walk with a friendly ghost in the moonlight. Such companionship, if it leads to nothing worse, exposes a human to boils and fits and, some say, a touch of Saint Vitus's dance as well.

At the time, Roderick and I, being inexperienced ghosts, knew nothing of all this. We entered into our kinsmen's nightly game of billiards with a vim. But gradually, as time passed, a change came over the players, and over us as well. The lads would no longer chaff each other about a remarkable shot. No; they began to take their new-found skill as a matter of course. And we, for our part, began to feel the old sting of rivalry. Bitter competition crept into the game. We no longer planned their shots for the joy of it, but rather as a blow directed at the other. A deadly feud sprang up between the house of Campbell and the house of Dingwall.

Well, matters went from bad to worse, as the saying is. Soon Roderick and I had no civil words for each other. And the lads were just the same, glowering and glooming at one another across the table, with sarcastic speech from time to time, like the sputtering of wet powder. One night, at small provocation—an argument over the careless way young Campbell had of scor-

ing his tally—the four of us would have been at each other's throats if the dawn had not intervened.

When Roderick and I climbed up to our attic that morning, I had a glimmer of reason. What was all this leading to but just murder and suicide again? Here were these two handsome laddies being haunted into their graves by two selfish old ghosts who wouldn't leave them alone at their game! What right had *we* to interfere?—*we* who were supposed to have given up the sinful joys of the flesh.

"Roderick," said I, addressing him for the first time in ten days—"Roderick, all this must stop."

"If you are referring to your kinsman's inability to count correctly," he says very stiffly, "why, I'm agreeing with you in the matter, Mr. Campbell."

"Man, man!" I cried, grasping him by the arm in my excitement. "Cannot you see where this game is leading? And the bonnie laddies below stairs! Are you wanting their blood on your head, Roderick Dingwall? Was not mine enough?"

"When a gentleman is owed a debt by another gentleman, he should not be the first to speak of it," says Roderick, still very stately. But for all that, I could see that he had given heed to my words.

"This is no time to stand on your dignity, man!" I cried, pressing my point. "Another night and it may be too late! There was murder in Jamie's eyes but a few moments back!"

"And Hector was showing his teeth like a wildcat,"

Roderick put in. "But just what are you advising, Willie?"

"That we stop this game for once and for all."

"And how may that be done? The lads are prepared to play it out to the bitter end. Each is determined to vanquish the other."

"But suppose we make the game ridiculous?" I cried, with the germ of an idea taking root in my brain. "Suppose we sicken them of it by not only subtracting our own skill but by making them bungle the most simple shot?"

Roderick was silent for a moment, evidently giving thought to my plan. "It sounds feasible enough, Willie," he said at last. "Man, it should work."

Well, after that, we turned in for the day in a couple of old linen chests, and soon were sleeping peacefully. Little did we think that our plans would go all awry. Two silly old ghosts, we thought we had solved our difficulties.

That night Jamie and Hector sat late over their wine in brooding silence. It was well after eleven before they entered the billiard-room and drew their cues from the rack. They had the look on their faces of men who were determined to do or die.

Jamie won the toss, and I tipped Roderick the wink. He concentrated his mind on a miss to such an extent that his kinsman's cue barely grazed the white ball, moving it but a few inches to one side.

At that, Jamie rapped out an oath. "I miscued!" he cried. "Hell's fire! I forgot to use the chalk!"

"That's a pity," said Hector with a polite sneer. "It's a game that requires thought." He ostentatiously chalked his cue and bent over the table to shoot.

Now, in my turn, I concentrated on a miss, but with more delicacy than Roderick. This time the cue ball ran in the right direction, but I saw to it that it missed the others by a hair.

Hector looked amazed. "I missed!" he muttered. "That's strange! It was an easy shot enough!"

Now it was Jamie's turn to sneer. "I've seen you miss easier shots than that. I guess your streak of luck's about through. Science will tell in the end," says he, and misses a carom which a blindfolded child could have made.

Well, they bungled shot after shot. But they kept at it just the same. And the longer they played the worse their tempers grew. They were not so much disgusted with the game as they were just disgusted with one another. Roderick and I were at our wits' end. At any moment we expected to see murder done.

"Shall we give them back some of our skill?" Roderick whispered.

"It wouldn't do any good now," I murmured sadly. "I'm afraid we've been consorting too much with the lads."

Hardly had I spoken before the climax came. Hector was taking aim, when Jamie, intent on chalking his cue, accidentally lushed against his arm. At that, my kinsman straightened his back and his eyes flashed sparks.

"I'll trouble you to play like a gentleman, Mr. Dingwall," says he cold as ice. "While you're in the house of a Campbell, you'd best remember that it's not a Campbell's way to stoop to stable-boy's tricks to win a game."

At that, Jamie puffed up like a pouter-pigeon. "By God, Mr. Campbell," cried he, "I'll have you know that a Dingwall can learn nothing from a Campbell but just how to lead cattle away in the moonlight!"

Now, at this direct blow at the MacGregor blood in his veins, Hector struck Jamie with his open hand across the cheek-bone. And Jamie, being a lad of some spirit himself, was at him like a wild man with his cue gripped by the small end.

"My God!" I cried to Roderick, wringing my hands. "Stop them before it's too late. We've driven them to this, just you and I! Man, man, stop them before murder's done!"

"What can I do, Willie?" he wailed, with his face in his hands. "What can I do?"

Just at this moment the clock in the hallway struck bravely above the din of the rattling cues. It was *twelve*—that hour when ghosts can assume their old bodily form.

Hardly had the last stroke died away before Roderick raised his face. On it was a look of brave purpose. A sensitive man he had always been, sensitive to a fault about his personal appearance, but now I read in his eyes a great renunciation.

"What are you about to do, Roderick?" I whispered.

For answer, his hand went up to his stock and began to fumble with the safety pin which held it in place. Unwinding the band of white linen, he leaped to his feet and bounded between the combatants. Then, assuming his old bodily form, he pointed at the gaping wound in his throat. "Desist!" he cried in an agonized voice. "Look on me, Jamie! I am the spirit of your Uncle Roderick, the suicide. Behold in me, Hector Campbell, the ghost of him who murdered 'Wild Wullie, the Waster'!"

It was a magnificent act. When one considers the supersensitiveness of his nature, one must give Roderick due credit. He had sacrificed his personal vanity to make his appearance effective. At the best, that slit throat of his was an unsightly thing to see.

And if the act were magnificent, so were the results of the act. The combatants dropped their cues in horror. For an instant they stared open-mouthed at this terrible apparition, then they turned and fled, bare-headed, out into the starlit night.

"Roderick," I cried, grasping his hand, "I congratulate you!"

But with averted eyes and trembling fingers he was hurriedly replacing his stock, and so gave me no heed. At last he murmured: "Whatever will Jamie be thinking of his own uncle this night?"

It was the one complaint I ever heard out of the man.

All this happened a long time ago. Since that night Roderick and I have had Brangler Hall quite to ourselves. Hector and Jamie have never ventured back. In fact, we've seen no mortal face in thirty long years. No doubt, it is better so.

But the rats and spiders give us no peace. Long ago they ended our billiards, tearing the cloth on the table to shreds and weaving their webs from corner to corner. Then there is the dust which half covers the balls, and which only mortal hand may remove. Often, sitting idle in a corner, we have wished that thieving old Tam were still with us.

Roderick is smiling at me as I write. He thinks my literary aspirations are a pose. Like many another kindly ghost, he is perfectly content to sit in the moonlight and twiddle his thumbs. Because he has lived on such intimate terms with me, he cannot understand why I should have an artistic bent. Perhaps these pages will open his eyes. Indeed, Wild Wullie, the Waster, is Wild Wullie, the Waster, no more.

FOR ART'S SAKE

I

BURGESS MARTIN! That was a name to conjure with in literary circles a score of years ago. But how many are there now to whom it means more than an echo fast receding in the somber caverns of time? Not many, surely. And yet there was a period in New York's police annals when he juggled the sphere of art before the amazed eyes of the world, playing on the emotions of his readers with the deft touch of a master, instilling in our minds the strange, crimson thoughts which blossomed so abundantly on the twisted branch of his philosophy. And stepping back from life, calm and smiling, a famous toreador, he waved the red flag before the aroused, infuriated beast and waited. Those horns should gore sensitive humanity as a tribute to genius; while art, like a Nero, peered down from the balcony.

And the man's works—those two thin little volumes bound in red morocco, those two deadly little volumes which formerly crouched between the kindlier books in any library like crime-besmirched dwarfs—have they vanished entirely from the memory of man? Vivid, poisonous growths of mental fungi, those tales sprang to life only to die before the sun. Quite perfect they

were, and quite malign. Handbooks of assassins, they——. But I must begin at the beginning.

My younger brother, Paul, was responsible for bringing Martin and me together. He had picked him up in some Bohemian restaurant which he frequented and from that time forward was so loud in his praises that natural curiosity prompted me to see this paragon for myself.

"You must meet Burgess Martin, Charley," Paul said one evening. "He's just the sort of chap you'd want to room with in Paris. He's an artist to the core."

But I was not inclined to take my brother's statements without a pinch of salt. My four years experience in college ways—I was then a senior at Columbia University—had made me slightly intolerant of freshman enthusiasm. Besides Paul had already shown a marked tendency toward strong drink and the false friendships that went with it. On more than one occasion he had brought back to our apartment "a good fellow" who needed considerable moral persuasion to depart in the morning without a few valuables. I have even known Paul's bibulous friends to pocket salt-cellars and spoons, so it is no wonder that his laudatory statements about Martin at first did not move me.

"But I tell you he's an artist," Paul repeated belligerently.

"What kind of an artist? Does he mix drinks artistically?"

"Don't be a damn fool, Charley. Burgess Martin is the most intelligent chap I ever met. He's in my class in English literature and he knows more about the subject than Professor Brent himself."

"So you have discovered a genius in the freshman class," I said with all the weary tolerance of a senior. "What a strange anomaly! This year I thought they seemed especially unripened."

"Martin isn't. He makes what he says alive, somehow. You must really meet him, Charley. I'm going over to his rooms to-night. Why don't you come along?"

"You say he's going to Paris next fall to take up painting?"

"Yes, he'll study under Verone. If you two fellows hit it off, you might room together. Get your hat, Charley."

I could see that Paul had set his heart on my meeting his new friend and so I could no longer resist. "Now I'm in for a boring evening," I thought as I followed my brother out of the apartment.

Burgess Martin at that time lived in one of those delapidated old boarding houses still to be found in the down-town section of New York City. This particular building seemed to be tottering on its foundation. It had a sodden, dissipated air about it—the air, in fact, of a *femme de monde* who realizes that she is aging. Here was the tomb of dead intrigue, of soiled romance.

We were admitted by a slatternly landlady and

mounted two flights of rickety stairs. On the second landing Paul came to a halt and thundered on a door which was peeling like the face of a florid man who has sat too long in the sun. Almost immediately it swung open and I confronted that strange individual whose personality was one day to overshadow both our lives.

Burgess Martin was a tall man, well over six feet. He had one of those faces which seem to challenge time—a face that when young, looks old; and when old, seems young. It was long, lean, ascetic—the lips, colorless and thin; the nose, hooked and warlike; the eyes, small and grey with the piercing quality of gimlets; the forehead, a threatening protuberance which overshadowed the rest and hinted at phenomenal intellectual powers. His body was thin, almost to the point of emaciation; yet, for all that, one sensed a great virility stirring in that skeleton frame.

I was immediately conscious of this virility and of something which perhaps sprang from it. The man exuded an unpleasant atmosphere, an atmosphere very difficult to resist. His personality, like an octopus, wound its many cold arms of reason about one. To struggle against it was useless and yet one struggled automatically. Genius is one of the most irritating traits in others. To acknowledge it, one must bend the stiff neck of self-pride.

Perhaps my nerves were a trifle out of tune at the time. It is the only way I have of accounting for that strange sensation which ran through me as Martin's

thin, cool hand slipped into mine. I felt as though I had a precious secret which must be guarded at all costs and which even now was threatened. The man's unfeeling grey eyes were fixed intently on me; those eyes which, like magnets, seemed drawing my ego out of my body.

"Have a seat, gentlemen. And help yourselves to those cigarettes."

Martin turned to Paul and I felt instant relief. Seating myself in one of the rickety chairs the room afforded, I lit a cigarette and passed the box to my host.

"No, thank you," he said a trifle bruskiy. "I don't smoke. It wastes too much time."

"Are you so busy as all that?" I asked. "I had no idea the freshman requirements were especially stiff. In my time, one could squeeze through without much work."

Martin's thin lips drew up at the corners like a cat's. It was his nearest approach to a smile. "My dear fellow," said he, "I hadn't my college work in mind. Of course, that's childishly simple. I am trying to perfect myself in one or two of the arts and that requires time when one hasn't the proper guidance."

"The proper guidance!" I murmured. "Surely Professor Brent is a competent teacher of English literature. He's had several books of essays published."

Again Martin's lips drew up at the corners. "A small man," said he "—a small man with a small mind. His work fairly bristles with penny-whistle platitudes.

All his sunny little essays are woven out of the worsted mottoes our grandmothers used to frame and hang on the wall: 'Be good and you'll be happy', 'Virtue is its own reward', 'If at first you don't succeed, why try, try again'. What sickening, sentimental slop! Teach *me* literature? Why, he can't even teach himself!"

Martin's words and the sneering contempt with which they were uttered, made me boil inwardly. My college career had formed me into the usual type of undergraduate to whom the institutions of the university were sacred matters not lightly to be tampered with. Professor Brent had grown grey in service and had even made his voice heard in the outer world; yet here was a green freshman attempting to overthrow him! What consummate conceit! But I would put this young ass in his place.

"Perhaps you can tell me how Professor Brent's essay on man could be improved upon," I said coldly. "I happen to have the book with me."

"Oh, I say, Charley," Paul broke in, running his hand through his hair, "that's his very best essay! Of course, there's nothing much wrong with it."

But Martin's grey-eyes brightened as he took the small leather volume I offered him. "Without doubt the ideas expressed in it are puerile," said he, opening the book to the essay in question. "Let us examine the style. Ah, just as I thought—stiff, laborious—a very poor flow of words."

"Could *you* do as well?" I asked ironically. The

man's insufferable egotism grated on my nerves like sandpaper.

"Much better," he answered simply. "Come, I'll prove it. You are familiar with this essay, I presume?"

"I know it by heart."

"So much the better. Now I'll read it as it should have been written, transposing as I go along."

Martin bent his brows over the essay while my brother and I interchanged glances. Although I tapped my forehead with a meaning forefinger, Paul smiled triumphantly. Evidently he had perfect confidence in his new-found acquaintance.

Now our host's voice broke the silence—a voice, rich, vibrant, which carried one along with it as on a swiftly moving stream. And, strange to say, although the meaning of the essay was in no manner changed, the style was entirely altered. New life seemed to have been infused into every line. The sentences glowed with poetic fire. My artistic sense was stirred by such a perfect phraseology. It seemed well nigh impossible that any man could read on without hesitation and transpose so remarkably.

"Splendid!" I cried when he had done. "But surely you worked that out before?"

"I never even read it until just now," he answered, smiling at Paul. "Really, I wouldn't waste my time over such material. Well, did I improve upon it?"

"That's a matter of opinion," I muttered, overcom-

ing my admiration with a mighty effort. "Personally, I've always liked Brent's style."

"Own up when you're beaten, Charley," Paul cried. "There's no comparison. I'm a dub about most high-brow matters, but even *I* realize that Martin has improved it."

"That's a matter of opinion," I repeated stubbornly.

Martin raised his eyebrows and regarded me quizzically. "You don't appear to have much literary taste," said he. "However, that won't hold you back as a painter. Paul tells me that you intend studying under Verone. Perhaps we can hire a studio together." He rose to his feet. "I've a painting in my bedroom which might interest you."

"Yes, indeed, I would like to see it."

Martin strode into an adjoining room and returned almost immediately with a canvas under his arm. Placing it in a position where the light touched it effectively, he stepped back.

"There you have it," said he.

I uttered an exclamation of surprise at what I saw. To my as yet untrained eye, it seemed a truly remarkable piece of work. And it affected me strangely. Although it was very warm in the room, I felt a wave of intense cold pass through my frame, followed almost immediately by a sensation of acute nausea.

The painting which affected me thus was startling in its conception. It depicted a young girl lying dead on a country road blocked with snow. Desolate and forsaken, she lay there, her white face upturned to the

leaden sky. Blood was streaming from her neck and slowly sinking into the snow. And all about her the tiny flakes were still falling—a thick veil of them which shut in this tragedy completely from the outer world. Somewhere in the swirling background, a dark shape lurked—an evil, twisted shape, vague and unreal as a distant dream. Was it the assassin, or was it merely the shadow of approaching night? As I watched, it seemed to stir slightly.

"Why, this is the work of a great artist!" I cried in amazement. "Did *you* paint it?"

"Yes," he answered slowly. "But it won't do. It's very crude."

"Crude! Why, it fairly stands out of the canvas. I think it's a masterpiece; You're too modest."

"That's what *I* say," Paul chimed in. "He's entirely too modest."

"I'm nothing of the sort," Martin said contemptuously. "No one is actually modest and only fools pretend to be."

"But where did you get the idea?" I asked. "It's a remarkable conception."

"The girl was a friend of mine. One afternoon I found her lying dead in the road with her throat sliced from ear to ear. Of course, I was thoroughly shocked; but I realized perfectly what an excellent model she made. I couldn't resist making a sketch of her just as she was."

"Who murdered her?" I asked.

"No one knows."

"And you mean to say, Burgess, that you made a sketch of her while she lay bleeding there!" Paul cried. "Don't tell me that you're such a hard-hearted brute as all that! I don't believe a word of it."

Martin regarded him for a moment with a kind of cold curiosity in his grey eyes. "I see that you read me like an open book, Paul," he murmured.

"Not at all. But no one could sit down calmly beside a murdered friend and make a sketch of her. The thing is impossible."

"Perhaps. But that is exactly how she looked when I found her."

"What was the motive for the crime?" I asked.

"Apparently no motive," Martin answered with a shrug of his shoulders. "Or, at least, none that could be discovered. But let's say no more about it. It's a nasty story and brings back unpleasant recollections."

Soon the talk drifted into other channels. Martin gave us a glimpse into his childhood which must have been far from a happy one. At an early age he had lost both parents and had been adopted by an eccentric aunt who had taken him to live with her in a lonely house far out in the country. This aunt had had many peculiarities. A firm believer in spiritualism, considering herself a medium, she had often taken her small nephew into a dark room at the top of the house where she carried on ghostly conversations with the dead.

"I was only six years old at the time," Martin finished, "and you can readily understand what effect such treatment had on my forming mind."

"What became of her?" I asked.

"She died at last and went to join her spirit friends. But long before that I knew the whole thing to be a farce. She left me ten thousand a year which is some recompense for all she made me suffer."

At that time ten thousand a year seemed to me a princely income. I would willingly have put up with a dozen eccentric aunts to have secured it. Something of this must have been written on my face, for Martin's lips once more curled up at the corners into a grimace which was half smile and half sneer.

"Yes, ten thousand a year," he repeated slowly. "Much more than I spend, for I believe that an artist should live without the luxuries of life. I tell you all this, of course, because I would like to have you with me in Paris and I don't think you would readily room with a pauper."

"After seeing your work, I would room with you if you hadn't a cent," I said warmly. "The thing is settled as far as I am concerned."

II

During the remainder of the college year Paul saw Burgess Martin daily. A close friendship sprang up between the two which was to me, at least, unaccountable. They were such direct opposites that such an alliance seemed altogether beyond the bounds of reason. Perhaps, after all, real warmth is obtained only by rubbing together two quite dissimilar substances.

Paul had been going down hill steadily ever since entering college the previous fall. He was one of those unfortunate men over whom alcohol in any form has a deadly influence. High spirited, generous to a fault, full of the joy of life, my younger brother was a delightful companion and one of the most popular freshmen in the university. But let him have a few drinks and soon a startling transformation would take place. He would become morose, intolerant, prone to fly into a rage at the slightest provocation. Then would follow a period of deep depression which bordered on melancholia—a dangerous mental state when I have known him to contemplate suicide.

But Martin, in some miraculous fashion, succeeded in curing him. Paul no longer returned at night the worse for liquor. He gave up café life altogether and took up reading seriously. I often saw him in the college library browsing over some book which Martin had recommended. In those last few weeks of the spring term, he succeeded in passing his examinations.

The following autumn found Martin and me snugly ensconced in a comfortable apartment in Paris. My father provided me with an ample income to pursue my artistic studies and I was not slow in spending it and making acquaintances in the Latin quarter.

Those were happy days. Our studio soon became the meeting-place of congenial spirits. Martin struck the one jarring note in an otherwise perfect harmony. Among those gay chattering magpies of art, he seemed as somber and solitary as a crow. He avoided my

guests as much as possible; behind his back, they called him "Monsieur la Nuit." He had an especial detestation of women, alluding to them very much as a man might speak of some deadly and prevalent disease. When he heard the swish of their skirts on our landing, he would lock himself in his bed-room and not come out again until they had gone. "A true artist can have but one mistress—his art," he was wont to say. "The rest are leeches."

Although I failed to share my roommate's views, I never allowed friends to interfere with my work. I improved rapidly. Often our instructor, the famous Verone, stood before my easel longer than was his wont with the other students. Martin's drawings alone overshadowed mine; yet I felt vaguely that they were disappointing to the master.

One bright sunshiny afternoon in May, Emile Verone rested his hand for a moment on my shoulder. "Ah, monsieur," he murmured, "you have talent and your heart is in it. There is life in that figure. You have caught it in a web of youth. Bravo!"

Leaving me jubilant, he passed on to Martin's easel. Here he remained motionless for several moments, a frown of perplexity creasing his forehead, gazing at my roommate's canvas in the manner of a man attempting to read a riddle.

"It is good—very good," I heard him mutter. "And yet there is something lacking. It is not technique, it is feeling. It—. Ah, I have guessed your little secret.

Your heart is not in your task. Am I not right, Monsieur Martin?"

"Perfectly," Martin answered, glancing up. "The model is not to my taste. That big, fat peasant with a face like a pumpkin does not inspire me."

I knew of Verone's hasty temper and was prepared for some manifestation of it. My roommate's answer had been rather unceremonious. But the little Frenchman did not appear to be the least bit ruffled. His voice suddenly sank into a soothing murmur.

"Quite so," he said mildly. "Every artist has his likes and his dislikes. But I have a plan. Absent yourself from the class for a month and choose a model for yourself. I will be anxiously awaiting the result. Does that satisfy you, monsieur?"

"Yes, indeed," Martin answered with a strange glint in his grey eyes. "Nothing could suit me better."

During the days that followed I saw very little of my roommate. He would leave the studio each morning, his portfolio under his arm, and not return again till the shadows of nightfall. And the few hours which he did spend in the apartment were spent in the privacy of his bedroom behind a locked door.

To tell the truth, I was relieved by his absence. The man was like a wet blanket thrown on the bonfire of goodfellowship which I was attempting to kindle in the studio. My guests were ill at ease in his company; and I, myself, felt a strange irritation at his every word and gesture. Now, as I look back on it, I think it was his atmosphere—that ever-present atmos-

phere of personal power—which we could not forgive him and which was as gall and wormwood to our own growing personalities.

One night, while champagne corks were popping merrily and laughter echoed through the studio, Martin's bedroom door swung open and he stepped into our midst. His face was a deathly white and there were great, black hollows under his eyes. Instantly our laughter died away.

"Pour yourself a glass of wine," I said with forced heartiness. "Have you come to join the merry-makers?"

"Just that," Martin muttered.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" one of my guests asked. "You're as pale as a ghost, monsieur."

"I've been living with a corpse for a month," Martin said slowly. "Would you like to see the results?"

He turned and re-entered his bedroom. A moment later he glided out again with a canvas under his arm. Placing it on the mantelpiece where we could all get a good view of it, he turned toward us and said in his deep, sonorous voice: "Allow me to introduce to you the results, gentlemen."

Again there was silence, broken only by the deep breathing of those about me. All eyes were fixed on the painting. For many moments we stared at it, spellbound, motionless. It was the most sincere tribute I have seen paid to a living artist. There were two or three men present that night who afterward became

international figures; but, at the moment, we knew in our souls that there was but one great master and that he now stood before us.

What was there in this painting to move us so? It is beyond my feeble pen to describe adequately the sensations of horror with which it filled me,—horror, overwhelming and vaguely sinister; horror whose breath was cold and damp as the tomb. One seemed to enter that picture bodily; to enter it and lose oneself in the shadows.

The painting represented the morgue in the dim twilight and more especially the body of a man lying on one of the marble slabs. The upturned face of the corpse was a mottled green shade; the protruding eyes were covered with a kind of fungus. And to add to its horror, the bristling chin had dropped, disclosing two yellow fangs in a ghastly grin. On either side of this grim figure, partly revealed in the semi-gloom, were other slabs—each the bed of some new fantastic terror. Underneath this revolting conception was written in English these four words, "He Laughs at Death."

We toasted Martin with brimming glasses, we shook him by the hand, we called him "master." And he, for once, shook off his cloak of aloofness. Indeed, he put himself out to amuse us, telling us stories so intensely droll that we roared with laughter till all unconsciously our eyes returned to the painting. Then, as the laughter died in our throats, as the smiles faded

from our faces, I thought I saw his lips curl in triumph.

III

Emile Verone went into ecstasies over Martin's painting, calling it "a masterpiece of the terrible"; and soon it became noised abroad that my roommate was one of those rare freaks of nature, a genius. Art students now began to seek Martin out as a profitable acquaintance. But he refused to be drawn out of his cocoon of solitude and mystery. His personality, as always, enwrapped him like an impenetrable coat of mail. Would-be friends and admirers flinched when they met his cold grey eyes. Soon the first fine edge of their excitement wore off; they gave him up as impossible with a shrug of the shoulders and a muttered "Monsieur la Nuit."

Time passed quickly. Almost before I realized it, a year rolled by. Martin had worked diligently; now the walls of our studio were covered with morbid masterpieces. As one might imagine, a highly strung person could not have entered this apartment for the first time without an inward tremor. Indeed, when the lights burned low, the room seemed to be a veritable charnel-house.

One gloomy afternoon in autumn, these paintings were too much for my self-control. I was on the brink of a serious sickness at the time; and, as I sat alone before the dying fire, the flickering flames would reveal first one stiffening horror and then another till

my overtaxed nerves could stand no more. Leaping to my feet with a muttered curse, I began turning those ghastly painted faces to the wall.

Suddenly I heard a low laugh behind me. Wheeling about, I encountered Martin who had entered as noiselessly as a cat. His sallow face still wore a crooked, evil smile which creased his right cheek like a scar.

"Emile Verone is right," he said, moistening his lips with his tongue. "No one will buy my paintings because they are too good, too realistic in their horror. And if they were sold by any chance, they would be banished to the attic. Who would live with the dead but Martin?"

"Suddenly I felt sick—deathly sick. I had the strange sensation of having some precious secret drawn from me against my will—the same sensation, in fact, that I had experienced once before. Then followed dizziness and helplessness. Martin's face appeared to loom above me, gigantic, monstrous. It grew larger and larger—a huge, terrifying mask behind which an evil passion lurked. Suppose he should remove this mask? Ah, it was slipping now, slipping——

Everything grew black before my eyes. I felt a sharp blow on my forehead, then numbness and nothingness. I had fallen over in a swoon.

For the duration of that week I was delirious with typhoid fever. Strange dreams tormented me, and in these dreams Martin was always the central figure. I can still remember one of them distinctly.

I felt that I was lying naked on the scorching sands of a desert beneath the rays of a blistering sun. It was useless to struggle; I was held down by some invisible weight. And over my bare, burning body an army of tiny ants was crawling, causing me acute agony. But just as my sufferings were at their height, Martin's lean face bent over me, his cold grey eyes peered curiously into mine, and he said earnestly: "How do you feel now?"

When I at last came out of the land of delirium, I was as weak as a new-born child. The sun was streaming through the window, casting its javelins of light on every side. One of them lay across the bed like a bar of molten gold. It occurred to me that I would like to feel its reassuring warmth, but I had scarcely enough strength to reach out my hand.

Suddenly Martin's voice broke the silence. "How do you feel now?" he asked.

I started at these words which had echoed through my dreams. I had to steady myself before I answered feebly: "Much better, thank you."

During the next few days I improved rapidly. Martin was a competent nurse. Sitting beside my bed, he whiled away the tedious hours by his remarkable knack of story-telling. It was not the stories themselves which held me—he would often repeat those I had already heard—but his truly remarkable wording which made them flow as smoothly as a river of oil and was as pleasing to the ear as music.

Sometimes I would speak of Paul, and then Martin

would be the eager listener. I received several letters from home. One of these worried me. It was from my father and ran as follows:

"Dear Charles: Paul is drinking again. I can do nothing with him. The slightest reprimand drives him into a frenzy of remorse and despondency. At such times he is quite capable of taking his own life. I wish you were home. Perhaps you could manage him. Affectionately,
Dad."

This letter came while I was still very weak and I asked Martin to read it aloud to me. I saw his face darken as he perused it. When he had finished, he sat in gloomy silence. At last I heard him mutter: "It's in his blood. I could handle him, but another might take the wrong way. It would be fatal to——"

"You must think a great deal of Paul," I broke in.

"A great deal?" he cried vehemently. "Why, Paul means more to me than my art! Do you think I would have wasted my time pulling *you* out of the valley of death if you weren't his brother?"

He rose without waiting to hear my response and hurried from the room. Although it may seem surprising, I was relieved by what he had just said. I had never liked the fellow; and to be weighed down under a load of obligations to one heartily disliked, is a very unpleasant experience. If he had nursed me back to health merely on account of his friendship for Paul, surely I did not owe him as much as if he had been actuated solely out of regard for me.

Soon I was strong enough to leave my bed and sit up for an hour or so each day. For three weeks I had been living on a diet of milk and broth, but now the doctor allowed me solid foods. Ah, the joy of eating when one is recovering from typhoid! It repays one for all those earlier sufferings.

One evening as I was waiting impatiently for supper to be served, I heard Martin's bedroom door open. A moment later he entered, carrying a suitcase. A mutual coldness had sprung up between us, but this unusual sight made me forget everything.

"Why, where are you going?" I cried in astonishment.

"Home," he answered, placing the suitcase on the floor.

"Not to America, surely?"

"Where else?"

"But your art? How about your painting?"

"Oh, I'm giving that up," he said in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Giving it up!" I cried. "After what you've already done! Why, you will be recognized by the world in another year or so! You must be mad!"

"Do you think so?"

"I know so!" I answered with some heat. "What else could you turn your hand to with the same success? Art, such as yours, springs from the soul. By renouncing it, you would be tearing out the best in you."

"I will have to do that in any case to follow the career which I have planned for myself."

"What is this precious career?"

"Literature," he answered calmly. "I took up drawing merely to illustrate my stories. No other man could do them justice."

"So you are one of those numerous young men who think they can write," I said in a tone which brought a flush to his sallow cheeks. "What reason have you to suppose so?"

"You must acknowledge that I can tell a story."

"Yes, but your stories are not original. Have you a keen imagination?"

"Not a vestige of one," he said simply.

"Then how can you expect to become a successful writer? A literary man without any imagination is doomed to failure from the start."

"You are wrong—entirely wrong!"

"How so?" I demanded.

"Because a writer does not necessarily need a creative imagination," he said a trifle wearily. "I, myself, have what is far better—a concise memory and the ability to write in the most perfect wording exactly what I see and feel. There is enough going on in the world at this moment to serve as the substance for a million stories. Of course, one has to branch away from the beaten path to find such material. But that is exactly what I am going to do."

"But you haven't mingled enough with other men," I hastened to add. "You know little or nothing of

human nature. A man to be a successful writer"—I was quoting Professor Brent—"must be a student and admirer of his fellow men. Without companionship, a writer misses the human touch."

Martin's lips curled up at the corners in one of his irritating smiles. "My dear Smithers," he said in a tone which he might have used in speaking to a tiresome child, "you're entirely at fault in such a surmise. Surely an onlooker, a mere spectator with no party feeling of any kind, can witness the battle of life with better results than can the actual combatants. You say that a writer should study and admire his fellowmen. That is impossible. If we admire a man, we cannot study him. We are prematurely blinded to all but his virtues. By taking that attitude toward mankind at large, we lose the larger half of faults and follies which go into the makeup of the average mortal."

"I don't agree with you," I said coldly. "But even if you were right, you'd be a fool to throw away a certainty for an obscure possibility. Have you stopped to think that the successful writer of to-day has to cater to the mob as you call them?"

"But *I* won't have to do that," he cried with flashing eyes. "I intend devoting my time exclusively to horror tales. Have you ever witnessed an accident on the street? Well, in a moment, hundreds collect where there was but one. They are drawn thither by that morbid streak in humanity, that overmastering desire to feast one's eyes on gruesome details. Such a sensation will be gratified in my stories. Men and women

will buy them to experience the delightful tremor of tragedy beside their own firesides. Who would not walk many blocks to see a murder committed? Nearly all of us would go if our own precious lives were not endangered. I tell you the public will snatch up my work because it will give them the exact sensation of those who stand about on tiptoe to catch a glimpse of death."

In spite of myself, his words stirred my imagination. Was it possible that literature could be made as vivid, as this? He had succeeded in portraying horror most realistically with the pigments of the painter, but could he create such an atmosphere with cold words alone? No, it was impossible—even laughably absurd.

"You cannot possibly create such an acute feeling in the minds of your readers," I said at length. "No man could do it."

"What no man can do, *I* can do," Martin replied with insufferable egotism. "I will surely succeed as a writer—as surely as you will fail as a painter."

"Really!" I cried with a sneer. "Emile Verone thinks rather highly of my work."

"Your work is promising now because you paint as your eye tells you. But later, when you get out into the world, it will be different."

"In what way?" I asked.

"Because a successful portrait painter—bear in mind that I am speaking from the commercial, worldly standpoint when I say successful—must be nothing more or less than a beauty doctor. Men and women do not wish

to be painted as they are, but as they *think* they are. Flatter them cleverly enough, and you'll soon become what the world considers a successful artist. What a soul-stirring vocation! Your watchword through life shall be: "When I touch my patron's vanity I also touch his pocketbook."

"I'll never do that—not if I have to starve first!" I cried angrily.

But Martin only smiled unpleasantly and picked up his suitcase. With a curt nod, he turned and strode out of the room. A moment later I heard the outer door slam. He had gone.

IV

That same week Martin sailed for home. He left behind him his gruesome paintings which he bequeathed to me in a sarcastic note. I immediately removed those grisly masterpieces and hung up in their place some of my own work. At the time I was living a trifle beyond my means; and so, when I received what I then considered a handsome offer from Emile Verone for my roommate's morbid creations, I was glad enough to accept it. Of course I intended paying Martin the price I received for them at some future date—a date which, unfortunately, never materialized. These same paintings, I now understand, hang in the Louvre and are worth their weight in gold.

After Martin had left Paris, I began to look around for another roommate who would share my expenses.

One evening, as luck would have it, I happened to run into an old acquaintance at the Folies Bergere. He had wandered to Paris alone to amuse himself and was delighted at the prospect of living with a former college friend who knew the ropes.

Wilbur Huntington was a plump young man who had made quite a reputation for himself at the university. No one had ever caught him in the act of opening a book, yet he had always glided smoothly through the examinations. He was an anomaly to the professors who claimed that success required effort. His half-shut, sleepy, brown eyes, his bland smile, his round, expressionless face, quite belied the man's intelligence. Although he was lazy to a fault, his mind was as keen as a knife which had just visited the grindstone. I have never met his equal as a psychologist.

I was lucky to have fallen in with him. He came of a very wealthy New York family, who gave him a lavish income—an income which he was not slow in spending. Money meant little or nothing to him. During the months we roomed together we lived like fighting cocks.

There was nothing Huntington liked better than to fill our studio with Emile Verone's pupils and discuss art. He would start the ball rolling with some titbit of knowledge which he had picked up; start it rolling, and then sink back comfortably on the lounge, close his narrow-lidded eyes and smile blandly at the ceiling. He liked to hear the maniacs rave, as he expressed it. In the Latin Quarter he was called "Le Cochon d'Inde."

They facetiously brought him offerings of lettuce leaves which he devoured solemnly and rapaciously. The man's appetite was amazing.

With such a companion, the months sped by merrily. Occasionally I received a letter from home. It seemed that Paul had reformed, and that this reformation had been brought about through Martin. Apparently my former roommate had sought him out immediately on his return to America and had once more succeeded where others had failed. The letter, which informed me of this, was written by my mother. It ran as follows:

"My Dear Son: You will be glad to know that Paul has given up drinking. What a relief this has been to your father and me! We have been so worried about him since you left home! But now everything seems to be all right.

We owe Paul's reformation to your friend, Mr. Martin. He has a remarkable influence over the boy. And yet, somehow, I can't bring myself to like him. When he is in the room, I always feel as though I had a precious secret which I must keep from him at all cost. This is absurd, of course.

My dear boy, I am glad that you are getting along so well in your studies! I hope you will come home soon. Father has not been in good health lately. I believe he has been worrying over business affairs. Lovingly,
Mother."

At the time I did not give much heed to the last few lines of my mother's letter. Father had always been such a strong, robust man that I could not imagine him

sick. Death and failure seemed quite remote from him. And so, when I received a letter from Paul two months later, I was quite unprepared for what it had to tell me. The news which it contained was like a bolt from the blue. I quote it here:

"Dear Charley: Come home at once. Father died this morning, and we need you. Only yesterday I learned that the firm had failed. . Would write more, but mother is calling. Hurry home. Affectionately,
Paul."

"What's the trouble?" Huntington asked. He had come into the studio unnoticed and now stood at my elbow. What's the trouble?" he repeated. "You're as white as a ghost."

I tried to answer him but couldn't. Something clicked in my throat like a clock running down. I handed him the letter in silence.

"I don't know what to say," he muttered a moment later. "I'm awfully sorry, Charley. I want you to know that." He offered me his plump hand boyishly.

But I did not see it. There were weak, womanly tears in my eyes. Father was dead—not only dead but ruined! I had pictured to myself two more years in Paris and then a luxurious studio in New York; and now these air castles had crumbled in an instant. But what a selfish brute I was! Father had just died, and I was already thinking of myself. Martin had been right in his estimate of me.

"*The Marseillaise* sails to-morrow," Huntington said. "I'll hustle down and get our staterooms reserved."

"But surely you're not going to leave Paris?" I murmured. "I can make it all right by myself."

Huntington smiled sleepily. "Don't you worry about that," he answered. "I'm sick of Paris. When *you* go, *I* go. Besides, as you know, queer birds are my hobby; and I'm rather anxious to meet this chap, Martin, of whom you have told me so much."

On the following day we took passage for New York. The ocean was rather rough for that time of year; to my natural depression were added the qualms of seasickness. But on that trip I learned the true worth of the plump, sleepy man whom my associates of the Latin Quarter called "*Le Cochon d'Inde*". He was indefatigable in his efforts to cheer me up.

I found affairs at home even worse than I had imagined. My father had died a bankrupt. He had left nothing except the house which was heavily mortgaged and several debts incurred during his illness. These bills, added to the natural grief attending his death, had aged my mother at least ten years. I had, indeed, come home at the right moment if I could help.

My one pleasant surprise was Paul. He had matured considerably in the last few years. I found him looking splendidly—a handsome, capable fellow, if there ever was one. On the first night of my homecoming we had a long talk together after mother had gone to bed.

"They tell me you're not drinking any more, Paul?" I said casually.

"No," he answered with a grim smile. "I'm through with that stuff for good. Martin cured me."

"How did he go about it?" I asked.

"Oh, he showed me a few examples of what it could do to a fellow. You see he's living in the slums these days, and he has lots of opportunity to study drunks in their last stages."

"In the slums! Why does he live there?"

"He's gathering material for a book on murder—studying the criminal types close up. He says it pays to get first-hand knowledge of a subject. When I begin practicing law, he'll send me a lot of clients."

"When do you go up for your final examinations?"

"Next month—thanks to Martin. If it weren't for him, I'd probably be hitting the high life yet. But one night he collared me, dragged me over to his tenement, and introduced me to a bleary-eyed old chap who was fighting imaginary snakes. What a sight he was!" Paul passed his hands across his eyes as though to shut out a picture. "He had been a gentleman, too, in his day—a Harvard man, I believe. Any one could tell he wasn't an ordinary drunk by his ravings. He quoted a lot of poetry to keep off the snakes. Dante's *Inferno* I believe it was. Well, it cured me."

"I'm glad of that. But you mustn't give Martin all the credit. A great deal belongs to you."

"Not a bit," he answered with a rueful shake of the head. "Martin scared me into it. But what are you

going to do now, Charley? Are you going to paint portraits?"

"Yes, if I can get any sitters. I've got to look around a bit first. You don't know any wealthy beauty who wants to have her face immortalized?"

Paul rose yawning. "No," he answered. "But if I did, I don't think I'd hand her over to you until I had discovered if there weren't some legitimate, legal way of separating her from her cash."

The next day I began writing letters to former acquaintances with the hope that they might know of some one who was anxious to have a portrait painted by a pupil of the famous Emile Verone. I soon learned that I could hope for little from this source. Most of my college friends were so busy or so absent-minded that they failed to answer my note; and the few replies which I did receive were far from encouraging. Evidently the world at large was not at all interested in furthering the future of an aspiring young genius.

The pile of bills in my mother's desk grew higher day by day. I no longer dared to open them. My spirits were at very low ebb on the morning when I received a note from Wilbur Huntington which gave me a ray of hope. It ran as follows:

"Dear Charley: The mater wants her portrait painted. She's not much on looks, but she has a well-lined pocketbook. I have boosted you to the skies. She now thinks that you are a Van Dyke, a Whistler, and a Sargent, all in one. Call on her next Monday and make good. As ever,
Wilbur.

When I finished this hope-inspiring epistle, I uttered a whoop of joy which brought Paul out on the veranda in no time. "I've struck it at last," I cried.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Have you found a half-dollar or something?"

"I've found a good many half dollars," I answered gleefully. "I've been asked to do a portrait of Mrs. Huntington—you know, Wilbur Huntington's mother. It's the chance of a lifetime. If I make good, she'll recommend me to her society friends and it will be smooth sailing after that."

"Good man!" cried Paul. "You've struck it all right. But look here. I've got another surprise for you."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's a story by Martin," he answered. "They're featuring it this month in the Footstool magazine. Just look it over while I run downtown. I want your opinion of it. It's the first piece of work he's had published."

After Paul had gone, I opened the magazine. On the first page was an illustration by Martin himself. I recognized it instantly. It was a miniature of that first painting I had seen of his—that vivid conception of the girl lying dead in the snow. It had been improved by a few deft strokes of the brush so that now it was a veritable masterpiece of mystery. For a long moment I gazed at it while the well-remembered feeling of intense cold passed through my frame. At last, with

an effort, I turned the page. "The Murder of Mary Mortimer," was the title of the story.

"Some melodramatic nonsense, no doubt," I told myself and began to read.

But from the first page I knew that I was wrong—entirely wrong. I could not blind myself to the truth. If the man's illustration was gruesome and yet masterful, the man's story was diabolic and yet a classic.

As I read, I felt the same sensations stirring in me that the deformed idiot in Martin's story felt when the voice whispered in his ear: "You are losing her! Is it not better to have her dead?" And when he is driven by this voice to strike her down, when she falls like a red ruin in the snow, I saw that scene as though I were standing where the dark shadows of nightfall were closing in.

"I see you like my story," said a familiar voice.

I looked up with a start and encountered Martin's cold grey eyes. His thin lips were curling up at the corners in their wonted cat-like grimace. For a moment I experienced the unpleasant nervous shock of a somnambulist who is suddenly awakened.

"A remarkable story!" I said at length in a rather unsteady tone. "The most startlingly vivid piece of fiction I ever read! Surely you must have imagination to write like that?"

"On the contrary, not a grain of it. As I told you once before, there are countless themes drifting about and a man has only to get off the beaten path to find

them. Without exaggeration I can say that I have done so."

"Your story proves that," I assented. "But where did you get the idea?"

Again his lips writhed into an unpleasant smile. "That would be revealing my little secret," he murmured, wagging his head reprovingly at me. "A wise angler never tells where he caught his last trout."

"Your story is founded on truth?" I asked.

"It would seem so. A man without imagination cannot lie artistically."

"But I don't believe that even a weak-minded person could be turned into a murderer by mental suggestion. It's preposterous! That's the weak spot in your story, Martin."

He threw back his head and burst into a laugh—if you could call a series of sounds so inhuman a laugh. It was as hoarse and guttural as the cawing of a crow. At last he broke off and regarded me solemnly.

"Smithers," he said, "you amuse me. In fact, you are the one man in the world who can make me laugh."

By this time I was thoroughly aroused. This man's colossal egotism was unendurable. "You may laugh as much as you please," I cried, "but that isn't answering my criticism of your story. I repeat that mental suggestion cannot form even a weak-minded person into a murderer. Your tale doesn't ring true to life."

"Perhaps so," he murmured. "I thought that it could be managed by mental suggestion—under the

right circumstances, of course. But where is Paul this morning?"

"He went downtown," I said brusquely. "He probably won't be back for an hour or two."

"Well, I'll not wait. Tell him I called, won't you? Good-bye, Smithers."

For some time I sat watching his tall, lean figure receding in the distance. Finally I rose, and, moved by a sudden fit of childish irritation, picked up the magazine, entered the library, and deposited it carefully on a bed of glowing coals.

"It's better out of the way," I told myself. I never knew until years later how truly I had spoken.

V.

It was not long before Martin's prophecy about my career came true. Spurred on by adversity and a natural desire to please I soon became one of those flourishing society portrait painters who fatten on the vanity of women. Mrs. Huntington's picture did not suit her until I had touched it up to such an extent that her own son could not recognize any likeness. But when I had beautified her to her heart's content, she became enthusiastic and recommended me to all her wealthy friends. That was the beginning. Soon I had all I could do to fill the many orders which rained down on me. My work became the vogue—I was no longer a man but a fashion.

Prosperity brought the fulfillment of my youthful dreams. I was now able to rent and fit out one of the most artistic studios in Washington Square. But, in spite of this, I was far from happy. I had moments of deep depression when my work galled me cruelly—moments when the only spur that kept me going was the knowledge that before long I could retire and live a life of leisure.

Meanwhile Paul had passed his examinations to the bar and was actually practicing. No sooner had he hung out his shingle than he was besieged daily by a ragged multitude of clients whom he shrewdly suspected Martin had sent his way. A stream of villainous faces passed through his office at all hours—faces which one could imagine as being associated with every crime in the calendar. Paul had a keen mind; he soon developed into a criminal lawyer of exceptional reputation. His clients, in spite of their poverty-stricken appearance, paid him well for his services and he soon became affluent.

I saw a great deal of my brother at this time. We had become much closer friends. The four years which divided us, no longer seemed such an insurmountable barrier. Now he would often take me into his confidence.

There was only one topic on which we could not agree. Paul was still an ardent admirer of Martin; while I, although I had to acknowledge the man's gifts, loathed the very mention of his name. I could not forgive him his prophecy concerning my career. Yes,

that afternoon in Paris, he had told me what I would soon become. And because he had seen so clearly into the hidden recesses of my character, I felt that I would hate him till the end. It is primitive but human to resist the prying eyes of genius. The ego—that most precious possession of man—is outraged to find itself held up before the clear, steady flame of psychological insight.

Paul had a way of referring to Martin which was extremely annoying to me. He would repeat over and over again that he owed everything to him. It used to make me very angry to hear him belittle his own success by such a quixotic statement. Surely he owed a large measure of his practice to his own acuteness and perseverance. Often we would argue about it.

"Yes," Paul would say, glancing about his well-appointed library, "I owe all this to him. He cured me of drunkenness and sent me my clients."

"Nonsense! Perhaps he *did* help to cure you and perhaps he sent you a few clients; but if you hadn't had strength of will enough to leave the liquor alone and strength of mind enough to win the majority of your cases, his help wouldn't have amounted to much."

But Paul would shake his head obstinately and repeat: "He has done everything for me—everything."

And then I would generally lose my temper and express my true feelings. "How about that book he is writing? He may be able to make *you*, but he doesn't seem to be able to make himself. He's been

writing for over two years now and has had only one story in print. Won't the publishers take his work?"

Now Paul, in his turn, would flush angrily and his blue eyes would grow darker. "How should I know? He never talks about himself. But I'll tell you this, Charley—when his work is published, the whole world will know about it!"

Often, after one of these heated controversies, I would leave my brother's apartment in a temper and walk the streets for hours before I regained my habitual calm. It was on one of these midnight rambles that I met Martin, himself, under rather singular and sinister circumstances—circumstances which left a never-to-be-forgotten impression on my mind.

One mild March night I left Paul's apartment with rather more than my usual irritation. I was so heated, in fact, that I determined to walk it out of my system, if possible, before retiring. As I knew by former experience, a nocturnal ramble has a quieting effect on ruffled nerves. All the poor, petty passions of man flourish best between four walls. They are soon smothered in the sable robe of outer night.

It was a fine evening for a stroll. The aroma of budding spring was strong in the air—spring, that supple, green-limbed goddess whose presence is felt even in the cold, atrophied arteries of the city. A new moon hung lazily in the heavens, riding the small, silver clouds which swept past it like charging breakers. But the stars were not so fortunate. Often they were

submerged beneath these foam-flecked billows of the infinite, bobbing up again into view like floating lanterns.

As I walked along toward Washington Square, the irritation, which had been so real a moment before, vanished entirely. It was followed by an almost philosophic calm. I began to take myself to task.

Why should I interfere with Paul in his choice of friends? Surely he was old enough now to choose them for himself. Just because I happened to dislike Martin, that was no reason why I should attempt to influence my brother against him. And when it came to that, what had the fellow ever done to me that I should so hate the sound of his name? He had told me several truths hard to stomach, indeed; but no doubt they had been intended kindly as a warning. On the other hand, he had nursed me back to health when my life had hung in the balance. What had I ever done to thank him? Nothing—absolutely nothing. Well, I would turn over a new leaf; I would apologize to Paul for what I had said.

By this time I was within a few blocks of home. Seeing an inviting alley which I had not yet explored and which might prove to be a short cut, I wandered into it and into a strange adventure as well. Winding smoothly along for several hundred yards, it was so narrow and tortuous that the old brick houses on either side seemed to be twisted out of normal shape; to be tottering toward each other like drunkards about to

embrace. And then suddenly, almost violently, the alley ended in a precipitous, ivy-covered wall.

This wall brought me to an abrupt halt. I experienced a sensation of surprise, of chagrin. I had followed this alley as a man follows an odd and rather attractive philosophy, thinking that in due course it would bring me out into familiar, homely surroundings; and here was this disconcerting wall looming up like an abrupt and positive negative. I could not have been more unpleasantly surprised if a friend, while telling me a whimsical, fantastic tale, had suddenly dropped dead in the middle of a sentence. Indeed there was something brooding and brutal about this wall, like death itself.

The little street was as dark as a subterranean passageway. I might very easily have blundered into the wall without seeing it, had it not been for an antique, iron lantern which was suspended from it and which shed its flickering beams over its rough, red surface. The light, however, was not sufficient to make objects at a short distance discernable. For instance the houses on either side, and more especially their areaways, were in tottering, unstable shadow.

I came to an enforced halt near the wall and glanced at the house on my right. It seemed to me that the shadowy figure of a man was sitting on the stoop in the attitude of one who is patiently waiting; but I could not be sure of this as the mantle of gloom enshrouding the house was almost impenetrable. Whatever it was, it remained absolutely motionless.

I turned and was about to retrace my steps when I suddenly heard strange shuffling sounds. *Flip, flap, flip, flap*, the sounds grew nearer and nearer. And for some unaccountable reason I felt a flicker of fear. Through those hurrying footsteps, that flapping of worn-out leather on cobblestones, there sounded the warning of approaching danger. *Flip, flap, flip, flap*—it was like the frantic beating of terror-stricken wings.

I came to a halt and attempted to pierce the shadows in front of me. At the next moment, I stepped aside with a warning cry.

"Look out!" I shouted. "There's a wall in front of you."

But the man who ran swiftly past me, his head thrown back, his broken shoes flapping wildly on the cobblestones, could not stop himself in time. Into the wall he went at full speed; and then, rebounding like a rubber ball, toppled over on his back.

"Are you hurt?" I cried, running forward.

He was on his feet again by the time I reached him—on his feet and staring about him wildly. A ribbon of blood ran down his chin, losing itself in his grey, tangled beard; one of his knees had torn its way through the patched cloth and now projected arrogantly, a globule of raw flesh; his long, green coat, many sizes too big for him, flapped idly in the March breeze.

"Are you hurt?" I repeated, touching him on the arm.

He started and turned a pair of bloodshot eyes on

me. "Oh!" he said in a husky voice. "I thought you was one of 'em! I can see you ain't now. No, mister, there ain't much wrong with me."

"But that was quite a fall you took. It must have suaken you up. Look at your knee."

"To Hell with my knee!" he cried, shaking his head like a restive horse. "I got to get out of here, mister! Ain't there a gate in this wall? For mercy's sake, get me out of here before the boss and his gang show up!"

"Who's the boss and his gang?" I asked, intending to humor him till I ascertained whether he were drunk or mad. "I'm sure everything will be all right."

"Don't you hear 'em?" he broke in, cocking his head on one side. "Don't you hear 'em? They're comin' for me now!"

Indeed I *did* hear a confused, muffled thudding in the distance which gradually grew louder, approaching with the swiftness of hurrying feet. "Probably the police," I thought to myself. "This fellow has robbed some one and is trying to make a get-a-way."

Suddenly I felt his hand on my arm. He was shaking me violently. "It's them!" he cried. "Give me a boost up on the wall, mister! Give me a leg up and I'll fool 'em yet!"

But I shook his hand from my arm. My suspicions had now become a certainty. I was not the man to help a criminal escape. I respected the laws of my country too much to see them cheated by this villainous scarecrow in his flapping green coat. If he had

attempted to climb the wall, I believe I would have detained him "till his pursuers arrived.

"You'd better stay here quietly and face the music," I said sternly. "If you break the laws, you've got to answer for it."

At that he swung away from me and limped toward one of the dark houses. "Maybe I can get in here," he muttered.

By now the thudding of a dozen pairs of feet echoed through the alley. They could not be more than a hundred yards away and they were coming fast. I saw the man stop at the bottom step of the shadowy stoop; I saw a dark figure rise slowly to its feet above him—the figure which before I had been unable to make sure of because of the gloom—and then I heard a strange conversation which I shall never be able to forget.

"Let me in your house, mister!" cried the man in the green coat. "Quick! They're comin' up the alley now! For God's sake, open the door and let me in!"

Then I heard a low laugh which rasped on my nerves like sand-paper. "I'm sorry," said a vaguely familiar voice, "but I don't happen to have the key."

What followed then is like the half-remembered figments of a dream. I saw the man in the green coat leap back as though he had come into violent contact with another wall; I heard him scream out like an animal in pain; and the next instant, he was on his knees beside me, clasping me about the waist with emaciated arms.

"Don't let 'em hurt me, mister!" he muttered. "Don't let 'em hurt me! The boss thinks I'm going to blab! Tell him——"

The rest of his words were swept away by a storm of men dashing towards us—not policemen, as I had thought, but ragged men with caps drawn down over their eyes; men flourishing cudgels with now and then the sickly gleam of a knife flashing through them like lightning in a forest. For an instant they hovered over us like a breaking wave and then we were overwhelmed and dragged apart.

I heard a shrill scream, a dull thudding of blows falling on flesh, and then a cracking sound as though a solid substance had been shattered. At that I struggled and cried out. The next instant a sickening pain closed my eyes—I knew nothing more.

VI

When I regained consciousness it was to find myself stretched out on the pavement at the foot of the wall. Above my head, the antique iron lantern cast its feeble beams at the impenetrable ebony breast of night. I felt instinctively that some one was standing within a few feet of me, but I lacked the strength of will to sit up.

"How do you feel now?" a familiar voice asked.

Turning my head with difficulty, I saw that a man stood near me, leaning up against the wall in an

attitude of nonchalant unconcern. There was something in this man's air of easy indifference which was galling in the extreme. Weak as I was, I managed to sit up and rub my head.

"Oh come now, Smithers," the voice continued unfeelingly, "you've been playing dead long enough. That was the merest tap you got—nothing to make a fuss about. They're all gone now. It's quite safe to stage a resurrection."

And now I knew the voice. Who but Martin could show such an utter lack of human feeling? There he stood, as indifferent as Fate, the lamp light accentuating the dark hollows under his eyes and revealing the cruel catlike curve of his lips. Like a pleased spectator at some farce, he leaned against the wall, smiling and playing absently with a small silver-headed cane.

"So it's you, Martin," I said, rising weakly to my feet. "How did you happen to find me?"

"I didn't," he answered carelessly. "On the contrary, you found me. I was sitting on the stoop of my house when you and your friend began quarreling."

"You were the man on the stoop then," I muttered. "I remember now. But what happened to that poor fellow in the green coat?"

"Your friend?" he asked.

"He was no friend of mine. I never saw him before. But what happened to him? You must have seen what happened to him?"

"He's lying over there," Martin said lightly, jerking his pointed chin over his shoulder. "And he's not

playing dead, Smithers. You and your other friends finished him off to the queen's taste."

"My other friends?" I cried, putting my hand to my throbbing head. "Who do you mean?"

"Why, all those impulsive gentlemen who came charging down the street a few minutes ago," he answered, "those gentlemen armed with clubs. What a devil's tattoo they did play on that poor fellow's ribs! He's nothing but a bag of broken bones now, Smithers."

"They were no friends of mine!" I cried angrily.

"No?" he said, raising his eyebrows whimsically. "You seemed rather anxious to keep that poor fellow here till they had played their little game with him. If you had boosted him up on the wall, as he wanted, no doubt he'd be alive this minute."

"Surely he's not dead, Martin?" I asked with a heavy heart. "Don't tell me that he's dead!"

"As dead as a doornail," he answered laconically. "But look for yourself."

He stepped to one side and I saw something which a moment before had been hidden by his shadow. The body of the man in the green coat seemed suddenly to spring out of the gloom. There it lay, like a scarecrow which has been blown over on its face—a grotesque, inhuman figure huddled up against the wall. And from it, dark running puddles of blood crawled away, leaving strange, fern-like traceries on the dusty pavement. Yes, he was undoubtedly dead. Only the green coat seemed still alive. One of its tails stirred slightly as the strong March breeze eddied about it.

And as I looked at this pitiful broken thing which a few minutes before had been so shaken by fear, horror and remorse made me forget my aching head. Martin was right; I had held his life in my two hands and I had let it fall! Why had I not helped him to climb the wall? Why had I been so sure that the police were his pursuers? What a fool I had been! And now I could never forgive myself—never!

"Are you satisfied?" Martin asked. "Personally I should call it a rather thorough job. Look at the back of his head. Your friends, Smithers, seem to be as workmanlike as they are impulsive."

Shuddering, I turned my back on the corpse. "Please don't joke about a thing like that!" I cried. "Haven't you any mercy? I'm too sick to listen to you! I feel as though I were responsible for this!"

"You are, Smithers. Don't let your natural modesty blind you to the truth. Fully two-thirds of the credit belongs to you. But you'll allow me the privilege of writing it up, won't you? I need just one more story to complete my book and this seems excellent material."

"Did you recognize any of the murderers?" I asked.

"Only you, Smithers."

"Don't joke, Martin! I mean would you recognize any of them if you should see them again?"

"No doubt," he answered carelessly. "I never forget faces. As I told you once before, my memory makes up for my lack of imagination. But I would advise you to get away before the police come. You'll be mixed up in an unpleasant affair if you don't."

"How so?"

"Well, you carried a heavy cane. Now it is broken in half. This man has been beaten to death. You are found near the body with a wound on your head."

"And you?"

"Why, I live on this street, Smithers. There is some reason why I should be here, while there is no reason under the sun why a society portrait painter should be found up a miserable, blind alley at midnight. If nothing more, it would cause considerable newspaper notoriety which I don't think would do you any good with your wealthy patrons."

"But I can't sneak out of it like this," I said weakly. "I feel that I'm too much to blame. That poor fellow might have got away if I hadn't been such a suspicious fool."

"Don't take all this so much to heart, Smithers," Martin murmured with one of his enigmatic smiles. "After all, what is one human life more or less? They are like ants, such men—only not so industrious. This fellow perished to-night in a good cause—for art's sake, indeed, for I intend to make the description of his murder a masterpiece."

"You're not human, Martin," I said, turning away. "However, I think I'll accept your advice and be off before the police come."

"I knew you would," he said triumphantly. "One can always depend on you, Smithers."

"And what are *you* going to do?"

"Why, I have modeled myself after the moon," he

cried, raising his cane and pointing fantastically at the heavens. "She and I will keep watch over the dead. My cold sister, I call her. She is wise, Smithers, horribly wise—so wise, indeed, that nothing can change the sad serenity of her face. Think of what she has seen, while looking down; think of the plains dotted with the slain and the purple rivers of blood that she has seen, and then wonder at the calmness of that white face in the sky! Leave the dead to Martin and the moon, Smithers—leave them to Martin and the moon!"

I did not answer him—dizziness and nausea were stealing over me. My only thought was to escape from this dark alley before the police came. Martin's wild words seemed a fitting climax to such a ghastly business.

At the first bend in the alley I cast a hurried glance over my shoulder. Martin still stood where I had left him, his cane pointing fantastically at the moon, his eyes on the corpse which huddled close to the wall as though seeking an outlet. And the antique, iron lantern dropped its petals of pale, yellow light, like a dying sunflower, on the glistening pavement where tiny, fern-like patterns of crimson were stealing noiselessly away.

VII

For several days following my adventure in the alley, I was confined to my bed. The blow that

I received had inflicted a severe scalp wound which called for medical attention; while, added to this, the unnatural excitement had brought me to the verge of a breakdown. At night I was subjected to horrible dreams from which I awoke bathed in a copious sweat.

On the day after the murder I scanned the papers eagerly. My curiosity was finally rewarded by the following paragraph:

BEATEN TO DEATH

Early this morning the body of a man was found at the foot of the wall which terminates Tyndall Place. His death was caused by the heavy blows of some blunt instrument. As yet the body has not been identified.

I laid the paper down with a sigh. So this was all the publicity the *Evening Star* thought such a ghastly business to be worth! What had shaken me to the depths of my soul, the *Evening Star* could dismiss in a few lines. I had expected to see the affair written up on the first page with perhaps a full-length picture of the man in the green coat. And I had found it only with difficulty, hidden away among the advertisements. How different it would have been had the victim possessed social prominence or even a moderate income! Then he would have come into his own on the front page in big, glaring type; a host of detectives would by now be hot on the trail of his assassins and the wheels of justice would soon be humming merrily, grinding into chaff those impulsive gentlemen, as Mar-

tin called them, who had broken simultaneously the skull of the green-coated man and the Fifth Commandment.

Martin! Evidently he had disappeared from the scene before the police arrived. Otherwise some allusion to him would have appeared in that article. No doubt he, like myself, had avoided getting himself mixed up in the affair on account of the unpleasant newspaper notoriety which was sure to follow. But why could he not have said as much to me? That was like the man—to hide his own frailties under mine; to make it appear that he was going to face the music, while in reality he was only waiting till my back was turned before he beat a hasty retreat. Well, hereafter, I would take what he said with a grain of salt. In spite of his insufferable air of egotism, he evidently had human weaknesses like the rest of us.

For the duration of that week I rested till I regained my mental and physical equilibrium. I had several callers, including Huntington, to whom I told in confidence what had befallen me in the alley. Wilbur listened with more than his customary attention, his eyes half closed and his blunt, shapeless nose twitching slightly. It was at times like these that one appreciated thoroughly the aptness of his sobriquet. Never have I seen a man who so closely resembled a guinea pig.

"Martin must be an unfeeling sort of chap," he muttered when I had finished. "You say he didn't seem to be at all disturbed by what had happened?"

"Not the least bit in the world," I assured him.

"Why, he began joking about it! You'd think he was used to seeing murders every night."

"Used to seeing murders every night!" Huntington repeated thoughtfully. "What an idea!"

"That's the impression he'd give any one. There's something not quite human about the man."

"You must bring us together, Charley," Wilbur said abruptly. "I've taken an interest in him. Psychology is my hobby, you know. Burgess Martin seems worth studying. If I weren't so infernally lazy, I'd look him up in that slum where he lives. Why was I born so lazy, Charley?"

"I don't know. Possibly you'd be a menace to society if you weren't. Your pleasing plumpness and hibernating habits are the bars of your hutch. Within, you nibble contentedly at your lettuce leaves; but, once out, you might turn carnivorous."

"A guinea pig turn carnivorous?" he said, rising. "It isn't done. But I imagine I could have much more fun with my hobby if I weren't so lazy. If crimes were committed in my back yard, I feel that I would be a famous detective. Why is it that I have a kind honest man for a valet when I long for one who has all the subtle instincts of those famous poisoners of the Renaissance?"

"Personally I should prefer the kind, honest valet, Wilbur. You can eat your lettuce leaves without the fear that they may be colored with Paris green."

"Well, at any rate, introduce me to Martin, Charley. I'm very anxious to meet him."

But Huntington was not the only one of my acquaintances who wished to meet Martin. His story, "The Murder of Mary Mortimer," had excited the interest and the admiration of a young writer who lived in the same apartment house as myself. During the last few months we had become friends; and when he learned that I had roomed with Martin in Paris, he was eager to know him.

Rupert Farrington was one of those young visionaries to be found in the bohemian quarter of any large city. Tall and slender, with large melancholy blue eyes and a girlish coloring, one had but to glance at him to realize that here was a dreamer who was incapable of crystallizing his dreams into a concrete form. There was something disconcertingly vague about his personality; one could forget his presence in the room as though he had no more mental or physical substance than a shadow. And yet, in spite of his apparent weakness, there were fiery depths in his nature capable of being roused into a storm. He loved his art passionately. Although he had never had anything accepted, he still worked on grimly with a firm belief that the editors were at fault. In fact he visualized these magazine monarchs, as he called them, as a kind of unscrupulous aristocracy which should be torn down. He spent his time writing, receiving rejection slips, and railing at the man in the editorial chair. His voice, even when raised, impressed no one—it was like the droning of a harmless fly.

"The Murder of Mary Mortimer" still held this

young man's fancy in an iron grip. He had a copy of the magazine in which it had appeared, now torn and smudged by countless readings, and I often found 'him' poring over it when he thought he was unnoticed. He could quote whole paragraphs of it from memory; and often, when we had a studio soirée, he would be called upon for a ghastly recitation from those well-thumbed pages.

On the day following my nocturnal adventure, he dropped in to see me. As usual, he began to praise Martin to the skies. The unpleasant experience through which I had passed, coupled with the hearty detestation I entertained for my former roommate, made any allusion to the man almost unendurable. It was all I could do to keep a civil tongue in my cheek while the young fool raved.

"You seem to have Martin on the brain," I said when I could get a word in edgewise. "A man can't be called a genius just because he has written one fairly decent magazine story."

"Fairly decent!" Farrington cried, his large eyes flashing dangerously. "Why, it's a masterpiece, Smithers! It stands alone in literature! It is a picture painted with words, remorseless, vivid——"

"And extremely morbid," I broke in. "That's probably the reason he's never been able to land any of his other work. The magazine editors know that the public doesn't want to be fed up on horrors. Martin's writings, like his paintings, aren't healthy. They shouldn't be printed."

Farrington glared at me for a moment in speechless anger. In the same breath, I had committed two unpardonable offenses—I had criticized Martin's work unfavorably, and I had spoken well of magazine editors. He could not have been more thoroughly aroused if I had slapped him in the face.

"I didn't expect to hear anything like this from *you*," he said at length in a voice which he attempted to make calm. "You had the rare privilege of living with him in Paris, and yet you seem to have absorbed nothing of his Spartan philosophy. Wasn't it Oscar Wilde who said: 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all.' "

"If I were an editor, I wouldn't publish any of his stories," I said stubbornly. "I'll make you a little bet right here and now—I bet you'll never see any more of his work in print."

"I'll take that," Farrington said, rising. "You're forgetting, Smithers, that there's another road to the public besides the magazine route. Martin's next thing may be a novel or a book of short stories."

"Perhaps," I answered, "but I'll not retract. On the contrary, I'll make another bet with you. I'll bet you that if he *does* publish anything, some day you'll wish that you hadn't wasted your time reading it."

"What do you want to bet?"

"I'll lay a hundred on both."

"All right; I'll take both," he said with a con-

temptuous laugh. "Martin couldn't write anything that wasn't worth reading. Good night, Smithers."

"You're young yet," I called after him. "Some day you may outgrow this silly hero-worship."

"I might live to be a thousand," he said over his shoulder, "but I'll never regret reading Martin."

Both Farrington and I were to remember those parting words of his on a certain dramatic occasion several years later. But at the time, they seemed of no more importance than the crackling of dry shells underfoot.

VIII

Although I religiously scanned the papers for the next month or so, I found no further reference to the murder of the man in the green coat. No doubt the police considered the solution of such an insignificant mystery scarcely worth their best efforts; and the press, siding with them and quite indifferent as to the fate of the victim, very obligingly let the matter drop. The old saying, "Murder will out," like many another old saying, has little or no foundation of truth. It is a matter for speculation as to how many unsolved murder mysteries, like submerged derelicts, are buried deep under the waters of time.

After my week's vacation I returned to work, refreshed in body and mind. There were several portraits which had to be finished before I received the generous checks that they were thought to be worth.

For the next month I was so busy that I had no time to brood over the tragedy. However, I was not yet done with the man in the green coat, as future events proved.

One night, fully two months after my adventure, Paul dropped in to see me. He had come to find out why I had not visited him since our last altercation. I had left his house in such a rage on that never-to-be-forgotten evening that he feared an estrangement in our relations might grow out of this silly quarrel. He came to straighten matters out.

"I can't help liking the man, Charley," he said, regarding me with his steady blue eyes. "Of course, if you'd rather not have me talk about him when we are together, I won't. He seems to be an inflammatory topic of conversation between us."

"I think it just as well if we don't argue about him," I agreed. "He rubs me the wrong way, Paul."

"Then we will say nothing more about him."

"Very well."

But Paul and I were soon to realize that such a compact was impossible to keep. Hardly had we agreed to it, before the studio door was pushed violently open and Rupert Farrington strode in. His face was flushed, his hair stood on end, his eyes were shining with excitement. He flourished a volume bound in red morocco under my nose as though it were some kind of new and deadly weapon.

"I win, Smithers!" he cried excitedly. "I win!"

My first thought was that the young poet had gone mad. There he stood, coatless, collarless, hatless—a

pair of pink worsted slippers adorning his flat feet, his flannel shirt open at his bony throat—waving the book about his head as though it were a tomahawk. No doubt Paul would think that such an apparition was quite a customary sight in Washington Square. I glanced at him and saw that his lips were twitching in their attempt to restrain a smile.

"You're not much of a prophet, Smithers," Farrington continued excitedly. "I told you there were more ways than one of finding recognition."

I haven't the slightest idea what you're driving at, Rupert," I said reprovingly. "Your words and your gestures convey nothing to my mind. If you will kindly refrain from dashing my brains out with that crimson tome, I'll introduce you to my brother."

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" Farrington muttered, evidently seeing Paul for the first time. "Glad to meet you, I'm sure. This book got me so worked up that I'm not quite myself."

"I'm very pleased to meet you," Paul murmured in the tone of a man saying: "Oh, don't mind me! I know this is bohemia—so be just as wild as you want."

"Now sit down, Rupert," I continued, "and explain what you mean. You say that you win. *What* do you win? You say that I am a poor prophet. When did I ever prophesy to you?"

Farrington seated himself and smiled triumphantly. "I win a hundred dollars from you," said he. "And I win it, because you made a false prophecy about Burgess Martin."

Paul and I started and interchanged glances. We had just agreed to drop the man's name from our conversation; yet here it was, popping up again with the obstinacy of a cork submerged for an instant under water! Evidently we could not so easily dismiss him from our intercourse as we had imagined.

"What has Burgess Martin to do with it?" I asked sharply.

"Everything," Farrington replied. "His book, 'Many Murders,' is being brought out by the Brainsworth Publishing Company next week. I have an advance copy which Williamson of the *Evening Star* loaned me. I believe you made a little bet, Smithers, that Martin wouldn't get any more of his work into print. I brought this book along as proof."

As he finished, he handed me the volume bound in red morocco. I had a feeling of extreme irritation as I examined it—an irritation which did not spring solely from the fact that I had just lost a bet. Any allusion to Martin was like the lash of a whip falling on my sensitive self-pride.

"So he has succeeded in having his work published at last," I muttered.

"And I feel that it will be a classic!" Paul cried enthusiastically.

"Don't be too sure of that," I replied. "It's more likely to be highly sensational melodrama. 'Many Murders!' Why, the thing bears the hallmark of the dime novel!"

Farrington flushed angrily. "You're wrong,

Smithers," said he. "The Brainsworth Publishing Company doesn't bring out dime novels."

"But I presume you'll acknowledge that even the Brainsworth Publishing Company can make mistakes. We'll see what the critics have to say about it."

Farrington burst out into a laugh. "That's like you, Smithers. You'd never acknowledge anything was good till a band of learned asses told you so. Have you ever heard of Sir Vivian Gerard?"

"The famous London critic? Of course! Who hasn't?"

"Well, the Brainsworth Publishing Company sent the manuscript of 'Many Murders' to him for his opinion. He wrote a glowing review of it which they are now using for advertising purposes. Here's a selection from it which they enclosed with each review copy."

Farrington fumbled in his pocket and drew out a small wrinkled sheet of printed matter. Adjusting his spectacles on his bony nose, he began to read the review. It ran as follows:

"A MASTER OF HORROR.

"It gives me great pleasure to introduce to the world an undoubted master of the horror tale. Not since the days of Poe has America produced such a consummate craftsman. I do not hesitate to say that even the immortal creator of 'The Gold Bug' had not the power of description which makes Burgess Martin's work unforgettable.

"'Many Murders'—Mr. Martin's first book—is a

masterpiece of the terrible. Simple, direct, quite free from any attempt to mystify the reader, each one of these weird sketches stands out like a finely carved cameo. While reading them, one thrills to a sensation of the actual. It is almost as though the reader were an eyewitness of those scenes which have flowed so vividly from their creator's fertile imagination. Morbid they may be; but, for all that, they deserve a lasting place in modern fiction."

"What have you got to say to that, Charley?" Paul cried.

"Not a thing," I answered a trifle shamefacedly. "When Sir Vivian Gerard makes such a statement, it is not for me to contradict. Have you read the book, Rupert?"

"Yes," said Farrington enthusiastically. "I read it last night and I couldn't get to sleep till morning. There's one sketch in it which I think is even better than 'The Murder of Mary Mortimer.'"

"What's that?" Paul asked.

"He calls it 'In a Blind Alley.' It's the last sketch in the book."

"What's the theme?" I inquired with a sudden suspicion of the truth.

"It hasn't a plot or any conventional theme," Farrington replied rather contemptuously. "The narrator sees a man beaten to death by a band of thugs. There's a kind of bitter irony running through it. The victim pleads with the narrator to help him over the high brick wall which terminates the street—his pursuers

are right on his heels, you understand—but the narrator is a conventional fool who, because the victim wears rags, thinks that he must be a crook trying to escape from the police. He refuses to help; a crowd of thugs dash up; and it's all over with the poor devil. By the way, Smithers, that chap who wouldn't help the other reminds me of you."

"Thanks," I murmured with a wildly beating heart. "Perhaps I would have acted so under the same circumstances. But I don't see anything remarkable about that story."

"It isn't the theme!" cried Farrington impatiently. "It's the way it's treated. Why, you can see the whole thing—the obstinate stone wall partly illumined by an antique lantern; the poor, cowering wretch, on his hands and knees, begging for mercy; and then the mob, with their cudgels, approaching like a many-headed monster. But the death of the man in the green coat! How vivid that is! You can see him squirming beneath a forest of clubs, you can hear the dull thudding blows! And when it's all over, when the many-headed monster crawls back into its lair, you have a vivid impression of the scene—the body crumpled up against the wall, the moon peering down with her enigmatic smile, and the conventional fool striding off before the police come, to avoid unpleasant notoriety."

"And what happened to Martin?" I cried out incautiously. "Didn't he sneak away, too?"

"Martin?" said Paul. "Why, what do you mean, Charley? This is only a story!"

"To be sure," I said with a forced laugh. "Rupert told it so vividly that it made me forget. Lend me the book, will you?"

"Certainly, Smithers," Farrington answered, eyeing me curiously. "I'll be very glad to have you read it. At last you seem to be interested in Martin. You'd better read it to-night while you're in the right mood."

I acted on his suggestion. After he and Paul had gone, I took up "Many Murders" and turned to the last story. There it was, my adventure in the alley, so vivid, so remorseless, that it was as though I were living once again those terrible moments. And as I read on, great drops of sweat gathered on my forehead—gathered there and trickled down into my smarting eyes. Martin had indeed succeeded in painting a picture with words.

IX

"Many Murders" set the whole literary world agog for several months. Critical articles concerning it appeared in all the leading newspapers and magazines. It is to be noted that none of these referred to it as an average work of fiction. No, this volume of sketches was called a masterpiece or else the sensational nightmare of a disordered brain.

Soon the public became excited and bought the book by the thousands, thereby proving that Martin had been right when he had said that his stories would prove popular. Sir Vivian Gerard wrote an article for one of the periodicals in which he claimed that

it was the first classic to become a best-seller immediately after publication.

Farrington kept me well posted as to the success of Martin's book. Not contented with winning his bet, he had an irritating way of gloating over my discomfort. If "Many Murders" had been his own work, he could not have taken a greater pride in its reception by the world.

He would drop into the studio of an evening with a laudatory criticism of the book. "Well, when will you acknowledge that you have lost the other bet too, Smithers?" he would ask.

"What other bet?"

"Why, the bet you made the other day that at some future date I would regret having read Martin's work."

"Oh, I'd forgotten about it. But I won't have to pay that bet for a long time. You might regret having read Martin's work when you were on your deathbed."

"Don't be a piker, Smithers. Name some definite date."

"Oh, very well. Let's say about twenty years from now."

"You *are* a piker, Smithers. But have it your own way."

I saw very little of Martin during the months which followed the publication of his book. Sometimes I met him at Paul's apartment where, in spite of the fact that he was now one of the shining literary lights of the world, he was a frequent visitor. Naturally I

avoided him whenever I could. Beside my inherent repulsion for the man which had grown since our adventure in the alley, I felt instinctively that he was laughing inwardly to see his prophecy about my career turning out to be so true.

One bright October afternoon, Paul and Martin paid me a visit. As chance would have it, the studio door stood ajar and they entered without the formality of a knock. At the moment I was retouching a portrait of Mrs. Vanderveer, a prominent figure in the society world, and was so intent on my work that I did not notice their presence till Martin spoke.

"And who is that supposed to be?" he asked in his cold impersonal way.

At the sound of his voice I started like a guilty schoolboy. "Mrs. Vanderveer," I muttered. "But it isn't finished yet."

"Really?" said he. "I've known her for some time. My sight must be failing."

"No, it's not that!" I cried bitterly. "I know it looks no more like her than her own daughter! But a man must live!"

Martin eyed me ironically and his lips curled up at the corners. "That's what people think down on my street," he murmured. "It's a fine old saying, and many a brave man has adorned the end of a rope because of it."

"Cut out the shop talk!" Paul broke in, seeing the embarrassment and hot anger written on my face. "Burgess and I are going on a little trip to the Maine

Woods. We've both got a vacation coming to us."

"When do you leave?" I asked, turning my back on Martin.

"Saturday morning. It will be corking in the woods now. We should get some good shooting. Why don't you join us, Charley?"

"No, I've a lot of work on hand. I've got to finish five portraits by Christmas. Remember me, Paul, if you get a buck and smuggle a few nice steaks back with you. You know how I like venison."

Although I was not looking at Martin when I refused Paul's invitation, I felt instinctively that he was pleased to know that I would not accompany them. And so what was my surprise when he seconded by brother's proposal. There was a genuine ring in his voice which I had never heard before.

"You'd better come, Smithers," he said. "An artist should find delight in the woods at this time of year. The foliage will be ablaze with color. You'll regret it if you don't come, Smithers."

I stared at him in amazement. There was a propitiatory air about the man, quite foreign to his usual manner. It was almost as though he were pleading with me to go.

What possible reason could he have for applying balm to my wounded sensibilities at this late date? Well, I would give him a taste of his own medicine—I would show him, once and for all, that I was not the sort of man one could take liberties with and then expect to jog along behind at a kind word like a

whipped dog. He might have won the fawning flattery of the world, but he could not win my esteem if he were the most masterful writer of all time. What was a genius, after all, but a mental abnormality—a creature bordering on insanity and tolerated only because it could amuse? Was not a keen, capable man of affairs on a far higher plane? Healthy thought, irrespective of its originality, to my mind, at least, was preferable to those brilliant poisonous inspirations which sprout from the oozing mire without apparent source and are called the fruits of genius.

"No, Martin," I said coldly, "your blazing, autumnal foliage does not tempt me. As you have often said, I am preëminently a society portrait painter who takes more pleasure in rustling bank-notes than in rustling leaves. I've got to stay here and stick to business."

His long, lean face which had worn a strange, almost wistful expression, suddenly stiffened into its habitual sneering aloofness. "Very well, Smithers," he said quietly. "Have it your own way. Stay home and stick to business. Let's be going, Paul."

"I'm sorry you won't come with us, Charley," Paul said, gripping my hand in leavetaking. "I'll not forget what you said about venison. We'll be back in two months, Charley."

XVI

After they had left the studio, I strode to one of the windows and looked out. A moment later I saw them

on the street. They were walking side by side. As never before, the contrast between the two men caused me a sensation of amazement. Paul was so flushed with health, so alive, so virile; Martin, gliding beside him with a catlike tread, his sallow face turned toward me, was so ethereal by comparison, so ghostlike, so unwholesome! It was as though Life and Death were walking in the bright October sunshine.

"That man is like an evil shadow," I muttered. "What can Paul see in him? Surely they won't stay up in the woods for two months. Paul will grow tired of it before then and come home."

Several days after Paul and Martin had left the city, I went out of town for a week-end with Wilbur Huntington. He had a country place on Long Island; and we spent Saturday, Sunday, and the better part of Monday, sauntering about a nearby golf course and sipping cool drinks afterward in the shade of the veranda.

On Monday afternoon Wilbur insisted on driving me into town in his racing car. I arrived at the studio in due course, wind-swept and dusty, with the dazed feeling of one who has been shot through space with the velocity of a falling star. Huntington's laziness did not extend to his motor. He had entered it in the Vanderbilt Cup and I was confident that afternoon that it had every chance of winning.

I was attempting to get some of the Long Island dust out of my eyes, when I heard a loud knocking on the

studio door. "Come in," I shouted. "I'm washing up. I'll be there in a moment."

My caller proved to be Rupert Farrington. He did not wait for me to complete my ablutions, but hurried into the bathroom and handed me a telegram.

"It came while I was at lunch," he explained. "You told me that you'd be home for dinner, so I signed the book for you."

"I'm much obliged," I answered, drying my hands. "It's probably from Mrs. Dyer. She's been pestering me to death about having her portrait finished before Christmas. This will be her third telegram."

"It must be a wonderful feeling to know that one is so necessary to society at large," Rupert said unpleasantly. "You're a lucky dog, Smithers. But I've got to be going. Drop in and see me when art's not beckoning."

I made a rather careful toilet before I opened the yellow envelope. Telegrams were no novelty to me. I had learned by bitter experience that a certain class of women send them with no more urgent reason than so many children scribbling notes behind their teacher's back.

At last I strode back into the studio where the red light from the setting sun touched one of the canvases as though with fire. Striding to the window, I tore open the telegram and glanced at it. The next instant it fluttered from my hand to the floor.

"Good God!" I muttered.

Unconsciously I looked down at the piece of yellow

paper which lay in a band of crimson light that seemed to stain it as though with blood. The black letters leaped up from it into my brain. Once more I read their purport:

"Paul is dead. Am bringing him home on the four-fifteen.
MARTIN."

"Paul is dead," I repeated. But it meant nothing to me then—nothing! It seemed as impossible as the wildest dream. Like a tongue-tied actor attempting to make his lines clear and convincing, I repeated those few words over and over again: "Paul is dead—Paul is dead."

But still that thin partition standing between me and the realization of the truth, resisted the dull pounding of those hammerlike words. And suddenly a brain-numbing fear stole over me, a fear that I could never be more than a puppet which had been wound up to repeat endlessly that meaningless phrase: "Paul is dead."

"Come now!" I told myself. "You must make yourself realize what this telegram means. You must suffer. It is right that you should suffer. Other men would suffer in your place. Can you not understand? Paul is dead!"

But still that thin partition was standing bravely against those hammerlike words. And wonderingly, fearfully, like a child in the dark, I looked out over the city.

X

The sun was slowly setting far away over those dingy housetops which were like uneven stepping-stones above the murmur of a brook. The sky hung over them like a sea of blood dotted here and there with floating islands of ice. Somewhere in the distance the shrill voice of a siren drifted, melancholy, forlorn, tearing its way like a projectile through a muttering multitude of other sounds. Surely it was pain incarnate—pain which I sought and which evaded me.

And as I gazed wonderingly at the passionate sky, a thought edged its way into my benumbed brain. Surely it was after five o'clock. What was it that this yellow, wrinkled piece of paper at my feet warned me of? Something which Martin was bringing home on the four-fifteen. It was already an hour past that time. But what was this inanimate thing of which he spoke? Why, it was Paul—my brother Paul, dead, already cold—Paul who had joked and laughed with me, who had fought and forgiven me—Paul!

And like a weary swimmer who has dived from a high cliff into the sea, slowly true realization fought its way up through the dark depths. I was no longer a mere puppet, squeaking a meaningless phrase. Pain was born in an instant—blinding, unbearable pain.

Paul was dead! I, who had known him so intimately, who had loved him so dearly, realized that fully now. Striding to and fro, quite careless of the furniture

which stood in my way, hearing nothing, seeing nothing, knowing nothing but this unforgettable fact, I was driven back and forth by the painful lash of memory like a wild animal in its cage.

I do not know how long I wandered aimlessly about the room. Suddenly I was brought to normal consciousness by loud knocking on the studio door.

"Come in," I muttered. "Come in."

The door opened and Martin strode swiftly into the room. In spite of my abnormal mental condition, I could not help noticing his altered appearance. The man seemed to have grown years older in those few short days. His face was heavily lined and as gray as a death's head; the whites of his eyes were threaded with tiny crimson veins as though from prolonged weeping; and his voice was as hoarse as the cawing of a crow.

"How's this?" he asked. "Didn't you get my telegram?"

I pointed mutely to where it lay on the floor and once more began to pace the room.

"Well, why didn't you meet me?" he cried angrily. "But it's like you to dodge all your responsibilities!"

"Where is Paul?" I asked dully.

"I've had him taken to his apartment. Go there and you'll find him."

"I'll go right away," I said weakly. "Wait till I get my hat."

"Don't you want to know how he was killed?" he cried in a kind of rage. "I bring your only brother

home dead and you treat the whole affair as a matter of course! Why, common curiosity should prompt you to ask a few questions!"

"You don't understand me, Martin," I said with a brave attempt at dignity. "What do I care about such details now? He's dead—that's all I care to know. Later, perhaps. Poor old Paul! If I'd gone with him——"

But Martin interrupted me with a quick, authoritative gesture. "Listen, Smithers," he ordered. "It happened this way: Our guide had a gallon of whisky. Paul began drinking again heavily. You know how it was when the stuff was in reach; he simply couldn't resist it. I tried to reason with him, but it wasn't any use. After the whisky was all gone, he had an attack of melancholia. You remember how depressed he used to get after a drinking bout at college?"

"Yes," I muttered.

"Well, this time it was far worse. He refused to be dragged out of the depths. One night the guide and I awoke with the sound of a gunshot in our ears. We ran out of the cabin to find Paul lying on the ground."

"Dead?"

"I should think so!" Martin answered brutally. "Why, he had a hole in his side that you could stick your arm into!"

The coroner bore out Martin's statement in regard to Paul's death. There was no doubt that the poor fellow, suffering from acute melancholia, had taken his own life. Tying a piece of string about the trigger of

his shotgun, he had leaned his weight upon the muzzle and discharged it by pressing his foot down hard upon the loose, dangling cord. His death must have been almost instantaneous. The heavy buckshot had ripped its way through his heart.

My mother was prostrated by the news. Ever since father's death she had been in poor health, and this was the last straw. On the day of the funeral she was so weak that the doctor refused to allow her to leave her bed. I was the only member of the family to attend the solemn ceremony. But Wilbur Huntington, although he knew Paul only slightly, was kind enough to accompany me.

It was one of those dismal days in late autumn, I remember—a day when all nature is solemn, melancholy, as though mourning for the wasteful abandonment of her youth. A gray drizzle of rain was falling which seemed to curtain us off from the outer world. Like strange, solemn ships, the funeral procession drifted slowly toward its goal.

Our snail's pace through the glistening streets grated on my overtaxed nerves. I had a wild impulse to shout to the man on the box, to order him to whip up his horses and drive us faster.

Suddenly Huntington's voice broke in upon my thoughts. "When a man takes a bitter dose of medicine, he takes it in a hurry. He doesn't sip it for the taste, does he?"

"No," I answered, at a loss for his meaning.

"Then why all this?" he asked, pointing at my

black clothes. "And why is it that we can't rattle along the streets at a livelier pace?"

"Custom," I explained.

"Custom be damned! The decent, sensible thing is to hide one's inner feelings from the world—not to parade them through the streets, as we are doing now, for the mob to gibber at. A funeral procession is a relic of barbarism; and there goes another."

We were entering the cemetery as he spoke, and the dull tolling of a bell rang out on the still air. Like the beating of a grief-stricken heart, solemnly, sadly, it uttered its message of misery to the living. And on every side, where tiny crosses held out their weary arms, where tombstones seemed kneeling phantoms, where long flat slabs of granite crouched like lizards, a sad echo seemed to rise and steal away on noiseless wings.

"All this," Huntington continued, "your friend Martin would very truly call toys made for the mass-mind. They hide true feeling and, like wine, intensify the emotions. But here we are."

"Poor old Paul!" I murmured.

The carriage came to a halt and we got out. Soon a number of my brother's friends assembled at the open grave and the simple service was well under way. Once, moved by an unaccountable impulse, I turned my head and saw Martin standing directly behind me. His face was as expressionless as though it had been hewn out of marble; his bloodshot eyes were staring straight at the coffin.

At last the ceremony was over. Now two men were filling up the grave with damp earth which fell on the lid of the casket with a dismal, reverberating sound. It was at this moment that I heard Martin speak in a low, muffled voice which seemed to come from deep down underground.

"It is done!" he murmured.

"What is done?" I asked in a low voice. "Surely, for Paul, it is just the beginning."

"I have buried my heart with your brother," he said.

But there was a strange exultation in his tone which scarcely tallied with his words. I saw Huntington glance at him curiously.

XI

After Paul's funeral, Martin passed out of my life completely. Occasionally Rupert Farrington would refer to him in glowing terms and prophesy that he would soon startle the world with another gruesome masterpiece. But, at these times, I was careful to lend a deaf ear to his eulogies.

Poor Farrington! I grew very attached to him as the years went by. He was one of those unfortunate mortals who have the inclination to do big things in art and yet never have the ability to perform them. A tongue-tied dreamer, he would have starved years before, if his father had not sent him a generous allowance. And it was a pitiful thing to see him circling round and round the flame of genius with no hope of

gaining the inner sanctuary—a poor moth doomed to outer darkness, struggling for recognition till his wings were singed.

Day after day he fought valiantly to compose one stirring line; day after day, bitter disappointment was his lot. Like many another man of his type, he could not criticize what he had written. To him, each poem was good—perhaps a masterpiece. The editors were at fault. They could not recognize genius when they saw it. Hatred of them had become an over-mastering obsession. He would rail against them till he grew purple in the face.

I remember distinctly one Christmas morning, a month before Martin's second book came out. Rupert broke in on me while I was having breakfast, his eyes wild and staring, his face suffused with blood. Stamping up and down the room, he gave vent to such a blind, ungovernable fit of fury that I feared for his reason.

"What's the trouble?" I asked when I could make myself heard.

"Trouble?" he fairly shouted. "Trouble? I'd like to wring his damn neck!"

"Whose neck?"

"Why, Hubbard's neck—Hubbard of the *Firefly*."

"What's he done to you?" I asked mildly.

Farrington came to an abrupt halt and fixed his blazing eyes on my face. "I'll tell you what he's done," he said in a voice which he attempted to make calm but which trembled on a sob. "Do you remember my

last poem, 'The Sea-Gull'? Well, it was a pretty smooth piece of work, although you didn't seem to appreciate it."

"What has 'The Sea-Gull' got to do with Hubbard?" I inquired.

"I sent it to him for his magazine," he answered bitterly. "That was a month ago. They've had it ever since. I thought that I'd landed something at last. What's to-day, Smithers?"

"To-day? Why, it's Christmas morning."

"To be sure—Christmas morning! Well, I got it back in the first mail, tied up with red ribbons. Now maybe you think that's a joke, Smithers—a damn good joke?"

"No, I don't," I hastened to assure him.

"Well, I don't either," said Farrington grimly. "I've worked too hard for that. It seems to me a contemptible thing to do—a low-down, contemptible thing! To keep it so long that I had hope and then to send it back tied up with red ribbons on Christmas day! I wish I had him here, that's all! I could beat him to death without the slightest compunction. A man who would do such a thing, *should* be beaten to death! Why, Smithers, I tell you it——"

"But how do you know that Hubbard is responsible for this?" I broke in. "It sounds more like one of his office force to me—some silly little stenographer playing a practical joke."

But Farrington shook his head stubbornly. "No, it was Hubbard—undoubtedly it was Hubbard. It's his

kind of humor. Have you ever seen the man? Have you ever talked to him?"

"No."

"Well, he's a pompous jelly bag with a silly, secretive smile—a sly man and a cruel man, a man who sits in his office like a round-bellied spider waiting to pounce on the flies. He makes game of us, Smithers—we poor fellows who try so hard and get so little! But he and his kind are driving me too hard! There are things that I won't stand, things that——"

"I think you're mistaken, Rupert," I broke in. "Calm yourself. This magazine proposition is driving you dotty. What possible reason could Hubbard have for doing such a thing?"

"Oh, just a little recreation," Rupert muttered. "His humor has to be tickled ever so often. But he's driving me too far, Smithers—a damn sight too far!"

I did not see Farrington again for several days. I was called out of town on an important business engagement; and when I returned, it was to find that he had gone home for the week-end.

One night, ten days later, I walked past his door and noticed that it was ajar. Glancing in, I saw Rupert seated in his favorite rocking-chair. As usual, when alone, he wore a faded brown smoking jacket and crimson worsted slippers. But to-night there was something incongruous about the man which drew my attention. Perhaps it was the rigid way he sat, or perhaps it was natural curiosity to learn what had transpired since I had seen him last, but something prompted me to

enter. Glancing at him again, as I did so, I noticed a volume bound in red morocco resting on the arm of his chair.

"Rupert," I said, "what have you been doing with yourself?"

But he did not answer me. Silent, immovable, he sat, staring into space.

"What's the matter with you, Rupert?" I said in a louder tone. "You're not sick, are you?" I bent forward and touched him on the shoulder.

At that, he started and looked up. His eyes were bloodshot, the veins on his forehead were black and bulging, his thick red lips were extended in an animal pout.

"What's the trouble?" he said thickly. "Is that you, Smithers?"

By this time I was thoroughly alarmed. "You're not sick, are you?" I repeated, shaking him by the arm. "What's the matter, Rupert?"

"Matter?" he repeated dazedly, shaking his head as though to rid himself of an unpleasant thought. "There's nothing the matter, Smithers. I've been thinking, that's all."

"You were in a kind of coma when I first came in."

He laughed a trifle shamefacedly it seemed to me. "Thoughts carry me away sometimes," he said in a more natural tone. "They drag my ego out of my body by the hair." He paused and ran his hand across his forehead. "At least, Martin's thoughts do," he finished with a faint smile.

"Martin's thoughts? Has his new book come out yet? Is that it?" I pointed to the red morocco volume on the arm of his chair.

"Yes, that's his new book," Rupert answered. "This is another advance copy. I believe it is to be published in a few days."

"What's the title?"

"The Confessions of Constantine."

"Do you like it as well as 'Many Murders'?"

"*Like* it?" he cried with a nervous start. "That's scarcely the word, Smithers. You can't *like* a book of this kind—you can only marvel at it!"

"Own up now, Rupert," I said quickly, thinking that the man was quibbling to defend his idol. "Own up, this book has fallen below your expectations. In a word, it disappoints you."

"Good Lord, no!" he cried almost fiercely. "If 'Many Murders' were a masterpiece, 'The Confessions of Constantine' is a super-masterpiece! It is so great that one fears it; so great that it conquers one's mind! Can there be such a thing as hypnotic writing, Smithers?"

"Of course not," I answered irritably. "The trouble with you is that you're mentally sick. What you need is a long vacation somewhere. Why don't you go home for a month or so?"

"Perhaps I will," he muttered. "Perhaps I will." He picked up the book and began to turn the leaves. "I know I ought to go home," he added a trifle wistfully.

"Have you forgiven Hubbard yet?" I asked, turning toward the door. "Or have you found out that he wasn't responsible for that Christmas present?"

But Farrington did not answer me. Evidently he had once more become engrossed in Martin's new book. Oblivious to everything about him, he sat with a strange, rigid attention, slowly turning the leaves. And, as I glanced back at him over my shoulder, it seemed to me that his face suddenly underwent a change—that the whites of his eyes were suffused with blood; that the veins in his forehead became black and bulging; that his moist, red lips puffed out at each long breath. And I left him thus, alone with "The Confessions of Constantine."

XII

Martin's new book was published the following week. If his first volume had caused a breeze of public comment, his second created a whirlwind. Those who were unfortunate enough to have read "The Confessions of Constantine" before it was suppressed by the government, can still remember the terrifying sensations with which it inspired them. Sir Vivian Gerard aptly phrased it in a newspaper article which ended in these words:

"I trembled when I read 'Many Murders' as though I were actually witnessing the terrible crimes which it described; but when I perused 'The Confessions of Constantine,' my hand was steady and my brain on

fire with the blood lust of the murderer as he strikes the fatal blow. I felt no repulsion at the savagery of it; only the great, unholy joy of brute rage. I cannot criticize this book; I can only wonder at it."

It was shortly after "The Confessions of Constantine" made its appearance that the still well-remembered crime wave swept New York from end to end. The police fought valiantly to hold it in check, but failed. In vain they made countless arrests; new murderers sprang up on all sides. It was as though it were some kind of contagious disease—a "murder microbe" as some learned fool maintained.

One afternoon, while this dangerous plague was at its height, Wilbur Huntington dropped into the studio on his way to the Cap and Gown Club. I was delighted to see him and stopped work for a time to chat.

"Well, what do you think of this murder scourge we're having?" I asked, laying my brush aside.

"It's rather interesting, don't you think?" he said, half closing his eyes. "I see you have a new bolt on your door, Charley."

"Yes," I answered, flushing slightly. "One has to nowadays. Bolts and locks are the fashion. They tell me the chief of police has himself guarded like a feudal baron."

"Strange that every one should be murdering some one," Huntington continued, his nose twitching slightly. "But seriously, Charley, the baffling fact about these crimes is the manner in which they are perpetrated."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean just that. A man goes out and murders some one without any real reason and without any skill. Murder is committed everywhere these days; and no one seems to care whether he's found out or not. Murder used to be shrouded in mystery; now it walks brazenly in the sunlight, inviting the attention of any passer-by. Do you know how many murderers gave themselves up last week?"

"No. How many?"

"Forty-nine. Forty-nine out of fifty! And they all seem proud of it! That's strange, isn't it, Charley?"

"Yes, it is," I answered. "It would seem that Professor Knolls might be right about the murder microbe."

Huntington threw back his head and laughed. "No, I think not, Charley," he said. "But what does your friend Martin say about all this?"

"How should I know? I haven't seen him now in nearly two years."

"You haven't, eh?" Huntington settled back on the lounge and closed his eyes. "What's the matter with that Farrington fellow?" he asked after a pause.

"Nothing, that I know of. Why?"

"I just met him as I was coming up the street. He seemed to be in a devilish hurry—his face red as a beet, his eyes staring. He looked as if he had gone dotty. I shouted to him, but he didn't seem to hear me—just went scooting by on those long legs of his. He left me staring, I can tell you."

"Rupert hasn't been himself lately," I hastened to explain. "You've got to make allowances for the poor fellow. All his life he's tried to become a famous poet and he's no further advanced now than he was ten years ago."

"That's a shame!" Huntington muttered. "I never knew he had worked so hard. Isn't there anything we could do for him—bribe some publisher to bring out his poems, for instance?"

"I'm afraid that wouldn't do any good," I answered. "You see, he really hasn't got the stuff. It would be a mistaken kindness. What he ought to do, would be to——"

"Who's that laughing in the hallway?" Huntington broke in suddenly. "That's a devil of a racket! Have you got a crazy man about the premises?"

"I don't hear anything. You must be mistaken."

But Huntington cautioned me to silence with a lifted finger. "Listen!" he whispered.

Then I heard it. And what a laugh it was, starting deep down in the throat in a kind of horrid chuckling and rising higher and higher till it ended in a dismal howl! Nearer and nearer it came, rising and falling, battering on the eardrums with a savage insistency. Finally the studio door flew open and we caught a glimpse of him who laughed.

Rupert Farrington stood on the threshold, swaying back and forth as though shaken by that inhuman merriment which tore his lips apart. His face was a deep crimson; beneath the flushed skin, all the muscles

were aquiver like a handful of worms. But the man's eyes were what caused me to utter an ejaculation of dismay. The pupils seemed mere pinpoints while the areas of white had grown enormous and were threaded with vivid veins. And as one looked at those eyes, a strange transformation seemed to take place; they were no longer eyes but spiders—spiders crouching in a crimson web.

I ran forward and took his arm. "What's the matter, Rupert?" I cried. "What's wrong with you?"

But he continued to shake with laughter—laughter which made every muscle in his body writhe as though in pain.

"What's the matter?" I repeated. "Are you mad? Stop that laughing or I'll shake it out of you! Haven't you any self-control?"

But still he laughed, painfully, immoderately, with his head thrown back and his eyes staring vacantly at the ceiling. Apparently he did not hear me.

Now Wilbur Huntington took a hand in the game. Stepping forward with unwonted briskness, he tapped Rupert on the chest with a commanding fore-finger. "Burgess Martin wants to know what you think of 'The Confessions of Constantine,'" he said in a loud, authoritative voice. "Do you hear what I am saying, Rupert Farrington? Burgess Martin wants to know what you think of 'The Confessions of Constantine.'"

Then a strange thing happened. Rupert's discordant laughter died away. It was as though it had been

bottled up in his throat. His bloodshot eyes left the ceiling and became fixed on Huntington's face.

"Tell him I like it," he said thickly. "Tell him it's true—damn true! A dull knife makes no difference—even a paper cutter will serve. To have one beneath you whom you hate; and then to strike—to strike not once or twice but a hundred times!"

Farrington raised one of his long arms above his head and I saw with horror that his coat-sleeve was stained with blood.

"Tell Burgess Martin that I have read 'The Confessions of Constantine' over and over again," he continued in a singsong voice. "Tell him that I have often crept into its pages. It is such a small book; yet I feel that I can find my way into it at will. That door is never locked. It opens readily. Sometimes before one knows it, one is inside. This afternoon I took a walk with 'The Confessions of Constantine.' We walked till I met a man who should not live—an editor who should not live!"

"He means Hubbard of the 'Firefly,'" I whispered to Huntington. "Do you think he has——"

But Farrington broke in upon me. He had lifted his voice to a shout. "The book opened its leaves to me, you understand. I entered a small room. He was sitting with his back turned toward me. There was an inviting ripple of flesh above his collar. Like a luscious bun it bulged out anxiously to receive the knife's sharp kiss. I hated this man and I approached. But did I hate him after all? Ah, no. Surely I loved him with

a great if transitory love! Does the butcher hate the sheep that is bleating in its death agonies? Does the tiger hate the fawn which has fallen to its lot? Surely it is not hatred which makes us kill, but *love*—love for——”

Farrington broke off suddenly. The color receded from his face; his eyes seemed to be covered with a thin coating of glass. He swayed forward.

“Catch him!” Huntington cried sharply. “He’s going off into a swoon!”

Hardly had he spoken before Rupert fell into my arms. He was a light man, and I had no difficulty in supporting him to the lounge where he promptly collapsed into a senseless heap of humanity. Then I turned to Wilbur with a dawning suspicion of the truth.

“What did he mean?” I cried. “Do you think he has killed any one?”

Huntington nodded grimly. “I shouldn’t wonder,” he muttered. “Who was the man in the room? Has he quarreled with an editor?”

“Yes and no. He thinks he has a grudge against Hubbard of the ‘Firefly.’ But it was nothing serious—nothing to make a man commit murder.”

Wilbur shook his head. “That doesn’t seem to matter nowadays. Murders are committed for the merest trifles. Yesterday an old chap killed his housekeeper because she forgot to put sugar on his grapefruit. Did you know that Farrington was quoting from ‘The Confessions of Constantine’ just before he caved in?”

"No, I didn't. I haven't read the book."

"Well, he was. I remember the passage distinctly. It's the most unpleasant thing in the whole damn book. It's a description of a murder which is supposed to be written by the murderer himself; and while you're reading it, you feel that you're sticking the knife in with your own hand!"

"Do you think Rupert's insane?"

"I don't know. It seems to me more like a fit—or a hypnotic trance. The man was not responsible for what he did, that's certain. But I'm going to look into this new book of Martin's—by Heaven, I am!"

For some time longer we talked in lowered voices with an occasional side-long look at Farrington who had apparently sunk into a deep sleep. The young poet lay on his back—one of his hands dangled nearly to the floor; the other rested on his breast, protruding from the bloodstained coat-sleeve like a white flower from an earthen jug. His small, rather girlish face had regained its habitual calm; now a smile hovered about the lips.

"I shouldn't wonder if he awoke in his right mind," Huntington whispered.

At that moment, Rupert opened his large, melancholy eyes. "Where am I?" he murmured.

"It's all right," I hastened to assure him. "You're in my studio. You've been sick, Rupert."

"Sick?" he repeated. "I had a terrible dream. I thought I had killed Hubbard and that I had actually enjoyed doing it." He smiled weakly.

"Don't talk too much," Huntington warned him.

"You're still very weak. You'll need your strength later. Why, what's the matter?"

"My God!" Farrington muttered. His wandering eyes had rested for an instant on his coat-sleeve. Staring at the bloodstained cuff, he repeated dully: "My God! It's true then—all true!"

"Oh, probably you've just cut your wrist a bit," Huntington said kindly.

"No, it all comes back to me now," Farrington cried, moistening his lips with his tongue. "I had been reading 'The Confessions of Constantine' and somehow I had lost my identity in those pages. I didn't murder Hubbard—it was some one else who had climbed into my body while my soul was asleep; some red, roaring beast from 'The Confessions of Constantine'! I know that you fellows can't understand what I mean! You think I'm trying to get out of this, but I'm not! I'm willing to pay the price!"

"Hush," said Huntington, "I hear footsteps in the corridor."

Suddenly the sound of heavy knocking echoed through the room. Some one was pounding on the studio door.

"Come in," I called.

Now the door swung slowly open and two policemen stepped into the room. Glancing about curiously, their eyes finally rested on Farrington.

"Well?" said Huntington sharply.

"Is Mr. Farrington here?" the taller policeman asked.

Rupert rose and confronted them. "That's my name," he said quietly. "What do you want of me?" "You're wanted for the murder of J. E. Hubbard, editor of the 'Firefly,'" the officer answered, stepping up to Rupert and slipping a pair of handcuffs on his slender wrists. "You'd better go quietly, sir."

"Very well," Farrington answered. And then turning to me with a brave smile which wrung my heart, he said in a voice that trembled only very slightly: "Smithers, you have won our last bet. I *am* sorry—dâmn sorry!—that I ever read any of Martin's work!"

XIII

Weeks passed and still the crime wave swept the city. One had but to glance at the papers to see how widely this homicidal plague had spread. Other towns soon became infected. Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago suffered even more severely than New York; and, strange to say, the police annals proved that these modern murderers sprang, not from the illiterate, uneducated classes as one might fancy, but from the reading public and more especially from the highest intellectual types.

It was during those ill-fated days that college professors, school-teachers, and literary critics began to run amuck. There was poor old Professor Brent of the university, for instance—Professor Brent who had written so many sugar-coated essays on the brotherhood

of man. Who would have thought it possible that this kindly old fellow—this senile optimist whose work had always been well sweetened before it went to press—should attempt to do away with a whole class of college students one bright spring morning? And yet one had to believe it. There it was in the papers, with a host of other incomprehensible crimes as well.

But perhaps the Southern States suffered most of all. Of late years lynching parties had been rather few and far between; now they happened again with almost machinelike regularity. Scarcely a day passed in any of those towns on the other side of the Mason and Dixon's line when some negro did not dance out his life at the end of a rope. And the leaders of these lynching parties—the men who adjusted the noose about the cowering wretch's neck or lit the fagots which had been piled up against his knees—were invariably men of keen sensibilities and higher education—men who would have shrunk from such a task a few months before.

As this crimson wave passed over the country, leaving horror and desolation in its track, the creative thinkers, who had as yet remained untouched, began to ask themselves a multitude of questions: What would be the final outcome of this catastrophe? If the higher type of intelligence fell victim to this homicidal mania, what could one expect from the illiterate, unimaginative masses who were born to follow like so many sheep? For the first time in human history, education had joined hands with crime. What would be the final

dénouement? Possibly we were now facing the end of the world—a bloody end of order, a return to those primeval days when every man's hand was raised against the other.

It was during these days of dark despair, days when our modern civilization seemed tottering in the balance, that a young man gained access to the chief of the New York police force and pointed out a simple cure which had been overlooked by all the criminal experts.

Wilbur Huntington, for it was he, had some difficulty at first in securing an interview. The chief of police, on account of the many attempts made on his life, was taking no more chances with strangers. If Huntington's family had not been so prominent in the city, so influential in political circles, it is doubtful if Wilbur would have been able to gain access to that official's office. As it was, the meeting was arranged and the following conversation took place:

"Well, what can I do for you?" asked the chief, fixing a vigilant eye on his visitor.

"I came to see you about this crime wave."

"Well?"

"You want these murders stopped, don't you?" Wilbur asked simply.

For the first time in many days the chief burst out into a laugh. "Of course!" he answered.

"Well, I know how to stop them—or at least, the great majority."

Now the chief regarded his visitor with a look of fatherly pity, a look which seemed to say: "Too bad,

too bad! Another madman to deal with. I'd better humor him a bit."

"It will be all right, Mr. Huntington," he said aloud. "Don't you worry your poor head about it. Just you go home and——"

But at this point, Wilbur interrupted him by stepping forward and placing a book bound in red morocco on his desk. "Here's the root of the whole matter," he declared.

"My dear young man," the chief said wearily, "I can't be bothered by this sort of thing. The State pays competent men to——"

But again Wilbur broke in upon him with scant ceremony. "I know you think I'm a crank!" he cried. "But I'm going to prove that I'm not. Will you give me five minutes of your time?"

The chief glanced at his office clock and nodded. "Fire away," said he. "Five minutes and no more."

"Students of crime know that a diseased brain often prompts murder," Huntington began quickly. "Yesterday I visited the homes of the fifty murderers who were apprehended in this city last week and in forty-five of them I found the book which I have just placed on your desk. Are you familiar with it? It is called 'The Confessions of Constantine.'"

"No," the chief answered, becoming interested in spite of himself. "But how can a book have anything to do with crime? It was merely coincidence that you found it in their homes."

"Perhaps," Huntington agreed. "But a book such

as this *can* incite crime and I'm going to prove it. You, yourself, must have noticed that if an unusual murder is committed, is given publicity by the press, other murders of almost identically the same nature are sure to follow. What causes these other crimes? The answer seems obvious—mental suggestion; or, in other words, a printed description of the ghastly details which appeals to the brutal instinct in man."

"Very well put," the chief said approvingly, a note of respect creeping into his voice. "I had never thought of such a thing, but it sounds quite plausible. And you think this book could possibly——"

"I know it!" Wilbur broke in. "Just think, chief. If the description of a murder crudely written by some inartistic cub reporter can excite crime, what could not a book like 'The Confessions of Constantine' accomplish? It is a work of undoubted genius and gives one a vivid portrayal of both the murder and the sensations of bloodlust in the brain of the murderer. Why, this book can overmaster the sensitive dreamer; can hypnotize him into crime as though by the beckoning of a bloodstained finger! And here is another clew which should not be overlooked: All of these assassins are inveterate readers who live their real lives between the covers of countless books. Such people can be ruled by the printed words of a genius. A sensitive bookworm is easily excited to laughter or tears by a well-written story, so why can he not be excited to brute rage as well?"

"There is a great deal in what you say," the chief

admitted. "I read quite a bit myself. Do you think this book would have any effect on me?"

"No doubt," Huntington replied. He picked up "The Confessions of Constantine" and opened it at random. "Read this short chapter," he said, handing the book to the official. "See how it affects you."

The chief, impressed in spite of himself by his guest's bizarre theory, glanced at the page Huntington indicated. Then, as Wilbur told me afterward, his attention became riveted on the book, the veins on his forehead bulged out, and a strangely sinister look crept into his eyes. Breathing heavily like a man running a race, he read page after page. At last Huntington touched him on the shoulder. Then he looked up dazedly, the whites of his eyes threaded with crimson veins.

"What is it?" he asked thickly.

But before Wilbur could answer him, the chief shook off the insidious atmosphere of the book and was himself once more. "By Heaven, you're right!" he cried, springing to his feet. "I felt like a murderer myself just now!"

"If it could affect *you* that way," Huntington said, "imagine how it would affect a nervous, high-strung man who has an enemy or a dull, brutish man who has a wrong to avenge! It seems to me that it would overthrow the brain of the one and feed the roaring beast in the other, till both would one day break through the bars of civilization!"

"You're right!" the chief repeated. "You're undoubtedly right! I can still feel the brute in me licking its

lips. But what can we do? This murder propaganda is scattered all over the world by now."

"That is your problem," Huntington said, rising. "No doubt 'The Confessions of Constantine' can be traced through the Brainsworth Company and the various stores. Have the book condemned by the government, secure every copy printed, apply some kerosene and a lighted match—that's my advice. You'll soon find that, after 'The Confessions of Constantine' is done away with, this murder microbe will no longer be a menace to society. Good afternoon."

It is needless to say that his advice was taken and acted upon. Before six months had passed there were only two copies of "The Confessions of Constantine" in existence—one in Wilbur Huntington's possession, the other at police headquarters—and manslaughter had once more become a comparatively rare crime.

Indirectly Huntington's discovery saved Rupert Farrington's life. It led to a very thorough examination of the prisoners on trial for murder and a suspension of sentence when it was found that they had been mentally unbalanced by Martin's book. Rupert was transferred to Matteawan for several months where he was under the personal supervision of several eminent brain specialists. Finally he was liberated. He returned home, thoroughly cured of his literary aspirations.

The chief of police got all the glory when the crime wave was broken, but Wilbur Huntington was allowed

to keep "The Confessions of Constantine" as a souvenir. The book soon became his evil genius.

XIV

"I tell you the man is a menace to society and should be exterminated!"

It was Huntington who spoke. He had been living with me at the studio for over two weeks while his bungalow on Long Island was being renovated. Wilbur had brought "The Confessions of Constantine" with him. In spite of my protests, he had been reading portions of the condemned book aloud during the last hour and railing at the author between breaths. I did not like his air of unusual excitement and sought to calm him.

"Martin could hardly have guessed that his work would cause so much suffering and crime," I ventured.

"He couldn't, eh?" Huntington cried. "Well, I think he could. In fact, I'm sure of it. A genius never underestimates his work. I believe he knew exactly what effect 'The Confessions of Constantine' would have on the reading public."

"Oh, come now, Wilbur! That's a little bit too much!"

"I believe he planned it!" Huntington continued stubbornly. "Any man who could formulate in his brain such terrible thoughts and who had such a brutally vivid imagination, would delight in the results. Each

murder would seem like a new leaf in his crown of victory; they would whisper in his ear that he, alone, was master of his art. I can fairly see him chuckling over the gruesome headlines of the papers, I can fairly hear him saying to himself, 'This—all this—is *my* work'!"

He paused for breath. His heightened color and flashing eyes once more indicated an unhealthy excitement entirely foreign to the man. Again I sought to calm him.

"I don't like Martin any better than you do, Wilbur. But I think you do him an injustice in this. You just alluded to his brutally vivid imagination. Well, the truth is that he has no imagination at all. He clearly told me as much when we were in Paris together. No doubt he gets his themes secondhand, from the riffraff he associates with."

"No imagination?" Huntington muttered. "No imagination?"

"No, not a grain of it—or so he says. He told me that he had a remarkable memory which served him as well."

"That's strange! Then how does he describe so vividly what is taking place in the murderer's brain? 'The Confessions of Constantine' is brimming over with the psychological sensations of the assassin."

"No doubt he knows many murderers," I answered. "Possibly they confide in him."

Huntington threw back his head and laughed. "The sensations of an assassin must be difficult to describe,"

he said at length. "The ordinary criminal could not express them. Have you ever been in love, Charley?"

"In a very mild way, perhaps."

"Well, let me hear you describe the sensations of love."

I hesitated for a minute. "I don't believe I can do it," I said. "At least, not clearly. I felt very happy and that sort of thing."

"Of course, you can't describe them. It takes genius to portray vividly any of the great passions. Hate is just as difficult as love. Martin *can* portray hate. You say he does it without imagination—that means without the knack of climbing into any one else's skin. Are you sure that he told you he had no imagination, Charley?"

"Quite sure. I remember distinctly everything he said."

Wilbur closed his eyes, and, interlacing his pudgy fingers over his paunch, sank back on the lounge. Such an attitude of abandon meant that he was thinking deeply. It was quite characteristic of the man to sink into a kind of coma and then come to the surface again grasping an illusive fact. As I sat watching his recumbent figure, I was prepared for some startling manifestation of uncanny insight.

At last Huntington sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Have you got Martin's first book about the premises?" he asked.

"'Many Murders'? Yes. Do you want to see it?"

"Yes, indeed, Charley," he murmured. "Perhaps we can read between the lines."

I took "Many Murders" out of the bookcase and handed it to him. He opened it at random and read a portion of "In a Blind Alley" aloud. At length he closed the book and picked up "The Confessions of Constantine."

"He didn't have to have imagination to write *that* story, Charley," he said. "You shared the adventure with him, I believe?"

"Yes, it was that murder in the alley I told you about. He saw it all."

Huntington nodded and opened "The Confessions of Constantine." For some time he read silently, moving his lips. He seemed to be weighing each word. Finally he spoke again.

"'Many Murders' came out before your brother's death, didn't it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And 'The Confessions of Constantine' about two years after his death?"

"I believe so."

"Then I have a little theory which, if it stands the acid test of truth, will put Martin *hors de combat* for good and all. Perhaps the world has little more to fear from him."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're driving at, Wilbur."

"Have patience, Charley. Listen! I think I hear some one tapping on your door."

When I flung the door open, I found a freckled messenger boy in the corridor. He had a registered

letter for Wilbur, addressed in very small but legible writing—writing which, for some unaccountable reason, seemed familiar. Signing for the letter, I returned to Huntington.

"Here's a letter for you," I said, handing him the note. "Whoever addressed this envelope has a confidently steady hand. It's like engraving."

"You're an inquisitive cuss!" Huntington murmured. "Perhaps it's from a lady friend."

He tore open the envelope and glanced at its contents. The next moment, his eyebrows crawled up his forehead in surprise. "Speaking about the devil!" he cried. "Well, what do you know about this!"

"Nothing. But I'd like to. That handwriting interests me. There's something familiar about it. Is it from your mother?"

"Not exactly!" Huntington replied. "Just listen to this." Holding the letter on a level with his eyes, he began to read as follows:

"MY DEAR MR. HUNTINGTON: I understand that you have recently become a literary critic. Allow me to congratulate you on your judgment in regard to my book, 'The Confessions of Constantine.' No doubt, as you so wisely pointed out to the police, it was a work which proved rather detrimental to the morals of the reading public. By condemning it, the government paid me the highest tribute which can fall to the lot of any artist—the tribute of taking my mental creations seriously.

I have just finished another book of short stories, and I should like your opinion of it before it goes to

press. As you have constituted yourself a moral censor, a Mother Grundy of literature, I feel obliged to be guided by your advice. Will you do me the honor of calling at eight o'clock tonight?

Very sincerely,

BURGESS MARTIN."

"You evidently have him worried," I said. "Are you going?"

Huntington paused for a moment before he answered. Finally he raised his eyes to my face and I saw that they were flashing like slits in a furnace door.

"Yes, I'm going!" he cried. "This time I see my way clear. I'll strike him down, Charley; I'll put my foot on his neck! Perhaps I can suggest a new idea for his book—something that even *he* has never thought of. He has described crime from the standpoint of the spectator, from the standpoint of the criminal; but are there not other lengths to which he could go? Martin's mind must be like an overladen camel. One more straw, and then—— But we'll see, Charley; we'll see."

Huntington rose to his feet with the intention of leaving the apartment. I was in a bewildered state as I followed him to the door. My friend's incomprehensible words made me fear for his reason. Was it possible that "The Confessions of Constantine" was conquering his mind as it had conquered Rupert Farington's?

"When will you be back?" I asked as he slipped on his coat.

"Not for two days. I promised my mother to

visit her for a while." He took my hand in leaving and pressed it warmly. "We've been good friends, you and I," he said with one of his rare smiles. "We've had lots of fun together. That's pleasant to think over, isn't it? Good night, Charley."

What could have come over Huntington, I wondered as the door closed behind him. Something had changed him utterly. He, the most undemonstrative of men, had actually held my hand like a lovesick schoolgirl. He had said good-bye to me as though we were parting for years instead of for days. What could it all mean?

XV

A week passed and I saw nothing of Huntington. This was strange, to say the least, as he had promised to look me up in a day or so and let me know how his interview with Martin had turned out. Vague misgivings began to torment me as I remembered his rather bewildering statements in regard to "The Confessions of Constantine." Had the book thrown him off his mental balance as it had Rupert Farrington, Professor Brent, and so many others?

On the following Tuesday Mrs. Huntington phoned me. No sooner did I hear her high, fretful voice than I had a premonition of disaster.

"Yes, Mrs. Huntington," I answered. "This is Mr. Smithers. What can I do for you this morning?"

"You might send Wilbur home. I haven't seen him in months."

"Send Wilbur home?" I repeated dazedly. "Why, he left here last week, Mrs. Huntington! He told me then that he intended staying with you the rest of the time he was in New York."

There came a long-drawn silence and then a deafening volley of words. "Why, he never came! I haven't seen him for over two months. Do you suppose anything could have happened to the poor boy? Oh, I'm so frightened! He was such a reckless driver! He might have driven his car out into the country and had a smash-up on some lonely road. What shall I do, Mr. Smithers?"

"Please be calm," I told her. "No doubt Wilbur is all right. Probably he's gone out to Long Island. Have you called up his bungalow?"

"No, of course not! I thought he was with you."

"Well, phone there and I'm pretty sure you'll find him. If not, call me up. I'll find him for you."

"Thank you so much! Probably you're right. But he should have let me know. Good-by, Mr. Smithers."

"Good-by," I answered and hung up the receiver with a feeling of uncertainty.

For the rest of that morning I attempted to paint, but made a miserable failure of it. Try as I would, I could not fix my attention on the work at hand. Huntington's incomprehensible words about Martin kept ringing through my head. At last I tossed the brush aside and left the studio with the intention of inquiring for Wilbur at the Cap and Gown Club.

I was descending the stairs and had reached the first

landing when I came face to face with a small man who was coming up. I was about to stand aside so as to give him room to pass, when he addressed me.

"Are you Mr. Smithers?" he asked.

"Yes," I said in surprise. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to ask you a few questions about a friend of yours. You know Wilbur Huntington, I presume?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Well, I think we'd better have our talk in your apartment, if you don't mind."

I led the way back to the studio with the feeling that something quite unexpected was about to happen. In fact, my brain was in a whirl. Who could this rather common-looking little man be? And what could he possibly want to know about Huntington?

But my visitor gave me no time to compose myself. No sooner had the door closed behind us than he spoke.

"I understand that Mr. Huntington was here on the afternoon of the twenty-fifth?"

"Yes, he was."

"I'm Greene from police headquarters," the little man continued, opening his coat and displaying a metal badge. "As I believe you know, Mr. Huntington has been missing now for several days. His mother has just put the case in our hands."

"He wasn't at his bungalow, then?"

"No, he hasn't been there in over a month. Mrs. Huntington thought you might be able to give us valuable information. Where was he going when he left your apartment, Mr. Smithers?"

"He was going to the house of Mr. Burgess Martin on Tyndall Place."

"Burgess Martin, eh? That's interesting! Was there anything unusual about Mr. Huntington's manner—anything which would lead you to suspect that he wasn't in a normal state of mind?"

Then I did a very foolish thing—a thing which I have regretted ever since. I revealed everything to the detective, answering his questions with the candor of a child. I told him of the letter Huntington had received, of his wild words about Martin, and of his final threat. And when I had finished, my visitor thanked me heartily.

"If other people were as willing to give evidence as you, Mr. Smithers," said he, "the work of a detective would soon dwindle down to nothing. What you say about Burgess Martin is especially interesting. Word has just come to us that he, too, is missing."

"What?"

"Yes, his landlady hasn't seen him in days." The detective turned toward the door. "I've got to be off on this new clew you've given me, Mr. Smithers," he called back over his shoulder. "It's just possible, if we can lay our hands on Mr. Huntington, that he'll be able to tell us something about Burgess Martin."

When the detective had gone, I realized fully what I had done. I had branded my best friend as a murderer. I had slipped the halter about his neck. Then, for the first time, I saw clearly the significance of Wilbur's threatening words when coupled with the dis-

appearance of Martin. Yes, I had made an ass of myself. But there was no helping that now. The damage was done. I could do nothing more—only wait as patiently as possible for the results.

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, but the two men still remained missing. Meanwhile the newspapers made much of the mystery and soon it became the sensation of the year. It was remembered that it was through Wilbur Huntington's efforts that Martin's last book had been condemned by the government. From that fact, they argued that there was bad blood between the two men, and this gave rise to all manner of wild conjectures. Possibly they had fought a duel to the death; or perhaps it had been a suicide pact. The yellow journals knew how to make hay while the sun shone.

Nearly two months after the detective visited me, a body was found floating in the East River. The face had been beaten into an unrecognizable condition by some heavy weapon and the corpse generally was so disfigured by its long submersion in the water, that, had it not been for a ring on the second finger of the left hand, identification would have proved impossible. This ring was engraved with the initials B. M.

The news spread quickly through the city. Newspaper extras appeared with startling headlines. For a time excitement quickened the most feeble pulse. On all sides, one heard this question—"But where is Wilbur Huntington?"

On the following day the rumor was verified. Mar-

tin's tailor, a little Russian Jew who had made his clothes for many years, visited the morgue and identified the corpse's water-soaked suit by his own initials which he had sewed into the sleeve. After this there could no longer be any doubt; it was indeed Burgess Martin's body.

But if Martin had been murdered, as the wounds on his face and head evinced, what had become of his companion, Wilbur Huntington, on the night when they had both disappeared? Had Huntington killed Martin and then fled? If he were innocent, would he not come forward and prove it?

Questions like these appeared in all the papers. But the missing man still remained missing; the mystery was no nearer its solution than before. No doubt the chief of police at this time was pestered daily by hundreds of letters from cranks who had worked themselves up into a frenzy over this insoluble riddle. At last he wrote an article for the *Gazette* which ended in these words:

"It is not possible that Wilbur Huntington, after saving the world from a thousand crimes, failed to take his own cure and fell a victim to that brain malady from which he had rescued so many others?"

After this opinion was published, there could be but one verdict. The world regarded my friend as a murderer and a madman.

XVI

Several years passed and the mystery still remained unsolved. It was as though Wilbur Huntington had vanished into thin air. Although many of the leading criminal experts had taken up the search, no clew to his whereabouts was forthcoming. One by one these detectives acknowledged themselves beaten and went back to the solving of less difficult problems. Meanwhile new sensational mysteries arose to attract the attention of the public; soon the affair was practically forgotten.

During that time, I prospered exceedingly. Each year brought me greater wealth, a larger circle of acquaintances, and more material luxuries of every kind. I had won the respect of a great many people who envied me my position in the world—people who little guessed what I had sacrificed in order to climb.

I soon learned that the respect of the mob was of small value. The world, as a whole, judges an artist as it judges a business man—not by the excellence of his work, but by the size of his bank account. I was a symbol to them of the golden image and they prostrated themselves accordingly. Little guessing the bitter irony their words conveyed, they called me to my face “the painter who had made good.” Sometimes it gave me a kind of brutal satisfaction to realize how completely I had sold the public. But now and then another thought would steal into my brain—the thought

that I had not sold the public but had, in reality, sold myself. On these occasions, I was far from a happy man.

Ten years after Wilbur Huntington's disappearance, I laid my brush aside for the last time. I was now forty and had amassed a comfortable fortune. It seemed to me that I had earned the right to play. But those years of drudgery at the easel had taken away all youthful buoyancy. My health was not what it should have been. I consulted a physician and he advised me to take a vacation in the wilds of Florida.

"Why not come along with me to Naples?" Dr. Street suggested. "I'm going to make the trip, as usual, on the fifteenth. You'll want some one with you who knows the ropes."

I agreed to his proposition with pleasure. I had known him long enough to realize that he would make an excellent camping companion. But, unfortunately for our plans, when the day arrived Doctor Street was detained in New York much against his will. As all my preparations were made, I decided not to wait for him. He was careful to point out the exact locality of the hotel where I should meet him a week later.

"By the way," he said as we parted, "don't forget to hire Bill Pete when you get to the hotel. He's the best guide in all Florida. Make him take you over to his hut on the other side of the bay and give you some fishing. What you need is exercise and fresh air."

The trip to Florida was uneventful. I got off the

train at Fort Myers and engaged a delapidated Ford to take me to Naples. The driver gave me a hand with my numerous belongings, climbed back on his seat, and we were off.

It was a forty mile drive from Fort Myers over a road sadly needing repair. Two hours later I caught sight of the wooden structure which my driver assured me was the hotel. In spite of my natural fatigue, I warmed to the majestic scene which had appeared with the startling suddenness of a vision.

There, stretching away as far as the eye could see, was the Gulf of Mexico, now reflecting on its slightly agitated bosom the last scattered rays of the setting sun. Already the dark shadows of approaching night stole out from the palm trees which lined the beach. The melancholy call of an owl suddenly rose on the still air and was thrown to and fro by a multitude of echoes before it was allowed to die away.

Naples was known to only a limited number of sportsmen. There were not more than a dozen people at the hotel when I arrived. I felt fairly certain that I could secure the services of Bill Pete. After dinner I inquired about him at the desk.

"No, he's not here now," the clerk informed me. "But he generally paddles over for his newspaper about eight o'clock. I'll let you know when he arrives."

I nodded and, lighting a cigar, strolled out on the veranda. The moon, by now, was slowly rising over the treetops—a blood-red moon which, as it ascended, gradually lost its vivid coloring and became a pale silver.

Under its magic touch, the surface of the water was transformed into a sea of drifting sparks. The wind had risen. Now and then the crest of a wave was illumined, becoming for an instant a curling, foam-flecked lip. It was a night of ebony and silver.

"How beautiful it is," I murmured half-aloud.

"It may be beautiful," said a voice at my elbow, "but it is horrible as well!"

I started, for I had thought myself alone. Now I could see the tall, dark figure of a man leaning against the railing of the veranda within arm's reach of me. How was it that I had not heard his footsteps? He had not been there a moment before; of that I was certain.

"Horrible?" I repeated slowly. "Why is it horrible?"

"Look!" he cried, pointing at the sky with a dramatic gesture. "What do you see? That is no smile on the moon's face, although there are fools who think it is. No, it is a grimace of despair like one sees on a death's-head when the jaw drops down. And how white she is, how ghastly white! True, the moon has a round face; but it is the more terrible for that. She has the bloated look of decomposing flesh. And what have become of her eyes? Have the vultures picked out her eyes?"

I moved my feet uneasily. What an unpleasant imagination this fellow had! How could people turn such a beautiful night into a charnel house? Probably this man was some crack-brained poet or other. There was something familiar about his voice—something which I could not account for and which irritated me.

"It is though Nature had placed that death's-head in the heavens as a warning to all mankind," he continued solemnly. "Oh perhaps She hung it there to kindle the imagination, to beckon us on to unparalleled achievement, to blow into flame a glowing spark of curiosity. What is death and what are the sensations of death? Who can answer? And yet mankind is unwilling to learn. They hide the truth from themselves, disguising it under many different masks. They play with the moon as a baby might play with the face of its dead mother. They even write songs about her, calling her the jolly, smiling moon! And all these years that great, white face has looked down upon them in frozen horror!"

I felt the mental itch of curiosity as I listened. Where had I heard that voice before? He had been speaking in a very low tone, but each word had a familiar ring.

"I think I must have met you before," I said. "You're a poet, aren't you? I used to know a good many poets when I lived in Washington Square."

"I am no poet," he said curtly.

"But you write," I insisted. "I'm sure I've heard your voice before. I used to know several novelists. There was——"

"I don't write," he broke in rather brusquely. "My name's Bill Pete and I've lived around here nearly all my life."

"Not Bill Pete, the guide?" I cried in amazement.

"The very same. The clerk told me that you were

looking for me. If you want a guide, I think you'll find that I know my business. I'm familiar with every rookery in these parts and I've got a snug little cabin across the bay if you were thinking of camping out."

"So you're Bill Pete," I muttered under my breath. "Well, you've got a most astonishing vocabulary for a backwoodsman!" Aloud, I said: "You've worked for Doctor Street?"

"Yes, frequently. He always engages me when he comes to the hotel."

"Then, you're the man I want. You may consider yourself engaged from now on. I think I'll use your cabin to-morrow night. Is it comfortable?"

"Yes, sir," Bill Pete murmured. "I think you'll find it very comfortable."

Once more I shot a quick look at that tall, shadowy figure beside me. I *had* heard him speak before; each moment I grew surer of it. When was it and where? I would find out in the course of the next two or three days—that was certain.

"You'll pardon me if I ask a rather personal question, Mr. Pete?" I said. "You didn't get your education in the woods, did you? Your choice of words seems to be rather fine, rather——"

I broke off suddenly. A moonbeam had touched the side of his face. I could see that his heavily bearded cheeks and chin were trembling as though from suppressed merriment, and yet his voice was quite steady when he answered me.

"I'm a college man, sir," he replied, moving his head slightly so that his face was once more veiled in shadow. "I've had my chances and I've thrown them away. There are lots of us like that." He paused for an instant and then added: "Good night, sir. I'll paddle over for you in the morning."

XVII

The following morning, Bill Pete paddled me across the bay to his cabin with the deft, silent strokes of an Indian. Sitting in the bow of the canoe and facing him, I studied the man, attempting to account for the impression I had had the night before. But, try as I would, my memory failed me.

Certainly there was nothing familiar in that bronzed, heavily bearded face. And yet there was something about Bill Pete which struck a long disused, discordant note in my breast. What was it? His eyes? They were hidden behind dark-blue spectacles which resembled the cavernous sockets in a skull. Perhaps the answer to the riddle was concealed by these spectacles. For one mad moment I was tempted to spring forward and jerk them off his nose.

"Why do you wear those things?" I said at length.

"What things?" he asked blankly. Although his face was half turned away from me, I felt instinctively that his eyes were boring into mine.

"Why, those spectacles," I said testily. "They make your face look like a skull."

"My eyes are very weak. These glasses protect them from the sun."

"Oh, I see."

Not another word was said till the canoe grounded on the beach. I assisted Bill Pete in moving the provisions we had brought with us into the shade; then he showed me his cabin.

It was an ordinary woodsman's shack, built of rough-hewn logs and containing two bunks. There was a crudely constructed table in the center of the single room, some pots and pans hanging on the wall, a wood stove in one corner, and a doorway without any vestige of a door. To a city-bred man, no building is complete without a door. This architectural omission bothered me till I learned that no wild animal availed itself of it with the single exception of a razor-back hog that each night entered after we had gone to bed and gnawed savagely at one of the logs.

Barely a hundred yards from the cabin, which stood on a slight rise of ground, the bay stretched out like a luminous shawl of bright spangles. Encircling it, was a dark somber army of tropical trees which stood like sentinels about a treasure. On windy nights, the lapping waves on the beach and the murmuring of the branches overhead mingled in a soothing melody which soon wafted one off to the land of dreams.

Bill Pete proved to be a very silent man, speaking very rarely and then always to the point. A smile seldom brightened his somber face. But although he was a poor companion, he proved to be an excellent

guide. He knew the woods like the creatures of the woods; his tread was so noiseless that he could creep up to within a few feet of a feeding deer before the animal sprang away in fright; and he knew with unfaltering intuition where the largest tarpon glided. Under his guidance, I had some excellent fishing.

This healthy, outdoor life worked wonders with my shattered nerves. The long tramps through the woods, the invigorating air, the nights of unbroken repose, were fast making a new man of me. Before the week had passed I felt an entirely different individual from the broken-down portrait painter who had left New York under the doctor's orders. It is no telling how healthy I would have become, had it not been for that night of unparalleled horror through which I passed—that night when I saw a black soul stripped bare and writhing out its life alone.

It had been a hard day's tramp through the forest. I felt deliciously tired as I lay before the log fire. Bill Pete sat a few feet from me. His corncob pipe was gripped between his teeth; his face, as usual, was veiled in shadow. The wind had been rising steadily for upward of an hour; now and then I could hear the rumble of thunder far off. Our fire would spring up fiercely at each eddying gust; and, as the bright curling fingers of flame grasped at the upper darkness, the encircling tree trunks would seem to take a long stride forward and then leap back again.

"It looks as though we were going to have a stormy night," I said at length.

Bill Pete nodded and puffed silver rings of smoke skyward. His spectacles for an instant reflected the firelight as he turned his face toward me.

"Doctor Street will be here to-morrow," I continued in a desperate attempt to make the man talk. "You'd better paddle over to the hotel in the morning."

Again Bill Pete merely nodded his head.

"You remind me of a man I used to know a good many years ago," I said irritably. "Like you, he had unpleasant theories about the moon and for days together would scarcely say a word."

"Who was he?" Bill Pete asked, with a sudden note of interest in his tone.

"A man by the name of Martin—Burgess Martin."

I heard something snap like a dry twig. Glancing at Bill Pete, I saw the red glowing bowl of his pipe lying on the ground at his feet. He had bitten through the stem.

"And what became of Burgess Martin?" he asked after a moment.

"Why, you must know!" I said in surprise. "He was that famous writer who was murdered several years ago. Surely you remember the case?"

"I believe I did read something about it," he answered in a low voice. "He was murdered by a literary critic, wasn't he? The murderer's name was Huntington, I believe; and he had previously had one of Martin's books condemned by the government."

"That's never been proved," I said with some heat. "Wilbur Huntington was a personal friend of mine and

one of the finest fellows in the world. If he *did* kill Martin, it was because he was mentally deranged at the time."

Bill Pete burst out into an unpleasant laugh. "Why do the masses believe that a murderer must be insane?" he cried. "Surely to kill is the natural instinct of man. You say that Huntington was a fine fellow. Well, what has that got to do with it? How can any one gain the fineness and fullness of living without first feasting on the lives of others?"

"I disagree with you," I said with a yawn; "but I'm too tired to argue. I think I'll turn in."

"Don't let me keep you up," he muttered.

I took a last look at the shadows which played under the trees and entered the cabin. As I moved about, getting ready for bed, I could see Bill Pete's dark figure silhouetted against the firelight. Like a carved idol of wood, he sat perfectly motionless.

It did not take me long to fall asleep that night. Hardly had I crawled between the blankets and closed my eyes, before I was swept far out on the sea of dreams. And in these dreams, I was conscious of something which was approaching steadily and relentlessly—something which threatened my very existence. I felt that I must escape. I tried to struggle but I was held down by bands of steel. Nearer and nearer that relentless presence approached. Now I could feel its warm breath on my cheek.

I awoke, bathed in perspiration, to a sensation of supernatural dread. The oil lamp on the table was lit.

I could see every object distinctly. There, with his back toward me, stood Bill Peta. What was he doing at this hour of the night? Why, he was shaving! He was standing before the small mirror I had hung on the wall and was shaving! He held one of my razors; I could see the blade glimmer faintly as he lowered his arm for an instant.

Still in a mental daze of sleep, I stared at his back. Then I glanced at the shaving glass. What I saw there, will live in my memory always. I tried to rise, but I could not; I tried to cry out, but my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth.

"Who are you?" I gasped.

And now the tall figure was turning toward me. I saw that well-remembered face, thin, ascetic, with lips that curled upward like a cat's; I saw those cold, gray eyes which held in their depths a speculative stare; I saw the man, himself, approaching with a stealthy, noiseless tread. The mirror had not lied. It was Burgess Martin!

XVIII

There is no fear which man can experience so gripping, so subduing, as fear of the supernatural. When the mind cannot explain, when all the rivers of thought are frozen at their source, we become children again in the imagination, children who people the dark with living phantoms. Life is then no longer the familiar highway, brightly lighted, with the kindly signposts of

convention at every crossing, but a shadowy cave of horrors through which we must grope blindly. What lies waiting for us in the gloom? We do not know, we cannot guess—and therein lies the fear. Such a sensation is indeed terrible.

Here, in this dimly lighted cabin, far from all the reassuring realities of life, I was looking into the face of a man whom I had every reason to believe dead and buried years ago! Was it any wonder that I could neither move nor cry out, that I stared silently at this apparition like a terror-stricken child?

Although my brain was spinning dizzily like a top, although Burgess Martin's steadfast eyes held mine like magnets, I was instinctively aware of the objects immediately surrounding me. For instance, I knew that a blanket had been fastened securely across the doorway to keep out the wind which now howled in baffled fury about the cabin; and yet I had not even glanced in that direction.

The long-threatening storm had risen. Now the first drops of rain were pattering on the roof like tiny fingers tapping for admittance. Suddenly there came a blinding flash of lightning, followed almost immediately by a deafening peal of thunder. Again there was silence. Nature seemed to hold her breath.

"Why do you fear me, Smithers?" said a voice which I knew only too well. "I am no ghost."

By now Burgess Martin was standing beside my bunk, looking down on me with a gleam of derision in his eyes. Mustering all my courage, I attempted to sit

up. Then, for the first time, I realized that I was tied hand and foot with strong leather straps which a giant could scarcely have broken.

"It is useless to struggle, Smithers," Martin continued coldly; "not only useless but dangerous. My patience is worn thin. When I think of what I have suffered, when I think of what art has suffered, I can have no more tolerance for stupidity."

"Then you weren't murdered after all?" I muttered through dry lips.

"Most assuredly not," he answered with one of his catlike grimaces. Seating himself on the side of the bunk, he regarded me with a speculative stare. "Why is man invariably blinded by the obvious?" he continued. "A chain of circumstantial evidence can so easily be forged by a master mind that one should test it thoroughly before one believes. Why should you think that Wilbur Huntington murdered me?"

"I never thought so," I muttered.

"Ah, but you did, Smithers," he said lifting one of his long, thin hands in expostulation. "You did and the world did. And why? Simply because a body was found floating in the East River—a decomposing, unrecognizable body which wore my ring and clothes. And because *he* visited me that night, because he disliked my works, because he disappeared—you, his best friend, branded him a murderer. What a trifling thing I renounced when I sacrificed friendship on the altar!"

He paused as another reverberating peal of thunder shook the cabin. For an instant his sallow face was

illuminated by a sickly flash of lightning; I saw a tiny, pendulous drop of blood on his chin where the razor had slipped and nicked the flesh. Strange to say, the sight of this single crimson bead of blood was reassuring; it spurred my flagging courage. If he could bleed, surely he was human.

"And what became of Wilbur Huntington?" I asked.

"Why, it was *his* body which was floating down the river," Martin answered coldly. "He wore my clothes and ring, and the water had changed him somewhat—that was all."

Once more horror overmastered me. I caught a glimpse of the truth. "Who murdered him?" I cried. "Good God, Martin, did you——"

He bowed and I saw a smile crease his cheek like a scar. "Of course, Smithers. Wasn't it the natural outcome of his visit to me that night? This man stood in my path—in the path of art. I had to destroy him, or else my ambition was doomed. He had become an insurmountable obstacle in my path. I could go no further until I had forcibly removed him. How simple, how true! Why, even *he* had a premonition of the truth. He came to my rooms as a hero goes to battle. He was a brave man, Smithers."

Once more Martin paused and stroked his chin. I saw the pendulous drop of blood stain his finger tips. And now this blood was no longer reassuring. It revolted me. Those vibrating crimson finger tips were a symbol—a symbol of the stealthy assassin who slays by night. Soon they might be fastened about my throat

—or, perhaps, they would grasp the hilt of the hunting knife suspended from his belt. No matter how death came, those finger tips would play their part in it.

I felt that life and I were soon to part. Like a fallen tree trunk, I was at the mercy of this forester of lives. He confided in me so readily because he judged me as one already dead. It amused him to play on my emotions before he cut the thin thread which held me to existence. He was confessing to me now as a cat might confess to the mouse between its paws.

But I would keep a stiff upper lip! I was afraid—yes, deadly afraid—but he should never know it. He had laughed at me many times. He had called me a weakling. He had held me up to ridicule. But I would show him that I could face death. Perhaps I did not have the courage to brave life, but I had the courage to brave death. I would show him *that*—I would show him that even a weakling knew how to die.

“Why did you tie me?” I asked at length. “Are you going to murder me?”

He started and glanced up. “Not necessarily. Perhaps you will want to go. Man lives to learn; why cannot he die to learn? Is it not strange that human curiosity cannot overcome human fear? Are you afraid of the dark, Smithers? Will you not open the door for truth? What is the exact sensation of death, Smithers? Tell me—has that question never worried you?”

“Never,” I muttered. “Why should it?”

Martin shrugged his shoulders. “Perhaps it

shouldn't. But to me, it—well, you wouldn't understand. Only the moon understands. But you must listen to my story. No doubt you will think it one long, red road of wanton cruelty and mad blood lust. No doubt you will be unable to appreciate the supreme sacrifice of a strong nature—the sacrifice of human flesh, of human love, on the altar of the muse—that sacrifice to kindle the immortal flame of genius and create the indestructible. What *I* have done for art no man has done; what *I* will do for art you must bear witness to. I have chosen you as my messenger to the world."

At that instant a shaft of lightning flashed between us like a lifted sword blade. It was immediately followed by such a deafening peal of thunder that the tiny cabin echoed it like a hollow drum. Now the rain came down in a silver deluge, tapping on the boards overhead as though a multitude of hammers were at work. Several drops trickled through a chink between the logs and fell on my upturned face. And they kept on falling relentlessly while I listened to Martin's confession.

XIX

"As you already know, Smithers," Martin began, "my parents both died when I was very young and my aunt took me to live with her. In that great, gloomy house the books were my only companions. And what a collection! I believe every great horror tale ever written found a permanent resting place on the shelves which

circled her library. And beside these, there were scores of volumes dealing with spiritualism and necromancy—volumes, gray with the dust of centuries, between whose covers lay many a forgotten tragedy like vivid, crimson flowers. And how I loved them all! How I lingered over them, forgetting time and place, drinking in great drafts of knowledge, reading on and on till often the pallid face of morning peered in at me through my window!

"But soon ambition began to lash me. Why could I not create horror tales which in no way would be inferior to those I now devoured with such avidity? Perhaps I might write even better. Certainly I had the will to persevere. No one could be more painstaking, no one could be more thorough. Surely, if Carlyle were right in his definition of genius, I might aspire to any heights.

"Thinking thus, I sat down in the library one sunny afternoon to start my career as a short-story writer, to create my first horror tale. Gradually, as the minutes passed, bright optimism flickered like the flame of a candle one breathes upon. I had thought that inspiration would envelope me like a fiery mantle, that I would be lifted out of myself and borne away to some strange kingdom of fancy where I could pick and choose from an unlimited treasure. But nothing of the kind happened. On the contrary, my mind seemed a vacuum. And then I realized the sickening truth: I was attempting to write and I had no imagination!

"Then I suffered, Smithers, as only the very young

can suffer. Ambition was already planted deep in my soul and I felt that it could never flower without imagination. Tears gushed from my eyes; I was a plaything for grief. No doubt my literary career would have ended there and then, had it not been for the strange occurrence which befell on that same, sunshiny afternoon.

"My aunt had been very sick for over a month. Now she was dying. As I sat with weak tears running down my face, her nurse entered the library and took me to the sick room to say a last farewell. No doubt she considered that my emotion was caused by natural grief at the expectation of losing a near relative. She wiped my eyes and attempted to console me, before she led me to my aunt's bedside.

"The old lady was almost at her last gasp. Her thin, yellow hands were fluttering over the coverlet, resembling the fallen, windswept leaves of autumn; the death rattle rasped harshly in her wizened throat with the mechanical vibration of an engine running down; her heavy, blue-veined eyelids were closed and did not open as I knelt beside her. Soon her breathing stopped. She was dead.

"On my way back to the library, the scene which I had just witnessed was pictured in glowing colors in my brain. Nothing could wipe it out. Wherever I looked, I saw my aunt lying in her great four-poster bed like a fallen branch on a snowbank.

"Once more I picked up my discarded paper and pencil and began idly to picture in words what I had

just seen. And then a strange thing happened. I seemed to be again in the sick room which I had just quitted—alone there with the dying woman, listening to her wheezing breath and watching her dry, shriveled hands fluttering about like autumn leaves circling in the wind.

“How long this strange mental hallucination possessed me, I do not know. When I regained normal consciousness, it was to find both sides of the paper covered with my microscopic writing. With amazement, I read aloud what I had written.

“You cannot imagine my feelings, Smithers, when I realized that what I was reading was a masterpiece of description. As clear-cut and convincing as an ivory carving, it had a vividness of detail, a charm of style, which held the attention in an iron grip. To be sure, it was merely a sketch—a word-painting of my aunt’s death—but, for all that, it was worthy of immortality.

“And there could be no mistake—I had composed this morbid masterpiece. It was my writing without a doubt. What did it matter that I had been unconscious of the manual effort which guided the pencil? Surely true inspiration lifted the artist out of the shell in which he lived his normal days. And yet *was* this true inspiration? Surely not. This was no flight of the imagination. It was a realistic description of something I had seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears. My aunt’s death had been photographed on the film of my brain and I had developed it with all the art of a stylist into this perfect picture.

"Now true realization of the truth was born in upon me. I was, indeed, a writer without imagination and therefore I must rely solely on what I saw with my own eyes and what I heard with my own ears. I had determined to devote myself to horror tales. Very well. But in order to be a master of tragedy, I must steel my heart against all weakness, all feeling; I must, perhaps, witness the perpetration of crime so as to impress my readers with its reality. It was necessary for an unimaginative artist to associate with the scum of the world in order to rise above the world. Therefore I must tear out my heart so that my head might rise above the stars. All this I realized, but I did not turn back."

There came another crash of thunder which drowned him out. His next few words were lost, swallowed up by the rattling of the pots and pans on the wall, the tapping fingers of rain, and a gust of wind which went howling about the cabin.

"For many months I trained myself for my future career," Martin resumed. "Fortunately, at that time, I had no friends except a few household pets on which I had centered my affections. Because I loved them, I knew that they must go. I must have no human weaknesses to hold me back—nothing which could later interfere with art by making my will subordinate to mercy.

"So, coldly, methodically, but with unparalleled mental anguish, I tortured to death each one of my poor pets. My brain reeled, but my hand was steady;

and, after each atrocious act, I felt the natural repulsion for these cruelties growing less and less. I slowly conquered myself.

"It was about this time that I first took up drawing with the intention of illustrating my future work. As in writing, it came naturally to me when death was my model. Sitting before one of my slaughtered pets, I would first write a vivid description of its demise and then draw a striking, realistic picture of the scene. I kept a child's diary, illustrated with no little skill, depicting the various crimes I had committed and portraying my various emotions with such clarity of vision that I am sure it would have had a disastrous effect on the minds of other children had it been published. Like 'The Confessions of Constantine,' it might have created a wave of crime.

"Shortly after this, I entered a nearby school and almost immediately obtained the theme for my first short story. One afternoon, while walking home, I saw one of my classmates—a rather pretty girl whom I had unconsciously grown quite fond of—on the arm of an overgrown yokel whose vacant eyes and moving lips indicated a weak mentality. That evening I made inquiries in town and discovered that this yokel often carried her books home from school and that she tolerated him only out of kindness. It was plain to see that he adored her and that he was extremely jealous as are most weak-minded persons.

"On the following day, I won the affections of the poor fellow by some small kindness and ascertained

that my theory was correct. His brain was like a clouded mirror, but he loved the girl devotedly. You know the rest, Smithers. I wrote it up in 'The Murder of Mary Mortimer.'

"I was the voice which drove the poor idiot on, the voice which turned the love in his undeveloped nature into a seething inferno of jealous hatred. And then, when he murdered her, when I saw her fall bleeding on a carpet of soft white snow, I stole out of the bushes where I had concealed myself and made a sketch of her. You remember the painting, I think. It was a vivid portrayal, but rather crude in its color scheme."

Martin broke off and regarded me intently. Seeing the horror written on my face, no doubt, he attempted to explain and thereby made his crime all the more revolting.

"To say that I felt no compassion for her would be to lie," he continued. "As I told you, Smithers, I was fond of the girl—dangerously fond. Otherwise I would not have driven the idiot to kill her. A dozen times I was on the point of leaping forward, of rescuing her before it was too late; and a dozen times the voice of reason whispered: 'Fool, fool, would you refuse art your first human sacrifice? It is necessary to tear out the heart so that the head may rise above the stars.' That voice spoke the truth, Smithers; it was the voice of my destiny.

"When the girl was lifeless, strange to say, all compassion vanished. I was once more the artist, calm and

smiling; she, the model who might inspire me to herculean effort. I strode forward to where she lay in an ever-widening stain of blood and, drawing out paper and pencil, went to work in a mental daze of creation. The idiot had fled. I had nothing to disturb me—only the white snow-petals which fall softly on her upturned face and formed themselves into a spotless bandage for her severed throat. The shadows of night were gathering in before I left her. Already she was partly covered by a glistening counterpane which would hide all telltale traces by dawn.

"But now you are trembling, Smithers! Why are you trembling? Are you cold? Perhaps I had better not speak of Paul."

"Yes, tell me of Paul!" I cried in a kind of desperation. "You murderer, tell me of Paul! You killed him because you were fond of him, I presume? Oh, if my hands weren't tied!"

"Calm yourself, Smithers," Martin said. "You must hear me out before you can judge. I did not kill Paul because I was merely *fond* of him. Ah, no. You, who have shared your affections with the mob, can scarcely understand the feeling I had for *him*. He was as wife, brother and friend to me—the personification of all my earthly affection—the single link which still held me to humanity.

"From the first, I knew that this friendship was fatal to art. To develop the ego, one must travel alone. Loving hands hold us back; they seek to bind us with the ropes of affection, mercy, generosity. We

must thrust them aside, we must crush them if need be, to reach our goal. All tender emotions clog the stream of inspiration. I could only create by forming myself into a machine devoid of all the warmer instincts of nature. Paul must go!

"But I was weak. I lacked the resolution to leave him. I dodged the issue. Why could I not follow my career and still keep this single affection, I asked myself. Surely it was possible. Before now many a man had led a double life. Art would not demand a complete excommunication from my fellows. As long as Paul remained, I would never be quite alone.

"Thinking that I could serve two masters at once, I engaged lodgings on Tyndall Place and soon was on intimate terms with the scrapings of the neighborhood—men who would slice a throat for slight compensation and often for the merest whim. Before many weeks had passed, I gathered about me a band of the most bloodthirsty rascals unhung. They nicknamed me 'The Boss' and were overjoyed to have a leader who could plan their little escapades skillfully and who sought no material gain for himself.

"Under my leadership a dozen murders were perpetrated and the police in every case failed to apprehend the assassin. I witnessed all of these crimes and they are reported faithfully in my first book. Yet each murder was a torture to me; and the remorse I felt when I visited Paul, was almost more than I could bear. You scarcely realized my true emotions, Smithers, on the night when we met on Tyndall Place.

No doubt you thought I was calm and collected; but, in reality, I was suffering far more than you. Every blow which descended on that writhing body, fell on my soul as well. As never before, Paul's influence was about to gain the ascendancy. For one mad moment I was tempted to throw myself beneath that shower of clubs and perish with my victim.

"Although 'Many Murders' was acclaimed a great success by the leading critics, it was in reality a miserable failure. I had succeeded in writing several vivid descriptions of violent death, but they were written from the standpoint of the spectator. I had only succeeded in portraying the sensations of an eyewitness—the commonplace form of narration in horror writing. Surely there was room for great improvement in my next book. Could I not probe far deeper into the subject? Now, if I could describe accurately and vividly the thoughts and sensations of the assassin as he struck the fatal blow, I would be accomplishing a unique effect in literature. But, unfortunately, I was not blessed with an imagination. In order to write a series of such stories, I must first commit a series of such crimes. I could no longer depend on my band of cutthroats to create models for me; I must shed human blood with my own hands. Who could know the sensations of the assassin but the assassin? It was necessary for me to become an actual murderer.

"Several days after I had come to this decision, I attempted to kill a man. He had been drugged and was lying unconscious in my crime studio on Tyndall

Place. I was alone with him. Stealing up beside the bed where he lay, I poised a needle-pointed stiletto above his heart. A single movement of my arm and he would have been a corpse; yet, try as I would, this simple act was beyond me. Thinking that I saw a resemblance to Paul on his white, upturned face, I sank to my knees and burst out into uncontrollable sobs. Defeated, broken, I crouched there until my intended victim awoke.

"That night I fought a great and final battle. All through the dark hours the struggle raged. At one moment my love for Paul, and all the human weaknesses which followed in its train, would gain the ascendancy; at the next, the calm and radiant goddess, Art, would hold my will in the hollow of her hand. It was not until the gray light of dawn descended on the city that the victory was won.

"I must sever the last link which holds me to humanity,' I told myself. 'Paul must be sacrificed, as others have been sacrificed, on the funeral pyre of genius. Brave men have starved for it, shall I turn back? Kind men have forfeited their loved ones for it, shall I be weak? No, Paul, my dear friend, you must die!'"

XX

Martin paused and passed his hand across his forehead. Great drops of perspiration had formed there, which at any moment threatened to run down into his

eyes. Evidently the memory of these mental sufferings could still move him. I might have pitied the man, had I not had such a hearty detestation and horror of him.

"Three weeks later Paul and I went to the woods together," he continued. "I had shipped a barrel of whisky to the camp several days before. It was child's play for me to overcome your brother's scruples and start him drinking again. For five days I kept him in a drunken stupor by passing him my flask when he showed signs of returning reason. On the sixth day I hid the barrel in the spring and refused to give him any more whisky. When he came to himself, he had an attack of violent melancholia. Sick in body, he was sicker yet in mind.

"As you know, Paul's fits of mental depression were rather dangerous. Before this he had always had some one to cheer him up, some one to drag him bodily out of the slough of despondency. But now I did just the opposite. Instead of trying to lighten his mind, I burdened it with all the weary weight of remorse. I gave him no hope to cling to. I told him that what had happened here in the woods would happen again and again; that there was no hope of ultimate cure for a drunkard; that he was predestined to die with *delirium tremens*. I even described his death rather vividly. I had always had a mental ascendancy over Paul; now I used this ascendancy as a weapon to destroy him. When I left him by the camp fire that night, I knew that the thought of immediate suicide was implanted in his whisky-soaked brain.

"But how I suffered as I lay in the dark cabin waiting for the end! All my other sufferings were as nothing compared to this. When I finally saw his hand slide silently in through the doorway and clutch the barrel of a shotgun which stood against the wall, I seized the sides of my bunk and literally held myself down. 'Only a moment now,' I told myself. 'Only a moment!'

"And then, when I heard the loud report of the gun, something seemed to snap in my brain—some chord of feeling which, having parted, left me as cold as ice. Since that day I have felt nothing—neither love nor pity, fear nor hate. Strange, isn't it, Smithers? What was it that died with Paul? Whatever it was, it left me free to go my own way."

"Your way shall lead to the gallows if I once get out of here alive!" I cried defiantly. "You'd better murder me now and have done with it!"

"I doubt if the courts would hold me responsible for your brother's death," he said quite calmly. "Crimes committed by the mind are beyond the reach of the law. However, hear me out, Smithers, and you'll have iron-bound proof.

"After Paul's death, I began creating material for my new book. Patiently, cleverly, I arranged a murder in which I played the chief rôle and did the actual killing with my own hand. I committed that crime, calmly, coolly, without the slightest compunction. The description of it appeared in 'The Confessions of Constantine.' That book, if you remember, described my

sensations—the sensations of the murderer—in the most minute and realistic fashion.

“During the next three days I committed twelve murders in all. I limited myself to that number because I was not actuated by a love for shedding blood alone. Ah, no, I destroyed life merely for art's sake. And I naturally refrained from wholesale slaughter, as I feared that my sensations would soon become dulled by overusage and that I would no longer be able to record them so vividly and with such artistic feeling. In a word, I fostered my talent.

“Soon after ‘The Confessions of Constantine’ was published, I began to read the papers with avidity. But I never turned to the literary sheet—the book reviews. I was tired of words; I wanted deeds. And I was not disappointed, as you know. ‘The Confessions of Constantine’ passed the supreme test; it was responsible for a wave of crime that swept the country from end to end. This was a triumph for art. I not only appealed to the minds of my readers; I conquered their minds. I was the maker of men's destinies, the angel of death.

“What exultation filled me during those few short months when ‘The Confessions of Constantine’ wandered through the world and whispered its red secrets to all mankind! How I gloated over this signal victory—a victory which no other artist had accomplished. Surely I was destined to dwell forever on the sunlit heights of great achievement. And then, just as the world seemed mine to play with at will, the roof of

the heavens fell on my proudly lifted head. You know what happened, Smithers. 'The Confessions of Constantine' was condemned by the government!

"I made inquiries and soon learned who was responsible for my downfall. I did not underestimate Wilbur Huntington for an instant. The man was a brilliant psychologist and capable of doing big things as a criminal expert. He had already traced the crime-wave to 'The Confessions of Constantine,' would he not soon compare it with 'Many Murders' and make some startling deduction? Suppose he should learn that I had no imagination? Would I be safe?

"Thoughts such as these, prompted me to write that letter which he received in your studio. Before he came that night, I made my preparations. Securing the services of three murderers who could be relied upon, I hid them behind the portières in my apartment. No sooner was he well inside, before they leaped upon him and pinioned his arms behind his back. He was helpless.

"So you decided to get me out of the way, Martin," he said with surprising calmness. 'I thought it might come to this.'

"In spite of the great wrong the man had done me, I could not help showing him a certain amount of respect. There he stood, with a boyish smile on his face, while those assassins were nearly tearing his arms out of their sockets. He seemed as careless to pain as he was to death. Your friend cut an heroic figure, Smithers.

"'You are quick to see the truth,' I said. 'If you wished to live, you should not have treated a great book in such a manner. It may be years before I can write another equally as good.'

"'That's what I came to see you about—your art!' he cried with strange enthusiasm. 'You're going to kill me immediately, I presume?'

"'Most certainly,' I answered. 'I never waste time when I am anxious to be at work.'

"'Then hear me first,' he broke in excitedly. 'I want to speak of your work.'

"'Well?' I asked.

"'You have described crime from the standpoint of the onlooker and from the standpoint of the assassin,' he said. 'That is true, is it not?'

"'Yes,' I assented.

"'But you have missed the great situation—the truly artistic situation!' he continued quickly.

"'How so?' I demanded hotly.

"'Why, you have never written a story from the standpoint of the victim!' he cried. 'In other words, what is the exact sensation of death?'

"'What is the exact sensation of death?' I repeated dully.'

"'To be sure!' he shouted almost gleefully. 'You're worse than a failure, Martin, for you are only a partial success! *You*, whom they call the recorder of sensations, have missed the only unknown sensation—that mysterious sensation of death! *There* is material beyond your reach. Till you have mastered it, you will

remain a living lie. I will know that secret, but it will not be mirrored in my dead eyes! You will have to go further, Martin—further!

“And then, Smithers, the truth of his words flashed through my brain like lightning. What *was* the sensation of death? All my life I had been straining toward that unknown knowledge without realizing it; all my life I had known instinctively that dead things guard a precious secret. Without this secret, I was a mere scribbler forced to give shopworn offerings to the muse. What *was* the sensation of death? If I knew that, unborn millions would live to fear me; my shadow would rest like black plumage over the world; and life, once gay and carefree, would shudder on the brink of the tomb!

“But now red rage flamed up in me—blind rage at my own impotence. How I hated this man who had pointed out the truth! My only thought was to destroy that brain which had grappled and was grappling with mine.

“Grasping the heavy poker which leaned against the grate, I struck him on the head with all my might. The iron bit into his skull and he fell senseless at my feet. But blind fury still possessed me. I struck again and again till his face was beaten into an unrecognizable mass.

“And then I stopped, ashamed. I knew that he had escaped; that my first blow had opened the door for him; that he was now safe from me, quite safe and the possessor of a priceless knowledge. And I dared not

look into his eyes for fear that I would see that relentless question: 'What was the sensation of death?'

"You know the rest, Smithers. I dressed his body in my clothes. I slipped my ring on his finger and later that night I had him thrown into the river. Then I left the city by stealth. Solitude has always appealed to me. I took to the woods, grew a beard and soon became familiar with my new life."

He paused and regarded me solemnly for a moment. "Tell me," he muttered, "why did Huntington call me a failure? Do *you* think that I am a failure, Smithers? I have tried so hard and now——" He shook his head sadly. "We, who serve, must give everything—everything!"

And now a new terror was added to my others. There remained no doubt in my mind. Looking up into his thin, convulsed face, I realized that Burgess Martin was mad. There he sat, his eyes fixed on mine with a speculative stare—a madman with the red stain of murder in his brain! How long before his slender, crimson finger tips would be at their wonted trade? How long had I to live?

XXI

"All that I have told you happened such a long, long time ago," Martin resumed in a weary voice. "Now nothing amuses me—nothing! For ten unbearable years that relentless question has burned my brain like molten lava. The world, no doubt, would think me

mad, but the moon knows better. To-night, as I sat by the fire, she bent down from the heavens and whispered to me, telling me how I could find the answer and be as wise as she and other cold things. Just think what it must mean to be wise as the moon!

"But do not imagine that I seek to learn this truth for myself alone. Ah, no, I do it for Art—I do it so that she may become all-powerful, so that she may rule over the dead as over the living. I shall leave a message behind which will open those dark portals. No longer shall the breath from the tomb be heavy-laden with mystery. The time has come for my last sacrifice!"

All this time his eyes had been fixed on me; his face had been so close to mine that I could feel his hot breath on my cheek. But now he rose and straightened himself to his full height. Slowly his right hand stole downward till it rested on the hilt of the hunting knife suspended from his belt. A moment later I saw the sharp blade gleam dully in the feeble lamplight.

"Tell me," he said softly, bending forward as a mother might stoop to caress her sleeping child. "Tell me, would you not like to go? Paul has trod that path; Huntington laughed as I struck him down. Surely *you* will not remain behind?"

And then, for the first time in all that terrible night, my courage deserted me. "Help!" I shouted. "Help!" But the moaning of the wind, that everlasting mourner, was my only answer.

"You were always a weakling," Martin said with a

sneer strong in his voice. "But I will not press you. You shall be my messenger to the world."

Now he bent down lower still, and, with the speed of lightning, passed the sharp blade of the hunting knife across the arteries in his left wrist. Instantly a warm stream of blood fell on my upturned face. At this new horror, everything grew black before my eyes. I fainted.

When I regained consciousness, Martin still lived, although his blood was dry on my cheek. He sat beside the table in the center of the room, bending over it and writing hurriedly. His left arm hung motionless by his side. From the wrist a dark ribbon of blood stole downward over the hand and, separating at each finger, dripped to the floor. The storm had died down, the rain had ceased. I could distinctly hear the scratching sound his pencil made while traveling over the paper, the intermittent pattering of blooddrops on the loose boards at his feet.

For the moment I was incapable of thought. I stared stupidly at this absorbed figure, scarcely realizing the struggle going on between mind and body, between life and death. And then the pencil—that swiftly moving pencil riveted my gaze. I felt that it was being pursued, that pencil; that it was a tiny terror-stricken creature, fleeing, dodging this way and that, leaping forward in a frenzy to escape. But what pursued it? What implacable destiny waited for it silently at the end of the page? Now it faltered, now it sped on again, now it moved jerkily forward for an inch or

two. And then—why, then it stopped! The race was over!

Burgess Martin sank lower and lower in his chair. The pencil slipped from his fingers to the floor. He tried to reach for it, to pick it up again; but strength was lacking. Soon his chin rested on his breast.

But how long he took to die! The lamplight was dying with him, slowly, surely, while dark shadows, clustering in the corners, grew bolder now and crept out in solemn, hovering groups. I saw them gathering about the doomed man, silently stealing forward, bending and bowing, mocking his weakness and futility of effort like evil marionettes. And once I distinctly heard a low laugh as though one were merry in the presence of death and would hide it from the world.

But now, as though spurred to final effort, Burgess Martin raised his head. He moved; he shook off death; he arose unsteadily to his feet. For an instant he stood there, grim and silent, his arms outstretched as though awaiting the cold embraces of his mistress.

"I have not the strength," he murmured. And then in a louder tone: "Forgive me if I have failed in this. I have tried so hard!"

And now there came a gust of wind from the lake. It tore the blanket from the doorway. It entered. It breathed upon the lamp and there was blackness. There followed the sound of a heavy fall and then silence.

I have but little more to tell. On the following day Doctor Street arrived at Naples, and, hearing that I

was in Bill Pete's cabin, hired a canoe and paddled across. He found me tied to my bunk and raving in a high fever. On the floor, within a few feet of the table, lay the stiffening remains of Burgess Martin.

Several weeks later, after I had recovered my health and strength, Dr. Street gave me further details. It seems that Martin's usually somber face was transfigured by a strange, unearthly smile and that he held in his right hand, crumpled up into a ball, a sheet of paper on which he had succeeded in writing several sentences. I have that sheet of paper before me now and, as I am convinced that his last message can do no harm in its unfinished state, I quote from it verbatim:

"I am dying, slowly, painlessly. From me are falling, one by one, the dry husks of life. A great weakness, which clarifies the senses, is stealing over me. I am a child again—a child who stands on the tiptoe of expectancy. Something is about to happen. What? I do not know. And yet I feel so sure of approaching freedom. I have lived my life behind iron bars; and now—why, now I smell the sea!

Yes, and I see it—that sea of eternity, that sea which holds a million, million souls! I hear it. My ears catch up the refrain and hold it like shells on life's shore. All my life I have sought to probe its mystery—that beautiful, sparkling sea of death.

Why am I so weak? The pencil is falling from my hand. I must hold it tighter—tighter! I have lived my life for Art's sake; I must die for Art's sake.

But hush! She is coming! My love is coming, my cold bride! And who is that beside her? Who is that who holds her hand in his? It is Death—proud

Death! I behold you and I am not afraid. I will tell the world of you, Death. You cannot hide your face from me. I see the answer to my question written in your eyes. Well, I shall speak! I——”

Here this strange manuscript broke off abruptly. No doubt at this moment the pencil had slipped from his hand. He had failed. But having failed, having sacrificed his life in vain, how was it that he was found with that strange, transfiguring smile on his face?

It is now five years since Martin's death. I have had plenty of time for thought. But there is a question which still puzzles me. Was he right in claiming that he had no imagination? Perhaps he had too much imagination; perhaps it was his gnawing imagination which drove him on, which turned him into a murderer and then into a madman, which finally made him cut into his own life with that sharp, inquisitive blade. Curiosity and imagination—surely they go hand in hand.

THE END



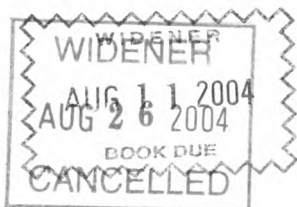


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