

Saltus Edgar

The Pace That Kills: A Chronicle



Edgar Saltus

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PART I

I

"I wish you a happy New Year, sir."

It was the servant, green of livery, the yellow waistcoat slashed with black, bearing the coffee and fruit.

"Put it there, please," Roland answered. And then, in recognition of the salutation, he added, "Thanks: the same to you."

"H'm," he mused, as the man withdrew, "I ought to have tipped him, I suppose."

He leaned from the bed, poured some milk into a cup, and for a second nibbled at a slice of iced orange. Through the transom came a faint odor of home-made bread, and with it the rustle of a gown and a girl's clear laugh. The room itself was small. It was furnished in a fashion which was unsuggestive of an hotel, and yet did not resemble that of a private house. The curtain had been already drawn. Beyond was a lake, very blue in the sunlight, bulwarked by undulant hills. Below, on the road, a dogcart fronted by a groom was awaiting somebody's pleasure.

"It is late," he reflected, and raised a napkin to his lips. As he did so he noticed a package of letters which the napkin must have concealed. He took up the topmost and eyed it. It had been addressed to the Athenæum Club, Fifth Avenue; but the original direction was erased, and Tuxedo Park inserted in its stead. On the upper left-hand corner the impress of a firm of tailors shone in blue. Opposite was the engraving of a young woman supported by 2-1/2*d*. He put it down again and glanced at the others. The superscriptions were characterless enough; each bore a foreign stamp, and to one as practised as was he, each bore the token of the dun.

"If they keep on bothering me like this," he muttered, "I shall certainly place the matter in the hands of my attorney." And thereat, with the air of a man who had said something insultingly original, he laughed aloud, swallowed some coffee, and dashed his head in the pillow. In and out of the corners of his mouth a smile still played; but presently his fancy must have veered, for the muscles of his lips compressed, and as he lay there, the arms clasped behind the head, the pink silk of his sleeves framing and tinting his face, and in the eyes the expression of one prepared to meet Fate and outwit it, a possible observer who could have chanced that way would have sat himself down to study and risen up perplexed.

Anyone who was at Columbia ten years ago will remember Roland Mistril, – Roland Mistril 3*d*, if you please, – and will recall the wave of bewilderment which swept the campus when that young gentleman, on the eve of graduation, popularity on one side and honors on the other, suddenly, without so much as a p. p. c., left everything where it was and betook himself to other shores. The flight was indeed erratic, and numerous were the rumors which it excited; but Commencement was at hand, other issues were to be considered, bewilderment subsided as bewilderment ever does, the college dispersed, and when it assembled again the Mistril mystery, though unelucidated, was practically forgot.

In the neighborhood of Washington Square, however, on the northwest corner of Tenth Street and Fifth Avenue to be exact, there were others whose memories were more retentive. Among them was Roland's grandfather, himself a graduate, founder of the Mistril fellowship, and judge of the appellate court. And there was Roland's father, a graduate too, a gentleman widely respected, all the

more so perhaps because he had run for the governorship and lost it. And again there was Roland's aunt, a maiden lady of whom it is recorded that each day of her life she got down on her knees and thanked God he had made her a Mistril. In addition to these, there were, scattered along the Hudson, certain maternal relatives – the Algaroths, the Baxters, and the Swifts; Bishop Algaroth in particular, who possessed such indomitable vigor that when at the good old age of threescore and ten he decided to depart this life, the impression prevailed that he had died very young for him. None of these people readily forgot. They were a proud family and an influential one – influential not merely in the social sense, but influential in political, legal, in church and university circles as well; a fact which may have had weight with the Faculty when it was called upon to deal with Roland Mistril 3d. But be that as it may, the cause of the young man's disappearance was never officially given. Among the rumors which it created was one to the effect that his health was affected; in another his mind was implicated; and in a third it was his heart. Yet as not one of these rumors had enough evidential value behind it to concoct an anonymous letter on, they were suffered to go their way undetained, very much as Roland had already gone his own.

That way led him straight to the Golden Gate and out of it to Japan. Before he reached Yeddo his grandfather left the planet and a round sum of money behind. Of that round sum the grandson came in for a portion. It was not fabulous in dimensions, but in the East money goes far. In this case it might have gone on indefinitely had not the beneficiary seen fit to abandon the languors of the Orient for the breezier atmosphere of the west. The Riviera has charms of its own. So, too, have Paris and Vienna. Roland enjoyed them to the best of his ability. He even found London attractive, and became acclimated in Pall Mall. In the latter region he learned one day that his share of the round sum had departed and his father as well. The conjunction of these incidents was of such a character that he at once took ship for New York.

It was not that he was impatient to revisit the misgoverned city which he had deserted ten years before. He had left it willingly enough, and he had seldom regretted it since. The pins and needles on which he sat were those of another make. He was uninformed of the disposition of his father's property, and he felt that, were not every penny of it bequeathed to him, he would be in a tight box indeed.

He was at that time just entering his thirtieth year – that age in which a man who has led a certain life begins to be particular about the quality of his red pepper, and anxious too that the supply of it shall not tarry. Though meagre of late, the supply had been sufficient. But at present the palate was a trifle impaired. Where a ten-pound note had sufficed for its excitement, a hundred now were none too strong. Roland Mistril – 3d no longer – wanted money, and he wanted plenty of it. He had exact ideas as to its usefulness, and none at all regarding its manufacture. He held, as many have done and will continue to do, that the royal road to it leads through a testament; and it was in view of the opening vistas which that road displayed that he set sail for New York.

And now, six weeks later, on this fair noonday of a newer year, as he lay outstretched in bed, you would have likened him to one well qualified to keep a mother awake and bring her daughter dreams. Our canons of beauty may be relative, but, such as they are, his features accorded with them – disquietingly even; for they conveyed the irritating charm of things we have hoped for, striven for, failed to get, and then renounced with thanksgiving. They made you anxious about their possessor, and fearful too lest the one dearly-beloved might chance to see them, and so be subjugated by their spell. They were features that represented good stock, good breeding, good taste, good looks – every form of goodness, in fact, save, it may be, the proper one. But the possible lack of that particular characteristic was a matter over which hesitation well might be. We have all of us a trick of flattering ourselves with the fancy that, however obtuse our neighbor is, we at least are gifted with the insight of a detective – a faculty so rare and enviable that the blunders we make must be committed with a view to its concealment; yet, despite presumable shrewdness, now and then a face will appear that eludes cataloguing, and leaves the observer perplexed. Roland Mistril's was one of these.

And now, as the pink silk of his shirt-sleeves tinted it, the expression altered, and behind his contracted brows hurried processions of shifting scenes. There was that initial catastrophe which awaited him almost on the wharf – the discovery that his father had left him nothing, and that for no other reason in the world than because he had nothing whatever to leave – nothing, in fact, save the hereditary decoration of and right of enrolment in the Society of the Cincinnati, the which, handed down since Washingtonian days from one Mistrrial to another, he held, as his forefathers had before him, in trust for the Mistrrials to be.

No, he could not have disposed of that, even had he so desired; but everything else, the house on Tenth Street, – built originally for a country-seat, in times when the Astor House was considered rather far uptown, – bonds, scrip, and stocks, disappeared as utterly as had they never been; for Roland's father, stricken with that form of dementia which, to the complete discouragement of virtue, batters on men that have led the chastest lives, had, at that age in which the typical rake is forced to haul his standard down, surrendered himself to senile debauchery, and in the lap of a female of uncertain attractions – of whose mere existence no one had been previously aware – placed title-deeds and certificates of stock. In a case such as this the appeal of the rightful heir is listened to with such patience that judge and jury too have been known to pass away and leave the tale unended. And Roland, when the earliest dismay had in a measure subsided, saw himself closeted with lawyers who offered modicums of hope in return for proportionate fees. Then came a run up the Hudson, the welcomeless greeting which waited him there, and the enervating imbecility of his great aunt, whose fingers, mummified by gout, were tenacious enough on the strings of her purse. That episode flitted by, leaving on memory's camera only the degrading tableau of coin burrowed for and unobtained. And through it all filtered torturesome uncertainties, the knowledge of his entire inability to make money, the sense of strength misspent, the perplexities that declined to take themselves away, forebodings of the morrow, nay of the day even as well, the unbanishable dread of want.

But that for the moment had gone. He turned on his elbow and glanced over at a card-case which lay among the silver-backed brushes beyond, and at once the shock he had resummoned fled. Ah, yes! it had gone indeed, but at the moment it had been appalling enough. The morrow at least was secure; and as he pondered over its possibilities they faded before certain episodes of the previous day – that chance encounter with Alphabet Jones, who had insisted he should pack a valise and go down with Trement Yarde and himself to Tuxedo; and at once the incidents succeeding the arrival paraded through his thoughts. There had been the late dinner to begin with; then the dance; the girl to whom some one had presented him, and with whom he had sat it out; the escape of the year, the health that was drunk to the new one, and afterwards the green baize in the card-room; the bank which Trement Yarde had held, and finally the successful operation that followed, and which consisted in cutting that cherub's throat to the tune of three thousand dollars. It was all there now in the card-case; and though, as sums of money go, it was hardly quotable, yet in the abstract, forethought and economy aiding, it represented several months of horizons solid and real. The day was secure; as for the future, who knew what it might contain? A grave perhaps, and in it his aunt.

II

"If I had been killed in a duel I couldn't be better." It was Jones the novelist describing the state of his health. "But how is my friend and brother in virtue?"

"Utterly ramollescent," Roland answered, confidingly. "What the French call *gaga*."

The mid-day meal was in progress, and the two men, seated opposite each other, were dividing a Demidorf salad. They had been schoolmates at Concord, and despite the fact that until the day before they had not met for a decennium, the happy-go-lucky intimacy of earlier days had eluded Time and still survived. Throughout the glass-enclosed piazza other people were lunching, and every now and then Jones, catching a wandering eye, would bend forward a little and smile. Though it was but the first of the year, the weather resembled that of May. One huge casement was wide open. There was sunlight everywhere, flowers too, and beyond you could see the sky, a dome of opal and sapphire blent.

"Well," Jones replied, "I can't say you have altered much. But then who does? You remember, don't you" – and Jones ran on with some anecdote of earlier days.

But Roland had ceased to listen. It was very pleasant here, he told himself. There was a freedom about it that the English country-house, however charming, lacked. There was no one to suggest things for you to do, there was no host or hostess to exact attention, and the women were prettier, better dressed, less conventional, and yet more assured in manner than any that he had encountered for years. The men, too, were a good lot; and given one or two more little surprises, such as he had found in the card-room, he felt willing to linger on indefinitely – a week at least, a month if the fare held out. His eyes roamed through the glitter of the room. Presently, at a neighboring table, he noticed the girl with whom he had seen the old year depart: she was nodding to him; and Roland, with that courtesy that betokens the foreigner a mile away, rose from his seat as he bowed in return.

Jones, whom little escaped, glanced over his shoulder. "By the way, are you on this side for good?" he asked; and Roland answering with the vague shrug the undetermined give, he hastened to add – "or for bad?"

"That depends. I ran over to settle my father's estate, but they seem to have settled it for me. After all, this is no place for a pauper, is it?"

"The wolf's at the door, is he?"

Roland laughed shortly. "At the door? Good Lord! I wish he were! He's in the room."

"There, dear boy, never mind. Wait till spring comes and marry an heiress. There are so many hereabouts that we use them for export purposes. They are a glut in the market. There's a fair specimen. Ever meet her before?"

"Meet whom?"

"That girl you just bowed to. They call her father Honest Paul. Oh, if you ask me why, I can't tell. It's a nick-name, like another. It may be because he says Amen so loud in church. A number of people have made him trustee, but whether on that account or not they never told. However, he's a big man, owns a mile or two up there near the Riverside. I should rate him at not a penny less than ten million."

"What did you say his name was?"

"Dunellen – the Hon. Paul Dunellen. At one time –"

Jones rambled on, and again Roland had ceased to listen. But it was not the present now that claimed him. At the mention of the plutocrat something from the past came back and called him there – a thing so shadowy that, when he turned to interrogate, it eluded him and disappeared. Then at once, without conscious effort, an episode which he had long since put from him arose and detained his thought. But what on earth, he wondered, had the name of Dunellen to do with that? And for the moment dumbly perplexed, yet outwardly attentive, he puzzled over the connection and tried to find

the link; yet that too was elusive: the name seemed to lose its suggestiveness, and presently it sank behind the episode it had evoked.

"Of course," Jones was saying, in reference, evidently, to what had gone before – "of course as millionaires go he is not first chop. Jerolomon could match him head or tail for all he has, and never miss it if he lost. Ten million, though, is a tidy sum – just enough to entertain on. A penny less and you are pinched. Why, you would be surprised – "

"Has he any other children?"

"Who? Dunellen? None that he has acknowledged."

"Then his daughter will come in for it all."

"That's what I said. When she does, she will probably hand it over to some man who won't know how to spend it. She's got a cousin – what's that beggar's name? However, he's a physician, makes a specialty of nervous diseases, I believe; good enough fellow in his way, but an everlasting bore – the sort of man you would avoid in a club, and trust your sister to. What the deuce *is* his name?"

"Well, what of him?"

"Ah, yes. I fancy he wants to get married, and when he does, to entertain. He is very devoted."

"But nowadays, barring royalty, no one ever marries a cousin."

"Dear boy, you forget; it isn't every cousin that has ten million. When she has, the attempt is invariable." And Jones accentuated his remark with a nod. "Now," he continued, "what do you say to a look at the library? They have a superb edition of Kirschwasser in there, and a full set of the works of Chartreuse."

The novelist had arisen; he was leaving the room, and Roland was about to follow him, when he noticed that Miss Dunellen was preparing to leave it too. Before she reached the hall he was at her side.

There is this about the New York girl – her beauty is often bewildering, yet unless a husband catch her in the nick of time the bewilderment of that beauty fades. At sixteen Justine Dunellen had been enchanting, at twenty-three she was plain. Her face still retained its oval, but from it something had evaporated and gone. Her mouth, too, had altered. In place of the volatile brilliance of earlier years, it was drawn a little; it seemed resolute, and it also seemed subdued. But one feature had not changed: her eyes, which were of the color of snuff, enchanted still. They were large and clear, and when you looked in them you saw such possibilities of tenderness and sincerity that the escape of the transient was unregretted; you forgot the girl that had been, and loved the woman that was.

And lovable she was indeed. The world is filled with charming people whom, parenthetically, many of us never meet; yet, however scant our list may be, there are moments when from Memory's gardens a vision issues we would fain detain. Who is there to whom that vision has not come? Nay, who is there that has not intercepted it, and, to the heart's perdition perhaps, suffered it to retreat? If there be any to whom such apparitions are unvouchsafed, let him evoke that woman whom he would like his sister to resemble and his wife to be. Then, if his intuitions are acute, there will appear before him one who has turned sympathy into a garment and taken refinement for a wreath; a woman just yet debonair, thoughtful of others, true to herself; a woman whose speech can weary no more than can a star, whose mind is clean as wholesome fruit, whose laugh is infrequent, and whose voice consoles; a woman who makes the boor chivalrous, and the chivalrous bend the knee. Such an one did Justine Dunellen seem. In person she was tall, slender, willowy of movement, with just that shrinking graciousness that the old masters gave to certain figures which they wished to represent as floating off the canvas into space.

And now, as Roland joined her, she smiled and greeted him. With her was a lady to whom she turned:

"Mrs. Metuchen, this is Mr. Mistrial."

And Roland found himself bowing to a little old woman elaborately dressed. She was, he presently discovered, a feather-head person, who gave herself the airs of a *princesse en couches*. But though not the rose, at least she dwelt near by. Her husband was Mr. Dunellen's partner; and to Justine,

particularly since the death of her mother, she had become what the Germans, who have many a neat expression, term a *Wahlverwandschaft*— a relation not of blood, but of choice. She was feather-headed, but she was a lady; she was absurd, but she was lovable; and by Justine she was evidently beloved.

Roland got her a seat, found a footstool for her, and pleased her very much by the interest which he displayed in her family tree.

"I knew all your people," she announced at last. And when she did so, her manner was so gracious that Roland felt the hour had not been thrown away.

During the rest of the day he managed to be frequently in her vicinity. The better part of the morrow he succeeded in sharing with Justine. And in the evening, when the latter bade him good-night, it occurred to him that if what Jones had said in regard to the cousin was true, then was the cousin losing ground.

The next morning Mrs. Metuchen and her charge returned to town. Roland followed in a later train. As he crossed the ferry he told himself he had much to do; and on reaching New York he picked up his valise with the air of one who has no time to lose.

III

In a city like New York it is not an easy task, nor is it always a profitable one, to besiege a young person that is fortified in her father's house. And when the house has a cousin for sentinel, and that cousin is jealous, the difficulty is increased. But, time and tact aiding, what obstacle may not be removed?

Roland understood all this very thoroughly, and on the day succeeding his return from Tuxedo he examined the directory, strolled into Wall Street, and there, at the shingle of Dunellen, Metuchen, & Such, sent in a card to the senior member of the firm.

The Hon. Paul Dunellen – Honest Paul, to the world in which he moved – was a man who in his prime must have been of glad and gallant appearance; but latterly he had shrunk: his back had bent almost into a hump, he held his head lower than his shoulders, but with uplifted chin – a habit which gave him the appearance of being constantly occupied in peering at something which he could not quite discern, an appearance that was heightened by his eyes, which were restless, and by his brows, which were tormented and bushy. He had an ample mouth: when he spoke, the furrows in his cheeks moved with it. His nose was prominent; all his features, even to his ears, were larger than the average mould. When Roland was admitted to the room in which he sat, the first impression which he got from him was that of massiveness in decay.

"Mr. Mistrial, I am glad to see you. I knew your father, and I had the honor of knowing your grandfather as well. Will you not take a seat?" The old man had half risen, and in this greeting made manifest something of that courtesy which we are learning to forget.

"You are very kind," Roland answered. "It is because of my father that I venture to call. If I interrupt you, though" – and Roland, apparently hesitant, occupied himself in a study of his host – "if I do," he continued, "I beg you will allow me to come again."

To this suggestion Mr. Dunellen refused to listen; but during the moments that followed, as Roland succinctly one after the other enumerated the facts in the case of his lost inheritance, the lawyer did listen; and he listened, moreover, with that air of concentrated attention which is the surest encouragement to him who has aught to say. And when Roland had completed the tale of his grievance, he nodded, and stroked his chin.

"The matter is perfectly clear," he announced, "though I can't say as much for the law. Undue influence is evident. The trouble will be to invalidate a gift made during the lifetime of the donor; but – " And Mr. Dunellen made a gesture as who should say, "It is for that that courts were established. "Yet, tell me, why is it that you have done nothing about it before?"

To this Roland made no immediate reply. He lowered his eyes. "Paralysis is written in your face," he mused. Then aloud and rather sadly: "The fairest patrimony is an honored name," he said. "It is for me to guard my father's reputation. It is only recently, stress of circumstances aiding, I have thought that without publicity some compromise might possibly be effected." He looked up again, and as he looked he assured himself that the old man would not outlast the year.

"Well, Mr. Mistrial, you must let me quote the speech a lord made to a commoner, 'You are not a noble, sir, but you are worthy of being one.'" And Mr. Dunellen reaching out caught Roland's hand and shook it in his own. "I enter thoroughly into your delicacy the more readily because I do not encounter it every day – no, nor every month. It does me good – on my word it does. Now, if a compromise can, as you suggest, be effected, and you care to leave the matter in my hands, I will do my best to serve you. It may take some little time, we must seem neither zealous nor impatient, and meanwhile – h'm – I understood you to say something about your circumstances. Now if I can be of any – "

This offer Roland interrupted. "You are truly very kind, sir," he broke in, "and I thank you with all my heart. All the more so even because I must refuse. I have been badly brought up, I know; you

see, I never expected that it would be necessary for me to earn my own living; yet if it is, I cannot begin too soon: but what would the end be if I began by borrowing money?"

As Roland delivered this fine speech he was the image of Honesty arrayed in a Piccadilly coat. He rose from his seat. "I am detaining you, I am sure. Let me get the papers together and bring them to you to-morrow."

"Do so, by all means," Mr. Dunellen answered, rising too. "Do so, by all means. But wait: to-morrow I may be absent. Could you not send them to my house this evening, or better still, bring them yourself? It would give me pleasure to have my daughter meet a man who is the moral portrait of his grandfather."

"Your daughter!" Roland exclaimed. "It is not possible that she is the Miss Dunellen whom I saw the other day at Tuxedo."

"With Mrs. Metuchen? Why, of course it is." And the lawyer looked as surprised as his client. "This is indeed a coincidence. But you will come, will you not?"

"I shall consider it a privilege to do so," Roland, with a charming affectation of modesty, replied; and presently, when he found himself in the street again, he saw, stretching out into beckoning vistas, a high-road paved with promises of prompt success.

And that evening, when the papers had been delivered, and Mr. Dunellen, leaving the guest to his daughter's care, had gone with them to his study, Roland could not help but feel that on that high-road his footing was assured; for, on entering the drawing-room, Justine had greeted him as one awaited and welcome, and now that her father had gone she motioned him to a seat at her side.

"Tell me," she said, "what is it you do to people? There is Mrs. Metuchen, who pretends to abominate young men, and openly admires you. To-day you captured my father; by to-morrow you will be friends with Guy."

"With Guy?" Mechanically Roland repeated the phrase. Then at once into the very core of memory entered the lancinating pang of a nerve exposed. During the second that followed, in that tumult of visions that visits him who awakes from a swoon, there came to him the effort made in Tuxedo to recall in what manner the name of Dunellen was familiar to his ears; but that instantly departed, and in its stead came a face one blur of tears, and behind it a stripling livid with hate. Could that be Guy? If it were, then indeed would the high-road narrow into an alley, with a dead wall at the end. Yet of the inward distress he gave no outward sign. About his thin lips a smile still played, and as he repeated the phrase he looked, as he always did, confident and self-possessed.

"Yes, I am sure you will like each other," the girl answered; "all the more so perhaps because no two people could be less alike. Guy, you see, is –"

But whatever description she may have intended to give remained unexpressed. A portière had been drawn, and some one was entering the room. Roland, whose back was toward the door, turned obliquely and looked.

"Why, there he is!" he heard Justine exclaim; and in the man that stood there he saw the stripling he had just evoked. Into the palms of his hands a moisture came, yet as Justine proceeded with some form of introduction he rose to his feet. "So you are the cousin," he mused; and then, with a bow in which he put the completest indifference, he resumed his seat.

"We were just talking of you," Justine continued. "Why didn't you come in last night?"

"It is snowing," the cousin remarked, inconsequently, and sat himself down.

"Dr. Thorold, you know;" and Justine, turning to Mistrial, began to relate one of those little anecdotes which are serviceable when conversation drags.

As she ran on, Roland, apparently attentive, marked that one of Thorold's feet was moving uneasily, and divined rather than saw that the fingers of his hand were clinched. "He is working himself up," he reflected. "Well, let him; it will make it the easier for me." And as he told himself this he turned on Thorold a glance which he was prepared to instantly divert. But the physician was

not looking; he sat bolt-upright, his eyes lowered, and about his mouth and forehead the creases of a scowl.

Dr. Thorold was of that class of man that women always like and never adore. He was thoughtful of others, and considerate. Physically he was well-favored, and pleasant to the eye. He was sometimes dull, but rarely selfish; by taste and training he was a scholar – gifted at that; and yet through some accident of nature he lacked that one fibre which differentiates the hero from the herd. In the way we live to-day the need of heroes is so slight that the absence of that fibre is of no moment at all – a circumstance which may account for the fact that Justine admired him very much, trusted him entirely, and had she been his sister instead of his cousin could not have appreciated him more.

And now, as Roland eyed him for one moment, through some of those indetectable currents that bring trivialities to the mind that is most deeply engrossed he noticed that though the physician was in dress the shoes he wore were not veneered. Then at once he entered into a perfect understanding of the circumstances in which he was placed. Though he lost the game even as the cards were being dealt, at least he would lose it well. "I'll teach him a lesson," he decided; and presently, as Justine ceased speaking, he assumed his gayest air.

"Yes, yes," he exclaimed, and gave a twist to his light mustache. He had caught her ultimate words, and with them a cue.

"Yes, I remember in Nepal – "

And thereupon he carried his listener through a series of scenes and adventures which he made graphic by sheer dexterity in the use of words. His speech, colored and fluent, was of exactly that order which must be heard, not read. It was his intonation which gave it its charm, the manner in which he eluded a detail that might have wearied; the expression his face took on at the situations which he saw before describing, and which he made his auditor expect; and also the surety of his skill in transition – the art with which he would pass from one idea to another, connect them both with a gesture, and complete the subject with a smile. The *raconteur* is usually a bore. When he is not, he is a wizard. And as Roland passed from one peak of the Himalayas to another, over one of the two that listened he exerted a palpable spell. At last, the end of his tether reached, he turned to the cousin, and, without a hesitation intervening, asked of him, as though the question were one of really personal interest, "Dr. Thorold, have you ever been in the East?"

Thorold, thrown off his guard, glared for an instant, the scowl still manifest; then he stood up. "No, sir; I have not," he answered; and each of the monosyllables of his reply he seemed to propel with tongue and teeth. "Good-night, Justine." And with a nod that was rather small for two to divide, took himself from the room.

He reached the portière before Justine fully grasped the discourtesy of his conduct. She stared after him wonderingly, her lips half parted, her clear eyes dilated and amazed, the color mounted to her cheeks, and she made as though to leave her seat.

But this Roland thought it wise to prevent. "Miss Dunellen," he murmured, "I am afraid Dr. Thorold was bored. It is my fault. I had no right – "

"Bored! How could he have been? I am sure I don't see – "

"Yes, you do, my dear," thought Roland; "you think he was jealous, and you are wrong; but it is good for us that you should." And in memory of the little compliment her speech had unintentionally conveyed he gave another twist to his mustache.

The outer door closed with a jar that reached him where he sat. "Thank God!" he muttered; and divining that if he now went away the girl would regret his departure, after another word or two, and despite the protestation of her manner, he bade her good-night.

It is one of the charms of our lovely climate that the temperature can fall twenty degrees in as many minutes. When Roland entered the Dunellen house he left spring in the street; when he came out again there was snow. Across the way a lamp flickered, beneath it a man was standing, from beyond came a faint noise of passing wheels, but the chance of rescue by cab or hansom was

too remote for anyone but a foreigner to entertain. Roland had omitted to provide himself with any protection against a storm, yet that omission affected him but little. He had too many things to think of to be anxious about his hat; and, his hands in his pocket, his head lowered, he descended the steps, prepared to let the snow do its worst.

As he reached the pavement the man at the lamp-post crossed the street.

"Mistrial," he called, for Roland was hurrying on – "Mistrial, I want a word with you."

In a moment he was at his side, and simultaneously Roland recognized the cousin. He was buttoned up in a loose coat faced with fur, and over his head he held an umbrella. He seemed a little out of breath.

"If," he began at once, "if I hear that you ever presume to so much as speak to Miss Dunellen again, I will break every bone in your body."

The voice in which he made this threat was gruff and aggressive. As he delivered it, he closed his umbrella and swung it like a club.

"*A nous deux, maintenant,*" mused Roland.

"And not only that – if you ever dare to enter that house again I will expose you."

"Oh, will you, though?" answered Roland. The tone he assumed was affectedly civil. "Well now, my fat friend, let me tell you this: I intend to enter that house, as you call it, to-morrow at precisely five o'clock. Let me pick you up on the way, and we can go together."

"Roland Mistrial, as sure as there is a God in heaven I will have you in the Tombs."

"See here, put up your umbrella. You are not in a condition to expose yourself – let alone anyone else. You are daft, Thorold – that is what is the matter with you. If you persist in chattering Tombs at me in a snow-storm I will answer Bloomingdale to you. You frightened me once, I admit; but I am ten years older now, and ten years less easily scared. Besides, what drivel you talk! You haven't that much to go on."

As Roland spoke his accent changed from affected suavity to open scorn. "Now stop your bluster," he continued, "and listen to me. Because you happen to find me in there, you think I have intentions on the heiress – "

"It's a lie! She – "

"There, don't be abusive. I know you want her for yourself, and I hope you get her. But please don't think that I mean to stand in your way."

"I should say not."

"In the first place, I went there on business."

"What business, I would like to know?"

"So you shall. I took some papers for Mr. Dunellen to examine – papers relative to my father's estate. To-morrow I return to learn his opinion. Next week I go abroad again. When I leave I promise you shall find your cousin still heart-whole and fancy-free."

As Roland delivered this little stab he paused a moment to note the effect. But apparently it had passed unnoticed – Thorold seemingly was engrossed in the statements that preceded it. The scowl was still on his face, but it was a scowl into which perplexity had entered, and which in entering had modified the aggressiveness that had first been there. At the moment his eyes wandered, and Roland, who was watching him, felt that he had scored a point.

"You say you are going abroad?" he said, at last.

"Yes; I have to join my wife."

At this announcement Thorold looked up at him and then down at the umbrella. Presently, with an abrupt gesture, he unfurled it and raised it above his head. As he did so, Roland smiled. For that night at least the danger had gone. Of the morrow, however, he was unassured.

"Suppose we walk along," he said, encouragingly; and before Thorold knew it, he was sharing that umbrella with his foe. "Yes," he continued, "my poor father left his affairs in a muddle, but Mr. Dunellen says he thinks he can straighten them out. You can understand that if any inkling of this

thing were to reach him he would return the papers at once. You can understand that, can't you? After all, you must know that I have suffered."

"Suffered!" Thorold cried. "What's that to me? It made my mother insane."

"God knows I nearly lost my reason too. I can understand how you feel toward me: it is only what I deserve. Yet though you cannot forget, at least it can do you no good to rake this matter up."

"It is because of – " and for a second the cousin halted in his speech.

"*Voilà!*" mused Roland. "*Je te vois venir.*"

"However, if you are going abroad – "

"Most certainly I am. I never expect to see Miss Dunellen again."

"In that case I will say nothing."

They had reached Fifth Avenue, and for a moment both loitered on the curb. Thorold seemed to have something to add, but he must have had difficulty in expressing it, for he nodded as though to reiterate the promise.

"I can rely upon you then, can I?" Roland asked.

"Keep out of my way, sir, and I will try, as I have tried, to forget."

A 'bus was passing, he hailed it, and disappeared.

Roland watched the conveyance, and shook the snow-flakes from his coat. "Try, and be damned," he muttered. "I haven't done with you yet."

The disdain of a revenge at hand is accounted the unique possible vengeance. And it is quite possible that had Roland's monetary affairs been in a better condition, on a sound and solid basis, let us say, he would willingly have put that paradox into action. But on leaving Tuxedo he happened to be extremely hungry – hungry, first and foremost, for the possession of that wealth which in this admirably conducted country of ours lifts a man above the law, and, an adroit combination of scoundrelism and incompetence aiding, sometimes lands him high among the executives of state. By political ambition, however, it is only just to say he was uninspired. In certain assemblies he had taken the trouble to assert that our government is one at which Abyssinia might sneer, but the rôle of reformer was not one which he had any inclination to attempt. Several of his progenitors figured, and prominently too, in abridgments of history; and, if posterity were not satisfied with that, he had a very clear idea as to what posterity might do. In so far as he was personally concerned, the prominence alluded to was a thing which he accepted as a matter of course: it was an integral part of himself; he would have missed it as he would have missed a leg or the point of his nose; but otherwise it left his pulse unstirred. No, his hunger was not for preferment or place. It was for the ten million which the Hon. Paul Dunellen had gathered together, and which the laws of gravitation would prevent him from carrying away when he died. That was the nature of Roland Mistril's hunger, and as incidental thereto was the thirst to adjust an outstanding account.

Whatever the nature of that account may have been, in a more ordinary case it might have become outlawed through sheer lapse of time. But during that lapse of time Roland had been in exile because of it; and though even now he might have been willing to let it drift back into the past where it belonged, yet when the representative of it not only loomed between him and the millions, but was even attempting to gather them in for himself, the possibility of retaliation was too complete to suffer disdain. The injury, it is true, was one of his own doing. But, curiously enough, when a man injures another the more wanton that injury is the less it incites to repentance. In certain dispositions it becomes a source of malignant hate. Deserve a man's gratitude, and he may forgive you; but let him do you a wrong, and you have an enemy for life. Such is the human heart – or such at least was Roland Mistril's.

And now, as the conveyance rumbled off into the night, he shook the snow-flakes from his coat.

"Try, and be damned," he repeated; "I haven't done with you yet."

IV

To the New Yorker March is the vilest month of all the year. In the South it is usually serene. Mrs. Metuchen, who gave herself the airs of an invalid, and who possessed the invalid's dislike of vile weather, was aware of this; and while the first false promises of February were being protested she succeeded in persuading Miss Dunellen to accompany her out of snow-drifts into the sun. It was Aiken that she chose as refuge; and when the two ladies arrived there they felt satisfied that their choice had been a proper one – a satisfaction which they did not share alone, for a few days after their arrival Roland Mistril arrived there too.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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