

Cobb Irvin Shrewsbury

Local Color



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«Public Domain»

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Irvin S. Cobb

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CHAPTER I

LOCAL COLOR

Felix Looms, the well-known author, disappeared – or, rather, he went away – on or about June fifteenth, four years ago. He told his friends, his landlady and his publisher – he had no immediate family – he felt run down and debilitated and he meant to go away for a good long stay. He might try the Orient; then again perhaps he would go to the South Seas. When he came back, which might be in a year or two years or even three, he expected to bring with him the material for a longer and better book than any he had written. Meantime he wanted to cut loose, as he put it, from everything. He intended, he said, to write no letters while he was gone and he expected to receive none.

He gave a power of attorney to a lawyer with whom he had occasional dealings, left in bank a modest balance to meet any small forgotten bills that might turn up after his departure, surrendered his bachelor apartments in the Rubens Studio Building, paid off his housekeeper, said good-bye to a few persons, wrote explanatory notes to a few more; and then quietly – as he did everything in this life – he vanished.

Nobody particularly missed him, for he was not a famous author or even a popular one; he was merely well known as a writer of tales dealing in the main with crime and criminals and criminology. People that liked his writings said he was a realist, who gave promise of bigger things. People that did not like his writings said he was a half-baked socialist. One somewhat overcritical reviewer, who had a bad liver and a bitter pen, once compared him to an ambitious but immature hen pullet, laying many eggs but all soft-shelled and all of them deficient in yolk.

Personally Felix Looms was a short, slender, dark man, approaching forty, who wore thick glasses and coats that invariably were too long in the sleeves. In company he was self-effacing; in a crowd he was entirely lost, if you know what I mean. He did not know many people and was intimate with none of those he did know. Quite naturally his departure for parts unknown left his own little literary puddle unrippled.

Looms went away and he did not come back. His publisher never heard from him again; nor did his lawyer nor the manager of the warehouse where he had stored his heavier belongings. When three years had passed, and still no word came from him, his acquaintances thought – such of them as gave him a thought – that he must have died somewhere out in one of the back corners of the East. He did die too; but it was not in the East. He died within a block and a half of the club of his lawyer and not more than a quarter of a mile from the town house of his publisher. However, that detail, which is inconsequential, will come up later.

At about seven-forty-five on the evening of June seventeenth, four years ago, Patrolman Matthew Clabby was on duty – fixed post duty – at the corner of Thirty-fourth Street and Second Avenue. According to the report made by him at the time to his immediate superior and subsequently repeated by him under oath before the grand jury and still later at the trial, his attention was attracted – to use the common formula – by a disturbance occurring on a crosstown trolley car, eastward bound, which had halted just west of the corner.

Patrolman Clabby boarded the car to find a small, shabby man endeavouring to break away from a larger and better-dressed man, who held him fast by the collar. In reply to the officer's questions the large man stated that he had detected the small one in the act of picking his pocket. He had waited, he said, until the other lifted his watch and chain and then had seized him and held him fast and called

for help. At least three citizens, passengers on the car, confirmed the main points of the accuser's story. For added proof there were the watch and chain. They were in the thief's side coat pocket. With his own large firm hands Patrolman Clabby fished them out from there and confiscated them for purposes of evidence. As for the prisoner, he said nothing at all.

The policeman totted down in his little book the names and addresses of the eyewitnesses. This done, he took the small man and led him off afoot to the East Thirty-fifth Street Station, the owner of the watch going along to make a formal charge. Before the desk in the station house this latter person said he was named Hartigan – Charles Edward Hartigan, a private detective by occupation; and he repeated his account of the robbery, with amplifications. The pickpocket gave his name as James Williams and his age as thirty-eight, but declined to tell where he lived, what occupation he followed, or what excuse he had for angling after other people's personal property on a crosstown car.

At this juncture Clabby grabbed one of his prisoner's hands and ran a finger over its inner surface, seeking for callosities of the palm; then he nodded meaningly to the desk lieutenant.

"I guess he's a dip all right, Loot," said Clabby; "the inside of his hand is as soft as a baby's."

"Take him back!" said the lieutenant briefly.

Before obeying, Clabby faced the man about and searched him, the search revealing a small amount of money but no objects that might serve for the prisoner's better identification. So, handling James Williams as casually and impersonally as though he were merely a rather unwieldy parcel, Clabby propelled him rearward along a passageway and turned him over to a turnkey, who turned him into a cell and left him there – though not very long. Within an hour he was taken in a patrol wagon to the night court, sitting at Jefferson Market, where an irritable magistrate held him, on the strength of a short affidavit by Clabby, to await the action of the grand jury.

Thereafter for a period James Williams, so far as the processes of justice were concerned, ceased to be a regular human being and became a small and inconspicuous grain in the whirring hopper of the law. He was as one pepper-corn in a crowded bin – one atom among a multitude of similar atoms. Yet the law from time to time took due cognisance of this mote's existence.

For example, on the morning of the eighteenth a closed van conveyed him to the Tombs. For further example, an assistant district attorney, in about a month, introduced Clabby and Hartigan before the July grand jury. It took the grand jury something less than five minutes to vote an indictment charging James Williams with grand larceny; and ten days later it took a judge of General Sessions something less than three-quarters of an hour to try the said Williams.

The proceedings in this regard were entirely perfunctory. The defendant at the bar had no attorney. Accordingly the judge assigned to the task of representing him a fledgling graduate of the law school. Hartigan testified; Clabby testified; two eyewitnesses, a bricklayer and a bookkeeper, testified – all for the state. The prisoner could produce no witnesses in his own behalf and he declined to take the stand himself, which considerably simplified matters.

Red and stuttering with stage fright, the downy young law-school graduate made a brief plea for his client on the ground that no proof had been offered to show his client had a previous criminal record. Perfunctorily the young assistant district attorney summed up. In a perfunctory way the judge charged the jury; and the jury filed out, and – presumably in a perfunctory fashion also – took a ballot and were back in less than no time at all with a verdict of guilty.

James Williams, being ordered to stand up, stood up; being ordered to furnish his pedigree for the record, he refused to do so; being regarded, therefore, as a person who undoubtedly had a great deal to conceal, he was denied the measure of mercy that frequently is bestowed on first offenders. His Honour gave him an indeterminate sentence of not less than three years at hard labour in state prison, and one of the evening newspapers gave him three lines in the appropriate ratio of one line for each year. In three days more James Williams was at Sing Sing, wearing among other things a plain grey suit, a close hair-cut and a number, learning how to make shoes.

Now then, the task for me is to go back and begin this story where properly it should begin. Felix Looms, the well-known writer who went away on or about June fifteenth, and James Williams, who went to jail June seventeenth for picking a pocket, were one and the same person; or perhaps it would be nearer the truth to say that James Williams was Felix Looms.

Lest my meaning be misunderstood let me add that this is no tale of a reversion to type. It has nothing whatever to do with any suddenly awakened hereditary impulse. In the blend of Felix Looms' breed no criminal strain persisted. His father was a Congregational preacher from Massachusetts and his mother a district school-teacher from Northern New York. His grandsires, on both sides, were good, clean-strain American stock. So far as we know, never a bad skeleton had rattled its bones in his family's closet. He himself was a product of strict training in a Christian home, a Yale education and much book reading. The transition from Felix Looms, bookworm, author and sociologist, to James Williams, common rogue and convict, was accomplished deliberately, and, as it were, with malice aforethought.

Here was how the thing came about. Secretly, through a period of years, Felix Looms had nursed an ambition to write a great novel of prison life. It is true he had written a number of short stories and at least one novelette dealing with prison life, and, what was more to the point, had sold them after writing them; but they lacked sincerity. There was neither sureness nor assurance about them. He felt this lack; his publishers felt it; and in a way his readers no doubt felt it too, without knowing exactly why they felt it.

It is one of the inexplicable mysteries of the trade of writing that no man, however well he handles the tools of that trade, can write convincingly of things about which he personally does not know. A man might aspire, let us say, to write a story with scenes laid in Northern Africa. In preparation for this task he might read a hundred volumes about Northern Africa, its soil, its climate, its natives, its characteristics. He might fairly saturate himself in literature pertaining to Northern Africa; then sit him down and write his story. Concede him to be a good craftsman; concede that the story was well done; that his descriptions were strong, his phrasing graphic, his technic correct – nevertheless, it would lack that quality they call plausibility. Somehow the reader would sense that this man had never seen Northern Africa with his own eyes or breathed its air with his own nostrils.

To this rule there are two exceptions: A writer may write of things that happened in a past generation, after the last man of that generation is dead – therefore historical novelists are common; or, provided his imagination be sufficiently plastic, he may write of things that are supposed to happen in the future – he may even describe the inhabitants of the planet Mars and their scheme of existence. None will gainsay him, seeing that no contemporary of his has been to Mars or knows more of the conditions that will prevail a year or a century hence than he knows. But where he deals with the actualities of his own day and time he must know those actualities at first hand, else his best efforts fall to the ground and are of no avail. He simply cannot get away with it. Hearsay evidence always was poor evidence.

Felix Looms knew this. In his own case he knew it better than his readers knew it – or even his publisher. Critical analysis of his work had revealed its flaws to him until in his own soul he was ashamed and humiliated, feeling himself to be a counterfeiter uttering a most spurious coinage. So one day he said to himself:

“The worst thing in our modern civilisation is a prison. It is wrong and we know it is wrong; and yet we have devised nothing to take its place. A prison is crime's chemical laboratory; it is a great retort where virulent poisons are distilled. Civilisation maintains it in the hope of checking certain gross evils; yet in it and by it evils as great are born and fostered. And the truth about it has never been told in the form of fiction, which is the most convincing form of telling the truth. Always the trouble has been that the people who have been in prison could not write about it and the people who could write about it have not been in prison.

“I know I could write about it, and so I am going to prison. I shall go to prison for one year, perhaps two or possibly three years; and when I come out I shall write a novel about prison life that will make my name live after me, for I shall know my facts at first hand – I shall have the local colour of a prison in my grip as no other man has ever had it who had my powers as a writer. I am going to gamble with this thing – the prison. I will give it a slice out of my life for the sake of the great work I shall do afterward.”

Mind you, I am not saying he put his big idea – for surely it was an idea and a big one – in exactly those words; but that was his thought. And when he came to work out the plan he was astonished to find how easy it was to devise and to accomplish. Thanks to his mode of life, his practical isolation in the midst of five million other beings, he needed to confide in but one person; and in Hartigan he found that person. Hartigan, a veteran of the detective business, who knew and kept almost as many intimate secrets as a father confessor, showed surprise just twice – first when Looms confided to him his purpose and again when he learned how generously Looms was willing to pay for his co-operation.

Besides, as Looms at their first meeting pointed out and as Hartigan saw for himself, there was no obligation upon him to do anything that was actually wrong. Aboard that crosstown car Looms did really take a watch from Hartigan’s pocket. Whatever the motive behind the act, the act spoke for itself. All that Hartigan told under oath on the witness stand was straight enough. It was what he did not tell that mortised the fabric of their plot together and made the thing dovetail, whole truth with half truth.

At the very worst they had merely conspired – he as accessory and Looms as principal – to cheat the state of New York out of sundry years of free board and freedomless lodgings at an establishment wherein probably no other man since it was built had ever schemed of his own free will to abide.

So Hartigan, the private detective, having first got his fee, eventually got his watch back and now disappears from this narrative. So Felix Looms, the seeker after local colour, gave up his bachelor apartments in the Rubens Studio Building and went away, leaving no forwarding address behind him. So James Williams, the petty felon, with no known address except the size number in his hat, went up the river to serve an indeterminate sentence of not less than three years.

From the hour he entered the Tombs on that morning of the eighteenth of June, Felix Looms began to store up material against the day when he should transmute it into the written word. Speaking exactly, he began storing it up even sooner than that. The thrill and excitement of the arrest, the arraignment before the cross magistrate in the night court, the night in the station-house cell – all these things provided him with startlingly new and tremendously vivid sensations. Indeed, at the moment his probing fingers closed on Hartigan’s watch the mind pictures began to form and multiply inside his head.

Naturally, the Tombs had been most prolific of impressions; the local colour fairly swarmed and spawned there. He had visited the Tombs once before in his life, but he knew now that he had not seen it then. Behind a mask of bars and bolts it had hidden its real organism from him who had come in the capacity of a sightseer; but now, as an inmate, guarded and watched and tended in his cell like a wild beast in a show, he got under the skin of it. With the air he breathed – and it was most remarkably bad air – he took in and absorbed the flavour of the place.

He sensed it all – the sordid small intrigues; the playing of favourites by the turnkeys; the smuggling; the noises; the smells; the gossip that ran from tier to tier; the efforts of each man confined there to beat the law, against which each of them presumably had offended. It was as though he could see a small stream of mingled hope and fear pouring from beneath the patterned grill of each cell door to unite in a great flood that roared unendingly off and away to the courts beyond.

Mentally Felix Looms sought to put himself in the attitude of the men and women about him – these bona fide thieves and murderers and swindlers and bigamists who through every waking hour plotted and planned for freedom. That was the hardest part of his job. He could sense how they felt without personally being able to feel what they felt. As yet he took no notes, knowing that when he

reached Sing Sing he would be stripped skin-bare and searched; but his brain was like a classified card index, in which he stored and filed a thousand and one thoughts. Hourly he gave thanks for a systematic and tenacious memory. And so day by day his copy and his local colour accumulated and the first chapters of his novel took on shape and substance in his mind.

Lying on the hard bed in his cell he felt the creative impulse stirring him, quickening his imagination until all his senses fairly throbbed to its big, deep harmonies. The present discomforts of his position, the greater discomforts that surely awaited him, filmed away to nothingness in the vision of the great thing he meant to accomplish. He told himself he was merely about to barter a bit out of his life for that for which a writer lives – the fame that endures; and he counted it a good bargain and an easy one.

In the period between his arrest and his conviction Felix Looms had one fear, and one only – that at his trial he might be recognised. He allowed his beard to grow, and on the day the summons came for him to go to court he laid aside his glasses. As it happened, no person was at the trial who knew him; though had such a person been there it is highly probable that he would not have recognised Felix Looms, the smugly dressed, spectacled, close-shaved man of letters, in this shabby, squinting, whiskered malefactor who had picked a citizen's pocket before the eyes of other citizens.

With him to Sing Sing for confinement went four others – a Chinese Tong fighter bound for the death house and the death chair; an Italian wife-murderer under a life sentence; a young German convicted of forgery; and a negro loft robber – five felons all told, with deputies to herd them. Except the negro, Looms was the only native-born man of the five. The Chinaman, an inoffensive-looking little saffron-hided man, was manacled between two deputies. Seeing that the state would presently be at some pains to kill him, the state meantime was taking the very best of care of him. The remaining four were hitched in pairs, right wrist of one to left wrist of the other. A deputy marched with each coupled pair and a deputy marched behind. Looms' fetter-mate was the Italian, who knew no English – or, at least, spoke none during the journey.

A prison van carried them from the Tombs to the Grand Central Station. It was barred and boarded like a circus cage – the van was – and like a circus cage it had small grated vents at each end, high up. A local train carried them from the station to Sing Sing. From start to finish, including the van ride, the journey took a little less than three hours. Three hours to get there, and three years to get back! Felix Looms made a mental note of this circumstance as he sat in his seat next the car window, with the wife-murderer beside him. He liked the line. It would make a good chapter heading.

The town of Ossining, where Sing Sing is, is a hilly town, the railroad station being at the foot of a hill, with the town mounting up uneven terraces on one side and the prison squatting flat on the river bank on the other. Arriving at Ossining, special and distinguishing honours were paid to the little yellow Chinaman. In a ramshackle village hack, with his two guards, he rode up a winding street, across a bridge spanning the railroad tracks, and then along a ridge commanding a view of the Hudson to the prison.

The four lesser criminals followed the same route, but afoot. They scuffled along through the dust their feet kicked up, and before their walk was done grew very sweaty and hot. The townspeople they met barely turned their heads to watch the little procession as it passed; for to them this was an every-day occurrence – as common a sight as a bread wagon or a postman.

It was not a long walk for the four. Quite soon they came to their destination. An iron door opened for them and in they went, two by two. Felix Looms saw how the German forger, who was ahead of him, flinched up against the negro as the door crashed behind them; but to Looms the sound the door made was a welcome sound. Secretly a high exaltation possessed him.

For a fact, this man who meant to learn about prison life at first hand went to the right place when he went to Sing Sing; for Sing Sing, the main part of it, was built in 1825-28, nearly a hundred years ago, when the punishment of imprisonment meant the punishment of soul and body and mind. In 1825 the man who for his misdeeds forfeited his liberty and his civil rights forfeited also the right

to be considered in any wise a human being. As an animal he was regarded and as an animal he was treated, and as an animal he became. The institution made a beast not only of him but of the man who was set to keep him. Also, in such by-products as disease and degeneracy the plant was especially prolific.

The cell house, the dominating structure within the prison close, must look to-day very much as it looked along toward the end of the third decade of last century. Straight-walled, angular, homely beyond conception, it rises high above the stone stockade that surrounds it. Once its interior was lighted and aired only by narrow windows. You could hardly call them windows – they were like slits; they were like seams. About twenty years ago large inlets were cut into the walls. These inlets admit much air and some light.

As the cell house is the core of Sing Sing, so the cell structure is its core. In the exact centre of the building, steel within stone, six levels of cells rise, one level on another, climbing up almost to the roof, from which many hooded, round ventilators stare down like watchful eyes that never sleep. In each tier are two hundred cells, built back to back, each row of cells being faced by narrow iron balconies and reached by narrow wooden stairways. The person who climbs one of those flights of stairs and walks along one of those balconies passes a succession of flat-banded, narrow iron doors. Each door has set into it an iron grill so closely barred that the spaces between the patterns are no larger than the squares of a checkerboard.

Not a single cell has a window in it. Even at high noon the interior is wrapped in a sourish, ill-savoured gloom as though the good daylight had addled and turned sour as soon as it got inside this place. The lowermost cells are always damp. Moisture forms on the walls, sweating through the pores of the stone like an exhalation, so that, with his finger for a pen, a man may write his name in the trickling ooze.

A cell measures in width three feet four inches; in length, six feet six inches; in height, seven feet and no inches. It has a cubic capacity of about one hundred and fifty feet, which is considerably less than half the cubic space provided by our Government for each individual in army barracks in time of war. It contains for furniture a bunk, which folds back against the wall when not in use, or two bunks, swung one above the other; sometimes a chair; sometimes a stool; sometimes a shelf, and always a bucket.

For further details of the sanitary arrangements see occasional grand-jury reports and semioccasional reports by special investigating committees. These bodies investigate and then report; and their reports are received by the proper authorities and printed in the newspapers. Coincidentally the newspapers comment bitterly on the conditions existing at Sing Sing and call on public opinion to rouse itself. Public opinion remaining unroused, the sanitary arrangements remain unchanged.

The man who occupies the cell is wakened at six-thirty A. M. At seven-thirty he is marched to the mess hall, where he eats his breakfast. By eight o'clock he is supposed to be at work somewhere, either in the workshop or on a special detail. At noon he goes to the mess hall again. He is given half an hour in which to eat his dinner. For that dinner half an hour is ample. At twelve-thirty he returns to his task, whatever it is. He works until quarter past three.

He gets a little exercise then, and at four he is marched to his cell. On his way he passes a table piled with dry bread cut in large slices. He takes as much bread as he wants. Hanging to his cell door is a tin cup, which a guard has just filled with a hottish coloured fluid denominated tea. Being put into his cell and locked in, he eats his bread and drinks his tea; that is his supper. He stays in his cell until between six-thirty and seven-thirty the following morning.

He knows Sundays only to hate them. On Sunday he is let out of his cell for breakfast, then goes to religious services, if he so desires, and at eleven o'clock is returned to his cell for the remainder of the day, with his rations for the day. When a legal holiday falls on Monday he stays in his cell from four o'clock on Saturday until six-thirty Tuesday morning, except for the time spent at certain meals and at divine services.

This is his daily routine. From the monotony of it there is one relief. Should he persistently misbehave he is sent to a dark cell, from which he emerges half blind and half mad, or quite blind and all mad, depending on the length of time of his confinement therein.

This, in brief, is Sing Sing; or at least it is Sing Sing as Sing Sing was when Felix Looms went there. Wardens have been changed since then and with wardens the system is sometimes altered. Physically, though, Sing Sing must always remain the same. No warden can change that.

Had he let it be known that he was a man of clerkly ways and book learning, Felix Looms might have been set to work in the prison office, keeping accounts or filing correspondence; but that was not his plan. So, maintaining his rôle of unskilled labourer, he was sent to the shoe shop to learn to make shoes; and in time, after a fashion, he did learn to make shoes.

He attracted no special attention in the shameful community of which he had become a small and inconsequential member. His had been a colourless and unobtrusive personality outside the prison; inside he was still colourless and unobtrusive. He obeyed the rules; he ate of the coarse fare, which satisfied his stomach but killed his palate; he developed indigestion and a small cough; he fought the graybacks that swarmed in his cell and sought to nibble on his body. By day he watched, he learned, he studied, he analysed, he planned and platted out his book; and at night he slept, or tried to sleep.

At first he slept poorly. Bit by bit he accustomed himself to the bad air; to the pent closeness of his cell; to the feeling in the darkness that the walls were closing in on him to squeeze him to death – a feeling that beset him for the first few weeks; to the noises, the coughing, the groaning, the choking, which came from all about him; to the padding tread of the guards passing at intervals along the balcony fronting his cell. But for a long time he could not get used to the snoring of his cellmate.

Sing Sing being overcrowded, as chronically it is, it had been expedient to put Looms in a cell with another prisoner. To the constituted authorities this prisoner was known by a number, but the inner society of Tier III knew him as The Plumber. The Plumber was a hairy, thick-necked mammal, mostly animal but with a few human qualities too. The animal in him came out most strongly when he slept. As the larger man and by virtue of priority of occupancy he had the lower bunk, while Looms, perforce, took the upper.

The Plumber slept always on his back. When his eyes closed his mouth opened; then, hour after hour, unceasingly, he snored a gurgling, rumbling drone. It almost drove Looms crazy – that snoring. In the night he would roll over on his elbow and peer down, craning his neck to glare in silent rage at the spraddled bulk beneath him. He would be seized with a longing to climb down softly and to fix his ten fingers in that fat and heaving throat and hold fast until the sound of its exhaust was shut off forever.

After a while, though, he got used to The Plumber's snoring, just as he had got used to the food and the work and the heavy air and the cell and all. He got used to being caged with a companion in a space that was much too small, really, for either of them. A man can get used to anything – if he has to. He even came to have a sort of sense of comradeship for his cellmate.

The Plumber was not a real plumber. By profession he was a footpad, a common highwayman of the city streets, a disciple in practice of Dick Turpin and Jack Sheppard; but possessed of none of those small graces of person, those prettified refinements of air and manner with which romance has invested these masters of the calling.

His title was derived from his method of operation. Dressed in the overalls of an honest workingman and carrying in his pocket a pair of pliers, a wrench and a foot-long scrap of gas pipe, he ranged the darker streets of his own East Side at night on the lookout for business. Spying out a prospective victim, he would first wrap the gas pipe in a handy newspaper; then, stalking his quarry from behind, he would knock him cold with one blow of the gas pipe on the skull, strip the victim's pockets of what cash they contained, and depart with all possible despatch, casting aside the

newspaper as he went. If there was any blood it would be on the newspaper; there would be none on the gas pipe.

Should suspicion fall on its owner – why, he was merely a straight-faring artisan, bound homeward, with certain of the tools and impedimenta of his trade on his person. It had been The Plumber's own idea, this device of the gas pipe and the evening paper, and he was proud of it and derisive of the imitators who had adopted it after he, growing incautious, had been caught, as it were, red-handed and sent up the river.

With pride and a wealth of detail he confided these professional secrets to his spectacled little bunkie after he came to know him. A fragment at a time he told Looms of his life, his likes and dislikes, and his associates in crimedom. He taught Looms the tricks of the prison, too – how to pass messages; how to curry the favour of the keepers; how, when so desiring, to smuggle contrabands in and out; how to talk with one's neighbours while at work or at mess, where silence is demanded, which same is accomplished with the eyes facing straight ahead and the words slipping sidewise from the corners of the mouth, the lips meantime moving but little. Considering the differences in them, they came to be pretty good friends.

Evenings and Sundays and holidays The Plumber would take the floor, literally as well as figuratively. He would stand at the door of their cell, shifting from foot to foot like a caged cat-animal in quarters too small for it, and sniffing like an animal through the small squares of the iron lattice; or else he would pace back and forth the length of the cell, constantly scraping his body between the wall and the edge of the upper berth. In these movements he found relief from his restlessness.

And while The Plumber walked and talked Looms would lie prone on his bed listening or making notes. For making these notes he used an indelible pencil, and for greater security against discovery he set them down in shorthand. The shorthand was partly of his own devising and partly based on an accepted stenographic system. As fast as he filled one sheet of paper with the minutely done, closely spaced lines he pasted it to another sheet; so that in time he had a long, continuous strip, all written over thickly with tiny, purplish-blue characters. Being folded flat and thin and inclosed in an envelope made of thin leather pilfered from the shoe shop, this cipher manuscript was carried by Looms inside his shirt during the day, and it went under his pillow when he slept. Once a week he was sent to the baths. At such times he hid the precious packet beneath his mattress.

The Plumber, of course, had abundant opportunity to examine these notes; but naturally enough he could make nothing of them. Privily he catalogued Looms – or Williams, which he thought was his cell-mate's name – as a sort of harmless lunatic; in short, a nut. Looms meantime made copy out of The Plumber. He meant to use The Plumber as a character in his book – as one of the principal characters. A criminal of the type of The Plumber ought to furnish much material; and without his suspecting it he did furnish much.

At the end of nine months they parted. The Plumber, having completed his term, went forth to sin some more. Thereafter Looms had a cell to himself. Before very long, his record being clean, he was the recipient of a mark of favour from the warden's office. He became a trusty. As a trusty he was doubly alert to win special privileges for himself. He knew all the tricks and devices of the place by now. Outwardly he was every inch a convict – a commonplace convict if not a typical one. Inwardly he now frequently caught himself slipping into a convict's mode of thinking – found himself viewing his prison existence, not as an observer of the system but as an integral part and parcel of the prison machine.

Drugged by the stupefying monotony of it he felt sometimes as though he had always been a convict. The days passed, leaving no conscious impressions on the retina of his brain. It was as though he rode on an endless band, which circled once in twenty-four hours, never changing its gait or its orbit. It took an effort to rid himself of this feeling.

The graybacks which crawled over his body at night, coming out of the cracks of the wall and the folds of his blanket to bite his flesh, no longer made him sick, for they were part of the system too.

Not once did he regret what he had done to get himself into Sing Sing.

The first year went by thus, and the second, and Looms entered on the third. He still kept his flat packet of manuscript close and safe, wearing it in its leather envelope next to his skin; but now he added no more notes in his cryptic shorthand code. He told himself he added no more because he already had at his fingers' ends, waiting to be transcribed into copy, the whole drama of prison life – the poisons it distills; the horrors it breeds; its qualities and its inequalities; its wrongs that might be reformed and its wrongs that can never be reformed. This was what he told himself. The fact remained that for the last seven months of his imprisonment he set down no notes.

At the end of the third year he was discharged.

The man who had entered Sing Sing three years before was not the man who came out. The man who went in had been slender and quick of movement, careful of his personal appearance, almost old-maidish in his neatness. He carried himself erectly; he walked with rather a brisk tread. This man had shapely hands.

The man who came out resembled the other in that he was small of frame and wore thick-lensed glasses. In nearly every other essential regard he differed from him. Even his height seemed less, for now he moved with a stoop in his shoulders and with his head sunken. His hands dangled at his sides as though they had grown too heavy for the arms on which they were hung. They were the hands of one who has done coarse manual labour – the nails were blunted and broken, the palms bossed with warty calluses. This man walked with a time-killing shambling, scraping his feet along. Beneath the natural sallowness of his skin his face had the bleached, unhealthy look of any living thing that has been kept too long in artificial twilight, away from fresh air and sunshine. By its colour it suggested a pale plant growing in a cellar, a weed sprig that had sprouted beneath a log. It suggested a white grub burrowing in rotted wood.

The greatest change of all, however, was in the expression of the face; for now the eyes moved with a furtive, darting movement – a quick scrutiny that lingered on its target for a second only and then flashed away. And when the lips framed words the mouth, from force of training, was pursed at the corner, so that the issuing speech could be heard with greater distinctness by one who stood alongside the speaker than by one who faced him.

The clothes Looms had worn when he entered the prison had disappeared; so for his reentrance into the world the authorities gave him a suit of prison-made slops, poorly cut and bunchily sewed. They gave him this suit of clothes, a shirt and a hat and a pair of shoes; also a small sum of money, a ticket back to the point from which he had been brought, and the small articles that had been taken from his person at the time he entered Sing Sing.

These and his sheaf of shorthand notes pasted together, folded flat and inclosed in his small leather pack, were all that Felix Looms brought away with him from the prison.

Once more he went afoot along the dusty road, followed the ridge along the river, crossed the bridge above the railroad tracks and descended to the station below to wait for a train bound for the city. Persons who were gathered on the platform looked at him – some understandingly; some curiously. He found it easier to evade their eyes than to return their stares.

Presently a train came and he boarded it, finding a seat in the smoker. The exaltation that had possessed him when he went to Sing Sing was all gone. A certain indefinable numbness affected his body, his limbs, his mind, making his thoughts heavy and his movements sluggish. For months past he had felt this numbness; but he had felt sure that liberty and the coming of the time for the fulfillment of his great work would dissipate it. He was free now, and still the lassitude persisted.

He viewed the prospect of beginning his novel with no particular enthusiasm. He said to himself that disuse of the pen had made him rusty; that the old enthusiasm, which is born of creation, of achievement, of craftsmanship exercised, would return to him as soon as he had put the first word of his book on paper; and that after that the story would pour forth with hardly a conscious effort on his

part. It had been so in the past; to a much greater degree it should be so now. Yet, for the moment, he viewed the prospect of starting his novel almost with physical distaste.

In this mental fog he rode until the train rolled into the Grand Central Station and stopped. Seeing his fellow passengers getting off he roused himself and followed them as they trailed in straggling lines through the train shed and out into the great new terminal. It was late afternoon of a summer's day.

His plans immediately following his advent into the city had all been figured out long in advance. He meant to seek obscure lodgings until he could secure a few needed additions to his wardrobe. Then he would communicate with his publisher and make to him a private confession regarding his whereabouts during the past three years, and outline to him the book he had in mind to write. Under the circumstances it would be easy to secure a cash advance from any publisher.

Thus fortified with ready money Looms would go away to some quiet place in the country and write the book. Mulling these details over in his head he shambled along automatically until suddenly he found himself standing in Forty-second Street. He slipped backward involuntarily, for the crowds that swirled by him daunted him. It seemed to him that they were ten times as thick, ten times as noisy, ten times as hurried as they had been when last he paused in that locality.

For a minute, irresolute, he hesitated in the shelter of the station doorway. Then, guided by habit, a thing which often sleeps but rarely dies, he headed westward. He walked as close to the building line as he could squeeze himself, so as to be out of the main channels of sidewalk travel. When he came to Fifth Avenue he mechanically turned north, shrinking aside from contact with the swarms of well-dressed, quick-paced men and women who passed him, bound in the opposite direction. From the asphalt beyond the curbing arose a clamour of wheels and hoofs and feet which dinned unpleasantly in his ears, creating a subconscious sense of irritation.

He moved along, dragging his feet, for two blocks; then halted on a corner. A big building rose before him, a building with many open windows. There were awnings and flower boxes at the windows; and, looking in at the window nearest him, he caught sight of well-dressed men and women sitting at tables. With almost a physical jolt he realised that this was a restaurant in which he himself had dined many a time on such an evening as this; somehow, though, those times seemed centuries back of him in a confused previous existence.

A uniformed carriage starter, who stood at one of the entrances, began staring at him and he went on up the avenue with his hands rammed deep into his pockets, his head bent between his shoulders, and his heels dragging on the sidewalk. He had a feeling that everybody was staring at him. It nagged and pestered him – this did.

He continued his way for four or five blocks, or possibly six, for he took no close note of his progress. Really he had no purpose in this northward progress; a restlessness he could not analyse kept him moving. He came to another building, also with awninged windows. He knew it for a club. Once or twice, he recalled, he had been in that club as a guest of a member, but for the moment he could not think of its name. Sitting at a window facing him were two men and in a spurt of reviving memory he placed one of them as a man he had known slightly – a man named Walcroft, a corporation lawyer with offices downtown.

This man Walcroft stared straight into Looms' face, but in his eyes there was no glint of recognition; only on his face was a half-amused, half-contemptuous expression as though he wondered why a person of so dubious an appearance should be loitering along Fifth Avenue at such an hour.

Looms, squinting back at Walcroft through his glasses, felt a poke in the small of the back. He swung round; a policeman approaching from the rear had touched him with a gloved thumb. The look the policeman gave him as they faced each other was at once appraising, disapproving and suspicious.

“Move on!” he said briskly. “Keep movin’!”

“I’m doing nothing,” said Looms slowly; but as he spoke he backed away a pace or two and his eyes flickered and shifted uneasily, avoiding the policeman’s direct and accusing stare.

“That’s the trouble,” said the policeman. “You’re doin’ nothing now, but you’re likely to do something if you stay here. Beat it! You’re in the wrong street!” With an air of finality the policeman turned away.

Irresolutely the ex-convict retreated a few yards more, stepping out into the roadway. Was he indeed in the wrong street? Was that why he felt so uncomfortable? Yes, that must be it – he was in the wrong street! Fifth Avenue was not for him any more, even though once he had lived on Fifth Avenue.

As he shambled across to the opposite sidewalk he shoved his hand up under his hat, which was too large for him, and scratched his head in a new perplexity. And then to him, in a flash, came a solution of the situation, and with it came inspiration and purpose. It was precisely in that brief moment that Felix Looms, the well-known writer, died, he having been killed instantaneously by the very thing after which he had lusted.

The man who had been Felix Looms – Felix Looms, who was now dead – headed eastward through a cross street. He hurried along, moving now with decision and with more speed than he had shown in his loitering course from the station. In turn he crossed Madison Avenue and Park Avenue and Lexington Avenue, so that soon the district of big restaurants and clubs and churches and hotels and apartment houses lay behind him and he had arrived in a less pretentious and more crowded quarter. He reached Third Avenue, with its small shops and its tenements, and the L structure running down the middle of it; he crossed it and kept on.

Midway of the next block he came to a place where a building was in course of construction. The ground floor was open to the street, for the façade, which was to be a shop front, had not gone up yet. The slouching pedestrian stopped and looked in searchingly. He saw scattered about over a temporary flooring, which was laid roughly on the basement rafters, a clutter of materials and supplies. He saw a line of gas pipes and water pipes, which protruded their ends from beneath a pile of sheathing, looking rather like the muzzles of a battery of gun barrels of varied bores.

At sight of this piping the eyes of the passer-by narrowed earnestly. Over his shoulders, this way and that, he glanced. There was no watchman in sight. The workmen – all good union men, doubtless – had knocked off for the day; but it was not yet dark and probably the night watchman had not come on duty.

He looked again, and then he stepped inside the building.

In a minute or so he was out. He had one arm pressed closely against his side as though to maintain the position of something he carried hidden beneath his coat. Head down, he walked eastward. Between Third Avenue and Second he found the place for which he sought – a small paved passageway separating two tenements, its street end being stopped with a wooden door-gate which swung unlocked. He entered the alley, slipping into the space just behind the protecting shield of the gate.

When he emerged from here the brick paving of the passage where he had tarried was covered with tough paper, torn to ragged fragments. There was a great mess of these paper scraps on the bricks. A small leather envelope, worn slick by much handling, gaped emptily where it had been dropped in an angle of the wall behind the door. The man responsible for this litter continued on his way. His left arm was still held tight against his side, holding upright a fourteen-inch length of gas pipe the man had pilfered from the unfinished building a block away.

About the gas pipe was wrapped a roll of sheets of thin paper, pasted together end to end and closely covered with minute characters done in indelible, purplish-blue shorthand ciphers. The sheets, forming as they did a continuous strip, spiralled about the gas pipe snugly, protecting and hiding the entire length of the heavy metal tube.

This was about six o’clock. About nine o’clock Marcus Fishman, a Roumanian tailor, going to his home in Avenue A from a sweatshop in Second Avenue, was stalked by a footpad at a dark spot

in East Fifty-first Street, not far from the river, and was knocked senseless by a blow on the head and robbed of eleven dollars and sixty cents.

A boy saw the robbery committed and he followed after the disappearing robber, setting up a shrill outcry that speedily brought other pursuers. One of these stopped long enough to pick up a paper-covered gas pipe the fugitive had cast aside.

The chase was soon over. As the fleeing footpad turned the corner of Fiftieth Street and First Avenue he plunged headlong into the outspread arms of Policeman Otto Stein, who subdued him after a brief struggle. The tailor's money was still clutched in his hand.

In the Headquarters Rogues' Gallery the prisoner's likeness was found; also his measurements were in the Bertillon Bureau, thus identifying him beyond doubt as James Williams, who had been convicted three years before as a pickpocket. Further inquiry developed the fact that Williams had been released that very day from Sing Sing.

On his trial for highway robbery, James Williams, as a confirmed and presumably an incorrigible offender, was given no mercy. He got a minimum of five years in state prison at hard labour.

CHAPTER II

FIELD OF HONOR

This war, which started with the assassination of an archduke and his archduchess – a thing we are apt to forget about in the face of a tragedy a billion-fold greater – this war, which started thus and so, already has touched or is touching or yet will touch, at some angle and in some fashion, every one of us in every corner of the world. Some it has touched indirectly, by the oblique. Upon others, who are as numberless now as the sands on the shore, it has come with such brutal emphasis that it must seem to them – such of them as survive – that the whole incredible business was devised and set afoot for the one and the sole purpose of levelling them, their lives and their own small personal affairs in the bloodied red mire of this thing.

For example, let us take the case of Paul Gaston Michel Misereux, his orphaned sister Marie and his orphaned half-sister Helene. In the summer of 1914 they lived in a three-room flat in a five-story tenement house in East Thirteenth Street in New York, not far from the East River.

New York seemed a long, long way then from the town of Sarajevo wherein the egg of war was hatching. Indeed, to the three I have just named New York seemed a long way from most of the things which to their uncomplex natures stood for what was comfortable and domestic and satisfying. They were desperately homesick very often for the Paris where they had been born and reared, and from where they had emigrated two years before after the death of their father.

But that summer the homesickness was wearing off a little. The city, which at the moment of seeing its notched and fangy skyline as they came up the bay had appeared to them not as a gateway into a promised land but as a great sabre-toothed shark of a city lying in wait to grind them up between its jaws, and which for the first few months of their life here had been so cold, so inhospitable, so strange in all its ways, so terribly intent upon its own matters and so terribly disregarding of theirs, was beginning to be something more than a mere abiding place to them. To them it was beginning to be home. The lonesomeness was losing some of its smart. In another year or two more France would be the old country and America would be their country.

Paul fancied himself half an American already. He had taken out his first papers, which, as he figured it, made him part way a citizen. Before very long he would be all a citizen. Likewise, by the practice of a thousand petty economies common among the first generation of foreigners who settle here and most remarkably uncommon among their descendants, they were starting in a small frugal way to prosper. If New York had given them a stone when they came into it asking for bread, it was giving them now the bread, and the butter to go on the bread.

Paul Misereux was a pastry cook. He worked as assistant to a chief pastry cook in a basement kitchen under a big, medium-priced restaurant near Union Square. He was small and dumpy and unhandsome, with the dead-white face of a man cook. His skin, seen by daylight, had a queer glaze on it, like the surface of a well-fluxed, well-baked crockery. Once it had been a blistery red; that though was in the days of his apprenticeship to this trade. The constant heat of it had acted upon him as alcohol does upon the complexion of a man who gets drunk quickly – it made him deathly white at the last, but before that it made him red.

He was the chief breadwinner. Marie had a place as trimmer and saleswoman in a small millinery shop on lower Sixth Avenue. Helene, the half sister and youngest of the three, was the housekeeper. She was inclined to be frail and she had a persistent cough. She was not in the least pretty. For the matter of that, none of them had any provable claim upon beauty.

So far as looks went Marie was the pick of the lot. At least she had fine eyes and a trim round figure that showed to its best advantage in the close-fitting, smooth-fronted uniform of her employment – a black frock with white collar and cuffs.

That June, there was a balance showing on the happy side of their partnership ledger. Paul had his mind set upon some day owning a business of his own – a bakeshop, perhaps even a small café. For her part Marie meant to be a fashionable milliner in her own right. When Paul was the proprietor of the biggest restaurant on Broadway she would be Madame, the mistress and the owner of the smartest hat-shop along Fifth Avenue. Helene was content to go on keeping house for the other two. The limit of her present ambitions was to be rid of her cough. To marrying and to the rearing of families none of them gave thought yet; there would be time for such things in due season, after affluence had come. Meanwhile, they would dwell together and save and save and save. Deposited to their joint account in the savings bank, the nest-egg of their hopes grew at the rate of a few dollars each week, drawing interest besides; and there was meat in the pot when they felt the need of meat to stay them.

Over yonder in Sarajevo a stumpy Serbian man, with twisted ideas regarding his patriotic duties, loaded up an automatic pistol and waited for a certain carriage of state to pass a given point. The carriage did pass, and presently the man and the woman who rode in it were both of them dead – the first to fall in the war which as to date claimed so rich a toll of the manhood of this planet, and which, being the unslakable glutton that it is, continues to claim more and more with every day that passes. The echoes of those pistol shots ran round the world and round again.

A monarch on a throne in Germany exchanged telegrams with his beloved cousin in Russia, and with another revered and venerated cousin in England, and with a dear but distant kinsman of his in Belgium, and with a respected friend, not related to him by ties of blood or marriage, who chanced for the moment to be the president of a republic in France. A family quarrel started up. The quarrel having progressed to a point where the correspondents lost their affection for one another, they severally called upon the people who suffered them to be what they were to go out and settle the grudge according to a fashion which originated when Cain clouted Abel in the first trade-war of which there is record. Because every other war from that day to this has been a trade-war, too, the plan of settlement has remained the same that was employed by Cain when he made carrion of his brother. The tools of this fashionable industry have been altered and greatly improved, and for that civilisation is to be thanked; but the results do not in the least differ from the original forms.

The people obeyed their rulers' calls. Looking back on it now it seems to us, who are onlookers, that there was no good and sufficient reason why they should have done this, but we know that obedience in such contingencies is a habit which has come down to them – and to us – from our remotest common ancestors, and it runs in our blood with the corpuscles of our blood. It is like a contagious miasma, which, being breathed into the body, afflicts all its victims with the same symptoms. So they put on the liveries designed for them by their lords against the coming of just such an occasion – shoddy-wools, or khakis, or red-and-blue fustians, as the case might be – and they went out, these men and these boys who were not yet men, to adjudicate the misunderstanding which had arisen as between the occupants of sundry palaces in sundry capital cities.

The tide of war – such being the pretty phrase coined by those who would further popularise the institution – lapped one shore after another. It went from hemisphere to continent, from continent to archipelago, from archipelago to scattered islands in seas suddenly grown barren of commerce. It flooded jungles in South Africa; it inundated the back corners of Australia; it picked up and carried away on its backwash men of every colour and of every creed and of every breed. It crossed the Atlantic Ocean to New York, and having crossed, it reached into a basement near Union Square for Paul Misereux. And the way of that was this:

France called out her reserves. Paul Misereux, although half an American, as has been stated, was likewise a French reservist. So at length the call came to him. Although he was French he was not excitable. He accepted the summons very calmly and as a matter of course. He had been expecting that it would come, sooner or later. That same day he visited the office of the French consul where certain formalities were speedily concluded. Then he went home and to his sister and his half-sister

he very quietly broke the news of what had happened and what he had done; and very quietly they took it. For they were not outwardly emotional either.

For six days life in the three-room flat went on very much as it had gone on before, except that the sisters went daily now to early mass, and on the first morning following the brother did not shave himself when he got up. French soldiers mainly wear beards, and he meant his beard should be well sprouted when he reported for service. At the end of those six days, on the seventh day, a new assistant pastry cook began serving in the restaurant cellar and a steamer drew out of her New York dock with flags flying, being bound – God and the submarines willing – for foreign parts. On the deck set apart for the second-class passengers, close up against the rail that was next the shore, Paul Misereux stood, a most dumpy and unheroic figure of a man, with patches of woolly beard showing on his pale chops, waving his hand, and with many others singing the Marseillaise Hymn.

When the steamer was gone from sight down the river toward open water the sisters left the pierhead where they had been standing and went away, Marie to her job in the millinery place on Sixth Avenue and Helene to hers in the small flat.

Except that Paul was gone, life for the remaining two continued for a while after this to be materially unaltered. Beyond a single long letter written on the voyage across and posted upon his arrival at Bordeaux, they had no word of him. For this, though, he was not to blame. A thing so systematic it had no aspect of being of human devisement and subject to human control had caught him. This system took him in hand in the same hour that his feet touched dry land. It gave him a number, it clothed him in a uniform, put a gun in his hands, strapped upon his back and about his waist and on his flanks all the other tools needful for the prosecution of the highly specialised modern trade of manslaughter, and set him aboard a train and started him north. Thereafter the north swallowed him up and concerning him no news whatsoever came back. He was an atom in a world event, and the atoms do not count even though they contribute to the progress of the event itself.

While these sisters of his waited, hoping each day the postman would bring them a letter with a French stamp and a French postmark on it, but sorely dreading what the portent of that letter might be, a stroke of bad fortune befell them. The man who owned the place where Marie worked professed to deal in French wares exclusively; but he had a German name and he spoke with a German accent. Perhaps he felt deeply the things some people said to him and about him and about his Fatherland. Perhaps he found it hard to be neutral in his words and all his acts when so many about him were so passionately unneutral in their words and their acts. Perhaps in those papers which avowedly were pro-German, and in those which avowedly were anti-German, he read editorials that changed his views on certain subjects. You see, the tide of war had searched him out too.

Or perhaps after all he merely realised the need, in a time when business conditions were so unsettled, of economising. At any rate one Saturday, without prior warning, he dismissed from his employ three of his women workers – an outspoken Irish girl, a silent Russian Jewess, whose brothers wore the uniform of a government which oppressed them, and a French girl, this last being Marie Misereux.

Monday morning early Marie was abroad, trying to find for herself a new job. She was deft enough with her fingers, but there were handicaps which denied her opportunity of proving to any interested person just how deft those fingers of hers were. For one thing, millinery shops, big and little, were retrenching in their expenses or trying to. For another, she was ignorant of the town and of the ways of the millinery trade – her first job had been her only one. Finally, she had only a faulty knowledge of English, and that in some lines is yet a bar against the applicant for work even in the polyglot, more-than-half-foreign city of New York.

The week which began with that Monday morning went by; other Mondays and other weeks went by, and Marie, walking the soles off her shoes upon the pavements uptown and downtown, earned nothing at all. The account in the savings bank, which always before Paul went away had grown steadily and which for the first month or so after he went had grown in a lesser degree, was

dwindling and dwindling. Now when Helene coughed she pressed her hand against her side. There was no news of their brother. Except for a few distant cousins three thousand miles away, they had no kinspeople. And in this country they had no friends.

Along the crest of a low hill, like a seam, ran a succession of shattered tree trunks, hemming earthline to skyline with ragged and irregular stitches. Once upon a time, not so very long before, a fine little grove of half-grown poplars had crowned that small eminence. But the cannon and the spouting volleys from the rapid-fire guns had mowed down every tree, leaving only the mutilated and homely boles.

Upon one slope of the hill – the slope that was nearer the city – a triangular-shaped patch of woodland projected its point like a promontory well up toward the hilltop. The shells had wrought most grievously here, too, but, being protected somewhat by the dip in the land, the forest, as they call such a stretch of park timber in Europe, had not suffered in the same proportionate extent that the comb of saplings higher up suffered. The twistified masses of shot-down boughs made good cover for the French sharpshooters.

Just under the far shoulder of the rise, zig-zagging this way and that after the fashion of a worm that has stiff joints, was a German trench – the foremost German trench of all the myriad trenches and cross-trenches that formed the sector of the investments at this particular point. Behind the Germans as they squatted in this trench was the village of Brimont. It had been a village once. Now it was a flattened huddle of broken masonry and shattered woodwork, from which arose constantly a sour stench of rotting things. Back of the site of the village, where a little valley made out between more hills, was a sunken road winding off to the north. Upon either side of the road were fields gouged by misaimed shells until the mangled earth looked as though a thousand swine had rooted there for mast.

That was what the Germans saw when they looked over their shoulders. What they saw when they looked straight ahead was, first, the patch of woodland sheltering their foes and beyond that, three miles away, the old French city of Rheims, with the damaged towers of the great cathedral rising above lesser buildings, and on beyond, melting away into blue reaches of space, the fields of Champagne. That is to say, they could see so much when the weather was clear, which generally it wasn't. Nine days in ten, this time of the year, it rained – the cold, constant, searching rain of mid-October. It was raining on this particular day, and up on this saucer-rim of land, which ringed the plain in, the wind blew steadily with a raw bite to it.

Firing back and forth between defenders and besiegers went on intermittently. At this spot there was no hard fighting; there had been none for weeks. Farther way, right and left, along the battle line which stretched from Switzerland to the sea, the big guns roared like bulls. But here the men lay in their shelters and nibbled at their foes like mice.

On second thought I beg to withdraw the latter simile. These men were not so much like mice as they were like moles. For they grubbed in the earth, as moles do, eating and sleeping, living and dying down in their mud burrows. Only, moles keep their fur tidied and fine, while these men were coated and clogged with the tough clayey substance in which they wallowed. It was as much as they could do to keep their rifles in cleansed working order.

Over in the German trench a slim Saxon youth was squatted, ankle-deep in cold yellow water. At intervals he climbed into a small scarp in the wall of the trench, a kind of niche just large enough to hold his body, and kneeling there, with his head tucked down and his shoulders drawn in, he swapped shots with a Frenchman in the woods slightly beneath and directly in front of him. Neither of them ever saw the other. Each in his firing was guided by the smack of his enemy's gun and the tiny puff of white smoke which marked its discharge; each knowing in a general way only the approximate location of the man he coveted to kill, for after an exchange of shots both would shift, the German to another scarp, the Frenchman to another tangle of felled boughs. There was nothing particularly personal, nothing especially hateful or passionate in the present ambition of either. It was merely the job in hand.

As between these two – the Frenchman and the German – there was, excusing the differences of language and religion, no great amount of distinction to be drawn. Temperamentally they were of much the same cast. Each in his separate small sphere of endeavour had been a reasonably law-abiding, reasonably industrious, fairly useful individual, until somebody else, sitting in a high place, had willed it for him that he should put by whatsoever task he might be concerned with and engage in this business of gunning for his fellow-man.

Their uniforms, to be sure, differed in cut and colour, or had so differed until the mud of Champagne had made them of a pattern together. The German soldier's helmet had a sharp spike set in it; the Frenchman's cap had a flattened top. Also the German carried his name and number in a small leather pouch which hung on a thong about his neck and lay snugly against the chilled skin of his breast under his shirt, whereas the Frenchman wore his name and his number on a small brass token that was made fast to a slender wire bracelet riveted about his left wrist.

Concerning these methods of marking men there had been argument from time to time, the German authorities contending that their system is the better of the two. For proof of the claim they point out that in the case of a Frenchman an arm may be torn away, bodily carrying the bracelet and the tag with it, whereas as regards a German, he may be shot in two and yet retain his identification label since it is not so very often that the head is entirely dissevered from the trunk. Here again, as in many other details, they contend German efficiency maintains its superiority over all. On both sides the matter is discussed dispassionately, just as the toxic properties of various makes of poisonous gases are discussed, or the rending powers of shrapnel upon human flesh.

About four o'clock in the afternoon the German climbed up into his favourite scarp once more. Hoping to draw his opponent's fire, he jerked his head up into sight for half a second, then jerked it down again. The trick worked; the Frenchman fired, but fired high. The German shoved his gun barrel out between two clods, shut both eyes – for he was by no means a clever marksman – and pumped a shot back in reply. The bullet from his rifle, which was a long, sharp-nosed, steel-jacketed bullet, devised in accordance with the most scientific experiments, found its billet. It struck the Frenchman as he lay belly downward on the earth with his gunstock against his cheek. It removed two fingers of the Frenchman's right hand, three fingers of his left hand, tore away his lower jaw, beard and all, and passed out at the back of his neck, taking splintered fragments of his spinal processes with it. He turned over on his back, flapping with his arms and legs, threshing about in the wet leaves and in the mud, making grotesque bubbling sounds down in his throat.

Pretty soon after that twilight came on and the rifle firing slackened. The Saxon youth, never knowing he had killed his enemy, called it a day and knocked off. He hunkered down in the slime to eat a tallowy stew of bull meat and barley from a metal pannikin. It was nourishing enough, this mess was, but it had the aspect of swill. Having eaten, he immediately thereafter crawled, in his wet clothes and soaked boots, into a sort of dugout hollowed in the wall of his trench, and slept there with four of his comrades on a bed of mouldy, damp rye straw. While they slept the vermin travelled from one to another of them, making discriminative choice of which body to bite.

Down in the little forest below, the Frenchman presently quit flapping and quietly bled to death. During the night a burial party of his own people came and found him and shovelled him underground where he lay. But first the sergeant in command of the squad removed the bangle from his wrist. In due course of time, therefore, word was carried back and back by succeeding stages to headquarters, and from there on to Paris, and from Paris on to New York, so that within a month's time or a little less it became the painful duty of a consular clerk in New York to transmit by mail to the deceased's next of kin, a sister, the intelligence, as conveyed in the official notification, that her brother, Paul Gaston Michel Misereux, was heroically dead on the Field of Honour.

For the repose of their brother's spirit they had a mass said at the little French Catholic Church where they worshipped, and in his memory candles burned upon the altar. Out of a length of cheap sleazy stuff they made a mourning frock for Helene. Wearing it, her face seemed whiter than ever

and the two red spots in her cheeks seemed redder. Marie had the black frock, with the white collars and cuffs, which had been her uniform as a saleswoman in the place on lower Sixth Avenue; she wore that as she hunted for work. Regardless of their sorrow, the hunt must go on. It went on, and was a vain quest. From much weeping her eyes were swollen and puffy and her face was drawn out of all comeliness. Even though through merciful forbearance each forbore to tell her so, none of those to whom she applied for work cared to hire so homely appearing a serving woman. In another week, or at most two, they would be scraping the bottom of their savings account.

Before this they had lived on scanty rations, wasting never a crumb. Now they trimmed the food allowance still finer. It may have been the lack of sufficient nourishment that caused Helene to drop down in a faint on the floor of the tiny kitchen one evening in the middle of the second week following the receipt of the news from the consul's office. As Marie bent to raise her head in her arms, a little stream of blood began to run from one corner of Helene's mouth. For some time after she recovered consciousness and had opened her eyes the little trickle of blood continued, and Marie, sitting beside her, wiped it away as fast as it oozed out between her lips. The younger girl appeared to suffer no pain, but was very weak. Marie got her undressed and into her bed in the small middle room. Then she ran downstairs to the basement to find out from the caretaker where the nearest doctor was to be found.

It seemed there was one only two doors away. He came presently, a testy man of sixty who was lame. One of his legs was inches shorter than its mate. He lived in a tenement himself and his practice was among tenement dwellers, and he was underpaid and overworked and had trouble enough sometimes to make both ends meet. He grew shorter of breath and of disposition at every step as he wallowed up the stairs, Marie going ahead to show him the way to the rear flat at the top of the house. Wheezing until the sound of his breathing filled the room, he sat down alongside Helene, and while he held one of her pipe-stem wrists in his hand he asked Marie certain questions. Then he told Marie to go into the front room and wait for him there.

In ten minutes or less he limped in to her where she sat with her hands clenched between her knees and her eyes big and rounded with apprehension. He thought he closed the intervening door behind him, but the latch failed to catch in the slot and it swung ajar for a space of two or three inches. Neither of them took note of this.

"She's quiet now," he said: "the hemorrhage is checked. I took a sample of her blood. I'll make a blood test to-morrow morning. How long has this been going on – this cough?"

A good long time, Marie told him – several months. She went on, in her broken English, to explain: "We thought it was but a bad cold, that soon she would be well –"

He broke in on her impatiently:

"That's what you said before. That's no excuse." He looked about him. "How many are there of you living here – just you two?"

"We are quite alone," she told him. "We had also a brother, but – but he now is dead."

It did not occur to her to tell him how the brother had died, or when.

"What's your business?" he demanded. Then as she seemed not to get his intent, he added:

"Can't you understand plain English? What do you do for a living?"

"Your pardon, doctor; I am a milliner."

"And this other girl – your sister – she's been staying at home and doing the housekeeping, you said?"

She nodded. For a moment there was silence, she still seated, he before her balancing himself on the longer leg of the two and on his heavy cane. "I'll make a blood test in the morning," he said at length, repeating what he had said a moment before.

"Doctor," said Marie, "tell me, please, the truth. My sister – is she then so ill?"

"Ill?" he burst out at her irritably. "Ill? I should say she is ill. She's got tuberculosis, if you know what that means – consumption."

She sucked her breath in sharply. Her next question came slowly: "What is there then to do?"

"Well, she couldn't last long here – that's dead certain. You've got to get her away from here. You've got to get her up into the North Woods, in the mountains – Saranac or some place like that – in a sanitarium or an invalids' camp where she can have the right kind of treatment. Then she'll have a chance."

By a chance he meant that with proper care the sick girl might live for three months or for four, or at the outside for six. The case was as good as hopeless now; he knew that. Still his duty was to see that his patients' lives were prolonged – if possible.

"These mountains, I do not know them. We are strangers in this country."

"I'll find out about a place where you can get her in," he volunteered. "I'll bring you the information in the morning – names and addresses and everything. Somebody'll have to go up there with her – you, I guess – and get her settled. She's in no shape to be travelling alone. Then you can leave her there and arrange to send up so much a week to pay for her keep and the treatment and all. Oh, yes – and until we get her away from here you'll have to lay off from your work and stay with her, or else hire somebody to stay with her. She mustn't be left alone for long at a time – she's too sick for that. Something might happen. Understand?"

"And all this – it will cost much money perhaps?"

The cripple misread the note in her voice as she asked him this. This flat now, it was infinitely cleaner than the abodes of nine-tenths of those among whom he was called to minister. To his man's eyes the furnishings, considering the neighbourhood, appeared almost luxurious. That bed yonder against the wall was very much whiter and looked very much softer than the one upon which he slept. And the woman herself was well clad. He had no patience with these scrimping, stingy foreigners – thank God he was himself native-born – these cheap, penurious aliens who would haggle over pennies when a life was the stake. And there was no patience in his uplifted, rumbling voice as he answered her:

"Say, you don't want your sister to be a pauper patient, do you? If you do, just say so and I'll notify the department and they'll put her in a charity institution. She'd last just about a week there. Is that your idea? – if it is, say so!"

"No, no, no," she said, "not charity – not for my sister."

"I thought as much," he said, a little mollified. "All right then, I'll write a letter to the sanitarium people; they ought to make you a special rate. Oh, it'll cost you twenty-five dollars a week maybe – say, at the outside, thirty dollars a week. And that'll be cheap enough, figuring in the food she'll have to have and the care and the nursing and all. Then, of course, there'll be your railroad tickets on top of that. You'd better have some ready money on hand so we can get her shipped out of here before it's too – Well, before many days anyhow."

She nodded.

"I shall have the money," she promised.

"All right," he said; "then you'd better hand me two dollars now. That's the price of my call. I don't figure on charging you for making the blood test. And the information about the sanitarium and the letter I'm going to write – I'll throw all that in too."

She paid him his fee from a small handbag. At the hall door he paused on his stumping way out.

"I think she'll be all right for to-night – I gave her something," he said with a jerk of his thumb toward the middle room. "If you just let her stay quiet that'll be the best thing for her. But you'd better run in my place the first thing in the morning and tell me how she passed the night. Good night."

"Good night, doctor – and we thank you!"

He went clumping down the steps, cursing the darkness of the stairwell and the steep pitch of the stairs. Before the sound of his fumbling feet had quite died away Marie, left alone, had made up her mind as to a certain course. In so short a time as that had the definite resolution come to her. And as she still sat there, in an attitude of listening, Helene, in the middle room, dragged herself up from

her knees where she had been crouched at the slitted door between. She had heard all or nearly all the gruff lame doctor said. Indeed, she had sensed the truth for herself before she heard him speak it. What he told her sister was no news to the eavesdropper; merely it was confirmation of a thing she already knew. Once up on her bare feet, she got across the floor and into her bed, and put her head on the pillow and closed her eyes, counterfeiting sleep. In her mind, too, a plan had formed.

It was only a minute or two after this that Marie came silently to the door and peered in, looking and listening. She heard the regular sound of the sick girl's breathing. By the light of the gas that was turned down low she saw, or thought she saw, that Helene was asleep. She closed the door very softly. She freshened her frock with a crisp collarband and with crisp wristbands. She clasped about her neck a small gold chain and she put on her head her small, neat black hat. And then this girl, who meant to defile her body, knelt alongside her bed and prayed the Blessed Virgin to keep her soul clean.

With her handbag on her arm she passed out into the hall. Across the hall a Jewish family lived – by name, the Levinski family – consisting of a father who was a push-cart peddler, a gross and slattern mother who was continually occupied with the duties of being a mother, and any number of small Levinskis. In answer to her knock at their door, Mrs. Levinski came, a shapeless, vast shape in her night dress, bringing with her across the threshold strong smells of stale garlic, soiled flannel and cold fried carp. Marie had a nodding acquaintance with this neighbour of hers and no more.

“My sister, she is sick,” she told Mrs. Levinski. “And I must go out. Please, will you listen? If she should awake and call out for me, you will please to tell her I am gone but soon will be back again. If you please?”

Mrs. Levinski said she would, and to show she meant it opened wide her door before she returned to her household duties.

For November the weather was warm, but it was damp and would be damper. A fine drizzle was falling as Marie Misereux came to the lower hallway entrance and looked out into the night; and East Thirteenth Street, which is never entirely empty, was almost empty. She hesitated a moment, with her left hand clenched tight against her breast, and then stepped out, heading westward. At the first avenue crossing she came upon a man, a fairly well-dressed man, who stood below the stoop of a private house that had been converted into some sort of club, as if undecided in his own mind whether to go in or to stay out. She walked straight up to him.

“Will you go with me, m'sieur?” she said.

He peered at her from under his hatbrim. Almost over them was a street lamp. By its light he saw that her face was dead white; that neither her lips nor her cheeks were daubed with cosmetics, and that her lips were not twisted into the pitiable, painted smile of the streetwalker. Against the smooth fulness of her dress her knotted left hand made a hard, white clump. Her breasts, he saw, heaved up and down as though she had been running and her breath came out between her teeth with a whistling sound. Altogether she seemed most oddly dressed and most oddly mannered for the part she played.

“You want me to go with you?” he asked, half incredulously, half suspiciously, still staring hard.

“If – if you will be so good.”

“Do you need the money that bad?”

“Assuredly, m'sieur,” she said with a simple, desperate directness. “Why else would I ask you?”

“Say,” he said almost roughly, “you better go on home. I don't believe you belong on the streets. Here!”

He drew something that was small and crumply from a waistcoat pocket, and drawing a step nearer to her he shoved it between two of the fingers of her right hand.

“Now, then,” he said, “you take that and hustle on back home.”

He laughed, then, shamefacedly and in a forced sort of way, as though embarrassed by his own generosity, and then he turned and went quickly up the steps and into the club house.

She looked at what he had given her. It was a folded dollar bill. As though it had been nasty to the touch, she dropped it and rubbed her hand upon her frock, as if to cleanse it of a stain. Then, in

the same instant nearly, she stooped down and picked up the bill from the dirty pavement and kissed it and opened her black handbag. Except for a few cents in change, the bag was empty. Except for those few cents and a sum of less than ten dollars yet remaining in the savings bank, the two dollars she had given the lame doctor was all the money she had in the world. She tucked the bill up in still smaller compass and put it in the bag. She had made the start for the fund she meant to have. It was not charity. In the sweat of her agonized soul she had earned it.

She crossed over the first bisecting avenue to the westward, and the second; she passed a few pedestrians, among them being a policeman trying door latches, a drunken man whose body swayed and whose legs wove queer patterns as he walked, and half a dozen pale, bearded men who spoke Yiddish and gestured volubly with their hands as they went by in a group. At Third Avenue she turned north, finding the pavements more thickly populated, and just after she came to where Fourteenth Street crosses she saw a heavily built, well-dressed man in a light overcoat, coming toward her at a deliberative, dawdling gait. She put herself directly in his path. He checked his pace to avoid a collision and looked at her speculatively, with one hand fingering his moustache.

“Will you go with me?” she said, repeating the invitation she had used before.

“Where to?” he said, showing interest.

“Where you please,” she said in her halting speech.

“You’re on,” he said. He fell in alongside her, facing her about and slipping a hand well inside the crook of her right arm.

“You – you will go with me?” she asked. Suddenly her body was in a tremble.

“No, sister,” he stated grimly, “I ain’t goin’ with you but you’re sure goin’ with me.” And as he said it he tightened his grip upon her forearm.

He had need to say no more. She knew what had happened. She had not spent two years and better in a New York tenement without learning that there were men of the police – detectives they called them in English – who wore no uniforms but went about their work appalled as ordinary citizens. She was arrested, that was plain enough, and she understood full well for what she had been arrested. She made no outcry, offered no defence, broke forth into no plea for release. Indeed her thought for the moment was all for her half-sister and not for herself. So she said nothing as he steered her swiftly along.

At a street light where a patrol telephone box of iron was bolted to the iron post the plainclothes man slowed up. Then he changed his mind.

“Guess I won’t call the wagon,” he said. “I happen to know it’s out. It ain’t far. You and me’ll walk and take the air.” He turned with her westward through the cross street. Then, struck by her silence, he asked a question:

“A Frenchy, ain’t you?”

“Yes,” she told him. “I am French. Where – where are you taking me, m’sieur? Is it to the prison – the station house?”

“Quit your kiddin’,” he said mockingly. “I s’pose you don’t know where we’re headin’? Night court for yours – Jefferson Market. Right over here across town.”

“They will not keep me there long? They will permit me to go if I pay a fine, eh? A small fine, eh? That is all they will do to me, is it not so?”

He grunted derisively. “Playin’ ignorant, huh? I s’pose you’re goin’ to tell me now you ain’t never been up in the night court before?”

“No, no, m’sieur, never – I swear it to you. Never have I been – been like this before.”

“That’s what they all say. Well, if you can prove it – if you ain’t got any record of previous complaints standin’ agin’ you, and your finger prints don’t give you away – you’ll get off pretty light, maybe, but not with a fine. I guess the magistrate’ll give you a bit over on the Island – maybe thirty days, maybe sixty. Depends on how he’s feelin’ to-night.”

“The Island?”

“Sure, Blackwell’s Island. A month over there won’t do you no harm.”

“I cannot – you must not take me,” she broke out passionately now. “For thirty days? Oh, no, no, m’sieur!”

“Oh, yes, yes, yes!” He was mimicking her tone. “I guess you can stand doin’ your thirty days if the rest of these cruisers can. If you should turn out to be an old offender it’d likely be six months – ”

He did not finish the sentence. With a quick, hard jerk she broke away from him and turned and ran back the way she had come. She dropped her handbag and her foot spurned it into the gutter. She ran straight, her head down, like a hunted thing sorely pressed. Her snug skirt hampered her though. With long strides the detective overtook her. She fought him off silently, desperately, with both hands, with all her strength. He had to be rough with her – but no rougher than the emergency warranted. He pressed her flat up against a building and, holding her fast there with the pressure of his left arm across her throat, he got his nippers out of his pocket. Another second or two more of confused movement and he had her helpless. The little steel curb was twined tight about her right wrist below the rumpled white cuff. By a twist of the handles which he held gripped in his palm he could break the skin. Two twists would dislocate the wrist bone. A strong man doesn’t fight long after the links of the nippers start biting into his flesh.

“Now, then,” he grunted triumphantly, jerking her out alongside him, “I guess you’ll trot along without balkin’. I was goin’ to treat you nice but you wouldn’t behave, would you? Come on now and be good.”

He glanced backward over his shoulder. Three or four men and boys, witnesses to the flight and to the recapture, were tagging along behind them.

“Beat it, you,” he ordered. Then as they hesitated: “Beat it now, or I’ll be runnin’ somebody else in.” They fell back, following at a safer distance.

He had led his prisoner along for almost a block before he was moved to address her again:

“And you thought you could make your getaway from me? Not a chance! Say, what do you want to act that way for, makin’ it harder for both of us? Say, on the level now, ain’t you never been pinched before?”

She thought he meant the pressure of the steel links on her wrist.

“It is not that,” she said, bending the curbed hand upward. “That I do not think of. It is of my sister, my sister Helene, that I think.” Her voice for the first time broke and shivered.

“What about your sister?” There was something of curiosity but more of incredulity in his question.

“She is ill, m’sieur, very ill, and she is alone. There is no one but me now. My brother – he is dead. It is for her that I have done – this – this thing to-night. If I do not return to her – if you do not let me go back – she will die, m’sieur. I tell you she will die.”

If she was acting it was good acting. Half convinced against his will of her sincerity, and half doubtfully, he came to a standstill.

“Where do you live – is it far from here?”

“It is in this street, m’sieur. It is not far.” He could feel her arm quivering in the grip of his nippers.

“Maybe I’m makin’ a sucker of myself,” he said dubiously, defining the diagnosis as much to himself as to her. “But if it ain’t far I might walk you back there and give this here sister of yours the once-over. And then if you ain’t lyin’ we’ll see – ”

“Must I go so?” She lifted her hand up, indicating her meaning.

“You bet your life you’re goin’ that way or not at all. I’m takin’ no more chances with you.”

“But it would kill her – she would die to see me so. She must not know I have done this thing, m’sieur. She must not see this – ” The little chain rattled.

“Come on,” he ordered in a tone of finality. “I thought that sick sister gag was old stuff, but I was goin’ to give you a show to make good – ”

“But I swear – ”

“Save your breath! Save your breath! Tell your spiel to the judge. Maybe he’ll listen. I’m through.”

They were almost at the doors of the squat and ugly building which the Tenderloin calls Jeff Market when he noticed that her left hand was clutched against her breast. He remembered then she had held that hand so when she first spoke to him; except during her flight and the little struggle after he ran her down, she must have been holding it so all this time.

“What’s that you’ve got in your hand?” he demanded suspiciously, and with a practiced flip of the nipper handles swung her round so that she faced him.

“It is my own, m’sieur. It is – ”

“Nix, nix with that. I gotta see. Open up them fingers.”

She opened her hand slowly, reluctantly. The two of them were in the shadow of the elevated structure then, close up alongside a pillar, and he had to peer close to see what the object might be. Having seen he did not offer to touch it, but he considered his prisoner closely, taking her in from her head to her feet, before he led her on across the roadway and the pavement and in at one of the doors of that odoursome clearing house of vice and misery, mercy and justice, where the night court sits seven nights a week.

First, though, he untwisted the disciplinary little steel chain from about her wrist. The doorway by which they entered gave upon the Tenth Street face of the building and admitted them into a maze of smelly dim corridors and cross-halls in the old jail wing directly beneath the hideous and aborted tower, which in a neighbourhood of stark architectural offences makes of Jefferson Market courthouse a shrieking crime against good looks and good taste.

The inspector’s man escorted the French girl the length of a short passage. At a desk which stood just inside the courtroom door he detained her while a uniformed attendant entered her name and her age, which she gave as twenty-one, and her house number, in a big book which before now has been Doomsday Book for many a poor smutted butterfly of the sidewalks. The detective, standing by, took special note of the name and the address and, for his own purposes, wrote them both down on a scrap of card. This formality being finished, the pair crossed the half-filled courtroom, he guiding by a hand on her elbow, she obeying with a numbed and passive docility, to where there is a barred-in space like an oversized training den for wild animals. This cage or coop, whichever you might choose to call it, has a whited cement wall for its back, and rows of close-set rounded iron bars for its front and sides, and wooden benches for its plenishings. The bars run straight up, like slender black shadows caught and frozen into solidity, to the soiled ceiling above; they are braced across with iron horizontals, which makes the pen strong enough to hold a rhino. Its twin stands alongside it, filling the remaining space at the far side of the big room. In the old days one pen was meant for male delinquents and one for female. But now the night court for men holds its sessions in a different part of town and only women delinquents are brought to this place. It may or may not be a reflection upon our happy civilisation – I leave that point for the sociologists to settle – but it is a fact that ninety per cent of them are brought here charged with the same thing.

The first coop held perhaps a dozen women and girls. One of them was quietly weeping. The others, looking, as they sat on one of the benches in their more or less dragged finery, like a row of dishevelled cage birds of gay plumage, maintained attitudes which ranged from the highly indifferent to the excessively defiant. The detective unlatched the door, which was of iron wattles too, and put his prisoner inside.

“You’ll have to stay here awhile,” he bade her. His tone was altered from that which he had employed toward her at any time before. “Just set down there and be comfortable.”

But she did not sit. She drew herself close up into a space where wall and wall, meeting at right angles, made a corner. Her cellmates eyed her. Being inclined to believe from her garb that she probably was a shopgirl caught pilfering, none of them offered to hail her; all of them continued,

though, to watch her curiously. As he closed and bolted the door and moved away the plain-clothes man, glancing back, caught a fair look at her face behind the iron uprights. Her big, staring eyes reminded him of something, some creature, he had seen somewhere. Later he remembered. He had seen that same look out of the staring eyes of animals, lying with legs bound on the floor of a slaughterhouse.

Following this, the ordinary procedure for him would have been to call up the East Twenty-second Street station house by telephone and report that, having made an arrest, he had seen fit to bring his prisoner direct to court; then visit the complaint clerk's office in a little cubby-hole of a room, and there swear to a short affidavit setting forth the accusation in due form; finally, file the affidavit with the magistrate's clerk and stand by to await the calling of that particular case. Strangely enough, he did none of these things.

Instead, he made his way direct to the magistrate's desk inside the railing which cut the room across from side to side. The pent, close smell of the place was fit to sicken men unused to it. It commingled those odours which seem always to go with a police court – of unwashed human bodies, of iodoform, of stale fumes of alcohol, of cheap rank perfumery. Petty crime exhales an atmosphere which is peculiarly its own. This man was used to this smell. Smelling it was to him a part of the day's work – the night's work rather.

The magistrate upon the bench was a young magistrate, newly appointed by the mayor to this post. Because he belonged to an old family and because his sister had married a rich man the papers loved to refer to him as the society judge. As the detective came up he was finishing a hearing which had lasted less than three minutes.

“Any previous record as shown by the finger prints and the card indexes?” he was asking of the officer complainant.

“Three, Your Honour,” answered the man glibly. “Suspended sentence oncet, thirty days oncet, thirty days oncet again. Probation officer's report shows that this here young woman – ”

“Never mind that,” said the magistrate; “six months.”

The officer and the woman who had been sentenced to six months fell back, and the detective shoved forward, putting his arms on the top of the edge of the desk to bring his head closer to the magistrate.

“Your Honour,” he began, speaking in a sort of confidential undertone, “could I have a word with you?”

“Go ahead, Schwartzmann,” said the magistrate, bending forward to hear.

“Well, Judge, a minute ago I brought a girl in here; picked her up at Fourteenth Street and Thoid Avenue for solicitin'. So far as that goes it's a dead-open-and-shut case. She come up to me on the street and braced me. She wasn't dressed like most of these Thoid-Avenue cruisers dress and she's sort of acted as if she'd never been pinched before – tried to give me an argument on the way over. Well, that didn't get her anywheres with me. You can't never tell when one of them dames will turn out in a new make-up, but somethin' that happened when we was right here outside the door – somethin' I seen about her – sort of – ” He broke off the sentence in the middle and started again. “Well, anyhow, Your Honour, I may be makin' a sucker of myself, but I didn't swear out no affidavit and I ain't called up the station house even. I stuck her over there in the bull-pen and then I come straight to you.”

The magistrate's eyes narrowed. Thus early in his experience as a police judge he had learned – and with abundant cause – to distrust the motives of plain-clothes men grown suddenly philanthropic. Besides, in the first place, this night court was created to circumvent the unholy partnership of the bail-bond shark and the police pilot fish.

“Now look here, Schwartzmann,” he said sharply, “you know the law – you know the routine that has to be followed.”

“Yes, sir, I do,” agreed Schwartzmann; “and if I’ve made a break I’m willin’ to stand the gaff. Maybe I’m makin’ a sucker of myself, too, just like I said. But, Judge, there ain’t no great harm done yet. She’s there in that pen and you know she’s there and I know she’s there.”

“Well, what’s the favour you want to ask of me?” demanded His Honour.

“It’s like this: I want to slip over to the address she gave me and see if she’s been handin’ me the right steer about certain things. It ain’t so far.” He glanced down at the scribbled card he held in his hand. “I can get over there and get back in half an hour at the outside. And then if she’s been tryin’ to con me I’ll go through with it – I’ll press the charge all right.” His jaw locked grimly on the thought that his professional sagacity was on test.

“Well, what is her story?” asked the magistrate.

“Judge, to tell you the truth it ain’t her story so much as it’s somethin’ I seen. And if I’m makin’ a sucker of myself I’d rather not say too much about that yet.”

“Oh, go ahead,” assented the magistrate, whose name was Voris. “There’s no danger of the case being called while you’re gone, because, as I understand you, there isn’t any case to call. Go ahead, but remember this while you’re gone – I don’t like all this mystery. I’m going to want to know all the facts before I’m done.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Schwartzmann, getting himself outside the railed inclosure. “I’ll be back in less’n no time, Your Honour.”

He wasn’t, though. Nearly an hour passed before an attendant brought Magistrate Voris word that Officer Schwartzmann craved the privilege of seeing His Honour alone for a minute or two in His Honour’s private chamber. The magistrate left the bench, suspending the business of the night temporarily, and went; on the way he was mentally fortifying himself to be severe enough if he caught a plain-clothes man trying to trifle with him.

“Well, Schwartzmann?” he said shortly as he entered the room.

“Judge,” said the detective, “the woman wasn’t lyin’. She told me her sister was sick alone in their flat without nobody to look after her and that her brother was dead. I don’t know about the brother – at least I ain’t sure about him – but the sister was sick. Only she ain’t sick no more – she’s dead.”

“Dead? What did she die of?”

“She didn’t die of nothin’ – she killed herself with gas. She turned the gas on in the room where she was sick in bed. The body was still warm when I got there. I gave her first aid, but she was gone all right. She wasn’t nothin’ more than a shell anyhow – had some wastin’ disease from the looks of her; and I judge it didn’t take but a few whiffs to finish her off. I called in the officer on post, name of Riordan, and I notified the coroner’s office myself over the telephone, and they’re goin’ to send a man up there inside of an hour or so to take charge of the case.

“And so, after that, feelin’ a sort of personal interest in the whole thing, as you might say, I broke the rules some more. When I found this here girl dead she had two pieces of paper in her hand; she’d died holdin’ to ’em. One of ’em was a letter that she’d wrote herself, I guess, and the other must ’a’ been a letter from somebody else – kind of an official-lookin’ letter. Both of ’em was in French. I don’t know exactly why I done it, unless it was I wanted to prove somethin’ to myself, but I brought off them two letters with me and here they are, sir. I’m hopin’ to get your court interpreter to translate ’em for me, and then I aim to rush ’em back over there before the coroner’s physician gets in, and put ’em back on that bed where I found ’em.”

“I read French – a little,” said the young magistrate. “Suppose you let me have a look at them first.”

Schwartzmann surrendered them and the magistrate read them through. First he read the pitifully short, pitifully direct farewell lines the suicide had written to her half-sister before she turned on the gas, and then he read the briefly regretful letter of set terms of condolence, which a clerk in a consular office had in duty bound transcribed. Having read them through, this magistrate, who

had read in the newspapers of Liège and Louvain, of Mons and Charlevois, of Ypres and Rheims, of the Masurien Lakes and Poland and Eastern Prussia and Western Flanders and Northern France; who had read also the casualty reports emanating at frequent intervals from half a dozen war offices, reading the one as matters of news and the other, until now, as lists of steadily mounting figures – he raised his head and in his heart he silently cursed war and all its fruits. And next day he went and joined a league for national preparedness.

“Schwartzmann,” he said as he laid the papers on his desk, “I guess probably your prisoner was telling the whole truth. She did have a brother and he is dead. He was a French soldier and he died about a month or six weeks ago – on the Field of Honour, the letter says. And this note that the girl left, I’ll tell you what it says. It says that she heard what the doctor said about her – there must have been a doctor in to see her some time this evening – and that she knows she can never get well, and that they are about out of money, and that she is afraid Marie – Marie is the sister who’s in yonder now, I suppose – will do something desperate to get money, so rather than be a burden on her sister she is going to commit a mortal sin. So she asks God to forgive her and let her be with her brother Paul – he’s the dead brother, no doubt – when she has paid for her sin. And that is all she says except good-bye.”

He paused a moment, clearing his throat, and when he went on he spoke aloud, but it was to himself that he spoke rather than to the detective: “Field of Honour? Not one but two out of that family dead on the Field of Honour, by my way of thinking. Yes, and though it’s a new name for it, I guess you might call Fourteenth Street and Third Avenue a Field of Honour, too, and not be so very far wrong for this once. What a hellish thing it all is!”

“How’s that, sir?” asked Schwartzmann. “I didn’t quite get you.” He had taken the two papers back in his own hands and was shuffling them absently.

“Nothing,” said the magistrate. And then almost harshly: “Well, what do you want me to do about the woman in the pen yonder?”

“Well, sir,” said the other slowly, “I was thinkin’ that probably you wouldn’t care to tell her what’s just come off in the flat – at least not in court. And I know I don’t want to have to tell her. I thought maybe if you could stretch the rules so’s I could get her out of here without havin’ to make a regular charge against her and without me havin’ to arraign her in the regular way – ”

“Damn the rules!” snapped Voris petulantly. “I’ll fix them. You needn’t worry about that part of it. Go on!”

“Well, sir, I was thinkin’ maybe that after I found somebody to take these letters back where they belong, I could take her on home with me – I live right down here in Greenwich Village – and keep her there for the night, or anyhow till the coroner’s physician is through with what he’s got to do, and I’d ask my wife to break the news to her and tell her about it. A woman can do them things sometimes better’n a man can. So that’s my idea, sir.”

“You’re willing to take a woman into your home that you picked up for streetwalking?”

“I’ll take the chance. You see, Your Honour, I seen somethin’ else – somethin’ I ain’t mentioned – somethin’ I don’t care to mention if you don’t mind.”

“Suit yourself,” said the other. “I suppose you’ll be looking up the newspaper men before you go. This will make what they call a great heart-interest story.”

“I don’t figure on tellin’ the reporters neither,” mumbled Schwartzmann, as though ashamed of his own forbearance.

The magistrate found the detective’s right hand and started to shake it. Then he dropped it. You might have thought from the haste with which he dropped it that he also was ashamed.

“I’ll see you don’t get into any trouble with the inspector,” he said. Then he added: “You know of course that this brother was a French soldier?”

“Sure I know it – you told me so.”

“You’re German, aren’t you?” asked Voris. “German descent, I mean?”

“I don’t figure as that’s got anythin’ to do with the case,” said the plain-clothes man, bristling.

“I don’t either, Schwartzmann,” said the magistrate. “Now you go ahead and get that woman out of this hole.”

Schwartzmann went. She was where he had left her; she was huddled up, shrinking in, against the bars, and as he unlatched the iron door and swung it in and beckoned to her to come out from behind it, he saw, as she came, that her eyes looked at him with a dumb, questioning misery and that her left hand was still gripped in a hard knot against her breast. He knew what that hand held. It held a little, cheap, carved white crucifix.

I see by the papers that those popularly reputed to be anointed of God, who are principally in charge of this war, are graciously pleased to ordain that the same shall go on for quite some time yet.

CHAPTER III

THE SMART ALECK

Cap'n Buck Flutter, holding his watch in the approved conductor's grip, glanced back and forth the short length of the four-five accommodation and raised his free hand in warning:

"All aboard!"

From almost above his head it came:

"If you can't get a board get a scantlin'!"

Clustered at the White or shady end of the station, the sovereign Caucasians of Swango rocked up against one another in the unbridled excess of their merriment. Farther away, at the Coloured or sunny end of the platform, the assembled representatives of the African population guffawed loudly, though respectfully. To almost any one having the gift of spontaneous repartee it might have occurred to suggest the advisability of getting a plank provided you could not get a board. It took Gash Tuttle to think up scantling.

The humourist folded his elbows on the ledge of the window and leaned his head and shoulders out of the car, considering his people whimsically, yet benignantly. He wore attire suitable for travelling – a dented-in grey felt hat, adhering perilously to the rearmost slope of his scalp; a mail-order suit of light tan, with slashed seams and rows of buttons extending up the sleeves almost to the elbows; a hard-surfaced tie of pale blue satin; a lavender shirt, agreeably relieved by pink longitudinal stripings.

Except his eyes, which rather protruded, and his front teeth, which undoubtedly projected, all his features were in a state of active retreat – only, his nose retreated one way and his chin the other. The assurance of a popular idol who knows no rival was in his pose and in his poise. Alexander the Great had that look – if we may credit the likenesses of him still extant – and Napoleon Bonaparte had it, and David Garrick, to quote a few conspicuous examples.

Alone, of all those within hearing, Cap'n Buck Flutter did not laugh. Indeed, he did not even grin.

"All right, black boy," he said. "Let's go from here!"

The porter snatched up the wooden box that rested on the earth, flung it on the car platform and projected his person nimbly after it. Cap'n Buck swung himself up the step with one hand on the rail. The engine spat out a mouthful of hot steam and the wheels began to turn.

"Good-by, my honeys, 'cause I'm gone!" called out Mr. Tuttle, and he waved a fawn-coloured arm in adieu to his courtiers, black and white. "I'm a-goin' many and a-many a mile from you. Don't take in no bad money while your popper's away."

The station agent, in black calico sleeve-protectors and celluloid eyeshade, stretched the upper half of his body out the cubby-hole that served him for an office.

"Oh, you Gash!" he called. "Give my love to all the ladies."

The two groups on the platform waited, all expectant for the retort. Instantly it sped back to them, above the clacking voice of the train:

"That's all you ever would give 'em, ain't it?"

Mr. Gip Dismukes, who kept the livery stable, slapped Mr. Gene Brothers, who drove the bus, a resounding slap on the back.

"Ain't he jest ez quick ez a flash?" he demanded of the company generally.

The station agent withdrew himself inside his sanctum, his sides heaving to his mirthful emotions. He had drawn a fire acknowledged to be deadly at any range, but he was satisfied. The laugh was worth the wound.

Through the favoured section traversed by the common carrier to whose care genius incarnate had just committed his precious person there are two kinds of towns – bus towns and non-bus towns.

A bus town lies at an appreciable distance from the railroad, usually with a hill intervening, and a bus, which is painted yellow, plies between town and station. But a non-bus town is a town that has for its civic equator the tracks themselves. The station forms one angle of the public square; and, within plain sight and easy walking reach, the post office and at least two general stores stand; and handily near by is a one-story bank built of a stucco composition purporting to represent granite, thus signifying solidity and impregnability; and a two-story hotel, white, with green blinds, and porches running all the way across the front; also hitch rails; a livery stable; and a Masonic Hall.

Swango belonged to the former category. It was over the hill, a hot and dusty eighth of a mile away. So, having watched the departing four-five accommodation until it diminished to a smudgy dot where the V of the rails melted together and finally vanished, the assembled Swangoans settled back in postures of ease to wait for the up train due at three-eight, but reported two hours and thirty minutes late. There would still be ample time after it came and went to get home for supper.

The contemptuous travelling man who once said that only three things ever happened in Swango – morning, afternoon and night – perpetrated a libel, for he wilfully omitted mention of three other daily events: the cannon-ball, tearing through without stopping in the early forenoon; the three-eight up; and the four-five down.

So they sat and waited; but a spirit of depression, almost of sadness, affected one and all. It was as though a beaming light had gone out of their lives. Ginger Marable, porter and runner of the Mansard House, voiced the common sentiment of both races as he lolled on a baggage truck in the sunshine, with his cap of authority, crowned by a lettered tin diadem, shoved far back upon his woolly skull.

“Dat Mistah Gashney Tuttle he sho is a quick ketcher,” stated Ginger with a soft chuckle. “W’ite an’ black – we suttinly will miss Mistah Tuttle twell he gits back home ag’in.”

Borne away from his loyal subjects to the pulsing accompaniment of the iron horse’s snorted breath, the subject of this commentary extended himself on his red plush seat and considered his fellow travellers with a view to honing his agile fancy on the whetstones of their duller mentalities. On the whole, they promised but poor sport. Immediately in front of him sat a bride and groom, readily recognisable at a glance for what they were – the bride in cream-coloured cashmere, with many ribbons; the groom in stiff black diagonals, with braided seams, and a white lawn tie. A red-faced man who looked as though he might be a deputy sheriff from somewhere slept uneasily one seat in the rear. He had his shoes off, revealing gray yarn socks. His mouth was ajar, and down in his throat he snored screechily, like a planing mill. The youngest member of a family group occupying two seats just across the aisle whimpered a desire. Its mother rummaged in a shoebox containing, among other delicacies, hard-boiled eggs, salt and pepper mixed and enveloped in a paper squill, blueberry pie, leaking profusely, and watermelon-rind preserves, and found what she sought – the lower half of a fried chicken leg. Satisfied by this gift the infant ceased from fretful repining, sucking contentedly at the meat end; and between sucks hammered contentedly with the drumstick on the seat back and window ledge, leaving lardy smears there in the dust.

Cap’n Buck – captain by virtue of having a regular passenger run – came through the car, collecting tickets. At no time particularly long on temper, he was decidedly short of it to-day. He was fifteen minutes behind his schedule – no unusual thing – but the locomotive was misbehaving. Likewise a difference of opinion had arisen over the proper identity of a holder of mileage in the smoker. He halted alongside Gash Tuttle, swaying on his legs to the roll and pitch of the car floor.

“Tickets?” he demanded crisply.

“Wee gates, Cap,” answered the new passenger jovially. “How does your copperosity seem to sagashuate this evenin’?”

“Where goin’?” said Fluter, ignoring the pleasantry. “I’m in a hurry. What station?”

“Well,” countered the irrepressible one, “what stations have you got?”

Cap'n Buck Flutter's cold eye turned meaningly toward the bell cord, which dipped like a tired clothesline overhead, and he snapped two fingers peevishly.

"Son," he said almost softly, "don't monkey with me. This here ain't my day for foolin'!"

Favoured son of the high gods though he was, Gash Tuttle knew instantly now that this was indeed no day for fooling. Cap'n Buck was not a large man, but he had a way of growing to meet and match emergencies. He handled the Sunday excursions, which was the acid test of a trainman's grit. Coltish youths, alcoholically keened up or just naturally high spirited, who got on his train looking for trouble nearly always got off looking for a doctor. As regards persons wishful of stealing a ride, they never tried to travel with Cap'n Buck Flutter oftener than once. Frequently, for a period of time measurable by days or weeks, they were in no fit state to be travelling with any one except a trained nurse.

Gash Tuttle quit his fooling. Without further ado – whatever an ado is – he surrendered his ticket, receiving in exchange a white slip with punchmarks in it, to wear in his hatband. Next came the train butcher bearing chewing gum, purple plums in paper cornucopias, examples of the light literature of the day, oranges which were overgreen, and bananas which were overripe, as is the way with a train butcher's oranges and bananas the continent over. In contrast with the conductor's dourness the train butcher's mood was congenially inclined to persiflage.

After an exchange of spirited repartee, at which the train butcher by an admiring shake of the head tacitly confessed himself worsted, our hero purchased a paper-backed work entitled, "The Jolly Old Drummer's Private Joke Book." This volume, according to the whispered confidences of the seller, contained tales of so sprightly a character that even in sealed covers it might be sent by mail only at the sender's peril; moreover, the wink which punctuated this disclosure was in itself a promise of the spicy entertainment to be derived from perusal thereof. The price at present was but fifty cents; later it would go up to a dollar a copy; this, then, was a special and extraordinary rate.

The train continued on its course – not hurriedly, but with reasonable steadfastness and singleness of purpose. After much the same fashion the sun went down. The bride repeatedly whisked cindery deposits off her cashmered lap; the large-faced man, being awakened by one of his own snores, put on his shoes and indulged in fine-cut tobacco, internally applied; but the youngest passenger now slept all curled up in a moist little bundle, showing an expanse of plump neck much mottled by heat-rash, and clutching in one greased and gritted fist the denuded shank-bone of a chicken with a frieze of gnawed tendons adhering to its larger joint.

At intervals the train stopped at small way stations, bus or non-bus in character as the case might be, to let somebody off or somebody on. Cap'n Buck now made his trips carrying his lantern – the ornate nickel-plated one that had been awarded to him in the voting contest for the most popular trainman at the annual fair and bazaar of True Blue Lodge of the Junior Order of American Mechanics. It had his proper initials – J. J. F. – chased on its glass chimney in old English script, very curlicue and ornamental. He carried it in the crook of his left elbow with the handle round his biceps; and when he reached the end of his run he would extinguish its flame, not by blowing it out but by a quick, short, expert jerk of his arm. This is a trick all conductors seek to acquire; some of them succeed.

Twilight, the stage manager of night, had stolen insidiously on the scene, shortening up the backgrounds and blurring the perspectives; and the principal character of this tale, straining his eyes over the fine print, had reached the next to the last page of "The Jolly Old Drummer's Private Joke Book" and was beginning to wonder why the postal authorities should be so finicky in such matters and in a dim way to wish he had his fifty cents back, when with a glad shriek of relief the locomotive, having bumped over a succession of yard switches, drew up under a long open shed alongside a dumpy brick structure. To avoid any possible misunderstanding this building was labelled Union Depot in large letters and at both ends.

Being the terminus of the division, it was the train's destination and the destination of Mr. Tuttle. He possessed himself of an imitation leather handbag and descended on solid earth with the assured manner of a seasoned and experienced traveller. Doubtless because of the flurry created by the train's arrival and the bustling about of other arrivals his advent created no visible stir among the crowd at the terminal. At least he noticed none. Still, these people had no way of knowing who he was.

In order to get the Union Depot closer to the railroad it had been necessary to place it some distance away from the heart of things; even so, metropolitan evidences abounded. A Belt Line trolley car stood stationary, awaiting passengers; a vociferous row of negro hackmen were kept in their proper places by a uniformed policeman; and on the horizon to the westward a yellow radiance glowed above an intervening comb of spires and chimneys, showing where the inhabitants of the third largest second-class city in the state made merry at carnival and street fair, to celebrate the dedication and opening of their new Great White Way – a Great White Way seven blocks long and spangled at sixty-foot intervals with arc lights disposed in pairs on ornamental iron standards. Hence radiance.

Turning westward, therefore, Mr. Tuttle found himself looking along a circumscribed vista of one-story buildings with two-story fronts – that is to say, each wooden front wall extended up ten or fifteen feet above the peak of the sloping roof behind it, so that, viewed full-on, the building would have the appearance of being a floor taller than it really was. To add to the pleasing illusion certain of these superstructures had windows painted elaborately on their slab surfaces; but to one seeking a profile view the false work betrayed a razor-like thinness, as patently flat and artificial as stage scenery.

Travellers from the Eastern seaboard have been known to gibe at this transparent artifice. Even New York flat dwellers, coming direct from apartment houses which are all marble foyers and gold-leaf elevator grilles below and all dark cubby-holes and toy kitchens above, have been known to gibe; which fact is here set forth merely to prove that a sense of humour depends largely on the point of view.

To our Mr. Tuttle such deceits were but a part of the ordered architectural plan of things, and they moved him not. What did interest him was to note that the nearest of these bogusly exalted buildings displayed, above swinging twin doors, a cluster of lights and a sign testifying that this was the First Chance Saloon. Without looking he sensed that the reverse of that Janus-faced sign would advertise this same establishment as being the Last Chance. He did not know about Janus, but he did know about saloons that are handily adjacent to union depots. Moreover, an inner consciousness advised him that after a dry sixty-mile trip he thirsted amain. He took up his luggage and crossed the road, and entered through the knee-high swinging doors.

There was a bar and a bar mirror behind it. The bar was decorated at intervals with rectangles of fly paper, on the sticky surfaces of which great numbers of flies were gummed fast in a perished or perishing state; but before they became martyrs to the fad of sanitation these victims had left their footprints thickly on the mirror and on the fringes of coloured tissue paper that dangled from the ceiling. In a front corner, against a window, was a lunch counter, flanked on one side by stools and serving as a barricade for an oil stove and shelves of cove oysters in cans, and hams and cheeses for slicing, and vinegar cruets and pepper casters and salt cellars crusted with the saline deposits of the years. A solitary patron was lounging against the bar in earnest conversation with the barkeeper; but the presiding official of the food-purveying department must have been absent on business or pleasure, for of him there was no sign.

Gash Tuttle ordered a beer. The barkeeper filled a tall flagon with brew drawn from the wood, wiped the clinging froth from its brim with a spatulate tool of whittled cedar, and placed the drink before the newcomer, who paid for it out of a silver dollar. Even as Mr. Tuttle scooped in his change and buried the lower part of his face in the circumference of the schooner he became aware that the other customer had drawn nearer and was idly rattling a worn leather cup, within which dice rapped against the sides like little bony ghosts uneasy to escape from their cabinet at a séance.

The manipulator of the dice held a palm cupped over the mouth of the cup to prevent their escape. He addressed the barkeeper:

“Flem,” he said, “you’re such a wisenheimer, I’ll make you a proposition: I’ll shake three of these here dice out, and no matter whut they roll I’ll betcha I kin tell without lookin’ whut the tops and bottoms will come to – whut the spots’ll add up to.”

The other desisted from rinsing glassware in a pail beneath the bar.

“Which is that?” he inquired sceptically. “You kin tell beforehand whut the top and bottom spots’ll add up?”

“Ary time and every time!”

“And let me roll ’em myself?”

“And let you roll ’em yourself – let anybody roll ’em. I don’t need to touch ’em, even.”

“How much’ll you risk that you kin do that, Fox?” Roused greed was in the speaker’s tone.

“Oh, make it fur the drinks,” said Fox – “jest fur the drinks. I ain’t aimin’ to take your money away frum you. I got all the money I need.” For the first time he seemed to become aware of a third party and he turned and let a friendly hand fall on the stranger’s shoulder. “Tell you whut, Flem, we’ll make it drinks fur this gent too. Come on, brother,” he added; “you’re in on this. It’s my party if I lose, which I won’t, and ole Flem’s party if he loses, which he shore will.”

It was the warmth of his manner as much as the generosity of his invitation that charmed Mr. Tuttle. The very smile of this man Fox invited friendship; for it was a broad smile, rich in proteids and butterfats. Likewise his personality was as attractively cordial as his attire was striking and opulent.

“Slide or slip, let ’er rip!” said Mr. Tuttle, quoting the poetic words of a philosopher of an earlier day.

“That’s the talk!” said Fox genially. He pushed the dice box across the bar. “Go to it, bo! Roll them bones! The figure is twenty-one!”

From the five cubes in the cup the barkeeper eliminated two. He agitated the receptacle violently and then flirited out the three survivors on the wood. They jostled and crocked against one another, rolled over and stopped. Their uppermost faces showed an ace, a six and a five.

“Twelve!” said Flem.

“Twelve it is,” echoed Fox.

“A dozen raw,” confirmed Gash Tuttle, now thoroughly in the spirit of it.

“All right, then,” said Fox, flashing a beam of admiration toward the humourist. “Now turn ’em over, Flem – turn ’em over careful.”

Flem obeyed, displaying an ace, a deuce and a six.

“And nine more makes twenty-one in all!” chortled Fox triumphantly.

As though dazed, the barkeeper shook his head.

“Well, Foxey, ole pardner, you shore got me that time,” he confessed begrudgingly. “Whut’ll it be, gents? Here, I reckon the cigars is on me too, after that.” From a glass-topped case at the end of the bar alongside Gash Tuttle he produced a full box and extended it hospitably. “The smokes is on the house – dip in, gents. Dip in. Try an Old Hickory; them’s pure Tampas – ten cents straight.”

He drew the beers – large ones for the two, a small one for himself – and raised his own glass to them.

“Here’s to you and t’ward you!” he said.

“Ef I hadn’t a-met you I wouldn’t a-knowed you,” shot back Gash Tuttle with the lightning spontaneity of one whose wit moves in boltlike brilliancy; and at that they both laughed loudly and, as though dazzled by his flashes, bestowed on him the look that is ever the sweetest tribute to the jester’s talents.

The toast to a better acquaintance being quaffed and lights exchanged, the still nonplussed Flem addressed the winners:

“Well, boys, I thought I knowed all there was to know about dice – poker dice and crap dice too; but live and learn, as the feller says. Say, Fox, put me on to that trick – it’ll come in handy. I’ll ketch Joe on it when he gits back,” and he nodded toward the lunch counter.

“You don’t need to know no more’n you know about it already,” expounded Fox. “It’s bound to come out that way.”

“How is it bound to come out that way?”

“Why, Flem, it’s jest plain arithmetic; mathematics – that’s all. Always the tops and bottoms of ary three dice come to twenty-one. Here, gimme that cup and I’ll prove it.”

In rapid succession, three times, he shook the cubes out. It was indeed as the wizard had said. No matter what the sequence, the complete tally was ever the same – twenty-one.

“Now who’d ’a’ thought it!” exclaimed Flem delightedly. “Say, a feller could win a pile of dough workin’ that trick! I’d ’a’ fell fur some real money myself.”

“That’s why I made it fur the drinks,” said the magnanimous Fox. “I wouldn’t put it over on a friend – not for no amount; because it’s a sure-thing proposition. It jest naturally can’t lose! I wouldn’t ’a’ tried to skin this pardner here with it even if I’d ’a’ thought I could.” And once more his hand fell in flattering camaraderie on a fawn-coloured shoulder. “I know a regular guy that’s likewise a wise guy as soon as I see him. But with rank strangers it’d be plumb different. The way I look at it, a stranger’s money is anybody’s money – ”

He broke off abruptly as the doorhinges creaked. A tall, thin individual wearing a cap, a squint and a cigarette, all on the same side of his head, had entered. He stopped at the lunch counter as though desirous of purchasing food.

“Sh-h! Listen!” Fox’s subdued tones reached only the barkeeper and Mr. Tuttle. “That feller looks like a mark to me. D’ye know him, Flem?”

“Never seen him before,” whispered back Flem after a covert scrutiny of the latest arrival.

“Fine!” commented Fox, speaking with rapidity, but still with low-toned caution. “Jest to test it, let’s see if that sucker’ll fall. Here” – he shoved the dice cup into Gash Turtle’s grasp – “you be playin’ with the bones, sorter careless. You kin have the first bet, because I’ve already took a likin’ to you. Then, if he’s willin’ to go a second time, I’ll take him on fur a few simoleons.” The arch plotter fell into an attitude of elaborate indifference. “Go ahead, Flem; you toll him in.”

Given a guarantee of winning, and who among us is not a born gamester? Gash Tuttle’s cheeks flushed with sporting blood as he grabbed for the cup. All his corpuscles turned to red and white chips – red ones mostly. As for the barkeeper, he beyond doubt had the making of a born conspirator in him. He took the cue instantly.

“Sorry, friend,” he called out, “but the grub works is closed down temporary. Anything I kin do fur you?”

“Well,” said the stranger, edging over, “I did want a fried-aig sandwich, but I might change my mind. Got any cold lager on tap?”

“Join us,” invited Fox; “we’re jest fixin’ to have one. Make it beer all round,” he ordered the barkeeper without waiting for the newcomer’s answer.

Beer all round it was. Gash Tuttle, too eager for gore to more than sip his, toyed with the dice, rolling them out and scooping them up again.

“Want to shake for the next round, anybody?” innocently inquired the squint-eyed person, observing this byplay.

“The next round’s on the house,” announced Flem, obeying a wink of almost audible emphasis from Fox.

“This here gent thinks he’s some hand with the bones,” explained Fox, addressing the stranger and flirting a thumb toward Gash Tuttle. “He was sayin’ jest as you come in the door yonder that he could let anybody else roll three dice, and then he could tell, without lookin’ even, whut the tops and bottoms would add up to?”

“Huh?” grunted the squinty-eyed man. “Has he got any money in his clothes that says he kin do that? Where I come frum, money talks.” He eyed Gash Tuttle truculently, as though daring him to be game.

“My money talks too!” said Mr. Tuttle with nervous alacrity. He felt in an inner vest pocket, producing a modest packet of bills. All eyes were focused on it.

“That’s the stuff!” said Fox with mounting enthusiasm. “How much are you two gents goin’ to bet one another? Make it fur real money – that is, if you’re both game!”

“If he don’t touch the dice at all I’ll bet him fur his whole roll,” said the impetuous newcomer.

“That’s fair enough, I reckon,” said Fox. “Tell you whut – to make it absolutely fair I’ll turn the dice over myself and Flem’ll hold the stakes. Then there can’t be no kick comin’ from nobody whatsoever, kin there?” He faced their prospective prey. “How strong are you?” he demanded, almost sneeringly. “How much are you willin’ to put up against my pardner here?”

“Any amount! Any amount!” snapped back the other, squinting past Fox at Gash Tuttle’s roll until one eye was a button and the other a buttonhole. “Twenty-five – thirty – thirty-five – as much as forty dollars. That’s how game I am.”

Avarice gnawed at the taproots of Gash Tuttle’s being, but caution raised a warning hand. Fifteen was half of what he had and thirty was all. Besides, why risk all on the first wager, even though there was no real risk? A person so impulsively sportive as this victim would make a second bet doubtlessly. He ignored the stealthy little kick his principal accomplice dealt him on the shin. “I’ll make it fur fifteen,” he said, licking his lips.

“If that’s as fur as you kin go, all right,” said the slit-eyed man, promptly posting his money in the outstretched hand of the barkeeper, who in the same motion took over a like amount from the slightly trembling fingers of the challenger.

Squint-eye picked up the dice cup and rattled its occupants.

“Come on now!” he bantered Gash Tuttle. “Whut’ll they add up, tops and bottoms?”

“Twenty-one!” said Mr. Tuttle.

“Out they come, then!”

And out they did come, dancing together, tumbling and somersaulting, and finally halting – a deuce, a trey and a four.

“Three and two is five and four is nine,” Gash Tuttle read off the pips. “Now turn ’em over!” he bade Fox. “That’s your job – turn ’em over!” He was all tremulous and quivery inside.

In silence Fox drew the nearest die toward him and slowly capsized it. “Four,” he announced.

He flipped the deuce end for end, revealing its bottom: “Five!”

He reached for the remaining die – the four-spot. Dragging it toward him, his large fingers encompassed it for one fleeting instance, hiding it from view entirely; then he raised his hand: “Six!”

“Makin’ twenty-one in all,” stuttered Gash Tuttle. He reached for the stakes.

“Nix on that quick stuff!” yelled his opponent, and dashed his hand aside. “The tops come to nine and the bottoms to fifteen – that’s twenty-four, the way I figger. You lose!” He pouched the money gleefully.

Stunned, Gash Tuttle contemplated the upturned facets of the three dice. It was true – it was all too true! Consternation, or a fine imitation of that emotion, filled the countenances of Flem and of Fox.

“That’s the first time I ever seen that happen,” Fox whispered in the loser’s ear. “Bet him again – bet high – and git it all back. That’s the ticket!”

Mr. Tuttle shook his head miserably, but stubbornly. For this once, in the presence of crushing disaster, the divine powers of retort failed him. He didn’t speak – he couldn’t!

“Piker money! Piker money!” chanted the winner. “Still, ever’ little bit helps – eh, boys?”

And then and there, before Gash Tuttle’s bulging and horrified eyes, he split up the winnings in the proportion of five for Flem and five for Fox and five for himself. Of a sudden the loser was

shouldered out of the group. He looked not into friendly faces, but at contemptuous backs and heaving shoulders. The need for play acting being over, the play actors took their ease and divided their pay. The mask was off. Treachery stood naked and unashamed.

Reaching blindly for his valise, Gash Tuttle stumbled for the door, a load lying on his daunted spirit as heavy as a stone. Flem hailed him.

“Say, hold on!” He spoke kindly. “Ain’t that your quarter yonder?”

He pointed to a coin visible against the flat glass cover of the cigar case.

“Sure it is – it’s yourn. I seen you leave it there when I give you the change out of that dollar and purposed to tell you ’bout it at the time, but it slipped my mind. Go on and pick it up – it’s yourn. You’re welcome to it if you take it now!”

Automatically Gash Tuttle reached for the quarter – small salvage from a great and overwhelming loss. His nails scraped the glass, touching only glass. The quarter was cunningly glued to its underside. Surely this place was full of pitfalls. A guffawed chorus of derision rudely smote his burning ears.

“On your way, sucker! On your way!” gibed the perfidious Fox, swinging about with his elbows braced against the bar and a five-dollar bill held with a touch of cruel jauntiness between two fingers.

“Whut you got in the gripsack – hay samples or punkins?” jeered the exultant Slit-Eye.

“Yes; whut is the valise fur?” came Flem’s parting taunt.

Under their goadings his spirit rallied.

“Cat’s fur, to make kittens’ britches!” he said. Then, as a final shot: “You fellers needn’t think you’re so derved smart – I know jest exactly how you done it!”

He left them to chew on that. The parting honours were his, he felt, but the spoils of war – alas! – remained in the camp of the enemy. Scarcely twenty minutes at the outside had elapsed since his advent into city life, and already one-half of the hoarded capital he had meant should sustain him for a whole gala week was irretrievably gone, leaving behind an emptiness, a void as it were, which ached like the socket of a newly drawn tooth.

Vague, formless thoughts of reprisal, of vengeance exacted an hundredfold when opportunity should fitly offer, flitted through his numbed brain. Meantime though adventure beckoned; half a mile away or less a Great White Way and a street fair awaited his coming. That saffron flare against the sky yonder was an invitation and a promise. Sighing, he shifted his valise from one hand to the other.

The Belt Line car, returning stationward, bore him with small loss of time straightway to the very centre of excitement; to where bunting waved on store fronts and flag standards swayed from trolley poles, converting the County Square into a Court of Honour, and a myriad lights glowed golden russet through the haze of dust kicked up by the hurrying feet of merrymaking thousands. Barkers barked and brass bands brayed; strange cries of man and beast arose, and crowds eddied to and fro like windblown leaves in a gusty November. And all was gaiety and abandon. From the confusion certain sounds detached themselves, becoming intelligible to the human understanding. As for example:

“Remembah, good people, the cool of the evenin’ is the time to view the edgycated ostritch and mark his many peculiarities!”

And this:

“The big red hots! The g-e-r-reat big, juicy, sizzlin’ red hots! The eriginal hot-dog sand-wige – fi’ cents, halluf a dime, the twentieth part of a dollah! Here y’are! Here y’are! The genuwine Mexican hairless Frankfurter fer fi’ cents!”

And this:

“Cornfetti! Cornfetti! All the colours of the rainbow! All the pleasures of the Maudie Graw! A large full sack for a nickel! Buy cornfetti and enjoy yourselves.”

And so on and so forth.

The forlorn youth, a half-fledged school-teacher from a back district, who had purchased the county rights of a patent razor sharpener from a polished gentleman who had had to look at the map

before he even knew the name of the county, stood on a dry-goods box at the corner of Jefferson and Yazoo, dimly regretful of the good money paid out for license and unsalable stock, striving desperately to remember and enunciate the patter taught him by the gifted promoter. For the twentieth time he lifted his voice, essaying his word-formula in husky and stuttering accents for the benefit of swirling multitudes, who never stopped to listen:

“Friends, I have here the Infallible Patent Razor Sharpener. ’Twill sharpen razors, knives, scissors, scythe blades or any edged tool. If you don’t believe it will – ” He paused, forgetting the tag line; then cleared his throat and improvised a finish: “If you don’t believe it will – why, it will!” It was a lame conclusion and fruitful of no sales.

How different the case with a talented professional stationed half a block down the street, who nonchalantly coiled and whirled and threw a lasso at nothing; then gathered in the rope and coiled and threw it again, always at nothing at all, until an audience collected, being drawn by a desire to know the meaning of a performance seemingly so purposeless. Then, dropping the rope, he burst into a stirring panegyric touching on the miraculous qualifications of the Ajax Matchless Cleaning and Washing Powder, which made bathing a sheer pleasure and household drudgery a joy.

Never for one moment abating the flow of his eloquence, this person produced a tiny vial, held it aloft, uncorked it, shook twenty drops of its colourless fluid contents on the corrugated surface of a seemingly new and virgin sponge; then gently kneaded and massaged the sponge until – lo and behold! – lather formed and grew and mounted and foamed, so that the yellow lump became a mass of creamy white suds the size of a peck measure, and from it dripped huge bubbles that foamed about his feet and expired prismatically, as the dolphin was once believed to expire, leaving smears upon the boards whereon the operator stood.

Thereat dimes flowed in on him in clinking streams, and bottles of the Matchless flowed from him until, apparently grown weary of commerce, he abandoned his perch, avowedly for refreshment, but really – this being a trade secret – to rub shavings of soft yellow soap into the receptive pores of a fresh sponge and so make it ready against the next demonstration.

Through such scenes Gash Tuttle wandered, a soul apart. He was of the carnival, but not in it – not as yet. With a pained mental jolt he observed that about him men of his own age wore garments of a novel and fascinating cut. By contrast his own wardrobe seemed suddenly grown commonplace and prosaic; also, these city dwellers spoke a tongue that, though lacking, as he inwardly conceded, in the ready pungency of his own speech, nevertheless had a saucy and attractive savour of novelty in its phrasing. Indeed, he felt lonely. So must a troubadour of old have felt when set adrift in an alien and hostile land. So must the shining steel feel when separated from the flint on which it strikes forth its sparks of fire. I take it a steel never really craves for its flint until it parts from it.

As he wormed through a group of roistering youth of both sexes he tripped over his own valise; a wadded handful of confetti struck him full in the cheek and from behind him came a gurgle of laughter. It was borne in on him that he was the object of mirth and not its creator. His neck burned. Certainly the most distressing situation which may beset a humourist follows hard on the suspicion that folks are laughing – not with him, but at him!

He hurried on as rapidly as one might hurry in such crowded ways. He was aware now of a sensation of emptiness which could not be attributed altogether to the depression occasioned by his experience at the First and Last Chance Saloon; and he took steps to stay it. He purchased and partook of hamburger sandwiches rich in chopped onions.

Later it would be time to find suitable lodgings. The more alluring of the pay-as-you-enter attractions were yet to be tested. By way of a beginning he handed over a ten-cent piece to a swarthy person behind a blue pedestal, and mounting eight wooden steps to a platform he passed behind a flapping canvas curtain. There, in company with perhaps a dozen other patrons, he leaned over a wooden rail and gazed downward into a shallow tarpaulin-lined den where a rather drowsy-appearing, half-nude individual, evidently of Ethiopian antecedents, first toyed with some equally

drowsy specimens of the reptile kingdom and then partook sparingly and with no particular avidity of the tail of a very small garter snake.

Chance, purely, had led Gash Tuttle to select the establishment of Osay rather than that of the Educated Ostrich, or the Amphibious Man, or Fatima the Pearl of the Harem, for his first plunge into carnival pleasures; but chance is the hinge on which many moving events swing. It was so in this instance.

Osay had finished a light but apparently satisfying meal and the audience was tailing away when Gash Tuttle, who happened to be the rearmost of the departing patrons, felt a detaining touch on his arm. He turned to confront a man in his shirtsleeves – a large man with a pock-marked face, a drooping moustache and a tiger-claw watch charm on his vest. It was the same man who, but a minute before, had delivered a short yet flattering discourse touching the early life and manners and habits of the consumer of serpents – in short, the manager of the show and presumably its owner.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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