Colonel Pacton's Brother

I

'Colonel Pacton! Colonel Pacton! Colonel Pacton!'

It was a raucous yell; it had no human note in it. The boy was a machine. His cry had no tone, since his speech had no meaning or interest for him.

Hoarse and crude, rasped from a raw larynx, bellowed from savage lungs, the scream was yet unable to assert itself. Only a few men heard it.

For its auditorium, frond-arched serenity of gloom, was no unhaunted glade or tangle of mangrove swamps, no snowy silence, no sand wilderness, no waste of sea. It was not even a Provencal market, a Dublin riot, a Chemin des Dames, or a city Zeppelin-bombed.

It was the entrance hall of an Hotel, the newest, and so, of course, the best and biggest in Flivverton. This city had sprung up like Jonah's gourd, but more so, for it affords shelter to many prophets and to yet more profiteers. Scarce fifty years ago it was a market town and fishing port. Then 'Hen' Flivver made it a city. Soon the capricious tide of the Greenback Sea swept up his river; the city, five years later, was a metropolis. Men had no time to bide; it's million bipeds—ninety per cent of them—were crowded in the same type of wooden shacks as had sufficed its pioneer thousand. The business section alone boasted of stone or brick, just as, in God's reign, His Cathedrals stood alone among, yet above and aloof from the town's houses, man's abodes, dark, dirty, comfortless, and cramped. God claimed man's lives, their love, their all. His servants' hall was packed with men of wealth, of genius; and when He died, intestate, Mammon, His next of kin, proved equally autocratic.

Genius got the sack, and Talent, far more docile and sensible, served in his stead.

But all that slaves can do his slaves had done; the business section of Flivverton was the Eighth Wonder of the World; proclaimed as such it was wherever its editorial drum-majors swung their batons.

II

'Colonel Pacton! Colonel Pacton!'

It woke an elegant Englishman, just registered as Earl of Granchester, from musings not unlike the above; he looked about him.

The Hotel Rathskeller was to Flivverton what the Parthenon was to Athens. The entrance hall was larger and loftier that Saint Peter's. In style and sanitation it yielded nothing to a London County Council Public Lavatory. It had a frieze with gilt inscriptions expressing lofty sentiments in grandiloquent language; they concerned honesty, hospitality, and a mysterious virtue called 'service.' It dwarfed its own offices. It had two hundred telephone booths, and an ice-cream soda counter served by twenty men. It had seats for five hundred. These were all filled; and for each one who sat there were four standing, and three walking. Walking? It was hardly that; rather a scuffling run, not unlike a waiter's, a bad waiter in a cheap eating-house.

Nearly all were shouting. The Earl's general impression was of a railway station in a nightmare.

'Colonel Pacton!'

The Earl rose slowly as a room clerk rushed at him. 'Two thousand sixteen.'

(There were not so many rooms; the number only meant Room 16 of Floor 20; but it sounded big.) A boy snatched up the Earl's valise, fought his way to the elevators; they shot up swiftly; the Earl, in comparative peace, even forgot to sympathize with the distress of the unknown fellow-man who wanted Colonel Pacton.

He took a bath and a nap; he had two hours to spare before he need dress for dinner. And he wondered what his host, the millionaire publisher, Hans Pumpern—senior partner of Pumpern, Ickel, Sauer and Kraut—would turn out to be like.

III

Hans Pumpern got up from the breakfast table, growling. His house, large as it was, was wooden. It stood on a magnificent boulevard, paved like a motorist's dream of heaven which curved gradually round half the city. Grass plots, planted with trees, served to divide it longitudinally into three. Its arc lamps turned its nights into Jubilees.

Hans Pumpern's wife held his fur overcoat for him. The skins were mangy, the cloth stained, worn through, even torn. His office occupied

sixteen rooms in the great Chantage Building 'down town,' that was the pride of Flivverton's busiest corner. (Eight million four hundred and twelve people passed it daily, each one reducing the fatal shocks of ambulation by wearing O'Flaherty's Heels.) He borrowed three dollars from his wife for his lunch. He had to buy a block in the city that morning; but he could not meet the owner and the lawyers at his office, lest the landlord swoop for arrears of rent, four months; or at any rate at his book stores, where he would have to face his staff, unpaid for weeks, some of them starving. They had to hang on, whether or no; for Pumpern was a Freemason of the Thirty-Third Degree, woe to the man that angered him!

Had they but known; He was in deep disgrace with his Consistory; his brother Masons were grimly waiting to slip a knife to his ribs.

But he was still the millionaire, the leading citizen, the social sunflower. That he had not a dollar in his pocket was rather a point to his credit; such a rich man—he must have some scheme on hand, something so good that he had stripped himself—shirt, socks, and viyella—to finance it.

He was a mysterious man, they all knew, and that again earns a rich man respect and a poor man distrust. He had made his millions very swiftly, very secretly, none knew his methods, or could give details of the stages of his career.

His cashier was a raw Welshman, and drew his pay, full tale of it, punctual as sunrise, though Pumpern himself should go dinnerless. For little Owen Evans had good assets. Built less for beauty than for use, his nose was like the salient at St. Mihiel, his eyes like a skirmish, the one, a troop of lancers wheeling to take the other, a big gun in flank, his mouth a front line trench, his teeth a well-shelled minster. But he could smell a rat, pick out a wrong figure in a column at the first glance, keep his lips from smile or speech, and use his black fangs to worry, snap, or to hang on.

Thus little Owen was the only man that mattered to big Hans. He wrote the publisher's most paying line of fiction, the Accounts. He wrote three versions for three publics; a Book of Acts for Pumpern and his partners, an Ecclesiastes for the Income-Tax people, and their kind; lastly, a Book of Psalms, but more so, for the eye of anybody who might think of buying shares. He was very proud of his art, and quite content to draw his pittance of fifty dollars a week; for he knew, as nobody else knew, that if the Acts ended with a shipwreck, he was

sure of a plank; if luck smiled, and David reached for his harp— well, he was waiting for just that.

In American business, Fortune is sudden and decisive; incalculable as the ball at roulette—unless the wheel is fake. Pumpern might be a clumsy faker; but even at that Luck might smile upon the suitor that her cousin Trickery spurned. And on that day would Mr Owen Evans hand in his resignation to Hans Pumpern, and in exchange pouch currency for every month he had worked—just ten nice little hundreds!

This morning his eye glittered; his one friend, treasurer of the city's biggest bank, had a double hook fast in his directors, triple gut, a sound line, a smooth reel, and a perfect rod; that friend was going to wind in, and the bank was going to back up Pumpern's new scheme to the limit, and Pumpern would sell his control of the publishing house for real money, and start again elsewhere after having paid the little royalty to his tame novelist. And Owen would build a castle on the land his father farmed, find a gay face ablush with red and honest blood, and found a dynasty; why not M.P., P.C., Secretary for—well, what of the Exchequer? Ha! Ha! —at the end, upstairs again and die Lord Plynlimmon. Plenty of men had done as much, and more.

He ate his breakfast with one hand, the other scribbling figures for the plot of a new ledger-novel, his fancy's flights outsoaring Sinbad's roc, his lyric ecstasy swearing that Flivverton should be a Shelley's Skylark and make Baghdad by that comparison no more than a snail in a book of old sermons.

And he had no idea as he thought of going to the House of Lords, that the Mountain might come to Mahomet. For a live lord was at that moment sitting on the edge of a board, his head bowing in bodily fear of the ceiling, his arms and legs in unaccustomed strife with his clothes, the whole not two hundred miles away, and closer every minute by two-thirds of a mile.

The Earl of Granchester was nothing to Owen Evans, not even a name; less therefore than the much-invoked and unresponsive Colonel Pacton was to the Earl a few hours later.

Owen was a poet, in figures; an atheist, he supposed himself, but in reality basing his whole life on the theory of causality. He had a dream, a purpose, a technique, all the virtues that could help to make for himself an idol, and in matter, an image of his dream, an incarnation of his god.

And he trusted cause to mother effect, sage counsel to outwit the whims of folly, constructive order's house to stand firm, though freakish gale or impish earthquake do it spite.

He who believes all this, believes in God, though he deny with an oath, though he blaspheme and curse, though he deride and mock, though when the cock crows he turn not, nor weep, though he face death like a man, while reiterating that he is no more than a dog in the last unfaltering brag.

But he believes in some persistent will beyond his, beyond the race-will of mankind; therefore the Will of Something, call it Matter or Spirit, no odds which, that makes Law; that therefore is presumably a Being, though we cannot conceive its nature, read its mind, or guess its goal.

Had Owen Evans known of the Earl, he would have cared no jot. Had one foretold to him that his career depended on the Earl, he would have shrugged his shoulders, and sniffed: 'I'll cross the bridge when I get there.'

He believed in Nature's 'playing fair.' But more mystically, this scoffer at faith believed in himself, in the ugly brat that came unwanted to the mean farmhouse and twelve acres of stony and steep, to elbow his three brothers and two sisters. The brat had brains; he had tilled them, ploughed, sowed, manured and watered them; in season they gave corn. They had built ships to carry him from the farm's pebbly rill to the school's stream, then to the broad swift river of college, then to the seas of the world; and in all storms they had proved staunch.

He believed also in his rare gift of imagination. When he wrote three values in his three ledger-epics, he chose by instinct as sincere and sound as ever guided poet through uncharted seas. His falsest ledgers were not false to him. He created a personality for each of them; to him the rosy mouth of the well-dined, well-wined, well-digesting optimist spoke truth no less than the pale trembling lips of the hypochondriac, whose sparse grey straggling locks ill-kempt framed the slate-coloured face with its blear eyes, its rheumy nose, its drooping mouth. That wheezing breath, that faltering pulse, that groggy heart, that jaundiced liver, those hard kidneys, that quite atrophied manhood; all this must be a picture, lively, convincing, not overdrawn, no caricature. That man must live and think; he must be

Virgin Truth, his purity prevail against all brigands, them that take taxes in the name of Government.

His ledger poets were no puppets; they lived, they wrote their lies with most assured integrity.

Part, and no little part, of this strange endowment of the cashier, was his power of divining a man's thoughts. He could put himself in another's place just as he could do with his own creations. Give him some slight acquaintance with a man, then let an argument start: Owen could tell in the first minute what his opponent would say throughout, and how he would act at the end.

Once he had overheard Hans Pumpern talk with a railroad magnate in the street. Mere small talk; but Owen took his cue from the man's mood, raised every cent he had saved, and sold on a narrow margin a certain stock which the magnate was playing. The close of the market found him more than seventeen thousand dollars 'nearer my God to Thee,' his first million.

Nothing but himself and his own mind were real to him; for even his unconscious faith in the Order of Nature was, fully analysed, faith in himself. He willed, acted, attained; that must be law, then. He could no more think otherwise than we, who think as Euclid thought, can grasp the possibility of the other geometries unless we have been trained.

IV

Owen Evans grinned at his horrible face as he rose from breakfast, and tied his cravat. He reached the office half an hour later; his friend telephoned from the bank that Old Man Stringer (President and main-spring) was in bed with a cold; the conference must be postponed; the city block would not figure in Pumpern's assets for another four-and-twenty hours.

Owen Evans did not even frown; he had waited almost as many years. It never occurred to him that with the Lord a thousand days is as one day, and that things can happen in one spin of our funny old pill which ruin the Character of Nature. A thousand years of Good Conduct, Punctuality, Uniformity, and so on; we commend her; she's our show pupil. Regularity! Industry! Propriety! Ah! So we benignly close our eyes; the classroom begins to fade; and when we wake—of sudden! oh impossible!

Nature's no mother at heart, wise Isis, builder of cities, daughter of God, sister and wife to Him, and in the end His mother!

Nay there's a madcap wench in her, a maid unwon, a might with no morality. Here is no mind as our mind; not are her ways our ways.

Owen was in the range of her dance that day; and what happened was not contrary to nature (as he would have deemed) though it upset his plans without intention. So once at Potosi a plant, busied with naught but its own growth, slew countless men, builded new towns and kingdoms, when its roots tore form the soil and showed the silver in their miser fingers.

V

The millionaire had not paid for his house or its contents; he proposed to do so by taking boarders. He thus occupied four rooms only. His wife did all the work, with a man hired by the hour to help occasionally.

She was a splendid child, supple and strong. A mop of fiery chestnut hair crowned her. Her face was a warm cream that flushed when her vivacity would. She had immense grey eyes; they had a haunted look. Did she take dugs? No; she had been thus from a child. Their strange light suggested a liability to some form of madness. She talked with them, for her speech was quite unequal to her demands on it; the interjection was her star actor—a blasphemy, a curse, or an obscenity served her best, her tone and not her choice of word determining the emotion she wished to express. But when she was articulate, the phrase was always brief, an epigram. She always spoke sheer truth, her phrase most passionate and intense. Her soul's distilment of pure spirit dripped limpid from her lips, undoctored, undisguised, unwatered and unflavoured.

Her eyes spoke oftener, and their vocabulary was more varied. They could not only love and hate; they could actually prattle. But as all tunes on the bagpipes must reckon with the changeless three bleats of its drones—the character, may one say, of the instrument—so to whatever message she sent through them, her eyes would add three deeper words: Sorrow; Thirst; and Madness. These three were one.

Her body was trim, slender, and yet robust; in it the panther's stealth and strength elastic, the gnat's restlessness and aimlessness, the deer's timidity and alertness, were united with the fox's furtiveness and the snake's conscious deadliness.

She had married Pumpern without serious thought, he chanced to be there; she could not have what she wanted—it didn't exist, even—so anything was as good or as bad as anything else. Her parents were dead long since, and her guardian Colonel Pacton, had tired of her violence, her innocence, and her contemptuousness; he rarely saw her.

She thought it a little hard on her to be asked to prepare a banquet for an English Earl, and the ex-horse-doctor, now a Spiritualist Lecturer and Medium, who was to meet him. Credit was in hospital with both legs broken, and Cash was to be nailed down that morning in the coffin of the butcher, or they must play at being vegetarian.

Help? Business boomed in Flivverton just then; anything that had arms and legs was snatched at; men gave it ten, fifteen, even twenty dollars a day.

Let her be praised, this Kohinoor of women! She had been 'finished' in England at a Brighton school, and knew the ways of Earls. She cooked a dinner to his taste, delighted him. The Preacher thought it lacked profusion, for his ideals were as his brother the hog's; and her husband loathed delicacy, for his palate was as his forebears', loving to yield to force; it craved voluptuous violences, revelled in discords.

VI

The Earl of Granchester, his cocktail poised, observed his fellow-guest, the Reverend Doctor Ross, with no small interest. 'Ross' was no doubt one of those higher things to which men rise by making stepping-stones of their dead selves; perhaps it had, not long since, been adapted from Rosenthal or something similar. For the long pendulous profusion that dwarfed his face trumpeted Semite, and that beneath his chest seemed like a kettle drum, booming forth Teuton. His fishy eyes suggested a pawnbroking ancestry. His mouth was an afterthought stuck on in a hurry, very loosely. It was a misfit, too, three sizes too big for his face. Its owner kept on licking it, but it would not dry.

The neck was very thick, its creases conquered the pink collar; their weight and moisture taught mere starch a mortal lesson, humbled its pride in its stiffness.

Granchester smiled as he thought of the trivial coincidences, the drifting gossamer, which had determined the composition of the party.

It was mere chance that had sent him to Flivverton at all. He had failed to get a cabin at Liverpool on the *Patagonia* that week; the delay had given time for a letter to reach him. In it a friend, a popular author, asked him to investigate the sales of his past book. He had wired Pumpern. The publisher jumped at the opportunity. He knew of the Earl—the whole world did—as a leader of certain sects devoted to the occult; so he must ask his own private Mediator between God and Man, the inspired Ross, to meet him.

Then—this was really rather curious—he had asked about a portrait on his host's wall. It was in oils, and the Earl was amazed to recognise a butterfly faintly fluttering in one corner.

'You have a Whistler?' he cried in crescendo.

'Whistler? Nothing,' answered Pumpern. 'My wife plays the piano; but we've a big Victrola: after dinner we'll have some.'

'No, No' insisted Granchester; 'this picture! What is it?'

'Oh that! That's my wife's guardian, Colonel Pacton.'

The Earl started. He knew at once how he had come to pick out the strange name from the din of the hotel; it was familiar, even dear to him. He had admired reproductions of the picture often enough; he thought it one of Whistler's best.

Curious! Very curious! And he nearly made the reflection that our world is a very small one.

VII.

Dinner began with talk of the journey from New York, veered to that city's business outlook, rose to severely moral summits as Prohibition claimed its parenthetical toll of austere virtue's commination, switched to the vastness, energy, wealth, efficiency and high-mindedness of Flivverton itself. Pumpern advanced statistical proof that even at half the present rate of increase, the city would be the biggest in the world in eight years and a month. Nobody proved that a baby who gains two pounds on eight in its first month must (even at half that rate) weigh more than a mammoth by the time it goes into short frocks. The praise of Flivverton took its two corybants like a spasm; it was almost epileptic. The Earl couldn't even assent; their frenzies overlapped. Only a madman would have tried to check them only a desperate suicide to contradict them.

Then they stopped suddenly, collapsed, like an eight's crew, when, twenty minutes above Putney, they have spurted from Barnes Bridge to Mortlake, and shot first past the post.

Granchester caught the ball. 'I never saw this city till today, and a first glance at Vastness tells so little. The mind is shocked, bewildered, overwhelmed. New York I know: did it prepare me? Nowise. It is a torn back number of an old-fashioned magazine. In its long history—far too long, it's senile!—it has never grown at one tenth the rate of your majestic world-metropolis. I am unutterably staggered by your progress, by your efficiency. I will not call you the last word in civilisation—let me say rather the first word, the creative Fiat, the God-utterance that shall brand the Past as Chaos. You are the first true cosmo-Civilization, a word too often profaned for me to profane it! Let us create a word for the ideal of Flivverton, a word beyond civilisation as Flivverton itself is beyond other cities. Gentlemen, I hail you pioneers, o pioneers of—dare I say it?—Millenialisation!'

The men recovered under this hypodermic; but as they had already said over and over all they knew, they simply sat and beamed.

Granchester went on: 'I hadn't dare to sleep—if, indeed, such intensity of emotion as today's permits me—yes, dare I sleep, knowing I shall wake in this reality beyond my dreams? Dare I risk sanity by further draughts of the spiritual rye whiskey that my eyes and ears must gulp? Yes! Neither love nor worship ever slew who seek the Good, the Beautiful, the True! Poetry! By your own God-man, Flivver. I crawl no more on the sidewalks of prose; I roll majestically, as Zeus, swiftly as Hermes, borne in that car that he made, that made Flivverton, I rush on Poesy's intoxicating tarmac!'

They plied him with gobbets of fact.

More automobiles pass the City hall in an hour than any corner in New York in two.

The daily death rate from car accidents is twelve and a half; two years back it was only three, and they had boosted it by including trolley-cars.

'A distinct variety of sport, I assume,' murmured the Earl.

They became inarticulate. "More". 'bigger' 'progress' 'dollars' 'taller' were all the words he caught, and then, yet louder and quicker, they changed from their comparatives to the corresponding superlatives.

Again they stopped, talked out. The Earl, too, was as tired as they; to listen had been an ordeal. He thought of his dentist, drilling inexorably, his whirring weapons always too near the nerve, sometimes right on it. But yet—well, he had hidden his soul behind his half-closed eyes, that languidly watched Elsa Pumpern; her beauty soothed them as it stirred the soul that lurked behind them.

VIII.

This time the conversation—or rather, the succession of speeches—died for good.

They had said all they knew on any subject soever outside their personal business, or domestic matters.

Dinner was over; the appalling prospect of evening lay before them like the Sahara. The Victoria, the Movies, a lecture: such are the three American alternatives to Silence, Scandal, and Squabble.

Or else get drunk. America knows no other devices to enable its inhabitants to endure either their own company or that of their fellow-creatures.

The situation was growing intolerable. It was hardly relieved for Granchester when his host followed his wife into the kitchen, and spent ten minutes storming about over the dinner. He struck her, and stamped back. Three minutes later she came in, sobbing: stood there and cried out in the first phrase she had uttered that evening.

'You promised me the ideals of life and I've had nothing but scrub-work!' Then she fled back.

But recuse was at hand. The Reverend Doctor Ross had not diverted his Powers of Healing from horse's body to man's soul without warrant.

He saw the Earl's impatience; it would not do at all to let him go. He had not been asked for nothing. The Granchester estates were huge, as Pumpern had found out from a loan broker (whose files had over a million names classed by their credit within an hour of receiving the telegram. Pumpern had called Ross in to hold the sheep for the shearing.

He must not go! The Earl had no thought of going: Elsa had bound him, faster than once Delilah, with all her Philistines to aid, bound Samson.

He stared at the canvas of Colonel Pacton. The man was clearly a kind-hearted gentleman. Why in the devil's name, thought he, did you hand over that child to this ogre?

IX.

Ross was too bent on his own plans to observe his victim. He had to double-cross his accomplice and his dupe, of course. Just so had Pumpern thought: 'I need this spoon; but I'll lick it clean when I'm through.' It is the natural attitude of business partners in America for one to hate, fear, spy upon, distrust, despise, betray, and finally to kick out the other. But first you must get the bear in the trap. Though to cheat your pal of his share of the hide be the more civilised pleasure, it depends on the bear, just as the tedious toil of stocking a shop with goods must be endured if you would enjoy the merry moment of arson. And the more solid pleasure of touching the insurance money.

So Ross played his one trick, the same old game: though the thieves disguise it differently for every new 'sucker'. Its name is Priestcraft.

He gave a sudden whinny, twitched all over, flung back his head, screamed, then as suddenly feigned sleep—the lucid sleep of the prophet.

He saw a stately man behind the Earl, was it his father? 'He has a shimmering crown. His expression is grave and calm. His name seems to be William.'

'My father's name was William,' Granchester admitted.

'I see a stately pile——'—he described it for five minutes, outside and in, with details that the Earl himself hardly knew until reminded of them. His sisters told their names, threw discretion to the winds as they chattered of their clothes, their children, their amusements, their adventures, everything! The prophet skated back through history. He knew all Granchester's 'spirit' relations, made them talk, described them. It was amazing: the man made no slip except about the type of armour worn at one particular period.

The vision and the voice took 40 minutes. Then he woke up, and pretended to know nothing of what he had said.

You saw his highness' father,' explained Pumpern; then all his family, his castle, his ancestors, that is, I fancy they were that. His highness seemed to recognise everything.

'It's true', said Granchester. 'Only one slip, a mere trifle of detail, in a mass of accurate facts, many most intimate and private, family secrets, wonderful, wonderful!

'Now let me say yet more: you could not have read from my mind, for some of it I did not know myself. How do I know this is true, then? Because they explain other things: I never saw your key, but it fits my lock.'

'You are convinced?' cried Ross in eager haste.

'There is one point where I must doubt. You saw the Earl of Granchester—you saw my father. Now there is a little mystery there—you may be right—it's a mere detail—but I'll ask my mother—even if she contradicts you, you have a good excuse for error—never mind—I'll say it flat. I—am—convinced.

They ran to him; they wrung his hands. Pumpern shed tears. It was indeed a victory for the 'Spirits'.

For, as we all know, the Earl, who was an F.R.S. for his physics, had been all his life the worst enemy of the spooks; and was indeed said to have come to New York to expose a famous medium.

X.

They had got him. They could make his father speak, his paternal authority fortified by spirit dignity. Yes, he should watch his son. The inexperience of thirty-seven years should profit by the wisdom of Summerland. He should not squander his estate, or gamble it. Surely his father, who had never appeared before him, now came thus hastily to tell him that this was the critical hour for his house, encumbered with lands and dwindling millions. Death duties? Falling Consols? The super-tax?

It is to smile. The sire was on the watch. He had planned this trip this trip to Flivverton, he knew that there lay

Gold—

Double!

Redouble!

Double again.

No end to it!

And all by using—oh, not risking! Merely by using wisely, watchfully, a minnow of cash on the books of business cast by the live System (his mind wandered into smiles for everything) in the pool of Opportunity.

Right here in Flivverton.

Do it now.

The partners had measured the minnow: about eight hundred and fifty thousand pounds sterling, they thought. More might sound greedy: less, as if they were afraid to ask more.

They were to split fifty-fifty; they swore it with frank gaze and hearty handclasp, the one muttering 'over my dead body' and his friend 'when I get back to Canada.' (There the police wanted him.)

XI.

Of course they would not spread the net in sight of the bird. Ross would go off again tonight, and have a vision of the father looking anxious. Ross must understand nothing, and be upset about it. Tomorrow morning he will have had a dream.

He will report it, but dismiss it cheerily.

Next, a Quija-scrawl, repeating one unmeaning phrase, the rest mostly pieties á la medium. Next a long sitting: father terribly urgent and most pathetically unintelligible. About a week of this, and then the Ouija board again to give a long clear message, entreaty and command in one. But it will be impossible to act on it, as it will refer to some quite unknown matter. But, as the Earl strays home, Fate taps his shoulder! A perfect stranger will have a fit at his feet. The Earl will pick him up, and assist him to reach his palatial residence. Those grateful lips will whisper of reward. 'No, you're a gentleman, I see; not money! Accept a share in the One Deal that will rate Morgan "Also Ran." '

And so on.

And now his father's message is made clear enough. Accept a share? Not he! He must control the trust. Come Nairne! Come Bradbury! Old notes for new!

It was a good enough scheme, the Third Murderer, having no claim but the blackmailer's on his pals, since he merely plays the small part assigned to him, takes a lump sum of fifty thousand. Either will hardly miss it, especially if he succeeds as well as he hopes in nailing his partner to the double-cross.

A splendid scheme! Not a loose nut or worn washer! But will she start? It all depends on that.

Can we convince him?

And now—

He said it.

Said it soberly, slowly, earnestly.

Said it with well-weighed emphasis.

Said this:

I am convinced.

XII.

The rest was merely formal. 'If your snark be a snark, that is right.'

Once you know that your sucker is a sucker, nothing can go wrong.

The Sucker's progress!

It varies as the path of the hooked salmon; a light firm hand, with patience and vigilance to rule it, and soon or late the end is sure. The needle varies not, merely vibrates from boiled to broiled.

Just so. But—But—The publisher may have read English in his cradle, the preacher prattled dialectic to his nurse; they could both swear, and millions more confirm, that they read, wrote, spoke English, understood it thoroughly.

But to understand English is one thing; to understand an Englishman who talks is another.

Their wish fathered their thought: 'I am convinced' was gold.

Yet they were both exponents of the Gilded Brick—what innocents knaves are!

They did not test their gold—they did not ask 'Convinced of what?' If they had, Granchester might have explained: 'the accuracy of your knowledge is indeed a pleasure; its wealth a wonder. Were I to bring together the page in the Sunday New York Herald, Whittaker's Almanac, and the family file in your local newspaper's 'graveyard' I could hardly do better.' And if he had been pleased by their gleam of intelligence in doubting him to be the absolute ass they hoped, he might have saved them a whole world of worry with the words:

'My friends! I knew a man who wished to marry. He spent a year and a fortune in preparing for it; he got everything from the engagement ring to a nomination at his club for his heir. Everything but the girl!'

But when at last he left the house, Ross sat awhile in silence. Then he rose heavily.

'There's a snag,' he said slowly. 'Can't see it; smell it. I'll tell you Pump, call me a liar, all right, it's O.K. See Here! You think this spirit

stuff of mine is bunk. So do I. But no; not clear through, no sir, I wish it was. It skeers me. I'd hate to think I'd lived forever, if I was I, and remembered all I've been. And I am skeered; skeered to die; skeered not to fall for some hot air: I know too much by a damned sight.

'But something's true; I dunno what.'

'But when I doctored horses, I could sit still and bring 'em, bring 'em from miles around, drop 'em outside my door I could, and all by power o' mind.'

'And I kin hear a voice inside me, clean against reason, never speaks but one word.'

'When you want to give away money, it says "Don't" ', jeered Pumpern'

The preacher grew more solemn; a deep flush dyed his neck and rose to his brow.

'It only says: Lost', he droned, 'I sometimes think it means I'm lost, my soul damned to hell. Billy Sunday stuff, ugh! But I think mostly it means my judgment's lost its way: for it speaks only when I'm cocksure of a thing; and the voice is always right. It hissed at me just now, when he said he was convinced, and I said to myself: Got him.

'Trust me; take no chances: we'll get him, but it'll be with the second barrel.'

He lumbered off without another word.

XIII.

Meanwhile the Earl had gone. The night was warmer than he had thought: he paused by the gap in the hedge which served as the side entrance, to take off his scarf. He found the arms of his young hostess hotter and tighter still.

She bruised his mouth with hers.

She cried, 'I'll follow you to the ends of the earth.'

She ran half leaping, like a hare, to the side door. As she passed through, the light fell full on her; he, watching, saw the strangest site of his life.

Over her silver sequin dress, cut high she had thrown a great black shawl. Its folds made him see a hooded hunchback, carrying a great salver on his head— the edge of the dress of course.

Then in her passion's vehemence, her face might have twisted and blanched to a bodiless devil's.

But in her hands he saw a kriss, fantastically shaped as if to whet the appetite of murder; as if men's blood lust after a while needed spice of perversity, exactly as does that passion's paler sister. And it was no strange kriss; it was his own, the most cherished spoil of his Malay wanderings.

How had she got it?

No matter: for it had smitten her throat; the red wedge gaped.

'Twas all impossible. He put the whole day from him: he slept sound.

XIV.

The Earl woke early, turned himself, went to sleep again. The one thought in his mind was his annoyance at finding himself in such a town and such a room. The bell-boy's howls for Colonel Pacton haunted his dreams; and when he woke he suddenly remembered that the familiarity of the name was only half explained by Whistler's picture. It woke him thoroughly; he rang for a cup of tea. But the town had been dry for two years; organisation had triumphed. The waiter, before asking for the order, placed a bottle of whiskey on the little table by his bed. He laughingly refused it; but the incident brought him the missing word.

He saw himself with his friend, Coldstream, driving from a recital of Frieda Hempel's in Atlanta, Georgia into the country to a farm ten miles away where Coldstream was playing at agriculture. He remembered how startled he was when the headlights fell upon a shadowy corner of the road, showing a lightless car manned by masked men, and how Coldstream, after much playful pretence at fear, laughed and stopped the car, and bought a gallon of 'Rye.' He then remembered how the car had been coquettish. The lights, the tires, the gas, almost everything took it by turns to hold them up. They were an hour late on the top of the last slope that curved gently to the farm; and it was then that Coldstream cheerfully said; 'We're sure to get home now unless Colonel Pacton's brother interferes.' He had made enquiries with the view to calculating the probability of so unwarrantable an attack on individual liberty, and discovered that Coldstream had merely invented the phrase as equivalent to 'unless something utterly unforeseen happens.' There might be a dozen Colonel Pacton's, each one with a half

a dozen brothers of the most malicious type, or there might not; Coldstream professed himself willing to submit to search.

The last cloud lifted from his mind; he was aware of only one desire; that was the passion to remove his body some four thousand miles East of its present lodging. He resolved to go straight down to Pumpern's office, show his credentials, settle the matter of the royalties before lunch, and tear himself, cost what it might, from fascinating Flivverton, by the non-stop express to England. The publisher had not arrived: he asked for the partners. The girl as the desk, determined to make her employer pay for the privilege of not paying her for a month, blurted out that the partners had never existed.

"'Who is in charge of the office?"'

'If it's about money,' said the girl, 'and I suppose you want the same as the rest, better e Mr. Evans. He's with Mr. Peters from the bank here. When he comes out, I'll ask him. What's the name?"'

'Granchester'

'Whatchye say?'

He told her again.

'I can't put that over to Mr. Evans.'

He handed her his visiting card. She read it with disgust.

'Play a straight hand', she said. I want your Christian name, the family name. Whatchye want to hide it for; or haven't you got none?'

The Earl of Granchester began to be amused. 'At my baptism,' he explained, "'I was named William Hodnay Wellington St. John Palmerston De Lacy Orne Belorme.'

'What's the big idea?' she said.

'My parents were very conscientious about remembering rich relations,' explained the Earl, 'And in England you can have as many names as you like without extra charge.'

'And what's the family name?'

'Orme.'

'Orme, is that all? Sounds French. You a Kanuck?'

'No, but its French. It means an elm. The elm tree is almost like one of the family. We plant it wherever we go; and the motto of our house is a Latin word which means 'unexpectedly', because elms have a habit of dropping their boughs without the slightest warning, even on perfect strangers, without the formality of an introduction. We have made it a family habit. We always do the unexpected thing. See how I

dropped down here—never heard of the place until Wednesday last week.'

'You're a queer sort,' said the girl. 'What is this Earl of Granchester stuff on the card?'

'That's the new title. I'm only the eighth earl.

'You have the right dope, if I may say so. I'm nineteenth Baron Orme, much more to the point. You may ask "Why Granchester?" We bought the place; or, as some people think, we stole it. Why did we want it? Girl, you would dote on Granchester. I have a castle, built six centuries back, on the one hill for thirty miles in any direction. Round it the land is ours for about six miles. The castle is ringed with elms, most of them older than itself, and nine avenues of elms radiate from it leading to nine hamlets—'

'Hamlets?' said the girl sharply. 'What's hamlets? Ain't that Shakespeare?'

'Villages, villages,' he explained to the girl. 'The people cultivate our lands. They are our children. They have no fear that they may lose their jobs through ill-luck or our ill-will. It has been a custom that any man, if he but bear a twig of elm, may speak on the instant to the head of the family; they two, alone, man to man, equal before their God. And we believe that if a man should lie to us on such an occasion, that when he pays the price of an audience, which is to pass the night beneath an elm, there will drop a bough on him and slay him.'

'You do talk funny,' said the girl, wriggling uneasily. The slightest departure from her well-worn round of familiar fully-explained incidents roused her passions. To her, an unknown word could mean no other thing than her unknown nature, not two incomprehensibles, but one incomprehensible.

'It is at least the fact,' the Earl went on, interested to explore her reactions, 'that no man has abused the privilege within the memory of man. And memory is a great thing among our people, let me tell you. We have a thousand secret treaties in our minds. Some cannot read or write, and their minds are stored more usefully than many a professor's.'

At that moment the door of the inner office swung open. A young man came out. It was easy to see that he was annoyed.

I'll send you name in,' said the girl to Granchester, 'or some of it, but believe me there's dirty weather ahead. When Mr Peters gets the

frozen face, our cashier takes it out on the whole gang. I've seen him stand right up to the boss and call him down.'

'I'm glad it's just like that,' replied the caller, 'my business would have made him angry anyhow. You can't get a quart into a pint bottle.'

XV

Evans of course knew Granchester by name. His English childhood flamed in him. He met an Earl! What else could matter?

Fate cannot harm me, I have snobbed today.

He forgot Peters before he had finished saying 'Show him in.'

Yet Peters had not come to chatter about markets, and his gloom was due to something more than the weather, liver, or reflections on the increasing prevalence of questionable business methods. He had tried to catch Evans at his house; just missed him; reached the office two minutes before him; greeted him with the words, 'The old man died at eight o'clock this morning.'

'The deal?' screamed Evans.

'Off,' said Peters.

'Hell!' was the cashier's summing-up.

'I couldn't even do anything at the Bank,' said Peters yet more bitterly. 'The time-locks only release at nine. How could I guess that the old beast would croak? A trifling cold, they said. I sat all afternoon in his room—the safe wide open. I could have taken nearly half a million; it lay loose—graft, every cent—not in the books; only we two knew about it; and now, the fool auditor has his seal on the safe—not a thing to be done. Hell! what a lesson. "Grab while the grabbing is good; chance everything else" is what they'll find on my heart when I join mother.'

Evans expressed a sympathy which he did not feel. 'That's your funeral anyhow,' he said; 'Why can't we pull this deal off>'

'When the old man snapped his silver cord,' replied the other, 'my pull on him snapped too. The bunch don't care a hoot for me. I'm old invaluable Peters, that's all.'

'But a deal's a deal,' urged Evans. 'Hadn't the old man O.K.'d it?'

'Sure he had, and expected the next Board Meeting to develop into a gun fight. The bunch aren't crazy. The old man wouldn't have put a cent of his money against all Pumpern's assets. I was the man behind the gun.'

'Didn't he sign something, damn him?'

'He did,' said Peters, 'just a sort of contract letter.'

'What did it say?'

'He pledged the bank to put up the full amount. Pumpern asked for details to be settled in conference.'

'Isn't that good enough?'

'Why, you poor fish, haven't you seen your boss this week? If that letter had reached him, he'd have been buying the town instead of loafing about in an old rag of a coat, that you or I would sell for a dollar if we could find a sucker, and cadging his lunch every day.'

'Who has the letter?' asked Evans.

'Somers of course—sent to him to countersign. He took it home, and sent it round the fiery cross. Believe me, some clan gathering!'

Evans considered. 'Can we do something with Somers?'

'Wouldn't give Pumpern a dime if was guaranteed a million dollars to do it. Why, the man's like a nightmare to him—wants to put him out of Masonry, one degree after another, with the peculiar swift kick of each applied in the tenderest spot; after that, ride him on a rail to Chicago, which Somers hates only one degree less than he hates Pumpern; and after that, think up something serious, and start in again.'

'But Somers can't destroy an official letter.' Evans had Welsh persistence in the same perfection that he had Welsh dishonesty.

'I saw the letter, of course,' said Peters, 'and Jessie has her notes. We were both there when he signed it. But on the technicality, it should be countersigned.'

'Is Pumpern going to sue the bank, compel them to produce the letter, ask the Courts to force somebody to make it good? What's the consideration, for another thing?

Evans gave up. 'You're right,' he said, 'but let's forget it. What's our slice of that poor lemon? I've got a worthwhile hand to play. I'm in on a deal of nearly fifty millions; and nobody knows I'm there. I'm going to hold 'em up. I'm giving myself just ten—unless they squeal too loud; if so, twenty. Either way, me for the soil that grows nothing but leeks, lambs and liars about six months from now; and if I need you, you'll hear.'

XVI

At this stage, Peters went off to the bank; and Granchester, who expected to find a raging madman, was met with nods and becks and wreathed smiles. He explained in two minutes that he wanted to

glance at the books and satisfy his friend, the novelist, that he was getting all his royalties. Evans behaved as if he had been made State Senator. It took him just twelve seconds to abstract the statement form the file. A glance assured him that his memory was in working order; there were no slips to fear. He took out his Number 3 Romance from the safe—the set of books he called *The Pain in the Neck or The Pessimist's Nightmare* by L. I. Livin. The Earl of Granchester, though a competent mathematician, even a brilliant one, when the figures meant something in science, became completely imbecile when they represented financial transactions. He could no more check his hotel bill than a corpse can measure his coffin; but he could look excessively knowing. In extreme cases, he could take out a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, and, looking over them, draw his conclusions, he completely failed. Little Owen read him without an effort. Anyway, there was no difficulty. The books tallied. Even the dollar mark could not blind Granchester to the consistent identities of totals, whether they meant anything or nothing to him. Owen knew well that there was nothing wrong with the books; he knew, and only he, of Pumpern's private printing press, far away south, where a man who could read was a suspicious character. He knew how the 'best sellers' got reprinted on that press; how Pumpern, under another name, sold them as Bookseller's Remnants at bargain prices, and thus how fifty thousand copies of a book could reach the public while only ten or twelve percent appeared in any of the documents that concerned them.

Granchester's scrutiny led to no more than a moral conviction that since the books were so right and the cashier so certain of the fact, such alacrity and rectitude must be a screen for something very wrong indeed in another department. He made up his mind to write to his friend to employ a detective who knew the quaint tribal customs of those who sailed the seas and flew the flag of Flint, or on the highways followed God's commandment by the honour that they paid to their sire Barabbas. All this took scarce ten minutes. Granchester turned to go. The Welshman called inwardly on his forefathers, on the wild men who bearded English Kings. He struck the Earl on his raw wound.

'It's two years,' he said, 'since I spoke to a human being. I expect to go home this year; but I'll die first unless you come to the rescue. Don't think me over-officious, don't think me a tuft-hunter. I'm not being rude if I say that a crossing-sweeper from the Thames Embankment would be as welcome. I'm being polite. It's not the Earl I want;

it's the English voice and the English way that tear from my heart-strings a mad symphony of agony and rapture. Do come to lunch.'

'I understand perfectly,' said the other laughing. 'You don't have to tell a man's a man for a' that, after a month or two in a land where it's not even the guinea stamp but the greenback; where dirty paper money tells of the hands that have clawed it.'

Owen caught up the tune. 'The long green is the fig leaf,' he said briskly. 'It hides all sin and shame.'

'Right,' said the Earl. 'This is your town and we're the only men in it. I'll lunch with you at noon—'

'At the Pontiac—the front entrance—noon sharp,' completed the cashier.

'Right, but of course when you next come to happier lands, I shall expect you to be my guest at Orme.'

XVII

Owen was overjoyed. He was just man enough to set his heel on snobbery, but not snob enough to glow all over at the heroism of his act. 'There are few cashiers,' he could not help saying to himself, 'who, born on a stony slope in Wales, of peasants scarcely higher, by any standard except anatomy, than their own sheep, have won their way by sheer merit to the Degree of Arts which Royalty honoured.' He had proceeded by less worthy methods to make his way up the slippery golden stairs and treacherous social slopes, and might never have been suspected but for a fluke that might not happen again in centuries, and which no cunning could have avoided. It was mere chance that he was guilty; had he been never so innocent he must have been suspected in those peculiar circumstances. That was why he was on Pumpern's trail in this half crazy abscess of a town, instead of being perhaps a Master Dice Thrower in Cophthall Court, or the financial adviser to a Kimberly King or a blackmail journal. But, after all, things were well enough, He was not yet twenty-six—he had accounts with six banks. Each of them had some five thousand dollars for him whenever he so willed it. He knew enough about most of the big men in town to assure him either an income for life at the best, or a free pardon and a getaway at the worst. And today was the day; indeed it was a bit of all right, and no mistake, for Mr Owen Evans. He ran breast-high on a trail of forty millions, and he was entertaining an Earl at lunch—not as the firm's cashier, by David, but by his birthright, by

worth of his Welsh blood that has mixed with English for he had forgotten how many centuries, whether on battlefield or in bed-chamber. But he was perfectly well aware that the Earl had been by no means bound to recollect just those particular truths. He might have been the haughty kind, though his father had certainly not lent money, or purveyed beauty to royalty. But he night very well have taken a personal dislike to Owen, who never lied to himself, or forgot for a moment that he was as repulsive an animal as walked the streets. He knew he had only one asset: his brain—an engine of quite exceptional power, scope and order.

XVIII

The upshot of these reflections was that Owen Evans. though he would have liked to kill the Earl, preferably in a duel, because he was such a manifest superior, was also ready to risk his body and soul in the Earl's service. The great man had not patronized him; had not stooped; had not once hinted at the gulf between them. He had joked as if he were an old-school fellow, a brother officer, or a duke. Owen could fancy himself in an Eton jacket and silk hat cribbing iambics from his Lordship. The epaulets tossed on his shoulders as foot to foot with the Earl he led his company to the charge. He felt a bullet strike him. He woke to find the Earl wounded no more nor less than he. The purifying mud of Flanders, the conflagrating blood of Britons made them brother priests to Mars. He saw the King himself pin the Victoria Cross on both their breasts. His fancy whirled him on. He felt the strawberry leaves about his brow; the gold was not a weight. He did not feel shame or surprise when at some brilliant gala, men did not call him 'you,' but said 'your Grace.' They flattered him, they courted him, they ate out of his hand. These daydreams made him reel; his soul was dizzy and drunk; he staggered, caught at his desk, sank with white face and sweating brow into his office chair. His throat moved in small spasms; he jammed his lower jaw against its mate. Tears sprang to his eyes that had not wept since he was whipped at school. He pulled himself together; his eye fell on the little mirror which told him what was passing in the office; he looked unflinchingly at his hideousness.

The Earl had not shown, even by the unconscious start that most men give when they first saw him, that he had noticed that detested ugliness. Hyperion had accepted the Satyr with all the indifference of Hamlet's mother. Granchester was himself splendidly handsome in the

way Owen most admired. He evidently scorned his toilet; tropical suns had tanned his face; a sportsman's hardships ringed his eyes; fever had wasted his cheeks and thinned his close-cropped curls. All this was beauty's armour. At thirty-seven he looked forty-four. But all these scars conspired to emphasise the majesty of the brow, a mighty dome where dwelt some wise, calm, conscious God. It added to the fearlessness, to the vigilance, to the swift apprehension and to the mastery of the eyes, to the nobility and refinement of the nose, to the firmness and passion of the mouth, to the resolution and probity of the chin. Then a man's carriage was itself 'distinction.' Owen had watched him as he left the office. He had never seen a man in his life who moved with such elastic ease, such mastery of his motion.

And this man did not shrink when he saw Owen. He had forbidden himself to feel what he was bound to know. Owen had never dared to risk a woman's 'No'; he rarely trusted himself even to speak with them except when business forced him. He thought how the Earl must, all his life, have had the women of the world like spaniels. He saw them with admiring eyes, tender and moist, with their throats parched, crouching as they waited for a whistle. Ariel had not let their contrast come into Caliban's mind. And so, just as he had dreamt of Granchester as a friend, he now, his wandering eye hypnotically fixed on its reflection, his face faded out. He saw himself as the Earl's rival. He lived Don Juan's life in a few minutes. Empresses, dancers—all were his! He seduced nuns at the very altar, eloped with brides in the first week of their honeymoon. Again he came to himself. He had lived Heaven for an eternity despite the clock that swore, with little contradiction, it was not half an hour. All this he owed to the Earl. And while the rational self, with its teeth in the crab-apple of life, would have killed him and trampled him whose mouth was glad with the rich peach of life, the poet in him touched the truth that sense-experience could not mask. He, the true Self, the nameless reality beneath the foolish label Owen Evans, wanted to pay that debt, the price of his gorgeous dream. He wanted to see Owen Evans do for the Earl of Granchester some service, something signal, something sublime, something to prove himself worthy of what he knew was nothing less than his redemption.

XIX

Over the yellow perch the Earl became most monstrous cheerful. But that peculiarly local delicacy merely made Owen remark that even

so exquisite a joy was but a Jew's price for a man's soul with his intellectual pleasures and society of his fellow creatures thrown into the scale.

'I can't see it,' said his guest. 'They tell me there are no amusements in America. I assure you that in some twenty hours, I've had more fun, more excitement that I ever got in a month the other side. Why, Hamlet no longer brings the blush of shame to my maiden cheeks; no longer do I lack the matter for soliloquy. By all the hollow turnips that hold candles, let me swear it. Mt father's ghost's abroad! Like Charles the First, half an hour after his head was cut off, he walks and talks. Oh, I'm too gross, encased in sense. He cannot reach me but through a holy man, a crystal soul to reflect truth, the saint whose name is Ross—nowadays. Through him I and my sire may pass the time of day. Ross is a German Jew; to my unsanctified eyes, he looks more hog than man. In such guise must the Gods walk, lest the profane pollute them. My father came to me last night; and I am only sorry to say that what he said was garbled by some deaf and dumb spirit. He did not say one word with any sense in it, despite his obvious anxiety, and the most over strained use of the saint's well-known influence with God. But this morning, after I left your office, there was a telephone call. It was my friend and benefactor Ross, who had been warned of God in a dream. My father, with tears streaming down his eyes, implored me not to leave the city till I had a message. I shall accordingly spend the afternoon trying to find a house, if possible, on a ninety-nine years lease.

Oh yes, my friend, man shall not live by perch alone, but by every word that cometh out of the mouth of Ross. I would not leave this town—not to be the boss of Tammany.

XX

Never was battle played by the Great General Staff of Germany with more precision than the campaign against the Earl. And certainly, German armies never found foe to do exactly what they wanted him as amiably as did Lord Granchester. It was like a Book of Euclid. Of the details of the proof are singularly dry. I will not reproduce the Ouija Board's string of letters, varied now and then by an intelligible word or phrase, like an oasis rare and refreshing. I will not trace the steps by which the Reverend Ross acquired the confidence of the ghost. I jump at once to the great message.

The ghost was minatory, affectionate, horatory, pathetic, expostulatory, paternal, everything by turns. But the gist of it all was that his son should do a kindness to a stranger, and find that he had entertained an angel unawares. He would be the guardian angel of the family; with his wings he would bear him up lest he hurt his foot against a stone. Not an hour had passed before this stranger punctually flopped at the very feet appointed. The Earl acted with appropriate promptness; rescuer and rescued soon found themselves fast friends. The angel waved his wings, the extraordinary coincidence was discovered, the Earl was duly impressed. The contracts were prepared; there was never a hitch.

XXI

Owen had been at work at high pressure during this time. Pumpern had set him to work out the figures for the scheme. It never occurred to him, absorbed as he was in fancy's flight, doing, so to speak, with the ten numerals as much as Shelley with his six-and-twenty letters, that there was any connection between Granchester, who never repeated his visit to the office, and the man who was to buy his poetry. Nor did the publisher's wife think that the Earl's daily visits to the house had any other purpose than to see her. She guessed her lover skeptical enough, thought that his long sittings had no other object than to throw dust into her husband's eyes. It was pure chance that stamped 'Received with thanks' at the foot of the little account that his soul had run up with his savior.

He prospectus completed, he made up his overtime mostly in taking walks about the city. It was pure chance that glued his eyes to a shop window, and delayed his return to his dinner. It was pure chance that he fell into a fit of abstraction, and fell into the wrong turning. The luck of the time and place threw him into a stall at the performance of the Comedy of the Apoplectic Millionaire and the Humane Nobleman. The violence dragged him from his meditations—he recognized both parties. But some instinct kept him from interfering. He knew the millionaire to be one of the least scrupulous of Pumpern's gang. His mind flashed back to the lunch at the Pontiac. 'That dream!' he thought. A third strand twisted itself in the rope. He remembered Pumpern asking him the rate of Sterling exchange. It came to him in a flash that his friend was the man they were after, the man to be noosed in the lasso of his own figures. He left his dinner unfinished, and went to a tele-

phone booth. The Earl was not in his hotel. He tried again in the morning, and got him.

'I beg your pardon,' said Owen, 'but Mr Pumpern asked me to call you up. Have you got the carbon copy of the rough draft of the Prospectus? There is a clerical error on page 3.'

'What prospectus?' said the Earl. 'Never saw one—never heard of one. Anything else?'

XXII

Owen apologized. He fought down his conviction; but his anxiety fevered him. He went about like a man in a dream for three or more days. Then, to his amazement, he found on his desk a not from the Earl.

'My dear young friend,' it ran. 'It appears I am settled. Indeed, I'm the oldest inhabitant. My father likes the climate. So you are the tenderfoot. You must come to lunch with me. I want to warn you. You stand in the gravest danger that can threaten cashiers—you make mistakes in figures. There is no clerical error on page 3, or on any other page of that Prospectus. Shall we say tomorrow at the same place and time>'

Over the lunch, Owen told all he knew; so did his host. There was no more to be said. A series of flukes had upset all calculations. As they rose from the table, Granchester said to Owen, 'only on word—act as if nothing had happened.'

The cashier agreed; and each took his own way.

XXIII

Granchester took his own advice. The revelations of the lunch did not alter a single detail of his plans. It was agreed to sign the papers at the office of a lawyer on next Monday morning. On Sunday evening, Granchester asked some friends to dinner. It was served in a private room. There was the millionaire, the angel; there were the publisher and the preachers. Last of all there was a funny little man whom everybody recognized as a friendly rival to Ross. He was a 'trumpet medium,' perfectly harmless, capable of no mischief. But what was he doing there?'

'I have a confession to make,' said the host. 'There was a moment when I lost my faith. It all seemed too good to be true. I may say frankly that I prayed about it. I resolved to go in secret to another

counsellor. He is here tonight. I thought I would have you all to celebrate my great fortune. My friend here, though he be least conspicuous, has been essential. I tell you plainly that if he had counselled me against my new investment, I had determined to withdraw. But, as he will tell you himself, my father came at the sitting. He urged me to go on.'

The conspirators began to recover. They had suspected mischief from the most harmless source. The tension was too great. What with the relief and the champagne the dinner was tremendous. Only one devil resisted every exorcism. That was the preacher's 'still small voice.' He still shivered with superstitious fear. When it was over, the Earl asked a favour.

'Will you, my friends with spiritual gifts,' he said, 'invoke a final benediction on my plans? Will you once more bring to our darkness that clear light that shines from beyond the veil? Will you fortify mortal hearts for the courage of those who have faced death, and found it but the gate to a fuller life?

They naturally said they would be only too happy to oblige.

The Reverend Ross went through his customary performances. Then a strange thing happened. He could not fake with his usual glibness. His tongue seemed tied. He forced himself to triteness. The sweat poured down his face. At last he stammered out—

'Yes, it's all right, all right. Yes—go on. I see success—your father's pleased. I'm only afraid, I can't help it, there's something I don't know about. Oh, get those papers signed—then the cloud will pass.'

After about half an hour he yielded the pulpit to his brother augur. This little old man had none of Ross' stunts. He went into trance like a child falling asleep. He was perfectly calm, perfectly confident.

'I see your father plainly. I hear him. He is calling you.'

'Can I speak to him,' said the Earl.

'Yes, yes, he wants you to.'

'Tell me once more, my father, only once more. Is success assured?'

'Yes, yes,' cried the old man, 'provided you stick to your plans. Everything must be done as it was first conceived. Yes, first—He seems to dwell on "first"—"from the very first of all," he says.'

'It's all right, then, once we sign the papers?'

' "Oh yes, oh yes." He smiles so beautifully. I do wish you could see him.'

'That's all right then,' cried Granchester with a sigh of relief.

'Ah, ah, he shakes his head; he speaks; I cannot hear it!'

'Nonsense' replied the host, 'he was perfectly clear. Oh, a thought strikes me! Can it be that something might prevent the completion?'

The medium made repeated efforts to report what he described as the nonsensical words of the ghost.

'Nothing can stop the deal,' he repeated a dozen times or more. Then he got one more word. Unfortunately, it was the word 'unless.' The minutes passed, his spirit wrestled manfully. At last he gave it up. 'The words are clear,' he said; 'but they mean nothing unless there's something which you haven't told us.'

'What are they>?' cried the Earl impatiently.

'Nothing can stop the deal,' said the old man in his most solemn voice, 'unless Colonel Pacton's brother interferes.'

'Don't know him,' cheerfully answered Granchester. The other three were equally at a loss.

'Colonel Pacton is my wife's guardian, of course,' said the publisher.

'I think I understand,' stammered the preacher, though his face had gone livid with fear. 'It's just another spirit.'

'Stop the séance, don't give him a chance, let's all go home!'

The party broke up. But Ross bore off his accomplices to his own house.

'I've got to talk to you fellows,' he said, 'I've got to talk damn straight. Sit down.'

XXIV

'As I've told both of you,' began the preacher, 'I fake this business all I can, but there's always just one little bit left over. You've got to trust to that, and act on it. Whatever your mind tells you. God knows better. Don't laugh, I've seen it work. I've had a hunch from the word go that there was something wrong. You never heard of Colonel Pacton's brother—no more did I. But I know who he is as well as I know who you are. You know what Pacton did in the War. He organized the government's protection against spies. I never heard of his brother, as I told you; but I know who he is and his job, as well as I know myself. He's on the door-step—put a fist to those deeds, and he'll come in, and he won't knock, and we'll all have a government job for the rest of our lives.'

The others declared he was crazy. He argued for an hour; they laughed the more. They went to their homes.

The Earl of Granchester arrived at the lawyer's office as the clock struck ten. He waited. No one came. The preacher's frozen feet had proved contagious. The lawyer rang them up. They were both ill in bed. It was agreed to postpone the conference till a week later.

'It's an infernal nuisance' said the lawyer. 'I know how you want to get home.'

His client breathed a sigh of resignation. 'We can but bear it patiently,' said he, 'when Colonel Pacton's Brother interferes.'

XXV

The next three days, the Earl pressed an exceptionally luxurious automobile into his service, merely changing his necktie for one more eloquent of sympathy with suffering. He sped from house to house; turn by tune his friends were gladdened by his bedside manner. They found it a bit of a strain, for all that. It was the preacher who first broke down.

'I'll tell you the truth,' he said. 'That message about Colonel Pacton's brother, that knocked me flat. I, too, had had that fear, that nameless fear. It haunted me. Had our friend told of some enemy that we could meet in fight, it wouldn't have mattered. The unknown name made my vague fear more imminent. You will think it weak of me, but I collapsed. It's the same story with the others, I don't doubt for a minute. You see, this business has been organized from spiritland all through. That's the appalling thing.'

'I thought as much,' said the visitor. 'I had myself to fight, as you so justly put it, not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers. But I hope you don't mean to back out of the deal?'

The preacher called out protestations.

'Never mind, never mind,' said the Earl. 'I think I know how to put your minds at rest.'

He drove to his hotel; summoned a bell-boy; bade him page Colonel Pacton. On this occasion, that particular idol of society was found almost at once. He came forward with his visitor's card in his hand. He was a tall grey-bearded man, so excessively distinguished that it almost pained one to look at him.

'I am Colonel Pacton,' said he. 'To what am I indebted, may I ask?' The question trailed away into a murmur which stamped him as be-

longing to one of the original Mayflower families as plainly as if he had worn a sailor hat with the name of the ship on it.

'I'm ashamed to intrude,' said Granchester. 'The fact is that I was about to conclude a business deal. I may excuse myself I trust yet more, if I mention that the sum involved was sufficiently large to make a quite perceptible difference to my somewhat slender purse, though, of course, nothing at all to such men as throng these halls of marble. It barely reached the forty million mark.'

'Yes,' said Colonel Pacton, slightly more frigid.

'My story is a short one. My friends are very superstitious. A medium told them that one thing alone could spoil the deal. "Nothing can do so," he told them in my presence, "unless Colonel Pacton's Brother intervenes." It frightened them clean out of the wits.'

The Colonel got rather red. 'This is absolute nonsense, absolute nonsense, sir,' he said, the soldier in him elbowing the diplomatist.

'So I say myself,' replied the Earl. 'And what am I to do? Couldn't you reassure them?'

'Why this is madness, madness!'

A sudden suspicion seemed to strike the Englishman. 'I suppose that you are the only Colonel Pacton?' he enquired deferentially.

'I surely am,' replied the veteran; 'and you may as well know right now that I haven't got a brother. I never had one. And both my parents being dead long since, you'll have to find a wonderful medium to persuade me that I'll ever have one now.'

'Tut, tut, too bad!' replied the Earl. 'Not even a spirit brother!'

The old man tapped the floor with his foot. 'What next? What can I do? Pray come to the point.'

'If you would give me an hour of your time, if you would call on my friends in your car, if you would tell them what you have just told me, I think I could complete the deal. I throw myself entirely on your good nature.'

'This city,' said the soldier emphatically and deliberately, 'is full of the craziest people I ever struck in my life. You seem to be sane. Out of gratitude for the pleasure of meeting anybody of that class, I'll be glad to come. Shall we start right away?'

With every possible solemnity, the formalities of the ritual were complied with. All three promised to turn up at the hour of the postponed conference. No further obstacle thrust up its head. Everything

was signed, sealed and delivered; copies went to the state archives for record. There was no more to do.

XXVI

'I have one more proposal to make, gentlemen, or, shall I say, one more favour to ask. I can never express in words what a wonderful time this has been. It has been indeed a privilege to watch the wondrous ways of Providence; heaven and earth conspiring to redeem my family fortunes! Still no word more of that. What I have to say is only as your friend, if you will let me wreathe my brows with that untarnished name. I must go to England at once to raise this money. Will you come with me as my guests? Let my poor castle repay, though in no coin but good will, the hospitality which the majestic castles in your fair city have so gladly granted.'

The plan met with ready acceptance. The long strain had left its mark on the nerves of the conspirators. They might just as well keep an eye on the property until they had cashed in on it, and made their getaway. Only a fortnight later, they were occupying the biggest suite on the fastest liner afloat.

XXVII

The three prominent citizen of Flivverton had become acclimatized to Granchester in the first week of their visit. The third week drew to its close. They stood alone upon the castle terrace. They were waiting for the Earl to return from London. The financial arrangements had been completed. He was to be there for dinner with the whole of the cash. Any train might bring him. They were getting a little nervous again. Every crack of a twig was mistaken for something to do with his arrival. At last, an unmistakable footstep.

'Why isn't he in the car?' growled the suspicious preacher. And then they saw it was not the Earl at all. A young man was standing right under the big elm in front of the house. They had been warned how treacherous elms were. They shouted to him to come out into the open. He still hesitated, shifting from foot to the other, plainly uncertain what to do next. At that moment the publisher recognized the stranger. It was his own cashier! He gasped out a fierce blasphemy. Dragging the others by their sleeves, he set forward at a shambling run.

'He's going to crab the deal,' he croaked at them. 'At the last minute we're dished. Kidnap him! Stick a knife into him anything! We've got to get him away!'

But the young man, though he greeted them with an independence of manner which surprised them, behaved as if he had nothing on his mind. He explained his presence in a dozen words.

'I resigned, as you well know , sir, last month, and I've come home to live. That I'm here is all pure luck. I stopped off simply because Lord Granchester asked me to dine with him whenever I came to England. But, to tell you the truth, when I got near the place, I began to feel it rather overpowering. You Americans can't understand that, very likely, but I stood there like a booby, not knowing what to do. I didn't even recognise you on the terracce.'

The three conspirators breathed again. Silence fell for a moment. A slow smile spread across their faces as the sound of a distant motor grew more and more distinct. The Earl was coming—they had turned the trick!

XXVIII

Another sound! It was a sharp, dry crack. Before they had time even to look for the source, the biggest bough of the great elm crashed down, and crushed the cashier into pulp.

They were too scared to scream—not one of them was hurt, or even so much as scratched. The fallen bough was perfectly green. The leaves had stroked their faces. It seemed as if the world had fallen away from them. The preacher even wondered—had he made a mistake, and was he dead? And then they saw that the car had drawn up opposite, and that the Earl had jumped out of it to examine the corpse.

'Come away from there,' was all he said.

Even those few words told them that his voice and manner were somehow curiously changed. He led the way in silence to the terrace.

'I want to talk to you gentlemen' he said. 'Let us sit here, with death just over our shoulders.

They took seats. The Earl lighted a cigarette. 'First of all,' he began, 'let me assure you that the hour of execution is only advanced by thirty minutes. But that joke of Nature,' and he flung his hand over towards the tree, 'has been a little too much for me. I'd like to cross-

examine you a bit, Mr Preacher. You, who know God so well, ought to be able to explain the universe—bits of it—bits like this.

'Here is the machinery of the curious drama which we four have been playing, as I see it with my peculiar squint. I see three forces working. The first I'll call the force that compels your faith, the three of you as a whole I mean. You think that effect must always necessarily follow cause. You base your actions on what your minds are bound to believe to be truth, owing to their quaint construction; and on experience, which tells you that observation of an infinitesimal fraction of nature over a period of time, which is an infinitesimal fraction of time, entitles you to formulate an universal law. You assume the continuity and uniformity of everything even though your actual observation, your direct observation, shows nothing but discontinuity and variety. Shall I read a paper at the Royal Society to prove that all boughs must fall on all cashiers? It would be just as sensible as to deduce form the microscopic and instantaneous phenomenon which we call the solar system, that infinity and eternity must be exactly like it.

'Then, there's the second force: pure chance. That's funnier still. To this hour, I haven't the least idea why that poor boy down there suddenly blazed into a dog-like love for me. By no intent of mine, I promise you! By pure chance, he is delayed in a walk, by pure chance misses his way, and thus it happens that he was a witness of my meeting our apoplectic friend here. He gets it in his head that you three gentlemen are in a plot to rob me. We meet at lunch. He gives me all the details. See how this chance has worked on my behalf? Don't worry, gentlemen, it's all right. You've got the papers signed and sealed, haven't you? You mustn't mind when I tell you as it happens, I knew everything that he had to tell me, bar a few details, before I'd been twenty-four hours in Flivverton. There we see chance at work. She patiently conspired with such intelligence as to baffle human conjecture; and yet her object seems to have been to break into a house with neither walls nor roof! Chance ends with more grim idiocy yet. Just when a difference of one yard in your positions under the elm would have satisfied every canon of poetic justice, you go unscathed; and the man who had gone clean out of the games lies there.

'Then, there's a third force: supernatural intervention. You and I, Doctor Ross, have given some time to study that. You played your hunches, didn't you? How do you score the game? Did Colonel Pacton's Brother interfere?'

'In a sort of way, he did,' returned the preacher. 'I was afraid of something. My Brother Divine merely gave it a name. My belief in Colonel Pacton's Brother created him. Thoughts are things.'

'Hum,' said the Earl, 'it doesn't bother me at all. Let me tell you that I invented Colonel Pacton's Brother myself, and spent three nights rehearsing the old medium and his part.'

The millionaire began to bluster. 'Do I understand, my Lord, that you have been playing the fool with us?'

'Business, business, please keep to business! You have the papers signed and sealed. Isn't that enough for you?'

The other two men forced their accomplice to make a shoe of patience.

'I want to assure you, gentlemen, that I take this business more seriously than anything else I have yet met in all my life. Here's an inexplicable thing. I can't begin to imagine a cause for it. I haven't seen the slightest trace of any effect. Do you remember the first night I dined at Mr Pumpern's? I seem to remember that your wife had not managed to suit your gastronomic requirements. When I got out of the house, I found her waiting to grab me.'

Pumpern suddenly got up. 'What in hell do you mean?'

'Tut, tut, metaphysics first, let me beg you. Well, having clinched, she broke away. I saw her in a flood of light which shone from your side door. Her figure looked like a black-hooded dwarf with a silver dish on its head. I saw her right hand clearly. I knew it for hers beyond a doubt. In it she had a Malay *kriss*. This I recognized as my own. I never saw another anything like it. It hung then, as it hangs now, as a trophy on my walls in my room in London. I cabled that night for news of it. Your wife's face was as bloodless as if she were dead. It was twisted into the most extraordinary contortions. Her throat had been cut by the *kriss*—it gaped like a melon with a slice cut out. It is the most extraordinary hallucination—and the only one I ever had. What did it mean?

The publisher rose and folded his arms. 'If this is true, Lord Granchester,' he growled with a pomposity which came near to deceiving himself, 'it means the vengeance of an outraged husband.'

'Don't distress yourself, Mr. Pumpern.'

'Not at all, not at all.'

'The intrigue, despite its melodramatic opening, went on as smoothly as your own plans for me.'

'You're much too late, my friend,' said Granchester. 'Your wife got a divorce last week. You aren't an outraged husband. She will be here tomorrow, anyhow, unless the boat's late.'

The millionaire found that he couldn't stand it.

'Are we three businessmen, or are we goats,' he said angrily. 'Can't you see that this is all bunk? I beg your pardon, My Lord, I didn't mean to put it in that way. I meant that you are making this all up to amuse us, as you have so often done before.'

'Quite right, quite right—the business view. We have our papers signed; we have our papers sealed; nothing else matters. Now, back to our supernatural! Here is one hunch you had: something inside you said "There's something wrong.' "

'It surely did,' was the surly acquiescence of the medium.

'You never played that hunch. You went in for a business deal, the largest of your lives. You put your business brains together. You worked day and night at it. Yet you omitted the first elementary precaution, a precaution you would take instinctively, any one of you, in a transaction involving half a dollar. I bet you your poor forty million that not one of you has ever missed it before in your lives.'

'Well, what is it?' said the banker. 'I wasn't in this from the start, you know. Have these fools let me down?'

'One moment let me beg of your indulgence. I want to finish with the supernatural. Why didn't you play your hunch?' he said to Ross.

'I didn't know what it meant.'

'I did,' said the Earl. 'You have gone wrong from the first owing to this absurd belief of yours in supernatural intervention. The hunch you didn't play was the only one that was right; and it wasn't a hunch at all. When you went off the handle over Colonel Pacton's Brother it was a guilty conscience; your moral conscience. But the other hunch was the prick of your intellectual conscience. It was your mind reproaching you that you had left out one link in your chai.'

The preacher was genuinely interested in the conversation; but the publisher got mote stolid every moment, and the third man more angrily suspicious.

'Let me draw you a picture. Ah, here we are,' he broke off suddenly, waving his hand to a tall man some ten years older than himself—a man with a gold eye-glass and a short square beard who was coming down from the house to the terrace. 'Never mind the picture. We'll do a dialogue. Imagine yourselves in the Union Club, New York. Here am

I and my friend in a window, frightfully bores. One of use opens a letter. "Bother," he says, "I suppose I may as well." He throws the letter to the other who reads it and says, "Not on your life." "Why not?" says the one. "Mug's game," says the second. "Here, you let me go instead of you." Well, I suppose so," acquiesces the man to whom the letter was addressed, going off to a writing table with a laugh, and scribbling a note to his friend. What do you make of that?'

It appeared that nobody made anything of it. 'Doesn't it suggest anything to you, thou man of God?'

'No,' he grunted.

'Doesn't explain why that little word "lost" kept running round your solar plexus?'

'Not a glimmer.'

'Never imagined that sort of scene?' He shook his head heavily.

The banker interrupted. 'Excuse me,' he said. 'As you yourself remarked, 'Business.' We still have a slight formality to transact.'

'Just what I was coming to,' smiled the young man sweetly. 'I go into the witness-box. Observe the correctness of my attitude. I hereby solemnly affirm that I have never in all my life been honoured with the privilege of intimacy with such imbeciles, dolts and fools as the shrewdest knaves in your city. And I further wish to remark that if I am cast for the part of Paris, and have to hand the apple to one of the three, I choose unhesitatingly my Venus from the remarkable specimen of the Blue-faced Baboon, who, after lying to God and to man since he could frame a phrase, now expects God and man to tell the truth to him. I pick him, also, on more practical ground. Don't be afraid! It's going to be your turn to say what you made me say—do you remember?'

'Do you expect us to remember all you say?' put in the banker in a tone of acid impertinence.

'Oh no,' returned the Earl with gaiety. 'Bur surely you have not forgotten the three words on which your whole plan had been laid—'I am convinced!' Be good enough to stand up for a moment, Doctor Ross, if I may venture to ask you to take the trouble. What I want to say is that you are convinced that as a fool you shine above your colleagues, as they exceed in knavery the common run of thieves in Flivverton, and as the thieves in Flivverton outclass the rest of the world. You say that little scene means nothing? Let me recall another. Do you remember how you ransacked Flivverton for information about the de-

tails of my family affairs, for pictures, interviews, biographies; no sprat too small for your cruel, fisher of men!'

The medium ventured upon the customary professional denials.

'Never occurred to you that while you were at the microscope there might be something you missed at the telescope?'

The baited man began to lose patience, and the Earl himself was tiring of the torture.

'Will you do me the honour of being so kind as to turn round?'

Ross did so, half afraid. He did not know what he might see. His superstitious terrors aggravated his intuition that he was in a trap.

'Do you recognize that man?' The preacher hunted in the jungle of his memory. At last, every muscle in his face gone suddenly flat, he sobbed, as a man will after a sufficient dose of the knout, and managed to gasp out—

'It's Colonel Pacton's Brother!'

The two Englishmen, utterly taken aback, burst into a frenzy of laughter.

'Come, come,' said the elder, 'this is undignified. It seems to me that all this trouble has sprung from failing to observe the ordinary customs in usage for centuries past in good society in England. Gold tried in the fire, gentlemen, proved in the forges of time!'

'Well?' growled the banker.

'We have never been properly introduced.' The words came through the black beard with a sort of murmurous and regretful courtesy.

'This gentleman,' said he, coming forward, 'who appears to have been engaged in some very delicate and interesting transactions during the last few weeks, is my young friend and fellow-investigator, Sir Roger Bloxam. I have the honour to bid you all most hearty welcome to my poor house.'

The ex-Earl attempted to save the situation by hustling his victims through the formality of introductions. But things had gone too far. The three Americans drew apart—and two apart from one.

'You must have seen Lord Granchester's picture a dozen times when you were looking him up,' said the publisher with a lump in his throat.

'We did everything,' said the banker, his business ability making him more accurate in his pronouns. 'We signed for forty million: and we never identified the principal. Good night!'

'You were our business head,' snarled back Hans Pumpern.

‘Business nothing!’ said the banker. I was to get a lump sum down, was I? I wasn’t even your partner; and I’m glad of it. Damn it all, I’m glad. I’m glad he’s got your wife. I’m glad because her money was the only money you had. It was your lunch money, it was your car-fare, you cheapskate. When you get back to Flivverton, what are you going to live on?’

‘Don’t disturb yourself about that, I beg,’ remarked Sir Roger. ‘My friend the novelist has it all clear by now, I feel quite sure. Poor Evans confessed to me about your secret printing press. They’ll never let you starve. You will never be out of a job.’

‘Don’t be vindictive,’ said Lord Granchester. ‘Can’t you see when a man’s had enough?’

‘Sometimes I can,’ said Sir Roger, ‘but not when he can’t see that a woman’s had enough.’

‘I simply cannot allow this to go on any further,’ said the Earl. ‘You have made me an accomplice in your pranks, you outrageous young scape-grace. Do you understand what is due to your fellow guests?’

There was a long embarrassed silence. Sir Roger paced the ground; his head was bowed, his eye was caught by the elm. He suddenly straightened his back, and walked up to the four men.

‘You’re only half right, Granchester,’ he said. ‘I don’t know if it’s supernatural. But I heard that boy speak then, as you hear me speak now. It flashed into my mind how it was that he, a scoundrel and a tool of scoundrels, suddenly made amends. It was because I, without the slightest conscious intention, spoke to him with absolute simplicity. I did not even see his body or mind. I told him my business as if I had been talking into a dictagraph. I was the first man who had never noticed the ugliness that he was ashamed of. He was a man, and I was a man. You can get to that either by plain good manners, or by such vivisection as we’ve been having here today. These men are more than my fellow-guests—they are my fellow men; they are yours!’

The Earl drew himself up and frowned. ‘What do you suggest that we should do?’

‘Well,’ said Sir Roger very slowly, ‘when you came in and spoilt it all, we were discussing the cause of phenomena. And the only thing that seems to have come off properly, with no misfires, is the force of the practical joke.’

Ross looked at him, tears in his eyes, and a glint as of light in their corners.

‘Yes,’ said Sir Roger, ‘we’re on dangerous ground. If a practical joke is the cause of events, am I, well, shall I call it presumptuous?’

‘Well, well,’ said the Earl impatiently.

‘Let’s call all bets off,’ suggested Sir Roger. ‘We’re strangers; none of us ever saw any of the others before. We give the high sign when we part. Wipe the slate. No bankruptcy, no prosecutions, everything back where we were as nearly as possible.’

‘What about poor young Evans?’ said the preacher.

‘We don’t want him back where he was. Pure chance took care of him. His soul’s saved; and all his troubles are over. Forget it.’

‘And what about my wife?’ said Pumpern.

‘Same happy ending; saved her soul; ended her troubles. What? aren’t you satisfied, my dear outraged husband? I’ll tell them to pay you her income. All over—goodbye—don’t you know. Did God make you? Back to the woods—Skidoo—23—if you’ve anything else to say, shut up!’

He waved at them like a conjurer banishing phantoms, turned on his heels, and walked quickly into the house.

The Earl followed him slowly. The three Americans looked at each other; the whole thing had been too much for them. Their brains were not working any more.

The banker rallied them. He put his hands on their shoulders. He only said one thing; but he said a whole lot when he said it. These were his words—and they will probably be in six foot letters of gold on the new police courts in Flivverton:—

‘GO WHILE THE GOING’S GOOD!’

At the top of the steps Sir Roger awaited his friend, a queer smile on his face.

‘Granny,’ said he, ‘we forgot to send the wedding cake to one poor fellow.’

‘I’m not curious,’ said the Earl. ‘Oh well, boys will be boys—what is it?’

‘Wedding cake’—Sir Roger always took sentences at their grammatical value whenever he could create confusion by doing so.

Sir Roger choked back a sob. He shook his head most mournfully. He drooped.

‘Oh kittens, kittens!’ cried the Earl impatiently. ‘All right. Get on—spit it out. It’s wedding cake, and whom did we forget to send it to?’

‘COLONEL PACTON’S BROTHER!’