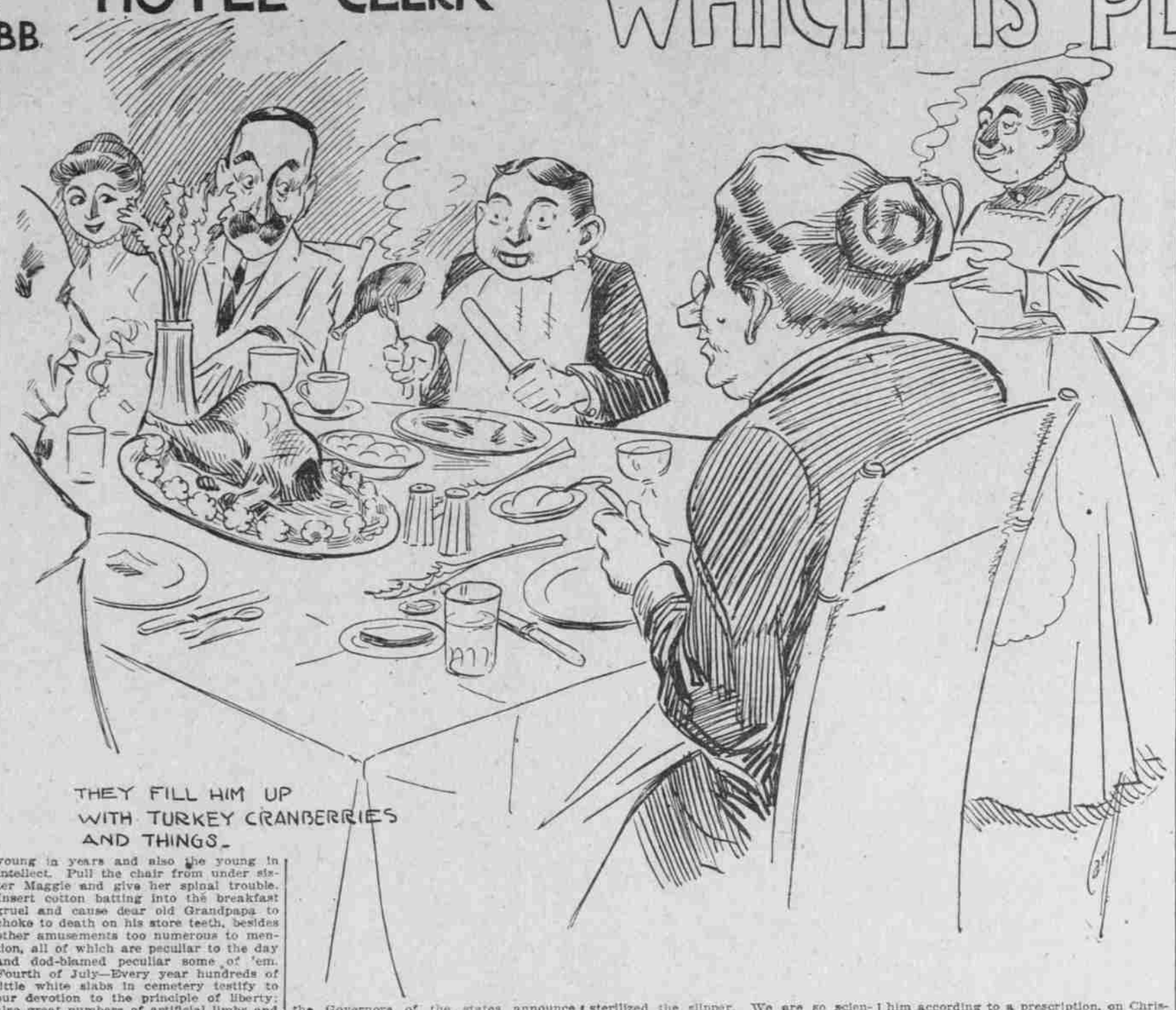
"CHRISTMAS COMES BUT ONCE A YEAR, SAYS THE HOTEL CLERK WHICH IS PLENTY"

BY IRVIN S. COBB



THEY FILL HIM UP WITH TURKEY CRANBERRIES AND THINGS.

"WOT'S the news?" asked the House Detective of the St. Reckless.

"Well, this week, according to the very latest and best advices from the other side, the Duke of the Abruzzi is positively not going to marry any young lady belonging to a well-known West Virginia family, but will solace his wounded heart by climbing Mont Blanc to the highest point where cookoo clocks and yodel songs may be found, after which he will again venture as far north as the latitude of Kennebunkport, Maine, on another of those desperate dashes to the Pole," said the Hotel Clerk. "Next week, if the present system continues in vogue, will be the week when he positively is going to marry her, no matter what his Aunt Margie thinks about it, and the week after that he positively will not, and so on until the referee either gives a decision on points or calls it a draw and declares the bets off.

"And that's all the news there is in the paper except several announcements to the effect that Christmas is coming. I was just reading a timely list of gifts suitable to all ages. Let's see: For mother—Set of sables, chest of flat silver, gold manicure set; for father—tiger skin auto rug, fur-lined overcoat, mahogany cellarette; for sister—electric runabout, diamond bracelet—well, anyway, it looks as if any man on a moderate salary ought to be able to provide an acceptable holiday remembrance for every member of the household, this year, at a cost not exceeding $1800 to $2000."

"Aw, don't be a grouch," said the House Detective. "Christmas comes but once't a year."

"Which is amply ample, not to say plenty, sufficient and abundant to excess," went on the Hotel Clerk. "One of the things that I like about the Merry Yuletide is that nobody has yet suggested a mid-Summer revival of it. Santa Claus would be all right if he closed his show on December 25. But these times he's followed by a full male chorus of bill collectors that begin doing bell-ringing turns at the front door along about the first ult., and from there on all through that ult., and clear into the next one. I have a married friend with many relatives who tells me he always knows when next Christmas is coming by the fact that he's almost through paying last Christmas' bills."

"Wot would the kiddies do without Christmas and Santa?" asked the House Detective.

"I wasn't speaking of the kids," said the Hotel Clerk. "Christmas was made for them and they were made for Christmas. I don't think I was more than 6 years old when our Sunday school superintendent felt it his sacred duty to tell me that my parents had something to do with the annual visit of Santa Claus, and that's quite a little ways back in the dim and more or less mussy past; but to this day I hate that man with the same cordial warmth that I have always bestowed upon the dog catcher that snared away the first pup I ever owned. Once you topple over Santa Claus in a kid's mind and it's not long until Grimm's Fairy Tales and Little Red Riding Hood are on their way, too. But there ought to be a law against an adult of either sex hanging up his sock or her stocking, as the case may be, if it means that somebody else is going to have to hang up the landlord and the installment dealer in order to properly fill it.

"Santa Claus coming down the chimney as he used to do, in the old days, or coming up the hot water pipes and through the plumbing fixtures, like a second-story worker, as he has to do, these times, with a pack on his back full of things for the kids, is probably the grandest public utility we've got in this country, Larry. John D. Archbold is inclined to think Standard Oil has the call as a philanthropic institution, but at this writing I'm still pledged to Santa, even if some of the illustrators do insist on making him look like Andrew Carnegie dressed up for a sleigh ride. And Santy doing a little something in the good cheer line for the poor, whom we have with us always but seem to forget it most of the time, rates almost as high in my estimation as John D. Rockefeller does in his own. But there's another Santa I don't seem to care for deeply.

"He's the insiduous old wretch that slips up behind you when looking in the show window of a jewelry shop along about this season of the year and whispers in your ear that if you expect to retain your self-respect you ought to send something to Jones, not because you like Jones, but because he's going to send you something. So the next day you detect yourself in the act of drawing out the money you've been saving up for a pianola or a bull pup, and you proceed to disburse it, buying things you can't afford for people who don't want them. And then there's always the highly important present that you put off buying until the last minute because you think you're going to have an inspiration, but don't, and so about 30 minutes before the shops close Christmas eve you are slowly ground up into materials for a rag carpet while you battle with several thousand other members of the Eleventh Hour Cane Rush and Casualty Club, and in a final fit of desperation you seize on something that you wouldn't want to see sawed off on your bitterest foe, and tell the clerk to wrap it up and send it away by messenger before you have a chance to become normal again. On Christmas morning you awaken to discover that somebody's done the same by you and so with murder in your heart and one of those imitation peace-on-earth-good-will-to-man smiles glued on your face, you go forth and meet him and tell him how pleased and happy you are and swap lies with him until the Recording Angel throws away his pen and screams for an adding machine.

"We're a strange people, anyhow, when it comes to celebrating our National holidays, Larry. Just look 'em over. New Year's—turn over a new leaf in the morning and turn it hurriedly back before night. April the first—sacred to the young in years and also the young in intellect. Pull the chair from under sister Maggie and give her spinal trouble. Insert cotton batting into the breakfast gruel and cause dear old Grandpapa to choke to death on his store teeth, besides other amusements too numerous to mention, all of which are peculiar to the day and dod-blamed peculiar some of 'em. Fourth of July—Every year hundreds of little white slabs in cemetery testify to our devotion to the principle of liberty; also great numbers of artificial limbs and many green blinds over the places where we formerly wore our eyes. Election day—Republicans voting for some Republican; Democrats voting for Bryan; Republicans and Democrats alike turning out for election returns in the evening, but Democrats going home the earliest. Thanksgiving day—The President and all the Governors of the states announce that this is a solemn festival of thanks and praise, so everybody goes to a football game.

"But Christmas is the one that really rings the bell, Larry. We rear children with great care these days. I've heard of one prudent mother that wouldn't spank her offspring until she'd sterilized the slipper. We are so scientific and precise about a child's diet that he grows up almost as strong and healthy as if we'd left him alone more and given nature a chance. So, after carefully nurturing him all during the year, giving him liquid nourishment out of a medicine dropper so many drops per day and compounding his food for him according to a prescription, on Christmas day his devoted parents and his doting aunts and uncles sit him down at a groaning board—I think I've heard the phrase 'groaning board' used in this connection somewhere—and they fill him with turkey and stuffing and cranberries and mince pie and plum pudding and nuts and candy and things until his eyes bulge out like two Yale locks and his tummy pushes him over backward and sits on him. So then he is put to bed and has a horrible dream in which he sees a tall man coming with a black bag and wakes up and finds this dream come true, because the doctor is arriving with a medicine case. It's a week before Ethelbert is normal again.

"Then among the grown-ups there's the quaint Christmas custom that has come down from the Danes or the Siwashes or somebody, called getting stewed. A man starts out Christmas morning with the best intentions in the world. But he takes an egg nog, and then another egg nog, and then another egg nog, and then some more egg nogs and after a while he decides that so much egg isn't good for him as a steady diet and he begins cutting down the egg part and increasing the nog or plain XXX stuff. And eventually the earth becomes void and without form and darkness covers the face of the earth and he starts home in a vehicle which looked like a cab when he got into it, but turns out to be a merry-go-round almost immediately, and the next morning he wakes up with a breath like a general merchandise store and a taste in his mouth like a garage."

"You speak feelin'ly," said the House Detective suspiciously. "You muster been there yourself."

"Well, I do recall one Christmas when a friend sent me a set of ancient histories for a present, bound in red leather with tan collars and cuffs," said the Hotel Clerk. "They were very superior and elevating books, that made a great show on a center table and were fine for pressing Autumn leaves or holding a door ajar. Naturally I was very much pleased with them, and in undertaking to live up to their classical character I may have gone a trifle too far. I recall taking a beaker of Falernian with an old Greek friend of mine named Isadore Bacchus, and shortly thereafter we were joined by his uncle from Germany, a delightful old gentleman with whiskers, named Herman J. Gambrinus, and we had a split of sack and a pony of malmsey drawn from the butt, and what with jest and quip and quotations from the old poets, like Virgil, and Horace, and Bill Nye, we made quite an evening of it.

"I remember that going through the park on the way home a savage rhododendron made an unprovoked attack upon me and, while endeavoring to elude the infuriated creature I fell over a bench and was painfully bruised. Also that when I awoke the following day, which I did so in the course of time, a conviction came to me almost at once that I must have eaten something the night before which disagreed with me, and carried the disagreement to the point of openly quarreling about it."

"You had a hang-over—that's wot wuz the matter with you," said the House Detective, knowingly.

"Oh, I wouldn't go so far as to say that," said the Hotel Clerk, "but I suppose a bookkeeper would have been warranted in calling it the "amount brought forward.'"

ON GOVERNMENT ORDERS

True Tales of the SECRET SERVICE By an Ex-Operative

No. 9. The Alligator Handbag

EDITED BY WM. J. BACON

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No. 9.

One evening when I looked in on Captain Dickson, who had but recently retired from a position high in the United States Secret Service, I found him seriously engaged in reading the afternoon paper. "Amazing yarns, you newspaper men write," he greeted me cheerily.

"What gives you that thought?" I queried, thinking how much more amazing were the experiences in the life of this man than anything he was likely to find in the paper which he held crumpled in his hands, and hoping to get him started telling one of his adventures.

"I was just reading about a green-goods swindle pulled off in New York City yesterday. It is strange how men, who have sense enough to accumulate a sum of money, can be so foolhardy as to part with it on a palpable swindle like this one. And yet you know," he continued, "there are some shrewd business men roped in on this self-same proposition—men who are respected in their home community for their business sense."

I knew in a moment there was a story ready for me, so I quietly filled my pipe, he pushed over the bottle of favorite sherry, and this came from him:

The king of the green goods sharks was Hank Bonner, alias "Red," "Madison," "Shorty," and a hundred others. He worked in New York City, and it was my pleasure to make his acquaintance in a picturesque manner.

Hank didn't do indiscriminate advertising, as do the green-goods sharks of the present time. Not Hank. He picked out his victims with care and made the selection of them a personal matter. He would make a "tour through the provinces," as he expressed it, and one of these tours that failed to land two or three victims was the rankest sort of a failure. When Hank had spotted his man he would return to the city and write him a personal letter, in which he hit out to a dot the man's weakest point of character, whether it was cupidity, vanity or downright criminality. Hank wasn't taking chances in these letters, for he had seen his victim, talked with him, tried him out, and so studied him at close range that Hank generally knew more about the man than the latter knew about himself.

He kept a close tab on the men whom he had worked and never tried to pull off two jobs in the same neighborhood. He would nab a sucker from Maine one week and one from Texas the next. In making his tours he assumed different characters, sometimes a gentleman of wealth seeking a bit of recreation, sometimes an itinerant minister or a book agent. Whatever character he assumed he acted it to perfection, and never made a false play in all his record until he tangled up with a lanky swamp-angel from Louisiana.

Hank had been down there selling patent churns, and at a county seat some distance from the railroad he had spotted a victim named Simon Boggs. The sharp characteristic of Boggs' nature was his suspicion of everything and everybody. He must have been of Missouri ancestry, if there is anything in the slang expression that is current today. A really suspicious man is the easiest victim of a swindle in the world. He is so careful to investigate every detail of a proposition before he bites at it, that if you can once satisfy him in this investigation, he takes everything for granted after that and you don't have any further trouble with him.

Boggs had been written just the right sort of letter. It was a masterpiece. It is over there in one of my scrapbooks, and you can read it sometime if you think it will interest you. It had the desired effect, for Boggs answered with a cautious letter, in which he said that he would have to be "shown" before he would invest in the money, but that he would take a small quantity if it was the real stuff. Boggs had more ready money than any man in his parish, and Hank knew that if he could rope Boggs in he would prove well worth the plucking.

An appointment was made with the wily Boggs and he came on to New York to look the situation over. Hank met him at the depot and took him to his rooms by a roundabout way in a hooded carriage so that Boggs never could have found it again. He was carried into a room where money seemed to be the cheapest commodity in the world. It lay about in piles on tables and chairs and the bed and floor were littered with it. His eyes grew as big as saucers at this vulgar disregard for Uncle Sam's currency.

He was told the customary gag about the stolen plates and the difficulty in working the money off in too large quantities in New York City, but was assured that every bill in the room would pass at the Government Treasury or any bank in the city. Boggs had to be shown. He was directed to pick out three or four bills at random from the litter of the room. This he did, being careful to get four, the largest number mentioned, and also being careful that they were all $50 in denomination. He was then spirited back to the uptown district, and he and Hank made a circuit of the banks where the bills were changed for those of smaller denomination without a murmur as they were as genuine as any that every left the bureau of engraving and printing.

Boggs was very much pleased with this. Next he wanted to see the plates from which they were printed and the printing plant. This was something that Hank hadn't counted on. He said it was impossible, but Boggs was as adamant and refused to invest a dollar unless they showed him. Hank agreed to do so the next day and during the night he bought a small hand-press and some ink and had half-tone plates made of both sides of the three denominations of the bills that he was purporting to have in such profusion, tens, twenties and fifties. He figured that Boggs would not know the differences between a half-tone plate and a steel plate. There was one matter he overlooked, and that was the paper on which to print his bills.

Boggs was conducted, with great secrecy, to the printing plant which, as a matter of fact, was on the floor above the room where the profusion of money was displayed. He examined everything minutely and expressed his satisfaction with everything. Then he wanted to see the stock of paper, having learned somehow that Government bills were printed on a specially prepared paper. Here he seemed to have Hank, but that gentleman was ready for the emergency. He regretted exceedingly that his paper supply was exhausted. Indeed, he said, it was a specially prepared paper, and his confederates were then engaged in manufacturing a large quantity of it, but it would not be ready for use for some two or three weeks.

This seemed to satisfy Boggs for the time, but he wanted to see the paper being made. Hank was stumped here for fair and had to decline, saying the process was so secret that even he had never visited the place. Boggs accepted this explanation, to all appearance, but as a matter of fact he was not satisfied in his own mind. His suspicion was aroused to the last degree and he made a resolution to see the paper before he invested heavily.

Nevertheless, he invested $100 in the money, a part of the $200 he had secured in having the four bills changed, getting for it $1000, which he counted with great care, examining each bill as it was handed over to him. Hank had carelessly thrust a bundle containing $1000 at Boggs, but the farmer had untied it and looked at every bill on both sides before he paid over the $100 agreed upon. He returned to his swamps and passed the money with so little difficulty that he soon wrote Hank and arranged to come on to New York and take his entire stock and trade. This was what Hank had been playing for and he counted on getting his $1100 back and a lot more besides.

He made preparations accordingly, drawing out of the bank some $45,000, the net proceeds of his years of swindling, and laying in a stock of paper that he thought would fool the farmer. He had a grip built especially for this transaction, an ingenious contrivance with a false bottom. The grip was a plain alligator handbag and in the devilry of its construction it was a work of art. Hank knew that he couldn't palm off bundles of green paper, veneered with bills, on the shrewd farmer, and he didn't have much faith in switching grips on him. His plan was to let the farmer place the bills in the grip while it stood on the table. The bills were dropped through a hole in the table and down through a pipe to the room below where they were caught in a basket and brought up to Hank by his confederate as they were needed, for Hank had to make his $45,000 serve for $200,000.

Boggs arrived in due time, and he had with him, as Hank had taken the precaution to learn from Boggs' own town, through a confederate, $20,000 in cash, all in $1000 bills.

He had something else with him, as Hank had learned to his sorrow, but Hank didn't suspect that at the time. Hank had as few confederates as possible, both because it made the splitting of the swag into fewer parts and because every additional man in on the deal was an added danger of detection. He worked his delivery of the goods always with only one man besides himself, Joe Lattimer, as old a criminal and as shrewd a bird as the redoubtable Hank.

Boggs was shown the printing plant again and he again asked to see the stock of paper. This was shown to him, and there was enough of it to have made millions of dollars if it had only been the real article. Boggs seemed satisfied, but he wanted to see a few bills printed. Hank was up a stump here, but he explained that his printer was at the bedside of a dying mother and there was no telling when he would report for duty again and he, Hank, knew as little of the art as a new-born babe.

Boggs had surreptitiously appropriated a corner of one of the sheets of paper, and that night, at his room, he compared it with the material of one of his own bills, and he saw that it was quite different intexture, nor was there a suspicion of silk thread in it that he could find. He knew by this that he was dealing with real crooks, and he set about to circumvent them. On the occasion of his former purchase he had held on to his money until the other was in his pocket, and he figured that he could work it again, so as soon as the bank opened next morning he bought $20,000 of New York exchange and forwarded it by registered mail to his home bank.

Next he bought two pairs of handcuffs at a sporting goods house, a bottle of liquor, and some drugs. How he knew what drugs to buy no one ever learned, but Boggs was a crafty scoundrel, and it is said that he was many things other than a simple farmer before he made his advent into the quiet Louisiana parish where he had grown rich by stealing timber. Nevertheless, he secured the right sort of thing, and he dosed the bottle with enough of it to send 20 men into a dreamless sleep, if the half-pint had been distributed among so many.

That night he met Hank according to appointment, and was conducted with as much secrecy as on former occasions to the room of amazing wealth. He accepted the alligator bag without complaint, and counted the bills, one by one, as they were passed over to him by Hank and his assistant. There is no doubt that he detected the false bottom of the grip, but he gave no signs of it. He counted the money as Hank passed it over to him and poked it into the limitless maw of the alligator handbag as seriously as if he suspected nothing.

When he had been paid over the $200,000, all in $50 bills, and had poked them into the grip to be whafted down through the pipe to the room below, he reached into his pocket for his wallet, and after fumbling about a bit pulled out the bottle of drugged whisky and sat it upon the table.

"Gents," he said, with gravity, "let's take a drink in honor of the occasion. I never close a trade of any size without taking a drink. It makes it easier to pay over money to have a little stimulant inside." Hank and his pal were so greedy to get their hands on Boggs' coin and get rid of the farmer that they readily consented, so each of them took a long pull at the flask and passed it back to Boggs, who held it out at arm's length, shook it to make it bead, and gazed as fondly and lovingly at it as does a love-lorn young man at his sweetheart.

He didn't drink it at first, but began to talk, rambling along about how he got his start in the world and how he made his first dollar and the luck he had and the like until the effects of the liquor began to work on the two crooks. They were soon in a frame of mind bordering on oblivion and Boggs made a feint of drinking from the bottle and pressed them to have another pull at it. They accepted without much urging. This was the last straw, and before either of them realized it they crumpled up in their chairs and tumbled out upon the floor. Boggs was ready for the occasion and gagged and handcuffed both.

He examined the grip and saw where the money had gone. Then he secured the keys to the room below from the recumbent Joe, let himself in and secured the basket of money which he stuffed into the grip, after attending to the hole in the bottom so that there was no danger of it leaking.

He locked the sleepers in their room and made his departure, not, however, until he had learned from the street lamp at the corner the location of the house. He caught the midnight train for his country home.

The next morning the chief of the Secret Service at Washington received a collect telegram informing him that two green-goods men with half-tone plates of bills of three denominations would be found in a room upon the third floor of a certain house in New York City. This telegram was forwarded to me, as I chanced to be in the city at the time, and I made an investigation. I found Hank and Joe still sleeping and captured the plates and enough packages of green paper with bills upon the top and bottom to send Hank and Joe up for long terms.

Boggs was never prosecuted. Before we secured a confession from the two men he had bunkoed so neatly, he had cashed out his properties in Louisiana and left for parts unknown. There was really no charge against him, but the stealing of the money from the two criminals, and neither of them cared to prosecute him on that score. They seemed to realize, in a rough sort of equitable way, that they deserved what they got, and I think both of them had a higher regard for Boggs because of it. They gave me a good description of Boggs and told me of several little peculiarities of speech and manner which he possessed, and I am sure that I met up with him down in Mexico some years later. He was a highly respected manufacturer and ranch-owner then, and reputed to be the wealthiest man in the State of Sonora. I tried to draw him out or trap him into saying something about the incident with the men in New York, but he was too smooth for that ruse to work. He spoke of New York freely, but never without laughing and I am sure that his mirth was induced by the memory of the trick he turned there on the green-goods men.

Bismarck's Courtship

From Reminiscences of the Prussian Statesman.

Bismarck was a gay young Prussian officer when he met Johanna von Puttkamer. She dealt him a stunning blow. You understand, of course, that we are talking in metaphor. He wrote to Papa von Puttkamer a formal request for Johanna's little bunch of digits.

Aghast at Bismarck's proposal, the old gentleman did not absolutely decline it. Instead, he wrote doubtfully, giving rather grudging permission of the young lover to pay a sort of "visit of inspection" at the Puttkamer home. Bismarck eagerly hastened to Reinfeld. The whole Puttkamer family was lined up to greet him. The father and mother glared at him solemnly, and Johanna herself stood between them, her eyes cast modestly downward. It was an awkward woment. The swift, whirlwind decision that scored Bismarck his later political triumphs came now to the front and he carried the situation by storm.

Galloping up the driveway, he leaped from his horse; ran forward and flung his arms around Johanna; taking no heed of her scandalized parents; catching her to his breast and covering her blushing face with kisses. After that there could be no talk of "probation" or "waiting." The betrothal was an accepted fact. Bismarck in his old age used to tell the story with more delight than he took in describing his statesmanship victories, and usually he would wind up by saying: "She made me what I am."

To the end of that married life the couple wrote each other long and loving letters each day whenever they were not together. The iron Chancellor's began usually, "My Angel," "Dearest Heart" or "Most Beloved." They contained somewhat prosy descriptions of the work he was doing, but here and there he speaks lovingly of her "blue-gray-black eyes," calls her his "Black Sun" and makes similar remarks. Once he said: "My metaphor of the 'Black Sun' is false. Are you not rather a dark, warm, Summer night, with fragrance of flowers and heat-lightning?"

The Countess never cared for nor cultivated marital trouble. She stood between Bismarck and a horde of diplomats, bores, savants, human donkeys and politicians and took care that his buttons were on and that the laundryman did not iron saw edges on his collars and shirts. Incidentally she loved the brute and softened down his rough places until he become quite human. A woman who understands is the whole Neufchatel. Johanna understood.

Light and Darkness as Remedies.

New Orleans Times-Democrat.

"Light is good for toothache. Darkness is bad for it. If you are a toothache sufferer, haven't you often noticed how the pain in your jaw increases when, late at night, you turn off the lamp and try to sleep?"

The speaker was a doctor. He went on:

"Light, you see, is good for the toothache. There are a number of diseases it is good for—asthma, cold in the head, earache. These diseases in the dark all grow worse.

"Darkness is good for a sick headache and for neuralgia and for nausea. Haven't you noticed it?"

"Light and darkness—they are remedies recognized at last, and today we prescribe them the same as we do quinine or nux."