

fear a somewhat incoherent explanation—he waved my words aside and said in a level voice:

"Not now, my boy; not now. Wait until we have had dinner. My mind as well as my body craves other food than that gathered from the fields of mystery."

"Do you note that canvas over there?" he added irrelevantly, and pointed to a brilliantly colored painting hung just over the couch.

My eyes followed his pointing finger, to rest upon the celebrated modern picture in oil, "The Dice Throwers of Tunis." I nodded.

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"Not Raphael or Velasquez nor Titian could have done that, my boy," he continued. They didn't know enough about light refraction in those days, and yet I doubt if the man who did that gem of color will ever take rank with those whose names I have just mentioned. We are learning and doing so many things in these piping times that he who does not achieve the unusual is the exception, one might almost say, and not the rule, and it therefore follows that the exceptional has become the commonplace."

Whereafter my friend plunged into one of those abstract monologues which are the delight of those who know him.

At table thirty minutes later he told me that he had hazardous work to do that night and that he wished me to accompany him. That was the only reference he made to the work in hand. He talked, it seemed to me as he ate, about everything under the sun but that which lay next to my heart just then. Whistler's etchings, the state of preparedness of the United States after she had fully realized that preparedness was the best guaranty of peace, the price of United States Steel preferred, and what not. And whatever he touched upon he lit with the Promethian fire of his wit. By the time that we had finished dinner I was almost of a mind to forget work and listen forever to the epigrammatic sallies of Dugald McCalman.

Proof of my companion's winning personality and brilliancy of mind may be found in the fact that long before we had finished dinner he had driven all thoughts of Mrs. Willoughby and her story from my mind, and he had suddenly to break off in an argument in which he maintained that present day newspapers better served the public in detailing accurately the news of the moment than in ramming predigested editorial opinions down the throats of the populace. I, suffering from an editorial bias of which numerous copy readers could give heartfelt testimony, had taken the opposite view. But I will admit that he was delivering some pretty strong attacks on my views when he paused, pulled out his watch and exclaimed: "We have just a little more time than is necessary to hear your report!"

We hurriedly finished our coffee and adjourned to the sitting-room, where, after lighting cigar and cigaret, we began going over all of the happenings since I had seen him. He heard me in silence, or almost in silence, until the end. Only when I related the incident of the abduction of the woman in front of the Willoughby home did he make a sound, and that was to break into a quick gust of laughter, which he suppressed almost at once when I looked at him in surprise. I asked for an explanation of his mirth, but he curtly bade me go on with my story. He did not break in on me again. When I had finished he nodded and said:

"Very good work, Hendy. I thank you. I wish I had time to tell you what I have been about in the meantime. I fancy it would interest you, but our minutes are limited. There are other and more important things to be done to-night. You have already evidenced that you are willing to undergo personal danger, so I need only say in that connection that our quest tonight will be a dangerous one, for we shall go into the lion's den to see what we shall see."

"The things you tell me are impor-

tant," he went on, "and I have time to say that since parting from you I have learned almost of a surety what I have long suspected, and that is that Chicago has become the criminal heart of the world, and that the Eothen Circle, headed by the man who is the master criminal of the ages, holds its secret sessions in this city. I believe that this man, who after the great war began attempted to set up headquarters in London, only to be balked by the police there, has chosen Chicago to be the hub about which his evil webs are spun. And I must say that, knowing the police laxity of the city wherein honest policemen and detectives avoid making arrests for fear that they will break in on the financial arrangements of their superiors, I have long wondered that the great 'Bos' did not come earlier to Chicago."

"Tonight we go to look upon this great 'Bos' if it is possible to do so. He is indeed an interesting man—interesting and the craftiest devil that ever held the laws of men and God in contempt. If we are so fortunate as to find him, Hendy, look well upon him, for without a doubt Hermann Swartzberger is the master criminal of all times. Had he turned his talents into lawful channels the world would have benefited much. It is strange that the great ones, both the good and the bad, often spring from the humblest sources."

"And now for our start," added McCalman energetically, as he cast aside the smoking butt of his cigar and stood up.

"I will be ready in fifteen minutes," he went on. "You are to follow me, and remember that we are prospective members of the Eothen Circle. I will answer all questions."

My friend disappeared into his bedroom and closed the door behind him. The quarter of an hour passed, during which time I heard him moving about in his room, and now and then whistling snatches of airs from the popular operas.

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Then the door of his bedroom opened and a middle-aged Englishman, floridly stout in appearance, walked out. One hand fondled the tip of a gray mutton chop before his left ear and the other toyed with a spectacular watch charm pendant upon two broad gold bands ranged across the middle of his waistcoat. The hair on his head was gray, with a generous bald spot, top front.

"Great heavens! is it you?" I exclaimed in astonishment.

"Ah, yes indeed, my dear Hendy," he answered in a voice so like that of the pompous and oily Briton who may at once be a graduate of Oxford or Cambridge, and the university of crime, too, for all the public can know, that I broke into a gale of laughter.

We got into our overcoats and went out into the night.

"We can pick up a taxi at the Mowrie street station," said my friend as we headed in that direction.

It had grown cloudy during the afternoon and there was a hint of new snow in the air. The night was starless, and down the long street swaying arc lights splashed the darkness with vivid blobs of color and made ghostly shadows of the creaking branches of the leafless trees.

My friend's declaration that we were bound for the rendezvous of the world's master criminal piqued my youthful imagination. "Not even old Haroun," I thought, had ever set out on a more alluring trail than that which our feet were following.

The cold night, lit only by golden globes of fire, gave a picturesque setting that stirred me strangely, as the unknown always stirs us, especially if we are young.

For what did I know of what lay at the end of this night's trail? I knew that I was going to see Hermann Swartzberger, the world's greatest criminal, and that the mission was a dangerous one; beyond these things I knew nothing. When and where we would find the

great "Bos," what dangers encompassed us on the undertaking—these things I did not know. I did know, however, that had my friend considered it necessary for me to be more fully informed he would have told me more. That did not worry me. I had great confidence in Dugald McCalman, and men older than I tell me that it takes youth to follow blindly. Perhaps when I am old I will not follow him or any other man without question. This is a question that I cannot answer until age falls upon me.

For some reason or other, until that night, the adventurous aspects of the quest in which we were engaged had not appealed to me so strongly. Until then it had been more or less a matter of fact proposition. But that night I felt that, with a world of actuality about us, we walked in a land of dreams. Such is the spirit of youth, they tell me. Well, if they speak truly, then of life's gifts the spirit of youth is the most precious, and I will strive to keep it by me until the end.

McCalman spoke not a word all the way to the station. He found a taxi, and with a curt "The Graystone" stepped inside. I followed him. We had ridden perhaps half the distance in silence, when he said to me:

"If it comes to a fight, Hendy, use your revolver freely. We deal with dangerous men, and they are desperate in close quarters."

The remainder of the ride was traveled in silence.

Once inside the taxi, that illusory sense which had taken hold on me so strongly abated somewhat, with a corresponding increase in the sense of actuality and action. I still felt that I was going on an unknown and unusual quest, fraught with danger, but the world seemed to have drawn closer, bringing with it a feeling of loss. Fascinated, I watched the shifting streets flash by the open window from which I gazed. I thrilled to the primal call of danger. Down in my overcoat pocket my nervous fingers gripped the short handle of my little revolver—the same handle which I had crashed against the skull of that savage dog in the apartment in Donchester street. This was the mood that held me in its spell when the car drew up in front of the hotel, forty-five minutes after leaving the rooms of my friend. As we stepped out onto the pavement I glanced up at the big clock set in the granite arch above the hotel entrance and noted that it was five minutes after 9 o'clock.

McCalman paid our fares and we crossed the pavement and stepped briskly into the green and gold lobby.

My friend made his way directly to the desk, while I, fearing that some of my acquaintances among the hotel clerks on duty might take up time, awaited him near the elevators. Within two minutes he had returned. I followed him into an elevator and we were lifted to the sixth floor.

I could not but note the wonderful manner in which my friend carried off his disguise. He would have made a great criminal or a great actor before the footlights.

Leaving the car, I followed him to a door on which the number 624 appeared in brass figures. He rapped sharply. The door was flung open immediately.

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CHAPTER XX.

A Room in Modern Bagdad.

A TALL flunky stood bowing before us. "We wish to speak to Mr. Steinfeldt," said McCalman. My friend's pronunciation left nothing to be desired. Here, whatever else he might be, was an Englishman, insistent, mastering, not to be denied.

But the flunky must have had his orders, for he answered: "Mr. Steinfeldt is very busy; may I ask you to state your business?"

By way of answer McCalman drew a blank card from his pocket, scribbled on it for a moment and handed it to the serving man with the words: "Give this

to your master." The doorman bowed and retired into the inner room.

"My name tonight is Gerald Harcourt, yours Amos Quilling," whispered McCalman to me as soon as the door had closed on the man's back. I nodded and looked about the little reception hall in which we stood.

It was the ordinary suite reception-room to be found in all hotels of the better class, simply yet elegantly furnished, and to my untrained eyes presenting nothing unusual. I was, therefore, a bit surprised when my friend turned and walked swiftly back to the door through which we had just come. He began busy-ing himself with the lock.

I saw McCalman draw a long, slender steel instrument from his pocket, and bending down, thrust the thing into the lock. For the first time I noted that the door was equipped with two locks, the larger and stronger of which was set over the other one. It seemed to me that this one had been only recently installed, and it was with this stronger lock that my friend busied himself. McCalman worked with practiced fingers. I stood trembling in my shoes, expecting the return of the servant, and with my gaze shifting between the door through which the man had just departed and the broad back of my friend.

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McCalman seemed to give his instrument a sharp, sudden twist, following which a grating sound reached me. My heart was pounding painfully. The door at the end of the room might open at any minute. If it did, we would find ourselves in devilish straits. McCalman was, of a surety, taking long chances. He gave another wrist turn, drew the instrument from the lock, and turning toward me, thrust it back into his pocket. He crossed the room to his former position. Little beads of perspiration stood on his forehead. I guessed them to be more the result of nervous tension than of physical effort.

My friend was not a moment too soon. He had hardly regained his former station when the door was opened and the serving man let himself back into the hall.

"Mr. Steinfeldt will see you, sir; step this way, please."

I could have cried out in astonishment as I crossed the threshold, for the man who rose slowly from his seat and came languidly forward to meet us, with a cigaret burning between taper fingers, was none other than the man whom I had seen in the home of Armour Fenning, the same who bore so striking a resemblance to the Willoughby butler. The anteroom had been brilliantly lighted, but in the room in which we now stood all of the electric bulbs had been deeply shaded with some material of a dark red color, which shed a soft old rose radiance. The room seemed rather the retreat of some effeminate voluptuary rather than a place wherein great evil plans were made.

The apartment was an exquisite bit of fairyland.

As the man came toward us I could have sworn that he was Thomas Phillips, tricked out in the rest-time trappings of a man of means and degenerated culture. The resemblance seemed stronger to me than it had been on that other occasion.

"How do you do, Mr. Harcourt," greeted our host, advancing and extending a limp hand.

I glanced swiftly back over my shoulder while the two men were exchanging greetings. The door was closed and the serving man had disappeared.

"I have long been desirous of knowing you, Mr. Harcourt," continued our host, speaking to McCalman. His lazy voice went on: "It is always a pleasure to meet a master craftsman in any line."

"And I have long wished to know you, sir," answered my friend. I could have sworn almost at that moment that McCalman had, of a verity, become the part he played.

"And now may I be allowed to pre-