A Terribly Strange Bed

— By —
WILKIE COLLINS

SHORTLY after my education at college was finished I happened to be staying at Paris with an English friend. We were both young men then and lived, I am afraid, rather a wild life in the delightful city of our sojourn. One night we were idling about the neighborhood of the Palais Royal doubtful to what amusement we should next betake ourselves. My friend proposed a visit to Frascati's, but his suggestion was not to my taste. I knew Frascati's, as the French saying is, by heart; had lost and won plenty of five franc pieces there merely for amusement's sake until it was amusement no longer and was thoroughly tired, in fact, of all the ghastly respectabilities of such a social anomaly as a respectable gambling house. "For heaven's sake," said I to my friend, "let us go somewhere where we can see a little genuine, blackguard, poverty stricken gaming, with no false gingerbread glitter thrown over it at all. Let us get away from fashionable Frascati's to a house where they don't mind letting in a man with a ragged coat or a man with no coat, ragged or otherwise." "Very well," said my friend. "We needn't go out of the Palais Royal to find the sort of company you want. Here's the place just before us, as blackguard a place, by all report, as you could possibly wish to see." In another minute we arrived at the door and entered the house.

When we got upstairs and had left our hats and sticks with the doorkeeper, we were admitted into the chief gambling room. We did not find many people assembled there, but few as the men were who looked up at us on our entrance they were all types—lamentably true types—of their respective classes.

We had come to see blackguards, but these men were something worse. There is a comic side, more or less appreciable, in all blackguardism. Here there was nothing but tragedy—mute, weird tragedy. The quiet in the room was horrible. The thin, haggard, long haired young man, whose sunken eyes fiercely watched the turning up of the cards, never spoke; the flabby, fat faced, pimply player who pricked his piece of pasteboard perseveringly to register how often black won and how often red never spoke; the dirty, wrinkled old man, with the vulture eyes and the darned greatcoat, who had lost his last sou and still looked on desperately after he could play no longer, never spoke. Even the voice of the croupier sounded as if it were strangely dulled and thickened in the atmosphere of the room. I had entered the place to laugh, but the spectacle before me was something to weep over. I soon found it necessary to take refuge in excitement from the depression of spirits which was fast stealing on me. Unfortunately I sought the nearest excitement by going to the table and beginning to play. Still more unfortunately, as the event will show, I won—won prodigiously, won incredibly, won at such a rate that the regular players at the table crowded round me and, staring at my stakes with hungry, superstitious eyes, whispered to one another that the English stranger was going to break the bank.

The game was rouge et noir. I had played at it in every city in Europe, without, however, the care or the wish to study the theory of chances, that philosopher's stone of all gamblers, and a gambler in the strict sense of the word I have never been. I was heart whole from the corroding passion for play. My gaming was a mere idle amusement. I never resorted to it by necessity because I never knew what it was to want money. I never practiced it so incessantly as to lose more than I could afford or to gain more than I could coolly pocket without being thrown off my balance by my good luck. In short, I had hitherto frequented gaming tables just as I frequented ballrooms and opera houses—because they amused me and because I had nothing better to do with my leisure hours.

But on this occasion it was very different; now, for the first time in my life, I felt what the passion for play really was. My success first bewildered and then, in the most literal meaning of the word, intoxicated me. Incredible as it may appear, it is nevertheless true, that I only lost when I attempted to estimate chances and played according to previous calculation. If I left everything to luck and staked without any care or consideration, I was sure to win—to win in the face of every recognized probability in favor of the bank. At first some of the men present ventured their money safely enough on my color, but I speedily increased my stakes to sums which they dared not risk. One after another they left off playing and breathlessly looked on at my game.

Still, time after time, I staked higher and higher and still won. The excitement in the room rose to fever pitch. The silence was interrupted by a deep muttered chorus of oaths and exclamations in different languages every time the gold was shoveled across to my side of the table; even the imperturbable croupier dashed his rake on the floor in a (French) fury of astonishment at my success. But one man present preserved his self possession, and that man was my friend. He came to my side and, whispering in English, begged me to leave the place, satisfied with what I had already gained. I must do him the justice to say that he repeated his warnings and entreaties several times and only left me and went away after I had rejected his advice (I was to all intents and purposes gambling drunk) in terms which rendered it impossible for him to address me again that night.

Shortly after he had gone a hoarse voice behind me cried: "Permit me, my dear sir—permit me to restore to their proper place two napoleons which you have dropped. Wonderful luck, sir! I pledge you my word of honor, as an old soldier, in the course of my long experience in this sort of thing I never saw such luck as yours—never! Go on, sir—sacre mille bombes! Go on boldly and break the bank!"

I turned round and saw, nodding and smiling at me with inveterate civility, a tall man dressed in a frogged and braided surtout.

If I had been in my senses, I should have considered him personally as being rather a suspicious specimen of an old soldier. He had goggling, bloodshot eyes, mangy mustaches and a broken nose. His voice betrayed a barrack room intonation of the worst order, and he had the dirtiest pair of hands I ever saw, even in France. These little personal peculiarities exercised, however, no repelling influence on me. In the mad excitement, the reckless triumph of that moment, I was ready to fraternize with anybody who encouraged me in my game. I accepted the old soldier's offered pinch of snuff, clapped him on the back and swore he was the honestest fellow in the world—the most glorious relic of the grand army that I had ever met with. "Go on!" cried my military friend, snapping his fingers in ecstasy. "Go on and win! Break the bank—mille tonnerres, my gallant English comrade, break the bank!"

And I did go on—went on at such a rate that in another quarter of an hour the croupier called out, "Gentlemen, the bank has discontinued for tonight!" All the notes and all the gold in that bank now lay in a heap under my hands; the whole floating capital of the gambling house was waiting to pour into my pockets!

"Tie up the money in your handkerchief, my worthy sir," said the old soldier as I wildly plunged my hands into my heap of gold. "Tie it up as we used to tie up a bit of dinner in the grand army. Your winnings are too heavy for any breeches pockets that ever were sewed. There, that's it—shovel them in, notes and all! Credie, what luck! Stop—another napoleon on the floor! Ah, sacre petit polisson de Napoleon, have I found thee at last? Now then, sir—two tight double knots each way with your honorable permission and the money's safe. Feel it—feel it, fortunate sir—hard and round as a cannon ball— Ah, bah, if they had only fired such cannon balls at us at Austerlitz—nom d'une pipe! If they only had! And now, as an ancient grenadier, as an ex-brave of the French army, what remains for me to do? I ask, what? Simply this—to entreat my valued English friend to drink a bottle of champagne with me and toast the goddess of fortune in foaming goblets before we part."

Excellent ex-brave! Convivial ancient grenadier! Champagne, by all means! An English cheer for an old soldier—hurrah, hurrah! Another English cheer for the goddess Fortune—hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!

"Bravo—the Englishman, the amiable, gracious Englishman, in whose veins circulates the vivacious blood of France! Another glass? Ah, bah—the bottle is empty! Never mind! Vive le vin! I, the old soldier, order another bottle and half a pound of bonbons with it!"

"No, no, ex-brave; never, ancient grenadier! Your bottle last time; my bottle this! Behold it! Toast away, The French army, the great Napoleon, the present company, the croupier, the honest croupier's wife and daughters—if he has any—the ladies generally, everybody in the world!"

By the time the second bottle of champagne was emptied I felt as if I had been drinking liquid fire—my brain seemed all aflame. No excess in wine has ever had this effect on me before in my life. Was it the result of a stimulant acting upon my system when I was in a highly excited state? Was my stomach in a particularly disordered condition, or was the champagne amazingly strong?

"Ex-brave of the French army!" cried I in a mad state of exhilaration, "I am on fire! How are you? You have set me on fire! Do you hear, my hero of Austerlitz? Let us have at third bottle of champagne to put the flame out!"

The old soldier wagged his head, rolled his goggle eyes until I expected to see them slip out of their sockets, placed his dirty forefinger by the side of his broken nose, solemnly ejaculated "Coffee!" and immediately ran off into an inner room.

The word pronounced by the eccentric veteran seemed to have a magical effect on the rest of the company present. With one accord they all rose to depart. Probably they had expected to profit by my intoxication, but, finding that my new friend was benevolently bent on preventing me from getting dead drunk, had now abandoned all hope of thriving pleasantly on my winnings. Whatever their motive might be, at any rate they went away in a body. When the old soldier returned and sat down opposite to me at the table, we had the room to ourselves. I could see the croupier in a sort of vestibule which opened out of it eating his supper in solitude. The silence was now deeper than ever.

A sudden change, too, had come over the ex-brave. He assumed a portentously solemn look, and when he spoke to me again his speech was ornamented by no oaths, enforced by no finger snapping, enlivened by no apostrophes or exclamations.

"Listen, my dear sir," said he in mysteriously confidential tones, "listen to an old soldier's advice. I have been to the mistress of the house (a very charming woman, with a genius for cookery) to impress on her the necessity of making us some particularly strong and good coffee. You must drink this coffee in order to get rid of your little amiable exaltation of spirits before you think of going home—you must, my good and gracious friend! With all that money to take home tonight it is a sacred duty to yourself to have your wits about you. You are known to be a winner to an enormous extent by several gentlemen present tonight, who, in a certain point of view, are very worthy and excellent fellows; but they are mortal men, my dear sir, and they have their amiable weaknesses. Need I say more? Ah, no, no. You understand me! Now, this is what you must do—send for a cabriolet when you feel quite well again, draw up all the windows when you get into it and tell the driver to take you home only through the large and well lighted thoroughfares. Do this, and you and your money will be safe. Do this, and tomorrow you will thank an old soldier for giving you a word of honest advice."

Just as the ex-brave ended his oration in very lachrymose tones the coffee came in, ready poured out in two cups. My attentive friend handed me one of the cups with a bow. I was parched with thirst and drank it off at a draft. Almost instantly afterward I was seized with a fit of giddiness and felt more completely intoxicated than ever. The room whirled round and round furiously; the old soldier seemed to be regularly bobbing up and down before me like the piston of a steam engine. I was half deafened by a violent singing in my ears: a feeling of utter bewilderment, helplessness, idiocy, overcame me. I rose from my chair, holding on by the table to keep my balance, and stammered out that I felt dreadfully unwell—so unwell that I did not know how I was to get home.

"My dear friend," answered the old soldier, and even his voice seemed to be bobbing up and down as he spoke—"my dear friend, it would be madness to go home in your state. You would be sure to lose your money. You might be robbed and murdered with the greatest ease. I am going to sleep here. Do you sleep here too. They make up capital beds in this house. Take one, sleep off the effects of the wine and go home safely with your winnings tomorrow—tomorrow, in broad daylight."

I had but two ideas left—one, that I must never let go hold of my handkerchief full of money; the other, that I must lie down somewhere immediately and fall off into a comfortable sleep. So I agreed to the proposal about the bed and took the offered arm of the old soldier, carrying my money with my disengaged hand. Preceded by the croupier, we passed along some passages and up a flight of stairs into the bedroom which I was to occupy. The ex-brave shook me warmly by the hand, proposed that we should breakfast together and then, followed by the croupier, left me for the night.

I ran to the wash hand stand, drank some of the water in my jug, poured the rest out and plunged my face into it; then sat down in a chair and tried to compose myself. I soon felt better. The change for my lungs from the fetid atmosphere of the gambling room to the cool air of the apartment I now occupied, the almost equally refreshing change for my eyes from the glaring gaslights of the "salon" to the dim, quiet flicker of one bedroom candle, aided wonderfully the restorative effects of cold water. The giddiness left me, and I began to feel a little like a reasonable being again. My first thought was of the risk of sleeping all night in a gambling house; my second, of the still greater risk of trying to get out after the house was closed and of going home alone at night through the streets of Paris with a large sum of money about me. I had slept in worse places than this on my travels, so I determined to lock, bolt and barricade my door and take my chance till the next morning.

Accordingly I secured myself against all intrusion, looked under the bed and into the cupboard, tried the fastening of the window and then, satisfied that I had taken every proper precaution, pulled off my upper clothing, put my light, which was a dim one, on the hearth among a feathery litter of wood ashes and got into bed with the handkerchief full of money under my pillow.

I soon felt not only that I could not go to sleep, but that I could not even close my eyes. I was wide awake and in a high fever. Every nerve in my body trembled; every one of my senses seemed to be preternaturally sharpened. I tossed and rolled and tried every kind of position and perseveringly sought out the cold corners of the bed, but all to no purpose. Now I thrust my arms over the clothes; now I poked them under the clothes; now I violently shot my legs straight out down to the bottom of the bed; now I convulsively coiled them up as near my chin as they would go; now I shook out my crumpled pillow, changed it to the cool side, patted it flat and lay down quietly on my back; now I fiercely doubled it in two, set it up on end, thrust it against the board of the bed and tried a sitting posture. Every effort was in vain. I groaned with vexation as I felt that I was in for a sleepless night.

What could I do? I had no book to read, and yet, unless I found out some method of diverting my mind, I felt certain that I was in the condition to imagine all sorts of horrors, to rack my brain with forebodings of every possible and impossible danger; in short, to pass the night in suffering all conceivable varieties of nervous terror.

I raised myself on my elbow and looked about the room—which was brightened by a lovely moonlight pouring straight through the window—to see if it contained any pictures or ornaments that I could at all clearly distinguish. While my eyes wandered from wall to wall a reminchrance of Le Maistre's delightful little book, "Voyage Autour de Ma Chambre," occurred to me. I resolved to imitate the French author and find occupation and amusement enough to relieve the tedium of my wakefulness by making a mental inventory of every article of furniture I could see and by following up to their sources the multitude of associations which even a chair, a table or a wash hand stand may be made to call forth.

In the nervous, unsettled state of my mind at that moment I found it much easier to make my inventory than to make my reflections and thereupon soon gave up all hope of thinking in Le Maistre's fanciful track, or, indeed, of thinking at all. I looked about the room at the different articles of furniture and did nothing more.

There was, first, the bed I was lying in; a four post bed—of all things in the world to meet with in Paris—yes, a thoroughly clumsy, British four poster, with a regular top lined with chintz, the regular fringed valance all round, the regular stifling, unwholesome curtains, which I remembered having mechanically drawn back against the posts without particularly noticing the bed when I first got into the room. Then there was the marble topped wash hand stand, from which the water I had spilled in my hurry to pour it out was still dripping slowly and more slowly on to the brick floor. Then two small chairs, with my coat, waistcoat and trousers hung on them. Then a large elbow chair covered with dirty white dimity, with my cravat and shirt collar thrown over the back. Then a chest of drawers with two of the brass handles off and a tawdry, broken china inkstand placed on it by way of ornament for the top. Then the dressing table, adorned by a very small looking glass and a very large pincushion. Then the window—an unusually large window. Then a dark old picture which the feeble candle dimly showed me. It was the picture of a fellow in a high Spanish hat, crowned with a plume of towering feathers—a swarthy, sinister ruffian, shading his eyes with his hand and looking intently upward. It might be, at some tall gallows on which he was going to be hanged. At any rate, he had the appearance of thoroughly deserving it.

This picture put a kind of constraint upon me to look upward, too—at the top of the bed. It was a gloomy and not an interesting object, and I looked back at the picture. I counted the feathers in the man's hat. They stood out in relief—three white, two green. I observed the crown of his hat, which was of a conical shape, according to the fashion supposed to have been favored by Guido Fawkes. I wondered what he was looking up at. It couldn't be at the stars. Such a desperado was neither astrologer nor astronomer. It must be at the high gallows, and he was going to be hanged presently. Would the executioner come into possession of his conical crowned hat and plume of feathers? I counted the feathers again—three white, two green.

While I still lingered over this very improving and intellectual employment my thoughts insensibly began to wander. The moonlight shining into the room reminded me of a certain moonlight night in England—the night after a picnic party in a Welsh valley. Every incident of the drive homeward, through lovely scenery, which the moonlight made lovelier than ever, came back to my remembrance, though I had never given the picnic a thought for years; though, if I had tried to recollect it, I could certainly have recalled little or nothing of that scene long past. Of all the wonderful faculties that help to tell us we are immortal which speaks the sublime truth more eloquently than memory? Here was I in a strange house of the most suspicious character, in a situation of uncertainty and even of peril which might seem to make the cool exercise of my recollection almost out of the question, nevertheless remembering, quite involuntarily, places, people, conversations, minute circumstances of every kind which I had thought forgotten forever, which I could not possibly have recalled at will even under the most favorable auspices. And what cause had produced in a moment the whole of this strange, complicated, mysterious effect? Nothing but some rays of moonlight shining in at my bedroom window.

I was still thinking of the picnic, of our merriment on the drive home, of the sentimental young lady who would quote "Childe Harold" because it was moonlight, I was absorbed by these past scenes and past amusements when in an instant the thread on which my memories hung snapped asunder. My attention immediately came back to present things more vividly than ever, and I found myself, I neither knew why nor wherefore, looking hard at the picture again.

Looking for what?

Good God! The man had pulled his hat down on his brows! No; the hat itself was gone! Where was the conical crown? Where the feathers—three white, two green? Not there! In place of the hat and feathers what dusky object was it that now hid his forehead, his eyes, his shading hand?

Was the bed moving?

I turned on my back and looked up. Was I mad, drunk, dreaming, giddy again or was the top of the bed really moving down, sinking slowly, regularly, silently, horribly, right down throughout the whole of its length and breadth, right down upon me as I lay underneath?

My blood seemed to stand still. A deadly, paralyzing coldness stole all over me as I turned my head round on the pillow and determined to test whether the bed top was really moving or not by keeping my eye on the man in the picture.

The next look in that direction was enough. The dull, black, frowzy outline of the valance above me was within an inch of being parallel with his waist. I still looked breathlessly, and steadily and slowly—very slowly—I saw the figure and the line of frame below the figure vanish as the valance moved down before it.

I am, constitutionally, anything but timid. I have been on more than one occasion in peril of my life and have not lost my self possession for an instant, but when the conviction first settled on my mind that the bed top was really moving, was steadily and continuously sinking down upon me, I looked up, shuddering, helpless, panic stricken beneath the hideous machinery for murder, which was advancing closer and closer to suffocate me where I lay.

I looked up, motionless, speechless, breathless. The candle, fully spent, went out, but the moonlight still brightened the room. Down and down, without pausing and without sounding, came the bed top, and still my panic terror seemed to bind me faster and faster to the mattress on which I lay. Down and down it sank till the dusty odor from the lining of the canopy came stealing into my nostrils.

At that final moment the instinct of self preservation startled me out of my trance, and I moved at last. There was just room for me to roll myself sideways off the bed. As I dropped noiselessly to the floor the edge of the murderous canopy touched me on the shoulder.

Without stopping to draw my breath, without wiping the cold sweat from my face, I rose instantly on my knees to watch the bed top. I was literally spellbound by it. If I had heard footsteps behind me, I could not have turned round. If a means of escape had been miraculously provided for me, I could not have moved to take advantage of it. The whole life in me was, at that moment, concentrated in my eyes.

It descended. The whole canopy, with the fringe round it, came down—down, close down—so close that there was not room now to squeeze my finger between the bed top and the bed. I felt at the sides and discovered that what had appeared to me from beneath to be the ordinary light canopy of a four post bed was in reality a thick, broad mattress, the substance of which was concealed by the valance and its fringe. I looked up and saw the four posts rising hideously bare. In the middle of the bed top was a huge wooden screw that had evidently worked it down through a hole in the ceiling, just as ordinary presses are worked down on the substance selected for compression. The frightful apparatus moved without making the faintest noise. There had been no creaking as it came down. There was now not the faintest sound from the room above. Amid a dead and awful silence I beheld before me in the nineteenth century and in the civilized capital of France such a machine for secret murder by suffocation as might have existed in the worst days of the Inquisition in the lonely inns among the Harz mountains, in the mysterious tribunals of Westphalia. Still as I looked on it I could not move. I could hardly breathe, but I began to recover the power of thinking, and in a moment I discovered the murderous conspiracy framed against me in all its horror.

My cup of coffee had been drugged and drugged too strongly. I had been saved from being smothered by having taken an overdose of some narcotic. How I had chafed and fretted at the fever fit which had preserved my life by keeping me awake! How recklessly I had confided myself to the two wretches who had led me into this room, determined for the sake of my winnings to kill me in my sleep by the surest and most horrible contrivance for secretly accomplishing my destruction! How many men, winners like me, had slept, as I had proposed to sleep, in that bed and had never been seen or heard of more! I shuddered at the bare idea of it.

But ere long all thought was again suspended by the sight of the murderous canopy moving once more. After it had remained on the bed, as nearly as I could guess, about ten minutes it began to move up again. The villains who worked it from above evidently believed that their purpose was now accomplished. Slowly and silently, as it had descended, that horrible bed top rose toward its former place. When it reached the upper extremities of the four posts, it reached the ceiling too. Neither hole nor screw could be seen. The bed became in appearance an ordinary bed again, the canopy an ordinary canopy, even to the most suspicious eyes.

Now, for the first time, I was able to move, to rise from my knees, to dress myself in my upper clothing and to consider how I should escape. If I betrayed by the smallest noise that the attempt to suffocate me had failed, I was certain to be murdered. Had I made any noise already? I listened intently, looking toward the door.

No; no footsteps in the passage outside, no sound of a tread, light or heavy, in the room above; absolute silence everywhere. Besides locking and bolting my door, I had moved an old wooden chest against it, which I had found under the bed. To remove this chest (my blood ran cold as I thought of what its contents might be) without making some disturbance was impossible, and, moreover, to think of escaping through the house, now barred up for the night, was sheer insanity. Only one chance was left me—the window. I stole to it on tiptoe.

My bedroom was on the first floor, above an entresol, and looked into the back street.

With caution I raised my hand to open the window, knowing that on that action hung by the merest hairbreadth my chance of safety. They keep vigilant watch in a house of murder. If any part of the frame cracked, if the hinge creaked, I was a lost man. It must have occupied me at least five minutes, reckoning by time—five hours, reckoning by suspense—to open that window. I succeeded in doing it silently, in doing it with all the dexterity of a housebreaker, and then looked down into the street. To leap the distance beneath me would be almost certain destruction. Next I looked round at the sides of the house. Down the left side ran a thick water pipe which seemed very solid. It passed close by the outer edge of the window. The moment I saw the pipe I knew I was saved. My breath came and went freely for the first time since I had seen the canopy of the bed moving down upon me.

To some men the means of escape which I had discovered might have seemed difficult and dangerous enough. To me the prospect of slipping down the pipe into the street did not suggest even a thought of peril. I had always been accustomed by the practice of gymnastics to keep up my schoolboy powers as a daring and expert climber, and I knew that my head, hands and feet would serve me faithfully in any hazards of ascent or descent. I had already got one leg over the window sill when I recollected the handkerchief filled with money under my pillow. I could well have afforded to leave it behind me, but I was revengefully determined that the miscreants of the gambling house should miss their plunder as well as their victim. So I went back to the bed and tied the heavy handkerchief at my back by my cravat.

Just as I had made it tight and fixed it in a comfortable place I thought I heard a sound of breathing outside the door. The chill feeling of horror ran through me again as I listened. No; dead silence still in the passage. I had only heard the night air blowing softly into the room. The next moment I was on the window sill, and the next I had a firm grip on the water pipe with my hands and knees.

I slid down into the street easily and quietly, as I thought I should, and immediately set off at the top of my speed to a branch "prefecture" of police which I knew was situated in the immediate neighborhood. A "subprefect" and several picked men among his subordinates happened to be up, maturing, I believe, some scheme for discovering the perpetrator of a mysterious murder which all Paris was talking of just then. When I began my story in a breathless hurry and in very bad French, I could see that the subprefect suspected me of being a drunken Englishman who had robbed somebody, but he soon altered his opinion as I went on, and before I had anything like concluded he shoved all the papers before him into a drawer, put on his hat, supplied me with another, for I was bareheaded, ordered a file of soldiers, desired his expert followers to get ready all sorts of tools for breaking open doors and ripping up brick flooring and took my arm in the most friendly and familiar manner possible to lead me with him out of the house. I will venture to say that when the subprefect was a little boy and was taken for the first time to the play he was not half as much pleased as he was now at the job in prospect for him at the gambling house.

Away we went through the streets, the subprefect cross examining and congratulating me in the same breath as we marched at the head of our formidable posse comitatus. Sentinels were placed at the back and front of the house the moment we got to it. A tremendous battery of knocks was directed against the door. A light appeared at a window. I was told to conceal myself behind the police. Then came more knocks and a cry of "Open in the name of the law!" At the terrible summons bolts and locks gave way before an invisible hand, and the moment after the subprefect was in the passage, confronting a waiter half dressed and ghastly pale. This was the short dialogue which immediately took place:

"We want to see the Englishman who is sleeping in this house."

"He went away hours ago."

"He did no such thing. His friend went away. He remained. Show us his bedroom!"

"I swear to you, M. le Sous-prefect, he is not here. He"—

To be Continued.

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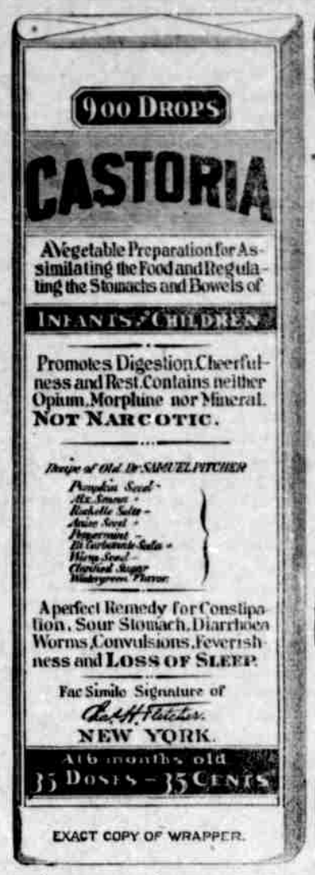

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