SIMON IFF - PSYCHOANALYST

STERILIZED STEPHEN

No. 4.

"Take an arm-chair, young lady," said Simon Iff genially. "Every man and every woman is a star. Dobson, tell Nankipoo to bring the drinks and gaspers."

The woman addressed sank into a chair rather than took it. She covered her face with her hands and began to wipe away the tears with a corner of her ragged gawdy skirt. Iff scrutinized her in silence.

"Explain the Law," said he when Dobson returned from his errand. "After that, leave us alone."

"It's this way," said the chauffeur, "as I understand it. Mr. Iff says that we are all really sort of gods who have disguised ourselves as men and women ~~sx~~ for the sake of the experience; and life on earth is always so painful and hideous that we are all first-class heroes simply for getting ourselves born. We ought all to respect each other for what we really are and for what we have done. It doesn't make any odds what particular rig we've got ourselves up in. Sit up and smile, lass, and talk to Mr. Iff as if he were your own twin brother."

"That'll do, Dobson," said Mr. Iff; "I am her own twin brother."

The girl lifted her head. The bitter years had taught her to read strange men at a glance. She saw respect and sympathy in the Magician's face. There was no hint of patronage or anything else that could wound the most sensitive spirit. Shesmiled timidly. Dobson left the room as the Japanese servant served the refreshments.

"Not bad stuff. May I fill your glass again?"

The girl nodded. The ~~sxx~~ stimulant had given her courage.

"Righto," said Simon, "tell me the whole trouble, Young un."

She began to stammer - "I don't know how I'm here," she managed to get out at last.

Iff answered her. "Simple enough, my dear. It's one of Dobson's duties to keep his eyes open for beauty in distress. Whenever he spots any one in need of any kind, he helps them out; and if he finds the job beyond him he brings the business to me."

"I thought he was your chauffeur," said the girl, as if the Magician's statement were somewhat surprising.

"So he is," cried Iff. "But then, what is a chauffeur?"

Doesn't the word mean one who warms things up? He saw you shivering in this cold world. That's all."

She still seemed puzzled. Simon sighed.

"Alas, I see that you have been taught to think of a servant as somehow inferior to his master. Dobson is my colleague, a star whose business happens to be to shove another star along the streets."

The wine was beginning to work in the girl. She began to recover from the obsession of her surroundings. She had never imagined the possibility of so gorgeous a room as Iff's. The sober splendour frightened her. She connected it instinctively with wealth and power, and to her wealth and power meant only the hidden horror behind the police - that monster, many-armed, that might pounce upon her at any moment without reason and without warning.

"What kind of a star am I?" she asked, and trembled at her own audacity.

"It's my business to find out," said he; "to find out why you happened to be in this particular disguise; to put you on your proper course; to free you from the forces which have dragged you off it."

She shook her head very slowly and sadly but with decision.

Iff eyed her narrowly.

She sat up straight, gripping the arms of her chair. There was something like a sneer on her lips, something like contempt in her voice.

"Looking for the lost sheep? That game's no good. I'm a goat, and you can't get mutton from me."

"Great," cried Iff. "That's the spirit I like. I'm a bit of a goat myself. Goats will be goats. Did you ever hear what one of the greatest poets and prophets that ever lived said about goats? 'The lust of the goat is the glory of God.'"

The girl's animation increased. It was a new experience for her to be addressed by an apparently respectable member of society except in one of three ways: either it was the coarse familiarity of casual admirers, the sanctimoniou severity of professional philanthropists, or the savage menaces of the police. Iff understood.

"Why in hell should I want to reform you?" he laughed. "I suppose you've had a streak of bad luck. I prescribe a new dress, a new hat, some gloves, and silk stockings with change of scenery. I admit that 8th Avenue, with all its charms, may seem monotonous in the long run. Help yourself," he concluded, tossing his bill-fold into her lap. "Try what the Broad Walk will do for you."

To his surprise, the girl sprang up as if his action had broken some spell that had bound her. She crossed the room like a queen, and handed back the ca Then she burst into a torrent of tears which shook her slight shoulders with tempestuous violence.

Simon took her back to her chair and soothed her. As soon as she was calm, he spoke with curt authority.

"Tell me the whole trouble."

His tone made her mistress of herself.

"All Morgan's millions wouldn't help me - you don't understand. How could you? I've got used to every kind of suffering. I've been sick, I've starved, I've been in gaol! I haven't a friend - I've nothing before me but death - I'm sliding; no one can save me. I don't want to be saved. Thanks for the money - at least for the thought in your heart. But a glimpse of joy would only make my wretchedness harder to bear. I haven't cried for five years."

The natural question shot through Simon's mouth. "Then why were you crying to-day?"

"Not for myself - I'm too hard and too proud. Look at this paper."

Her trembling hands fumbled in a shabby plush bag. She handed a slip torn from the columns of an "Evening Journal" to Simon. It was a police report. It recorded the conviction of Stephen Adams, aged 23, assistant cashier in the offic of a well-known firm of stock-brokers. The charge was 'theft' of a number of Liberty Bonds. Few details were given; but the method of the robbery had been the abstraction of a number of bonds from a packet, detection having been post - poned by replacing them by Bolshevik-manufactured forgeries. The sentence had been Draconic. Even the employers had asked mercy on the ground of the boy's previous good character, and the element of doubt as to his guilt caused by the failure of the prosecution to trace either the disposal of the stolen goods, or the way in which the Russian bonds came into his possession.

But the judge was 'determined to stamp out that sort of thing' and put on his heaviest boots.

Simon returned the paper to his guest with a gesture of inquiry.

"Stephen's my brother," she said.

"And you are very fond of each other?" asked Iff.

She hung her head dejectedly. "He cast me off when I went wrong. I have seen him since."

Iff's respect for the girl increased once more. Why should she take so much to heartthe punishment of the Pharisee? Her intuition read his thought

"I was like a mother to Stephen," she murmered. I'm seven years older. Mother died when he was born, and father two years later. Aunt Dorcas, his s ter, brought us up. She did her best for us both. She was ever so kind; bu dreadfully strict. I was always bad at heart, I'm afraid. I wanted my own and it brought me to what I am. But he was a dandy kid, clever and good as

one could possibly be. He seemed to take naturally to all her ideas. He was the model boy of the whole town. I'm sorry to say, I despised him for his goodness. I thought he was a sissy; maybe that's why I mothered him so much. I was 20 when Aunt Dorcas died. She left us all she had - it wasn't much, just over $2000. We stayed on in the flat. Stephen finished his schooling; but I couldn't send him to college, though he was such a splendid scholar and took heaps of prizes. I might have worked it if I hadn't run wild. But as soon as I found myself free, I was like a crazy thing, and before I knew it I had gone wrong with a boy who came down our way fishing for the summer. He knew all the tricks. When he knew what he had done, he wouldn't marry me, but he sent me to a wicked doctor. I was sick for a long while, and somehow they found out in the town what my trouble was. When I tried to get back to my old job, I was thrown out. It was the same everywhere. I came to New York and begged my boy to be decent; to help me out about Stephen. He got him a job in his father's office.

As for me, he was tired of my troubles. He wanted pleasure withoutpaying for it. I got work, and found it wouldn't keep me from starving. I had and another girl decided to do the usual thing. We went for the High lights on Broadway; and year after year we were driven further and further to skulk in the shadows."

She swallowed a lump in her throat. Iff seemed to be looking, not at her, but beyond her. His eyes glowed with angry bitterness. He was thinking of the stupidity of society.

"Don't you feel any resentment against your brother?" he asked tonelessly

"Why should I? I'm proud that he is good. He's right to disown me."

"It seems that we are likely to quarrel," snorted Iff. "I prefer your career to his. You only obeyed your nature: your misfortunes come from other people's meanness, while Stephen, with every chance in his favour, turned thie and stole so stupidity that I haven't a spark of sympathy for him; His virtue make him viler."

The woman flared up in fury. "But he isn't guilty," she shouted, "how dare you?"

Iff was impressed. "I suppose you are so sureof him because you know hi so well. But let me tell you that it never surprises me to find puritanicall virtuous people coming a cropper, especially when they are so well aware how they are, and when they prefer their respectability to natural human feeling

She remembered a good many similar cases. Her faith staggered for a mo and then asserted itself with augmented certainty.

"Not Stephen," she cried. "He was always genuinely good. He never ha idea of revolt."

"My dear girl!" said Iff, "I admire you temendously, but can't you se you are simply arguing against yourself? Stephen, as you describe him, is

a straw man, a weakling with no will of his own. Temptation would knock him over like a ninepin."

"Oh, how I wish I could show you how wrong you are! He wasn't merely obedient, he loved goodness for its own sake. He was active and eager to be better than he was asked to be. You know how dirty boys are; they seem to enjoy mud. Stephen could never endure a speck of dust on his clothes. His linen, his hands, his shoes - you couldn't have found dirt on them with a microscope. A boy can't do that just by passive trying to please. After Aunt Dorcas died, instead of getting slack and being influenced by my own carelessness, he got almost crazy about keeping himself clean. He read lots of learned books about germs. He was always disinfecting everything, from saucepans to doorknobs. He wouldn't kiss me for fear of germs. He always wore gloves, even at night, because of a story in a Sunday paper about the danger of infection from finger-nails. He was a joke in the office - they called him Sterilized Stephen."

Simon Iff had been twisting his mouth as if a curious flavour had touched it. He cleared his throat as he rose from his chair.

"Look here, young woman," he said, standing over her, "I doubt very much whether your sublime confidence amounts to anything; but you interest me enormously, and so does Stephen in a rather whimsical fashion. I'll look into the case for you and do what I can; but don't be silly enough to hope too much. Don't worry yourself; face the facts. Believe in yourself. Take these bills from Stephen's brother and yours; trot off to Atlantic City and let the breeze have a chance at your lungs. Come back here in a week, and perhaps I may have something to tell you."

He jotted down the name and that of the Brokers'; and took her to the do himself. They shook hands. Her grasp was so steady and so firm that he felt, in spite of himself, that her faith was something more than the passionate pro test of the bigot against the blasphemer who overthrows his idol.

II.

The next morning, Simon Iff called on the stockbrokers. Mr. Lubeck, the senior partner, was a middle-aged man whose natural kindness of heart had no been destroyed by the racket of the Street. He shook his head when Iff expl his errand. It was evident that he thought it Quixotic. But Stephen Adams been a special favourite, and Lubeck would have done much more to restore hi belief in the boy than Iff required. He explained the circumstances briefl clearly.

"Adams worked in a compartment shut off from the main office, with the cashier Hobbs, who had been twenty years with the firm, and another assista Jackson, of about Stephen's own age. On the day of the theft, Jackson had absent - suffering from influenza. A packet of bonds had been handed to A that he might inscribe their numbers in the appropriate register. He was hand the packet to the messenger for delivery to the customer, after havir placed them in an envelope and sealed them. The bonds were handed to Ada exactly a quarter to twelve. They had been carefully checked by one of t ners on taking them from the safe, and examined by another partner. Both

absolutely sure that none of the bonds were forgeries. The forged bonds, incidentally, were poor imitations; besides which, all dealers had been warned by the Treasury that systematic attempts were being made to circulate them. Everybody was in consequence very much on his guard. It is thus certain that Adams had received the genuine bonds, and moreover, he had entered the members conformably to the record of the bank which had issued them.

"Adams had himself sealed the package, and handed it to the messenger, who had locked it up at once in his satchel, and gone straight to the customer. This latter had taken the envelope at once to his bank, where the cashier broke the seals, and discovered at once that all the bonds except two, those at the top and bottom, were forgeries. The bank telephoned to Lubeck, who called the police. It was proved that nobody had entered the cashier's office except Hobbs, who had been out on some errand, in the building, and darted hurriedly in for his hat and coat, and out again in less than half a minute. His haste had indeed attracted general notice. Detectives found him at his usual restaurant talking volubly and excitedly to a friend. He explained his unusual conduct as due to sudden and severe trouble in his family; enquiry confirmed his statements. He had no discoverable financial anxieties, and was an old and trusted servant of the firm. It was not possible for him to have substituted the forged bonds in full view of Adams who was actually engaged upon them. Hobbs swore that in his hurry he had taken no particular notice of what Adams was doing - yet he was conscious of a vague impression that his sudden entry startled his assistant, and that there was a sort of shuffling among the papers.

Adams had gone to lunch immediately after handing the packet to the messenge The clerks noticed that his face was grey as if with fear, and that his hands were trembling.

He returned an hour later, still agitated, as if he had partially failed to conjure the peril that awaited him. He had spent the hour, not at lunch, but in a crazy dash up town to his boarding-house, where he had stayed less than ten minutes.

It being physically impossible for any other person to have committed the theft, he was tackled outright. He met the charge with stubborn denial. He ad mitted the logic of the situation fearlessly and firmly. He confessed that he could not suggest any alternative to the obvious conclusion. But he stuck stoutly to his statement. It was very striking to observe that his agitation ceased instantly when he heard the accusation. He was frightfully pale, but t calmest man in the office. "I can't excuse it; I can't explain it. I didn't it. It's beyond imagination. I am in the hands of God." They walked him off those words.

Simon Iff mused awhile over this story. He recognized despite the wide vergence of form, the almost fanatical faith and firmness of the sister in th the brother. Her integrity in her infamy was the same as his in his innocence; a the certainty of her candour as a sinner induced him to put confidence in his a saint!

"This is your first robbery; by the way?"

"Why, no!" cried Lubeck suddenly troubled, without quite knowing why. "We've had more than I care to think about, right along for years and years. The fact is, Mr. Iff, I'm what they call an easy mark. I like to trust people; Wall Street is wasted on me. I can't seem to learn sense - the truth is, I guess, that I won't. I'd sooner be a sucker than sour on humanity."

"Mr. Lubeck," said Iff, his eyes very bright, "You're a pretty good man of business, from my point of view. You've had the good sense not to sell your soul to save a few dollars; the power to love and trust is a man's best asset when he balances the books of his life."

"That's about the way I feel," returned the broker, simply. "Do you see any way out for Stephen? I'd give more than a cancelled coupon this hadn't happened."

"May I look at the office?"

"Sure; this way."

"Don't hope enough to hurt yourself," Iff warned him; "I can't see one spark. Yet I feel a sort of feeble flutter somewhere as if something might turn up. Is that the scene of the crime?"

"Yep," answered Lubeck, his hand on the knob of the door.

They went in. Hobbes and Jackson were busy on the books; they stood up respectfully as their employer appeared.

Iff swept the room with his glance. Its walls and roof were of opaque glass, framed in varnished oak. All was spotless and orderly, from the desks to the safe. There was no way to enter the room save the one door; the windows had not even a sill, and opened on a sheer smooth wall ninety feet above Broadway.

Lubeck, following his guest's eyes, volunteered that on the day of the theft the window had been closed, as a bitter wind was blowing, with sleet.

"Not a place for a rabbit to hide," remarked the broker, sadly.

"Unless in some conjurer's hat," laughed Simon, touching a 'Derby' that hung from a peg behind the door. A thought seemed to strike him; his eyes darted from the hat to the two men.

The second hat was of soft felt, old and much worn, but well kept, while the 'Derby', though nearly new, bore marks of grease. One might have fancied it begging to be brushed.

There was no need to enquire which of the men owned it. Jackson was dressed in shabby shoddy; it shone where the nap had been rubbed smooth. But the trousers had been carefully pressed, and the cuffs of the cheap cotton shirt were protected by paper.

Hobbs, on the contrary, with far better clothes, was careless about them. His whole appearance was that of some eccentric recluse, too much absorbed in

study to pay attention to externals. Lubeck introduced him as the best cashier in 'little old New York.' "He lives for his work; we have to wake him up to go home."

Iff recognized the eyes of an enthusiast; the man evidently itched to get back to his books. But the Magician was not interested in the merits of Hobbs; He was looking for something out of the common, something that nobody had noticed. A trifle might tell him more than a treatise, just as the almost imperceptible abberation of a planet indicates some invisible influence more significant than all the rest of its orbit.

There was only one object in the office which seemed superfluous in that ideally efficient and economical arrangement. Everything was planned for three people, from the chairs and the telephone to the blotters and the hat-pegs. The third man being out, the third peg was vacant; and Iff, as he mentally recorded this instance of the fitness of things, was reminded of a minute matter that meant nothing, that had not aroused any augmented attention. In a recess on the wall near the window there was a fourth hat-peg. Simon swerved sharply from the door, and inspected his intrusive superfluity that insulted the three-ness of the furniture. He pointed an enquiring finger at it as he noted that it looked newer than its rivals for the rapture of being garnished with headgear and overcoats.

He heard Hobbs chuckle, and Jackson giggle, over his shoulder.

"A painful subject," said the cashier. "I hate to think of it. That hook was put up to humour a fad of ~~xxx~~ poor old 'Sterilized Stephen'. I guess you've heard the story. Goldurn it, I'd give a month's pay to think we ALL got it wrong."

Jackson was angry with himself for having laughed, and murmered something about how horrible was Temptation.

"Temptation, hell," growled Hobbs, "must have known he'd be spotted straight off. My belief is that he went plumb crazy, didn't know what he was doing. Seems to me that fool fad of his about dirt and germs was a sign he had bats in his belfry. Wouldn't hang his things up with ours, what d'ye know about that?"

Simon Iff had turned to face the speaker.

"Mr. Hobbs, let me thank you most heartily for your remarks. I believe in my soul that you have thrown very full light on the case. I must go off now - but I hope to see you again very soon - perhaps to thank you for helping me to get an innocent lad out of prison."

Five minutes later, Simon Iff was on his way to apply for a permit to visit the convicted cashier.

III

It was three days later when the Magician stepped from his automobile across the threshold of the Gaol where Stephen Adams was serving the first weeks of his sentence. He had taken unusual pains with his toilet. "Mollie," my dear, I must look as if I had sprung out of a handbox," he had insisted, and Mollie had been

made to assure him over and over, with the most terrific oaths, that she had removed the most obstinate staphylococcus from the last square millimetre of his coat.

His first act was to hand the governor of the prison an order to permit an investigation of the mental conditions of the convict Stephen Adams. "It would be charming if you and the prison doctor would agree to witness my little experiment," he purred, "it's a bit out of the usual lines." The governor assented cordially enough, and sent for the medical officer. The three men found Adams in his cell. He appeared exhausted as if by severe mental strain, but stood up readily enough at the summons.

"I prefer not to explain the object of my enquiry at present," began Iff: "I merely beg that you gentlemen will make careful notes of the prisoner's reactions to what I say or do.

He then approached the convict, and began a conversation with him, cheerful in tone, and trivial in subject. As he talked he made violent gestures, touching the boy several times. Once he dropped his note book: it was instantly picked up and returned to him. After some ten minutes of this, Iff turned suddenly to the witnesses, and asked if they had remarked anything unusual. Both shook their heads. They seemed surprised that Iff showed no disappointment.

"Perfectly sane? Perfectly normal?" Iff asked.

"As any of us."

"Quite perfect," came the answers.

"Every faculty in full free function?"

"Certainly," the governor nodded.

"Much above the average all around," affirmed the doctor.

Iff turned to the prisoner, and resumed the thread of his previous remarks. His manner was in all respects unchanged; yet after a few seconds Stephen started back, as if he had received a blow. His face paled; his eyes glared in horror; he shrank back trembling from the magician as if he saw a ghost. He struggled to answer Iff's questions, but did so at random, either misunderstanding what was said or replying irrationally. The Magician worried him twice round the cell, and then left him shuddering in a corner. He next proceeded to execute a fantastic war-dance, with howls, ending in a double somersault. He then returned to the door and requested the doctor to ask Adams to describe what had taken place.

The convict made a powerful effort to control himself. As he spoke, he recovered little by little. He gave a more or less connected account of the conversation, but omitted to report the majority of Iff's actions. The doctor prompting him, he acknowledged with apologies that he had "somehow forgotten;" but he denied positively that the final dance had ever taken place.

The officials signalled their bewilderment.

"What does it mean?" cried the governor.

"May I tell you in your room?"

The governor nodded; the visitors retired, Iff waving his hand to the prisoner, and bidding him count confidently on being out in a month at most.

"First of all, gentlemen," said Simon Iff, settling himself in a huge leather chair, "I may assume that you have no doubts as to the genuineness of the behaviour of that boy?"

"Barring your having put him up to it, which is absurd, it's impossible. It would be senseless."

"He had no idea of your object," chimed in the governor; "nor, for that matter, have we!"

"Next," pursued Simon. "Will you please examine me closely. "Am I in any way altered since I was last in this room?"

Inspection gave negative results.

"Tut," cried Iff, "your old gaol wants a wash! Just look at my coat! These cuffs were clean this morning! How did that spot get on my shirt? My nails are simply disgraceful!"

"Search me," laughed one, to conceal his sense of shame.

"Modern psychology offers numerous alternative explanations of the phenomenon," pronounced the other, to smoke-screen his ignorance.

"All I ask you to do is to write a report of the facts as you saw them, and send it to the District Attorney. You'll hear the result in a few days - excuse me, won't you, now, I'm hot on a trail, and ever so many thanks for your kindness and assistance."

He bowed and smiled himself out of the gaol, and told Dobson to 'step on it' all the way back to Gotham. A telephone call secured him the company of Mr. Lubeck at dinner, where he proposed a programme which pleased, even while it puzzled, the kind-hearted old broker.

IV.

Stephen's sister came back from Atlantic City with colour in her cheeks instead of on them; Simon Iff wasted no time in telling her the results of his week's work.

"The hard half has been done, my dear; we know Stephen didn't do it, and we know who did. We know how it was done, what's more; and for that we must blame - you'll never guess - your Aunt Dorcas!"

"Aunt Dorcas!" echoed the girl blankly.

"Nobody else. Let me tell you the whole story as it happened. Here's a boy, kept away from danger (damn the fools) til he is afraid of every mortal thing he hears or sees. It's sin or sickness, hell or hospital, lying in ambush for everything he does! He is never allowed a chance to find out for himself that most of these horrors are bogies. He never faces his fears; they occupy his whole outlook; he devotes himself heart and soul to dodging them. As it happens, he reads a lot of exaggerated rubbish about germs, and his mind is obsessed about them. He becomes 'Sterilized Stephen'. The approach of 'infection' terrifies him clean out of his wits, so that he is unable to see what is in front of his eyes. A cowardly thief is cunning enough to make a plan to take advantage of this. He threatens to touch the boy with some unusually dirty object, knowing that his senses will be paralysed with fear; while Stephen is in this state, he substitutes forged bonds for genuine in the packet on the desk. Your brother sees nothing; ten seconds, and the thief is away. Stephen picks himself up still dazed, with no thought, no reason to think, to examine the bonds. He seals up the packet . . . ."

The girl's teeth were clenched with rage; her breath came hissing through them.

"But why did he bolt uptown?" she asked as Iff paused.

"I suspect he went to his coat for some patent disinfectant he favoured - and that the thief had stolen it, judging that Stephen would rush home for more. He's a good psychologist, the skunk; it all panned out according to schedule."

"How can I ever thank you - I feel frightfully bad about it."

"Nothing done yet, my dear, I'm sorry to say. The last half looks a pretty tough proposition. It's not a soft job to put one over on friend Hobbs - and that's where you come in!"

"I? How?" cried the startled girl.

V.

The gift - or achievement - of Concentration upon the work in hand is a two-edged sword. Having deliberately shut oneself off from full attention to one's surroundings, there remains a penumbra of vague consciousness of what is presented to the senses. As long as everything passes normally, there need be no disquietude, still less disturbance; but when the routine of nature (as it seems to the worker) is disorganised; a very curious and distinctly unpleasant phenomenon takes place. One cannot remain perfectly absorbed in contemplation of the 'bright spot in one's mind' - so to call it. At the same time, the habit of concentration persists, and prevents one from turning one's search-light upon the moving shadows of the background. One realizes dimly that something is going on which is unusual, and demands immediate attention; but one cannot awake sufficiently - unless the disturbance is very serious indeed - to feel sure that one's impressions are justly apprehended. The feeling of uneasiness is on such occasions not that which we associate with straightforward doubt as to what is happening; there is a touch of some equivalent of 'a bad conscience' connected with it. One feels that one ought to be able to describe events accurately, as one could in normal conditions: and the inability to do so takes the form of a sort of timid approach to the observer.

He feels himself somehow an inferior - to himself as he naturally is. Against this the will to concentrate reacts, often with violence: knowing (as one thinks) that whatever it is cannot be of any real importance, and therefore ought not to be allowed to interfere at all with one's work, one pushes it away with tempestuous anger as a weakness. The degree of concentration habitually attained in any case determines the degree of success in this process.

"Now Mr. Hobbs was a man of very considerable development in this great art. Shouting in the street - even a shot - would be dismissed automatically from his mind as none of his business; and if questioned subsequently, it would be hard for him to say whether he had heard it at all; much less, just what he had heard.

Events in his own office would affect him more nearly. His two assistants might go in and out all day as part of their regular duty, and he would not raise his head. He would be subconsciously aware of the approach of Mr. Lubeck and adopt instinctively the proper degree of alertness to greet him. The footsteps of a stranger would arouse him completely, provided that the moral attitude of that stranger, as witnessed by the manner of his tread, might suggest some strikingly unusual interview in posse.

Bent over his books, therefore, he did not consciously notice the return of his two assistants from lunch; for that was the daily occurrence. But when, twenty minutes later, they both rose quietly and left the office, his attention was attracted to the unusual character of the event. And somehow, he got the impression that they were both dressed in the deepest mourning - as they certainly had not been before lunch. But why should they be in such a costume? He worked it all out even as he went on with his figures. They must have lost a relative and obtained permission from Mr. Lubeck to attend the funeral that afternoon. Strange, though, that he should not have been notified. At this point his will indignantly protested. It was no business of his, after all; and - well; he couldn't swear that they were in black, now he put the question directly, though reluctantly enough, to himself. With a final effort he put his foot down, and swept the whole matter out of his mind.

At that moment he heard the approaching step of Mr. Lubeck. "Coming to explain" he registered briefly; half annoyed at the additional distraction. Then he noticed, with genuine alarm - that the well-known tread of his superior was slower and more ponderous than its wont. As the door of the private office opened he lifted his head, as was customary with him, and his face went suddenly white. It was not Mr. Lubeck at all but a Police Inspector in uniform. 'Nonesense', he cried internally, 'I know his step among a million.' 'Are my ears or my eyes at fault?' suddenly clamoured the sentinel of his mind. Testing his eyes by a direct gaze, as he rose to greet the intruder, he was brought up by an 'impossibility' of the most astounding order. Despite the uniform, it was Mr. Lubeck after all!

He growled at himself furiously. He simply could not believe that he was hallucinated about the uniform - and then the memory of his vague impression of seeing the two clerks in mourning unsettled him. Was it then one with an astonishing resemblance to his chief?

That theory died a sudden death; for the new-comer sat down quietly opposite, and began to speak to him casually in the perfectly unmistakeable tones of Mr.

Lubeck.

Before half a dozen sentences had been spoken Hobbs' sentinel was, so to speak, shouting and firing off his rifle. He found it utterly impossible to attend to the slow deliberate utterance, as his duty and habit was.

His mind had already been badly distracted, and his senses were storming at him to account for the appearance of his chief in that absurd uniform. He was so alarmed, psychologically, about his state of mind that he was preternaturally on the alert for any new deviation from the normal. And what assailed him was so subtle and so abnormal that it preoccupied his mind completely. He did not hear a word of what was being said. What he noticed at first vaguely, then with keen curiosity, and finally with terrifying accuracy of recognition, was a most strange, though negative phenomenon. Outside the clang and hubbub of the street continued as ever. But there was some thing missing. Imagine a man lying awake with nervous insomnia - at an inn by a waterfall? He is aware of the ticking of his watch under his pillow. But the watch stops. He is instantly alarmed. It is some time before he is able to make out what has disturbed him.

Just so with Mr. Hobbs: he realized slowly - after what seemed to him endless hours - that he was missing the perpetual clack and hum of the outer office. Had work suddenly ceased? - and why? What connection might that not have with the vague vision of the clerks in mourning, and with Mr. Lubeck's incredible masquerade - or his own hallucination?

He dared not make sure of the alternative, by appealing to the sense of touch to confirm his eyesight, or by asking his chief point blank about it? It might be as much as his job was worth; he might be thought to be going insane. And Mr. Hobbs had the very best of reasons for avoiding the slightest word or gesture which might in any manner give him away - might sow in in Mr. Lubeck's mind that he was not altogether the steady, sensible, even stolid cashier that he had manifested to enquiring eyes for twenty years with such unvarying success.

At this point in his meditations Mr. Lubeck startled him by a sharp change of tone.

"Hobbs!" The cashier sat up almost as if he had been struck.

"Are you listening to what I have been saying?" asked his employer, severely.

Mechanically, Hobbs repeated the instructions which had just been given. His conscious memory had recorded them perfectly. He was to take certain bonds - he had examined, verified, and entered their numbers in his ledger during the interview - to Mr. Simon Iff's apartment, take his receipt, and any further instructions.

"All right," said Lubeck more gently, as if relieved. "Excuse me, Hobbs, but I actually fancied for a moment" (he gave a little laugh) "that you were actually not paying attention. Of course" the broker assumed a soft, almost pitying tone "it's only natural if you should be a little distraught - as it were. You saw it at the lunch hour, I suppose?"

Hobbs assented, still mechanically. What was he supposed to have seen? He felt somehow that it would be a dreadful mistake to ask about it.

"Well, then, seal the packet," went on the other. The cashier's fingers were nervously employed in thrusting the bonds into a thick office envelope. Hobbs complied.

"Now then," went on Lubeck with an intensified seriousness, "that is not quite all. Please give me the whole of your attention: every detail of what I am going to say is of vital importance."

The cashier, putting the packet on one side, bent over to catch the low voice. It seemed as if secrecy, even in that empty office - was in some danger. At the same instant he paled once more. A footstep was again approaching: familiar somehow, and yet Hobbs was sure he had never heard it in his life - no, he knew it only too well - no, impossible - Keenly introspective, he evoked the 'sens du deja ecoute' to explain.

"Come, come!" said Lubeck reproachfully. "I quite understand. Go home when you are through with Mr. Iff - and take a day off to-morrow. I wouldn't have asked you at all but you're the only man I can trust on a business like this!"

The cashier, by a violent effort of will, fixed his eyes on those of his employer, and put his whole conscious being under control. But do what he might, he could not help hearing the footsteps in the outer office, or feeling in the marrow of his bones that their maker was no other than Stephen Adams.

The door opened. Stephen! No! Of course not. Frightfully, ghastly like him, though. But it was a girl? He looked heavily at Lubeck: not a flicker of an eyelid gave any sign that he was aware of the entrance of the new-comer.

The girl took off her overcoat and "Derby" and hung them on the pegs sacred to his ex-assistant. His eyes started from his head: she was in convict clothes. She sat down calmly at Stephen's old desk, opened the books, and began to write.

Mr. Lubeck gave no sign; instead, he laid his hand, kindly enough, on the cashier's trembling arm. "I don't want to ask you for the third time," he said compassionately, "to give me every last particle of your attention."

But this time Hobbs' whole mind revolted. Come what might, he must clear up this insane mystery.

"The girl in the chair!" he gasped. Mr. Lubeck repeated the words, in blank amazement.

"What girl? What chair?"

"There! there!" cried the cashier, releasing his forearm, and pointing.

"Where? Are you plumb crazy?" answered his chief, with irritation. "Really, Hobbs, this isn't like you."

Hobbs still pointed; the girl quietly rose, put on her hat and coat and left the office.

"My dear man, I don't see any girl!"

"No: didn't you see her go?"

"Tut, you must be seriously ill, man," cried Lubeck, with great concern in his voice. "Are you rehearsing the supper scene from Macbeth?"

The unhappy cashier subsided into his chair, and sat, panting, holding with nervous agitation to its arms; and gazing blankly upon the other's wondering face.

There was a long silence. At last. "I was dizzy for a moment," stammered Hobbs. - "Headache - couldn't sleep last night – something at lunch -"

"More beauties of prohibition?" laughed Lubeck, as if to reassure him.

"No, no, sir; never a drop!" cried the other, seriously upset at such a suspicion; "Just indigestion - fancied I saw something for a moment - better now - beg your pardon, sir, most sincerely."

"Good man, if you feel all right now, get along. We mustn't keep Mr. Iff waiting."

"No, sir," replied Hobbs miserably, and began to undo his waitcoat to put away the packet in the special pocket which he used for such purposes.

With a brief nod, and a cheery word, Mr. Lubeck walked out of the office.

But the cashier, having buttoned up the packet safely sat lost in the deepest thought. Was this fantastic adventure a joke? - unthinkable. A plot of some kind? He could not imagine his employer party to anything of the sort. Hallucination then, after all? The idea worried him very badly. He knew just enough of medicine to think that one sure characteristic of any such delusions would be that the victim could not possibly suspect them to be anything but real. His mind began a zig-zag logical sorites on the problem: every time he came to any conclusion some detail or other would pop up again and reserve the probabilities once more.

"Whew," he muttered, wiping his forehead. "I'll think more clearly in the fresh air." And he flung out of the office: in his state of mental disturbance, he forgot to take his hat and coat.

In the outer room he got a new shock. It was, as his ears had told him, empty. He looked at his watch. "Too absurd," he muttered, in acute annoyance. He walked across; just then he heard the closing of a ledger, in Mr. Lubeck's private office.

"I'll go and see about that uniform and settle that once and for all." He would have been positively relieved to find his chief disguised as a Zulu warrior. No such luck! He was sitting in his ordinary business clothes, very intent on his work. No trace of any masquerade.

"Well, what is it, Hobbs?" the chief did not look up.

"I beg your pardon, sir, did you say I might take to-morrow off?" was the best excuse he could invent.

"I did," replied Lubeck, with a peculiar intonation which somehow struck terror into his inmost marrow, though he could not have said why. He went out like a man in a dream.

The elevator, the hallway, the street all reassured him that his senses were intact. But then - ? In a way, that made things rather more serious than ever. It was curious, too, the way in which people were looking at him - at least - were they?

"Damn it, I'll square this!" he cried, as he pushed his way into Park Place, "Here's a sane man: I'll test myself by him."

He went up to the traffic cop. "Would you mind telling me what that building is, officer?" he said, pointing to the Woolworth.

The man knew the cashier by sight well enough: he had seen him pass there four times a day for years. Why hadn't he his hat and coat? And why did he look so agitated? And why - of all things - ask such a fool question? He decided that there was a joke or a bet in the background.

"Yes, Sir Ethelred, beg pardon, my lord," he answered saluting. "That there edifice is Grant's Tomb."

In any other circumstances the psychology of the moment would have been clear enough to Hobbs and reassured him finally that he was sane; but as things were, the answer shook him badly. He suppressed an inclination to howl and run off: he stood a moment dazed. The policeman began to suspect something wrong, and would have interfered; but the sense of routine duty came back suddenly to the cashier - in the complete ruin of the superstructure of his mind; he hailed a passing taxi, called out the address of Simon Iff and sank back with a sense of luxurious relief. It seemed to him, though, he had no idea why, that he was safe at least, that he had stumbled out of the mightmare as mysteriously and suddenly as he had stumbled into it.

Every detail of the journey up town, familiar and restful, restored him almost wholly to himself. He was able, by an effort, to distrust the unsolved problem of the past half-hour, and was sufficiently himself by the time the car drew up to realize that he was hatless and coatless.

"Why, of course, that explains the whole thing," he murmered joyfully - not seeing in the least any explanation of any one part of it. It was his sub-conscious self, alarmed for his sanity, that had been subtly reassured by the fact that events, generally speaking, had resumed their normal tone. There had been an accident of some sort, as the lack of hat and coat declared, but it was over now; it had not been serious; and as soon as he learnt the reason for his neglect, the nightmare features of his 'attack' - so he now called it - would become explicable. Amnesia, that's it! he concluded happily, as he paid off the chauf-

feur with that proud delight that the half-educated experience on finding themselves in bed with a long Greek or Latin word which is often in the newspapers and must be therefore perfectly respectable.

VI.

The embarrassment of Mr. Hobbs about the absence of his hat and coat completely dominated his mind between the taxi and the door of Simon Iff's apartment. He had quite satisfied himself that whatever had happened at the office was over and done with. It was therefore a terrific shock when the door was opened by that very replica of Sterilized Stephen in feminine flesh and felon attire had flitted through his office an hour earlier. He was struck speechless. But the girl addressed him without a trace of surprise. "Mr. Hobbs from Lubeck and Lewison," she said; "come right in, Mr. Iff's expecting you."

Despite his conscious paralysis, something in his mind registered the fact that the girl's accents were not Caucasian or Semitic; it was the precise and pretty, soft and slurred English of a Mongol. The effect was to bewilder him completely. His subconscious good sense told him surreptitiously of a possible point to the farce in the office, but there was no rational connection to be traced in this and it led him back to the state of uncertainty as to whether his senses were not playing him tricks. He suddenly remembered Simon Iff's reputation as a Magician. As the girl led the way to the door of his study he felt rather like a character in an Arabian Night, doubtful as to what dreadful or horrible experience might be lurking behind the door.

Ushered into the study, he was immediately reassured. There was nothing in any way abnormal. He began to look for the big envelope which he was to deliver but Iff stopped him.

"I thought if you had the time, Mr. Hobbs, we might go down to the bank together. The bonds will be safer where they are. But I see you are a little out of breath. Will you take a cigarette and a cup of coffee with me. As you see, I am just finishing lunch."

He filled a cup for the cashier and a liqueur glass of old brandy. He lit a match for Hobbs' cigarette and the two men smoked in silence. Somehow or other the calm impersonal gaze of the Magician had the effect of making Hobbs extremely ill at ease. He felt himself - he had no idea why - in the presence of a god; very gentle, yet very terrible; one who saw through him without even seeing him. And there was born in his mind an almost overmastering impulse to lay open his soul. His instinct of self-preservation held him back and he satisfied the impulse by appealing to the Magician for an explanation of the extraordinary events at the office.

Simon listened without surprise.

"This sort of thing is farily common," he said, and went into a little technical sermon on hallucinations and their causes.

"It is only natural," he concluded, "that you should be mentally upset. You were quite all right before lunch, weren't you?"

"Quite," said Hobbs.

"Exactly," continued Simon. "Your hallucinations are simply due to what happened during the lunch hour."

"But nothing happened during the lunch hour," objected Hobbs.

"What! Didn't you see it?" cried Simon, with the utmost surprise.

"See what? I don't know what you mean!" stammered the cashier, thoroughly alarmed, he knew not why.

Iff struck a hand bell at his side, and the cashier almost jumped out of his chair.

The girl appeared at the door. Simon addressed her volubly in Japanese, and she answered briefly in that language, with a low bow and disappeared.

Hobbs could not contain himself. He told Iff how things looked to him.

"What, Togo in stripes?" cried Iff laughing, and then checked himself and looked at the trembling man before him with the most serious commiseration. "Strange, strange," he said in a meditative voice. "I could understand it if you had seen it."

"Seen what?" cried Hobbs, his voice rising to a scream. By his elbow was the girl in stripes. She was handing a copy of the Evening Mercury to her master.

Iff ran his finger down the columns. In the stop press was only one paragraph. It stared loudly from the blank of the rest of the column.

SUICIDE IN SING SING.

"Stephen Adams, recently convicted for theft of bonds, hanged himself in the prison early this morning."

The finger with which Simon directed his attention to that bald statement, seemed to the guilty man like the finger of God. He was struck speechless. His face went blank as a sheet of paper. Iff took no notice.

"If you didn't see that," he said slowly, "I don't see what upset your mind so seriously as to make you see things. You don't drug?" he asked sharply.

Hobbs tried to frame the words 'never in my life' but his articulation refused its office.

"Can it be?" - mused Simon Iff - and rose suddenly from his chair -

"Never mind the cause," he declared vigorously, "the cure is the thing. Business before pleasure. Attend to duty and never mind the tricks our eyes sometimes play us. Let's get down to the bank. Here, swallow this."

He poured the cashier a stiff drink of brandy which pulled him together physically but left his mind in a blank passive state. He was quite fit to do anything, but deprived of initiative, of the power to think, in all but the most superficial sense of that phrase.

He followed Iff out of the room and was not in the least surprised to find Togo looking like a quite ordinary Japanese servant. Simon asked him about it.

"You see," he said, "you're better already." But when they got to the outer entrance, instead of Iff's motor car he saw a prison van. However, it did not seem so apparently to Simon, who said:

"I think it'll do you good if we walk down to the bank this day. Nothing like fresh air to blow away the cobwebs."

Hobbs assented mechanically and Iff addressed the uniformed driver.

"I shan't want you this afternoon, Dobson," he said, "but be back for the theatre after dinner. Amuse yourself as you like til then."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," replied the man saluting; and even distressed as he was, Hobbs could not fail to observe that the man's accent was utterly remote from anything American. He began to analyze his perceptions. He tried to look at his experience in perspective. It seemed in particular that his ears were somehow at war with his eyes. No, that didn't account for everything. He began to realize that almost all the inexplicable perceptions had something to do with Stephen and the police. Were they then phantasma created by his conscience? If not, was he suspected? Had a comedy been staged to frighten him into confession? Knowing himself safe, he brightened instantly at the thought. And yet, when he considered the matter, it seemed impossible. There would not have been time to prepare so elaborate a scheme, for Stephen had only hanged himself that very morning. And then he realized for the first time the import of that fact. It was he that was responsible for the boy's death. He had not thought of that before. He had hated Stephen as a coward and a prig and despised him as a crank. He had felt no remorse at his imprisonment. But that he should have killed himself was another story. Why had he not foreseen that such an issue was inevitable, given the ultra-neurotic character of the boy.

Hobbs had never believed in the supernatural, but now it seemed to him as the only rational explanation of events to suppose that by some mysterious sympathy, a dead man was somehow able to revenge himself by throwing the mental machinery of his murderer out of gear. There were plenty of well-authenticated stories of the sort.

"I must pull myself together," he thought, "whatever I do, I mustn't give myself away. I must ask for a holiday and go to a safe place til I've got over these fancies."

And he began to make plans but they were always interfered with a vision of his victim hanging from a bar of his cell window.

"Here, wake up!" said Simon Iff, who had not spoken all the way to the bank. "Here we are."

Hobbs took stock of his surroundings. Again his eyes were playing him false. An automobile was drawn up at the door of the bank and in it were two fashionable ladies, almost extravagantly dressed. There was a little crowd around the car, which the porter was trying to keep back. And the motive of the crowd was evident, for the chauffeur was the girl in stripes.

Then did other people share his hallucinations? Slight as the matter was in comparison with what had passed its incongruity brought to the ground all his previous theories and left his mind more completely bewildered than ever. It couldn't be hallucination if other people could see that accursed girl, and it couldn't be a comedy staged for his benefit, for that fact would knock the house of cards to pieces.

He followed Iff to the receiving teller's desk and pulled out the sealed envelope. The teller opened it. The man's face changed. "There's some mistake here, Mr. Hobbs," he said, "except these two, these bonds are forgeries."

The cashier found himself unable to utter a word. The teller gave a signal and two of the plain clothes men in the bank immediately slipped their arms through those of the terrified Hobbs. History had repeated itself. A glaring light broke in upon his mind.

"It's a conspiracy," he shouted, "and I know exactly how the trick was done."

"Yes, you might tell us about that," said Simon very gently.

Hobbs no longer knew what he was saying.

"I'm not guilty," he cried, "Adams can clear me."

"Isn't it rather for you to clear Adams?" suggested Simon Iff, and then the cashier remembered that Adams was lying dead in prison.

"I never meant to kill him," he went on, "I never thought he couldn't stand - " and once again he broke off short, appalled.

He saw that he had no chance to clear himself. He had sealed up the envelope and it had been in his possession till that moment. He knew too well that it had been changed by the girl in stripes while Mr. Lubeck was talking to him, but he couldn't tell that story to a Jury, he couldn't tell it to his own attorney. They would only say that he was shamming mad to get off. He had been trapped and instinctively he turned to Simon Iff to save him.

"I didn't steal the bonds," he whined. "I want justice."

"Then you must do it yourself," answered Simon. "Come, let us go into the president's room and tell us the whole story."

Completely broken down, the cashier complied. Iff had accurately divined the method employed to scare Sterilized Stephen. Hobbs had led up to the critical moment by teasing Stephen about his fears and threatening that one day he would bring down a culture of virulent bacilli and shedding them over him. He had, in

fact, squirted a little dirty water on Stephen's person and taken advantage of his distraction to change the bonds. Hobbs ended his confession with an appeal for mercy.

"It shall be granted," answered Simon, and went for a copy of the Evening Mercury. It was the same edition as the copy in Iff's apartment, but the stop press column contained no reference to Stephen Adams.

VII.

Simon Iff had been absent from New York for some weeks attending to the matter (elsewhere recorded) of Col. Van Schuyler. On his return he found a letter from Mr. Lubeck who concluded his congratulations by inviting the Magician to dinner to meet Stephen Adams and his sister Violet. The boy had been released immediately on the confession of Hobbs and the dinner party was intended, not only to celebrate the victory, but to plan future campaigns. The stock broker's original interest in his aseptic employee had been revivified by the sympathy he felt for his tribulations. The good man blamed himself quite unjustly for his reluctant contributions to the catastrophe. But Simon Iff was in his most cantankerous mood. He would not admit that any catastrophe had taken place. He blamed Lubeck, not for prosecuting his clerk, but for having encouraged him in his iniquity. He had no kind word for Stephen that night. All through dinner, in defiance of every rule of politeness, he treated the boy with savage contempt. He lost no opportunity of sneering at everything he said; he criticized his personal appearance in absolutely unpardonable terms. There was never such a bear at any dinner party that New York had ever seen. Only with Violet did he preserve the commonest form of politeness.

Not until dinner was over did Simon unmask his really heavy artillery. He attacked Sterilized Stephen with callous brutality so that Mr. Lubeck, seeing how acutely his guest was suffering, unable to defend himself because his enemy was also his savior, ventured a word of protest.

"My dear man," retorted Iff, "have you no common sense?" Can't you see that this rag of humanity is on the way to getting worse torn than ever? What's his whole attitude? That of a deeply injured man, who has been justified. His punishment begins now.

"You had Dr. Braithwaite examine you three days ago?"

"Yes," stammered Stephen, "and he told me that I was perfectly healthy."

"That's what he told you," sneered Iff. "But here's his private report of the scraping he took from your throat."

He took a paper from his pocket book and passed it to Stephen. The gesture was as if he had stabbed him. The boy read the slip. It appeared that his throat harboured the germs of influenza, diptheria, and typhoid, and some half dozen lesser diseases.

It was necessary to apply restoratives. At last, he mastered himself sufficiently to stammer something about his death warrant.

"Now look here, my boy," said Simon. "That's all nonesense. All our throats are full of those germs all the time. But none of us get any of those diseases except under special conditions, the chief of which is a lowered vitality. Now, nothing lowers vitality so much as fear. Look at yourself. The doctor declares you in perfect health and yet you nearly faint when I pass you a scrap of paper. I've travelled a bit in the tropics and seen plague and cholera sweeping away whole townships as a storm scatters the leaves from trees in autumn. I thought even in America every one knew that the one sure way to get an epidemic disease was to funk it."

"That's right," put in Lubeck. "I was in Panama in the old days and the people who got yellow Jack were not the people who took the big risks but the people who brooded on the danger."

"There's another point too," pursued Simon. "When fear, which is a definite pathological condition, a disease far more deadly than tuberculosis, attains a certain degree of intensity, it deprives a man of the use of his five senses. Did you ever read that essay of Sullivan's on Human Testimony?"

It appeared that nobody had.

"Well, you should," proceeded Simon. "However, I'll quote you as nearly as memory serves me, one remark."

"During the war it was noticed that the evidence of soldiers freshly wounded was often of the most fantastic description. They would testify as to the details of catastrophes which had never occurred; they would assert that so-and-so had been decapitated in front of their eyes, and so-and-so buried by an explosion, when, as a matter of fact, nothing remotely resembling these events had taken place."

"Is that possible?" asked Lubeck.

"Well, you ought to know," retorted the Magician. "You've had the case of this wretched invertebrate here and a much more striking example under your very nose."

"Yes," said Lubeck; "of course. Do you know, I've never really understood how you got away with that absurd business of Hobbs. He wasn't at all the nervous hysterical type and he hadn't been freshly wounded."

"Fishing for compliments," laughed Simon. "I've already congratulated you on the goodness of heart which inhibits so effectively the operation of your cerebral cortex. Hobbs had lived for years with the worst kind of fear; that of being found out. It wasn't pathological in the sense of being irrational, but on the other hand, he had no protection whatever against it. He couldn't fly to antiseptics, whenever it became acute. He couldn't even relieve his mind by talking about it. He had to be perpetually sitting on the safety valve; and any form of suppression always tends to turn normal instinct into pathological channels. I didn't expect to break him down by the scene in the office. I saw to it that he was freshly wounded."

"I staged the comedy to prepare him for the wound. I wanted to evoke his fear from the hell of the unconscious self in order that it might shake his confidence in his own critical judgement; in his sense of reality."

"But no one would really believe that his eyes and ears had gone wrong so suddenly and to that extent. He must have suspected that we were laying a fantastic trap for him and that should have put him on his guard rather than induced him to betray himself."

"True enough," admitted Simon. "But the things he saw were, so to speak, phan asms of his hidden fear, connected vaguely with Stephen through Violet's likeness to him, and the circumstances of the plot, assuming it to be one, were all so wildly improbable. The result was that a mere trifle of absolutely genuine evidence, as he supposed, believing (as people of his class do) in the newspapers, was enough to wound his guilty conscience. It never occurred to him that I had had that paragraph specially printed in my copy of The Mercury, especially as we had both prepared him for it by attributing his experiences, which we both assumed to be hallucinations, to something which we pretended to suppose that he must have seen during the lunch hour."

"Yes," said Mr. Lubeck thoughtfully, "but Hobbs was hardened by years of crime and utterly callous of the consequences to others."

Simon looked at him very sadly. "Surely you understand," he said slowly, "that such callousness is the very measure of the intensity of his own fear. The thought of prison was so intolerable to him that he did not dare to allow himself the luxury of the faintest human sympathy for his victims. But he had not contemplated death. He saw in an instant, taking him at his worst, that to be found out might drive him to kill himself. As a matter of fact, he was not as bad as that; he suffered genuine remorse. The psychological resultant was however the same. When he lost on the swings, he made up on the roundabouts. In any case we were sure of the main object: to render him incapable at the critical moment of the normal reaction. He saw himself caught in the identical trap which he had sprung on Stephen. He saw instantly, with every particle of his instinct of self-preservation, that this fact proved his innocence; that he was the victim of a clever scheme, so that in his anxiety to prove his innocense, he exclaimed jubilantly that he knew exactly how the trick was turned. In his normal state he would have perceived the implications of the statement. Suppose a man has been swindled by the three card trick; he could not have been swindled if he knew exactly how the trick was done. His explanation proved previous knowledge. We cannot be sure of the deep workings of his mind at this point but at least this is evident: that the series of shocks had quite abrogated his conscious control. He probably recognized his blunder in some stratum beneath clear consciousness; for he instantly completed it by the appeal to Stephen to clear him, very much as a man in certain conditions will run his bicycle into the very object which he is trying to avoid. The realization that Stephen was dead crowned the edifice with ills, as Euripides says. His unconscious stood before us all, stark in its horror of malignity and fear. The one relief which he had so long denied himself - confession - became the over mastering passion and he reeled off the list of his iniquities with something really not far from gusto. He had to get rid of 20 years of silence in a single outburst."

"Well, I must say," remarked Mr. Lubeck, "it has been a most masterly demonstration of psychology."

"I'm not very proud of it," replied Simple Simon. "The method was far too elaborate and complex to please me. It ought to have been managed in a quiet conversation. My excuse is that I had really no access even to the person of Hobbs. He was guarded in every way but one; and I had to arrange a scenario which would cut short all ways of escape. It was necessary that all explanations of events were equally untenable. However, enough of the past. Our business is to unsterilize Stephen. The bacillus of self-esteem finds him a most favourable medium? I doubt if he understands even now how I despise and loathe him. My chief satisfaction in getting him out of jail is that I have saved his fellow criminals from the contamination of his example. I cannot even make him angry," growled the mystic. "If he had any self respect, instead of self-esteem, he would have walked out of the house an hour ago."

The outraged youth began a homily on gratitude.

"I don't want your gratitude," howled Iff. "That's only another clean collar, and what you need is to play in the mud. You were brought up with a host of virtues, so called; so many painted masks to hide the face of a coward. You even despised your sister, and where would you be now without her? You've got to chuck all that. It's all a mass of iniquity, a monstrous growth in a thousand hideous forms of the original fear which was drilled into you by that accursed old hag, Aunt Dorcas, who, I hope, is roasting in hell at this minute. However, you've had your medicine; and I'm going to give you a chance."

His hand went back to his pocket and he produced a letter which he handed to Lubeck. The good old man's eyes grew dim as he read it. He went over to Stephen and laid his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I am glad I prosecuted," he said with humorous brusqueness, "I couldn't have done as much for you as this if you had stayed with me for ten years."

"Dear Mr. Iff," he read aloud, "I think this is about what you want. Send Adams to me at four o'clock next Monday. He can manage our new branch at Fu Ling above Hankow."

Stephen only understood that he was appointed to a position of great and absolute responsibility carrying a very great increase on any salary he might have hoped for many years to come. He sprang to his feet. But Iff checked him with a gesture.

"Fu Ling is a glorious place," said he, "I was there a few years back. The only European in the place was the Custom's collector. He was just getting over a couple of bullet wounds in the riot when the missionary was killed, thank God. That's why he wasn't there. It's a delightful old town - on the top of a mound about 70 feet about the plain; not a natural mound, of course; the solidified refuse of centuries. There is no sanitation as we understand it, not even in a European's house, and I hope you will notice that every one is healthy as anywhere else. The death rate is about the same as in this country.

"Of course," he said as if by an after thought, "there are lepers."

Stephen's hair had not yet grown long enough to stand any straighter than it did.

"I shouldn't worry," went on Iff remorselessly, "there's no influenza, no cerebro-spinal meningitis, no sleeping sickness, no consumption, no cancer, no rickets, and better still, none of those hydra-headed imaginary diseases which afflict us weekly in the Sunday Newspapers. Best of all," he added brightly, "there are no Sunday Newspapers. The risk of being murdered is a good deal less one half percent of what it is in Memphis, Tennessee. The risk of Hobbs is nil."

"You have to learn courage and self-respect out there," he went on, "and you will also lose your self-esteem, for you have to face reality every hour of the day - and night, and in reality," he concluded, on a full disphragm, "every man is a hero and every man is a god."

Something broke in the brain of Sterilized Stephen. He strode forward impulsively, head erect and sparkling eyes, to clasp the outstretched hand of the Magician but all he said was "I'll go," though his lips were as white as his cheeks.

Simon Iff collected Violet with his free hand.

"Observe, my child," he said. "He says he will go. And is not going the sure sign of godhead? Old artists represented the Egyptian gods as bearing a sandal strap in token that their function was to go, to go through every phase of existence untouched by anything they chanced to meet. Did you never hear the saying 'Every man and every woman is a star?' And what does a star do but go and give light in its going."

The eyes of the girl were fixed upon him with the soft yearning look of a dog for its master.

"Yes, my dear," he smiled, "you're going too. Your job in life is to look after your brother. You've seen all the worst side of life? Your experience is just what he needs."

He sat down in a big arm chair and lighted a proportionate cigar.

"The trouble with respectability," he said, "is this: that for the most part it doesn't exist at all. It's a fantasm created by fear. For this reason, every cunning scoundrel can use it to cloak his misdeeds. But when you've got rid of the sham, the genuine good of humanity comes and Violet here knows how much lovlier were the lives of the harlots and criminals with whom she has lived for years than those of people like Aunt Dorcas, who practically condemned her to starve to death for following a natural impulse, or the boy who persuaded her to it and left her to sink. Which is the better man, the thief who stands you a meal and a drink out of coarse comradeship or the cop who blackmails you out of half your earnings on Broadway? You'll find an honest set of values at Fu Ling. You have never done anything in your life that wasn't perfectly decent and straightforward - in itself, I mean, dear girl - apart from the artificial restrictions of society. You failed

financially through ignorance of the low cunning and the hypocritical tricks of your neighbours, and the poison of their vileness is so strong that they actually persuaded you that they were right to despise you. That's why you're going to Fu Ling with Stephen. For another thing, you would never recover in this mephitic atmosphere. Out there, you will be a royal personage by right of race, and they will all look up to you because you won't look down on them as missionaries do, God burn their rotten souls in hell, that the smoke may be for a sign."

The essence of Violet's nature was to love and trust, to protect when she felt strong, to appeal when she felt weak. At the moment it was as if she had been suddenly hoisted on to a throne and a moment's fear passed over her face, the noble fear that she might not live up to her task. She murmered something about the strange ways of those strange people.

"They won't be strange to you," the mystic said, "mankind is just the same all over the world. The differences between civilizations are the differences between Shams, for the most part. The primal needs of all men are alike and those needs form the basis of all their funny little ways. You have been at grips with them all your life and you will make no mistake in dealing with people as long as you love and understand."

There was dead silence in the room. Simon Iff suddenly discarded his prophetic manner and became the conventional guest.

"Goodnight and goodbye for a while," he said. "I must return to my sheep."

When he had gone, the silence lasted for a long while. Each of the three were lost in his own thoughts. When Violet thought it time to retire, Lubeck took them to the door himself and as he shook hands, jerked his head over his shoulder towards the number on the door.

"Goodnight, my children, remember your father's address."

VIII.

Fifteen months later a serious riot in Fu Ling was aborted by the moral and physical courage of Violet and Stephen. He had learnt that the only germ he had to fear was the germ of fear in himself. And to that, a year in China had made him immune.
