

THE ENGLISH ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE.

A TALE OF MERE CHANCE.

BEING AN ACCOUNT OF THE PURSUIT OF THE TILES, STATEMENT OF THE CLOCK, AND THE GRIP OF A COAT OF ORANGE SPOTS, TOGETHER WITH SOME CRITICISM OF A DETECTIVE SAID TO BE CARVED FROM AN OLD TABLE-LEG.

By STEPHEN CRANE.

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YES, my friend, I killed the man; but I would not have been detected in it were it not for some very extraordinary circumstances. I had long considered this deed, but I am a delicate and sensitive person, you understand, and I hesitated over it as the diver hesitates on the brink of a dark and icy mountain pool. A thought of the shock of contact holds one back.

As I was passing his house one morning I said to myself, "Well, at any rate, if she loves him it will not be for long." And after that decision I was not myself, but a sort of machine.

I rang the bell, and the servants admitted me to the drawing-room. I waited there while the tall old clock placidly ticked its speech of time. The rigid and austere chairs remained in possession of their singular imperturbability, although, of course, they were aware of my purpose. But the little white tiles of the floor whispered one to another, and looked at me.

Presently he entered the room, and I, drawing my revolver, shot him. He screamed—you know that scream, mostly amazement—and as he fell forward his blood was upon the little white tiles. They huddled, and covered their eyes from this rain. It seemed to me that the old clock stopped ticking, as a man may gasp in the middle of a sentence, and a chair threw itself in my way as I sprang toward the door.

A moment later I was walking down the street—tranquil, you understand—and I said to myself: "It is done! Long years

from this day I will say to her that it was I who killed him. After time has eaten the conscience of the thing she will admire my courage."

I was elated that the affair had gone off so smoothly, and I felt like returning home and taking a long, full sleep, like a tired working man. When people passed me I contemplated their stupidity with a sense of satisfaction.

But those accursed little white tiles! I heard a shrill crying and chattering behind me, and looking back I saw them, blood-stained and impassioned, raising their little hands and screaming, "Murder! It was he!" I have said that they had little hands. I am not so sure of it, but they had some means of indicating me as unerringly as pointing fingers. As for their movement, they swept along as easily as dry, light leaves are carried by the wind. Always they were shrilly piping their song of my guilt.

My friend, may it never be your fortune to be pursued by a crowd of little blood-stained tiles. I used a thousand means to be free from the clash, clash, of those tiny feet. I ran through the world at my best speed, but it was no better than that of an ox, while they, my pursuers, were always fresh, eager, relentless.

I am an ingenious person, and I used every trick that a desperately fertile man can invent. Hundreds of times I had almost evaded them when some smouldering, neglected spark would blaze up and discover me.

I felt that the eye of conviction would

have no terrors for me ; but the eye of suspicion, which I saw in city after city, on road after road, drove me to the verge of going forward and saying, " Yes, I have murdered."

People would see the following, clamorous troupe of blood-stained tiles and give me piercing glances, so that these swords played continually at my heart. But we are a decorous race, thank

in Taumanipas show a remarkable knowledge of mechanics. I remember the little hydraulic—what's that ? Well, what you say may be true, my friend, but I think you dream.

The little stained tiles. My friend, I stopped in an inn at the end of the earth, and in the morning they were there flying like birds and pecking at my window.

I should have escaped. Heavens ! I



HE FELL FORWARD, AND A CHAIR THREW ITSELF IN MY WAY AS I SPRANG TOWARD THE DOOR.

God ! It is very vulgar to apprehend murderers on the public street. We have learned correct manners from the English. Besides, who can be sure of the meaning of clamouring tiles ? It might be merely a trick in politics.

Detectives ? What are detectives ? Oh, yes, I have read of them and their deeds when I come to think of it. The prehistoric races must have been remarkable. I have never been able to understand how the detectives navigated in stone boats. Still, specimens of their pottery excavated

should have escaped ! What was more simple ? I murdered, and then walked into the world, which is wide and intricate.

Do you know that my own clock assisted in the hunt of me ? They asked what time I left my home that morning and it replied at once : " Half-past eight." The watch of a man I had chanced to pass near the house of the crime told the people " Seven minutes after nine." And of course the tall old clock in the drawing-room went about day after day repeating : " Eighteen minutes after nine."

Do you say that the man who caught me was very clever? My friend, I have lived long, and he was the most incredible blockhead of my experience. An enslaved, dust-eating Mexican vaquero wouldn't hitch his pony to such a man. Do you think he deserves credit for my capture? If he had been as pervading as the atmosphere he would never have caught me. If he was a detective, as you say, I could carve a better one from an old table-leg. But the tiles! That is another matter. At night I think they flew in a long, high flock, like pigeons. In the day, little mad things, they murmured on my trail like frothy-mouthed weasels.

I see that you note these great, round, vividly orange spots on my coat. Of course, even if the detective was really carved from an old table-leg, he could hardly fail to apprehend a man thus badged. As sores come upon one in the plague, so came these spots upon my coat. When I discovered them I made efforts to

free myself of this coat. I tore, tugged, wrenched at it, but around my shoulders it was like the grip of a dead man's arms. Do you know that I have plunged in a thousand lakes? I have smeared this coat with a thousand paints, but day and night the spots burn like lights. I might walk from this jail to-day if I could rid myself of this coat, but it clings—clings—clings.

At any rate, the person you call a detective is not so clever to discover a man in a coat of spotted orange, followed by shrieking blood-stained tiles.

Yes, that noise from the corridor is most peculiar; but they are always there, muttering and watching, clashing and jostling. It sounds as if the dishes of Hades were being washed. Yet I have become used to it. Once, indeed, in the night, I cried out to them: "In God's name, go away, little blood-stained tiles!" But they doggedly answered: "It is the law."

