



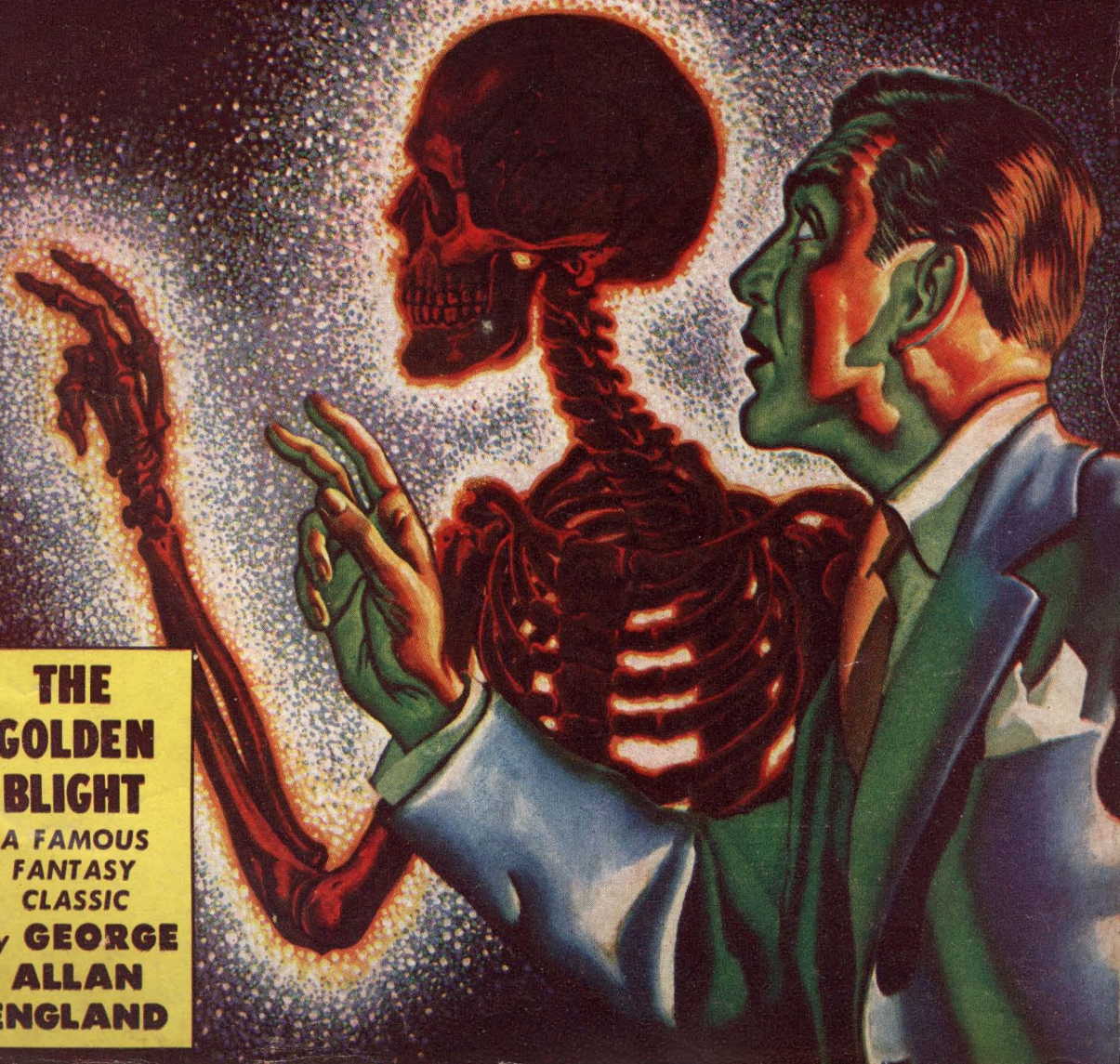
25¢

L MAR.

FANTASTIC

Novels

MAGAZINE



THE GOLDEN BLIGHT

A FAMOUS
FANTASY
CLASSIC

by **GEORGE
ALLAN
ENGLAND**



25¢

FANTASTIC

Novels

MAGAZINE

Vol. 2

MARCH, 1949

No. 6

Book-Length Novel

THE GOLDEN BLIGHT **George Allan England** 10

To a city of gold he came, to hurl his strange, grim warning across the world that the blight that thrives on slavery and war must perish—or Earthmen's hours were numbered!

Novelette

THE TOYS OF FATE **Tod Robbins** 102

He destroyed for the pleasure it gave him—the bored old gentleman who liked to knock down toy towns—a harmless pastime on the face of it—but that was not the end.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? 6

The Readers' Department

IN THE NEXT ISSUE 99

THE NEW FINLAY PORTFOLIO 101

Cover by Finlay. Inside Illustrations by Lawrence.

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.



THE GOLDEN BLIGHT

*To a city of gold he came, to hurl
his strange, grim warning across
the world that the blight that
thrives on slavery and war must
perish — or Earthmen's hours
were numbered!*

By **George Allan
England**

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST TOUCH

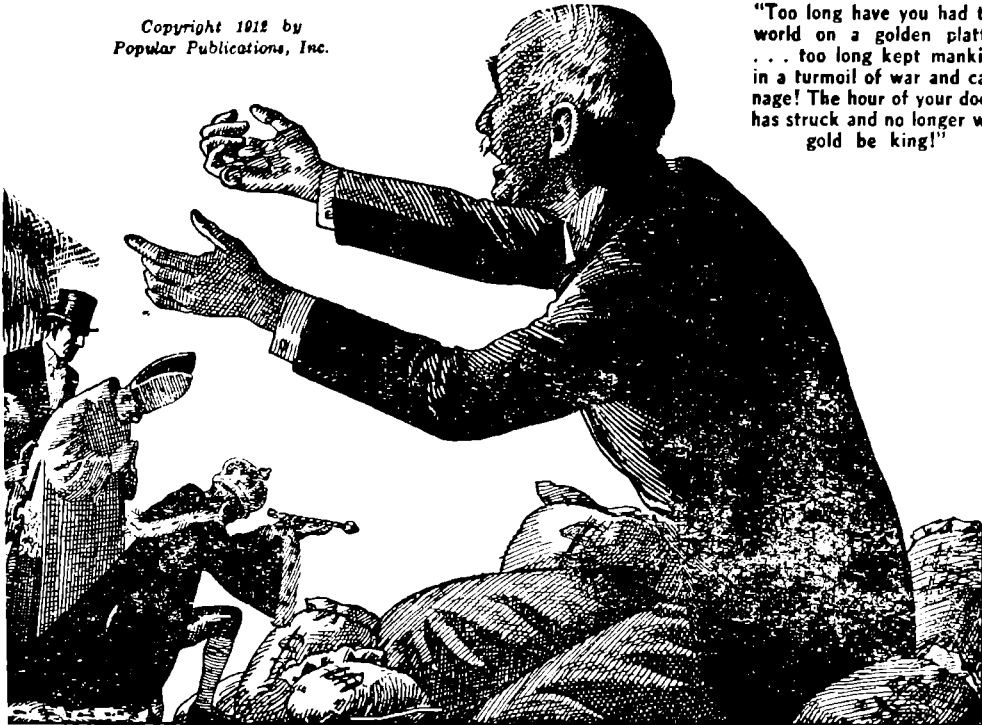
UNDER THE softly diffused glow of the library lamp, shaded with priceless glass dug from the ruins of Heliopolis—glass rendered opalescent by three thousand years of burial in the Egyptian sands—the last sheet of John

Storm's weekly report fluttered to rest upon the table. Storm leaned back and looked old Murchison full in the face.

"That's all, so far," the scientist concluded, and for a moment drew with unspeakable satisfaction at the moist black cigar that Murchison had handed him at the beginning of the conference.

"Of course at this stage of the game there's no telling what the next reaction

*Copyright 1912 by
Popular Publications, Inc.*



"Too long have you had the world on a golden platter . . . too long kept mankind in a turmoil of war and carnage! The hour of your doom has struck and no longer will gold be king!"

may or may not produce. But for the present, so far as I can report this evening, that's all."

Murchison sat silent, thinking a bit before commenting. ♦

His white, rather blunt fingers, on which he wore only a single plain ring of massive Roman gold, nervously tapped the arm of the huge Morris chair that held his small, lean figure. Then he fell to twisting at his gray mustache, sparse and ragged.

"H-m!" he grunted.

In the fireplace of Pentelican marble a log snapped briskly, throwing a brand out onto the tiles. The billionaire kicked it back into the ashes.

"Nothing definite, then?" he queried sharply. "No tangible specimen of nitrogen to show me, extracted, by your electrical process, from ordinary atmospheric air?"

Storm shook his head.

"Nothing—yet," he answered.

Murchison took off his gold-rimmed glasses, breathed on the lenses, and polished them with his handkerchief before replying.

Storm knew the symptom of annoyance well, and smiled a trifle to himself. But Murchison's expression, as he sat there blinking, was far from humorous.

All at once the financier set the glasses back on his thin-bridged nose and directed a keen blue glance at the physicist.

"See here, Storm," said he, the natural suavity of his Southern accent now hardened with irritation; "see here, this won't do. Won't do at all! When I hired you to carry on this line of research, I expected results. Results, inside of a month at the outside. Now, you've been working at the job since October 9, and the total net product so far is nil. And you've cost me, all told, more than six thousand dollars. It won't do, I tell you! Things can't go on this way!"

"That's up to you," Storm retorted, piqued. "I'm not magic, or anything of that sort. If you think there's another man in the country any better equipped than I am, you're at liberty to get him. The contract's in my pocket now, right here."

He tapped his breast.

"Say so, and it goes into the fire. Lots of other work on hand, you know. Your move!"

Murchison shifted a bit uneasily in his chair.

"H-m! I don't know that matters have reached that point—yet," answered he. "But, now, look at this thing yourself; more than two months' work and no con-

crete results! I expected you would have enough nitrogen to fertilize the whole of Texas before now, to judge from your prospectus!"

"I know. It did look that way. But Science won't always go where you try to drive her. She insists on leading. Men can only follow, and take what she offers."

Murchison snorted.

"Science!" he giped. "If I were a scientist, instead of a financier, I warrant you she would go!"

He smote the arm of his chair.

"I'd make her, just as I've made the money world and everything else I've ever touched. But you—all theory, all vague speculation. Six thousand dollars laid out, and the best you can report is that if I keep you at work another month, maybe three months, maybe a year, you may possibly get on the track of a commercially feasible process for extracting marketable nitrogen fertilizer from air! The devil you say!

"No, experimental science may be all well enough in its way, but, hang it, give me practical methods every time. See here, now. If I'd employed Griscomb from the beginning, a natural-phosphate expert, and given him the same time and money, and turned him loose on my properties in the South, or sent him out to some of the guano islands of Chile, or done anything along those lines, he'd have had results by now—big results! While you—all you've got to show is just—those!"

He nodded curtly at the handwritten papers lying on the antique Chinese table, and for a moment smoked in agitated silence. The long white ash of his cigar, too heavy, dropped onto his waistcoat. Annoyed, he brushed it off.

Storm masked a smile behind his hand, his clean-shaved face betraying lines of humor that even his earnestness and his thirty-six years had not yet dulled. His eyes brightened with a new light.

"These cigars," said he quite slowly, "are miracles."

He inspected his own.

"I thought," he continued, "I knew about everything going, in the cigar line, but I confess this brand has got me guessing. Do you mind my asking where it can be bought?"

"Bought?" snapped Murchison testily. "Don't talk rubbish! It can't be bought; it isn't for sale. Why do you think it can be bought? Can that 'Madonna of the Book,' over the mantel there, be bought? Is my Guttman old-German gold dining

service for sale? Do people inquire in shops for Fragonard panels? Art such as I specialize in isn't a common, market commodity!

"Neither are these cigars," he continued, a little mollified. "On my estate at Patanay, on the southern Vuelta Abajo of Mindanao, lies a certain field. One end of it—for what reason, how should I know?—has a certain soil. The place isn't bigger than the site of this house. A few dozen plants a year grow there; no more. Transplanted, they become ordinary manilla. But there—well, you see the result."

Storm nodded.

"That's right, I do," said he. "It's art, with a big A."

"THOSE cigars," continued Murchison, for the moment diverted by his hobby, "are made up for me by a man named Luis Requín. That's his only job. He ships me two boxes a year—just two. Each cigar is wrapped in silver foil and sealed in a glass tube. The tubes are packed in cotton, and the boxes sent by the Nippon Yusen Kaisha, kept in the steamers' safes, and insured at one thousand dollars each. Not that the thousand is worth considering—it's simply a means of positively securing delivery.

"Price? There's no possible price assignable to these weeds. So far as I know only four boxes exist in the world to-day. Two are en route from Mindanao. One, badly depleted, is in my humidor compartment in my house-safe. The other—"

"Yes?" interrupted Storm, with more real feeling than he had so far shown that evening.

"Is in the possession of Andrew Wainright. You know him—the Copper Czar they call him? My best friend, in spite of the fact that we fight like the devil. He keeps them in his office, in a special vault built into the wall. So you see—"

"Yes, I see," answered the physicist, a trifle gloomily. Then he grew very thoughtful, smoked a moment in silence, and inspected the cigar ash.

"Art," he said again at length, "with a big A. Not for ordinary mortals. By the way, Mr. Murchison, did you ever make a study of ash? Interesting material, I assure you. Very. Much may be learned from ash."

Murchison looked at him a trifle curiously. Then he frowned.

"Ash? Hang it, no! What should I want to know about ash? I'm dealing with the realities of life, the active principles—with

things that are, not things that have been! Ash? Humph!"

Storm shot a quick glance at the billionaire.

"There may be more in ash," he said, speaking carefully, "far more than you suspect. Perhaps before very long, maybe even before you go to bed this night, you may know more about ash than you do now!"

And with a quick gesture he tossed off the ash of his own cigar into the fireplace.

Murchison looked puzzled for an instant, but quickly masked his face with its usual dry and cynical aplomb.

"That may all very well be," he answered, "but it's entirely beside the point. Let's keep to facts. Facts! My time's worth eight thousand dollars an hour, at the very moderate estimate of six per cent on my invested capital. That's something like a hundred and thirty-five dollars a minute. Every time that Marfel clock up there ticks off a second, it means over two dollars. So, you see, we ought to stick to business. What?"

"It certainly looks that way," answered Storm. "Well, I've reported all I know, so far."

"Which is, summed up, absolutely nothing! Nothing at all, from a dollars-and-cents' standpoint. Nothing!"

"You mean that your whole object in this matter is the accumulation of more wealth?"

"What?" gasped Murchison.

"That all you're having me go into this research for is the mere piling up of still more dollars. No idea of benefiting mankind, adding to the world's available nitrogen and food supply; no—"

"Don't forget yourself, Storm!"

"No humanitarian impulse whatever! Just more gold, gold, gold—when you're already choked, and glutted, and swamped in gold!"

The billionaire stared at Storm as though the younger man had gone quite mad.

"There! That's quite enough. More than enough!" he snapped.

"No, I don't think it is," retorted Storm, leaning forward in his chair. "Not quite. Because, you see, the whole basis of my work is involved. You're thinking of one thing, I'm considering another. Science is my aim—that, and certain ideas I have about a few matters I won't bother you with just now. Your object is more gold. Am I right, or am I wrong?"

"Confound your impertinence!" cried Murchison, half starting up.

"Sit down, please," said the physicist. "What I'm going to say now will interest you. It really will. No, no, don't interrupt me—not just yet. You like my subject—gold. Before I get through to-night, I think you'll have some new ideas about it.

"Now, gold—why do you love it? Why do men toil, and fight, and even kill for it? That's plain enough; because it's the universal standard of value, the never-falling medium of exchange. It means ease, luxury, power. From world's end to world's end, all things yield to gold. At its touch every door swings open wide. The depths, the heights, all yield their tribute to it. Man's hand and woman's beauty come beneath its yoke."

"Stop!"

"It buys everything. Everything! Even Science herself. The waste places of the earth, the unknown wilds, are ransacked and made to give up their treasures, all for gold! If you want a railroad, Murchison, you offer gold. Bibelots, more gold. An ambassadorship, governorship, senatorial toga, still more gold!

"Gold writes the laws, and it enforces them. That Mazarin tapestry, hanging on the wall, means gold! That Strozzi bronze, gold!"

Storm pointed a long, big-knuckled finger, as though stabbing at the vase.

"The Franz Hals, over there, these Kazak rugs here, your original Gutenberg Bible, your King Charles prayer-book, your fifteen Caxtons, your Black Book of St. John, your Elzevirs you boast of—gold! Your—But no matter; why name the treasures?

"Each is a symbol of gold; of mankind wrung and tortured with toil, and poverty, and blood, and sweat; of exploitation, and of war! As such, you love them. For this main reason you love gold!"

Storm paused. Murchison, purple and speechless, sat staring at him. The billionaire's glasses had fallen from his nose and now dangled at the end of their silken cord. His hands twitched convulsively. His face had wrinkled into a strange, malicious mask; under his eyes the little fleshy bags that spoke of age became accentuated. He tried to speak, but could not.

The physicist regarded him a moment. Through Storm's mind passed a memory or two regarding this man's past; the industrial wars he had fought; the maimed and slaughtered thousands in his plants, and on his railways; his ruthless beating-down of human life so that he should rise to power. Storm's face hardened.

"Gold!" spat he. "Now, Murchison, I'm going to show you what it is you have been worshiping all your life; what you worship now. You put some gold before me, on that table there, and watch—that's all!"

For a minute the billionaire tried to brave his eyes, but he could not. He fumbled with his glasses.

"What—what do you mean?" stammered he.

"Mean? I mean just what I say! Your gold's a mere sham, Murchison. The sixteenth century imperial gold plate you mean to use at your big dinner next week is a delusion. Intrinsically, your Tyrian jugs, your ancient Greek gold wine-cups, haven't the utility-value of pewter—not in the light of my knowledge. Come, put some gold here on the table. Let me prove it!"

"You're insane!"

"Am I? That remains to be seen. Show me some gold, that's all. Then—"

"But—but gold is the one eternal, indestructible, basic factor in human life! Gold, the element—"

"Element? You're joking now. Come, come; set out some gold, under the light here!"

He pointed at the table.

"Surely you've got a little gold you're willing to risk? All for the sake of education?"

Murchison, his face livid with rage and secret apprehension, reached out and pressed an ivory button set into the side of the table.

Then he leaned back again, controlling himself with a strong effort.

Storm, smiling, once more drew at his cigar. The smoke, coiling, writhing upward in the dim-lit air, seemed to spell fantastic things in ever-changing runes, like half-seen symbols in a dream.

Came a pause. From beyond the stiff, gold-embroidered portière sounded a faint and vibrant twangling of harp-strings, playing Handel's *Largo*. But even at sound of his daughter's music the grim old billionaire's face did not soften. His gold? Menaced? What? Could it be?

The portière was drawn to one side. In the doorway stood an elderly Japanese, clad in a long blue kimono, noiselessly shod in felt tabi. He joined his palms and bowed, and sibilantly inquired:

"You ring, sar?"

"Ah, Jinyo!" Murchison exclaimed, starting. "Come here!"

"Yes, sar."

He approached the table. His slitlike

eyes noted the master's agitation, then for a fraction of an instant gleamed as they turned toward Storm. But they became at once impassive again.

"Upstairs in my room, in the right-hand corner of my dressing table, there's a small steel box. Bring it. Understand?"

"Yes, sar. Thank you, sar," murmured Jinyo. Then he was gone.

Three minutes, and the box lay on the mottled green-stone top of the table. Jinyo salaamed again, and withdrew.

With a key which he took from his pocket, Murchison opened the box. He tipped it over and shook out six heavy little rolls, neatly wrapped in paper. Each roll was circled with a band, marked "\$500.00."

"Now," said he, in a husky voice, "now, here is gold! Well?"

STORM made no answer, but picked up one of the rolls, stripped off the band and the paper, and slewed out the five-and-twenty double-eagles it contained, upon the stone.

Fresh-minted, bright, beautiful, the coins never yet had circulated. Storm rang one on the table-top, examined the milling, and weighed the coin in his hand.

"This," said he, smiling, "you admit to be the real thing, eh?"

"In a small way, yes. Just a few trifles, these coins. Enough to insure three boxes of those Mindanao Specials, that's all—but still gold. Yes, gold. I had them sent up from the office this afternoon for little Christmas gifts to my people here in the house and elsewhere—butlers, chauffeurs, maids, servants, and all that."

He spoke more calmly now, realizing perhaps that self-mastery was essential in face of this unknown peril. But in his spare-fleshed throat the throbbing of his pulse was ninety to the minute; and Storm, keen-eyed, noted it and smiled.

"Gold!" he said. "Here it is, the real metal, the immutable element! Atomic weight, 187; specific gravity, 17.16; standard coin gold, 21.6 K fine. Melts only at 107, and can be vaporized only by the electric furnace or the oxyhydrogen blow-pipe. Make sure, now, that I haven't got either apparatus on my person; nor any selenic acid either—the only acid which dissolves it; nor any aqua regia to transform it into the soluble trichlorid form."

Speaking, he manipulated the coin, rubbing it, turning it, stroking it with his strong fingers.

"Gold! Basis of all civilization, trade,

life, everything, is it not? Gold, the war-maker! The world-master! Gold, that turns the wheels of industry, moves armies, builds cities, dictates to kings and emperors, creates, rules, annihilates, glorifies! That bends men and women to its will, whitens the seas with the sails and blackens them with the smoke of commerce, creates paradise in the midst of hell, wrecks millions, crushes human rights and smears them out in blood, is lusted for, fought for, lost and won and paid for in man's life, in sweat and tears, in ruin, in damnation! Gold!"

He ceased, and a little silence fell there in the library. The clock on the mantel doled out a little silvery note. Storm glanced up at it.

"Half past nine," said he. "Before ten o'clock, sir, so far as this gold here is concerned, you'll be three thousand dollars poorer. I warn you now. This is no trifling, no empty bombast. I'm going to do just what I tell you; I am going to take this gold away from you. The lesson will be valuable. Are you satisfied with the price? It's only a trifle, you know, as you yourself said five minutes back. I have carte blanche, then?"

"Go ahead—fool!"

Murchison's voice was almost inaudible. In spite of his grip on the chair-arms, his hands were shaking with a nervous chill. His extinct cigar, its pricelessness forgotten now, hung loosely from his lips.

Storm stood up. He glanced at Murchison, then looked down fixedly at the gold coins. One by one he passed them through his fingers, then dropped them, clinking, on the table-top beneath the glowing iridescent light.

Then all at once a strange thing happened.

For now, across the outspread double-eagles, a spattering dullness began to appear, leprous and gray as though drops of mercury had been sprinkled over them. Every blotch was rounded at one side, pointed the same way—to southeastward, in the direction of New York.

Tiny the blotches were at first. But, even as Murchison, with a choking oath, started forward, glaring at the gold, they grew, enlarged, swiftly became confluent as they impinged, even like beads of quick-silver. Now two of the coins were all gray—now five of them—now all. Then, under the billionaire's very eyes, they dulled to a dirty white.

Murchison cried out. Then he clutched forward at his beloved gold.

"That's right! Touch one!" commanded Storm. "What's it worth now?"

Smitten to silence, the financier recoiled. "Merciful Heaven!" he stammered.

Under his scrabbling grasp every coin he had set his hand to suddenly crumbled into a fine, white, crystalline ash.

"Look out, there!" ejaculated Storm. "Your ring! What's the mater with your ring? You're losing it!"

Murchison's hand jerked up as though a viper had sunk its fangs into the flesh. His ring, already white, flaked off in whitish powder.

"Your picture-frames need attention, it seems to me," said the physicist, smiling and gesturing. "See there—and there? Poor work! Rotten bad!"

Murchison stared blankly at the frame of the Madonna over the mantel. The gold-leaf, swept with this horrible Blight, even as he looked was growing dull and gray and cold, losing its beauty, flaking off. On the polished slab beneath it a scatter of the crystalline powder was dropping in little scales and specks.

"Look out for your cravat-pin!" warned Storm. "You'll lose it if you don't!" Patronizingly he smiled.

The billionaire, dazed, brought his hand falteringly to his tie. Palsied, his fingers all but refused to obey his will. But when he touched his tie he started as with a galvanic shock.

"Where—what?" he stammered. "What—have you—done?"

His face grew suddenly pale as paper. The pin was gone.

All that remained was a pinch of whitish powder scattered over his cravat and down his clothing.

The big ruby that had been set in the claws of gold had vanished.

"The stone has probably rolled down inside your vest somewhere," Storm commented dryly. "You'll find it all right enough when you go to bed. If you don't, have Jinyo look for it on the rug."

"You devil!" shouted Murchison, lurching forward at Storm.

But the physicist only stepped back, still smiling.

"I advise you not to talk so loud," he suggested. "Some of your people here might come in to see what's the matter. And if any news of this should get out, for the present, it might prove embarrassing—very. Now, really, I must be going."

Never had he spoken more calmly in his life.

"After I'm gone, take a look at the rest

of your coins in the rolls there. They may interest you. Possibly they may even change your ideas of value a little, who knows?

"I'll go on with the research work, of course. One week from to-night I'll make my usual report, unless something more important interferes. Meantime, I shall be busy—extremely busy. Good night."

He gave Murchison one long look, then turned on his heel and—never even so much as glancing back—strode out of the room.

The billionaire, absolutely stunned, sat blinking. He had sunk back into the big chair, and now, chin on breast, sat gaping stupidly at the strange little piles of dust on the table.

Then, blinking, gasping, acting on a pure reflex of habit, he fumbled in his pocket for his gold cigar-case. He found none. Instead, two of those wondrous cigars came up loose in his shaking fingers—two cigars powdered with a fine, metallic ash. Murchison cried out in sheer fright. He pawed desperately at his pocket. Out he snatched another cigar, which broke to fragments in his clutch.

With an oath, he flung these fragments onto the rug and ripped his pocket inside out. Of the costly cigar-case no sign remained save a pinch or two of dust and some small diamonds which had been set in his engraved monogram.

"Oh!" wheezed the billionaire. He flung himself upon one of the untouched coin-rolls and tried to rip it open. Under the pressure of his fingers it collapsed to an empty twist of paper circled with the mocking inscription: \$500.00.

"Merciful God!" he gulped, and tore the paper.

Out sifted a fine stream of that same terrifying ash.

Murchison swept all the empty papers on to the floor, uttered a strange laugh, and made two wavering steps toward the door. Then he swayed, flung up his hands, and—plunged full length to the floor.

CONFUSION indescribable burst through the household of the billionaire when, running swiftly and noiselessly in at the sound of the fall, Jinyo found his master lying senseless on the great Burmah tiger-skin between the table and the door. Only a moment later came Mrs. Murchison and Hildegard from the music-room, and behind them, scared and silent and frightened out of their wits, two or three maids, a butler, and the Belgian chef.

Hildegarde first recovered common sense. "Here, Jinyo!" she commanded, while the mother knelt hysterically and with futile exhortations tried to arouse her husband.

"Now, mother, do be quiet!" Hildegarde insisted. "It's only a fainting-fit. No, no, it's not apoplexy, I tell you. Pierre, you take his shoulders. Jinyo, you and Edwards take hold, so—now, then—all right."

Servants and daughter cooperating, they carried him to the great hall, spacious and wonderfully beautiful, then past the Parian marble fountain and so to the electric elevator.

Presently Van Horne Murchison lay between his monogrammed sheets in his big, four-posted Louis-Seize bed, while downstairs the telephone was kept hot trying to locate Dr. Harlan Grant in the village.

But Grant was precisely the one man Murchison positively refused to see. When, after a few minutes, he came glimmering back to his senses and his ear caught the echo of Grant's name, he struggled up in bed. Gaunt and dishevelled, wild-eyed, vehement in spite of all his weakness and distress, he cried in angry voice:

"Doctor? No, no! No doctor! Won't have him—positively won't! Understand?"

"But, father—"

"No, no, it's nothing—nothing at all, I tell you! Just clear this infernal pack out of here, won't you? Mother, you have the windows thrown open. Give me air! Air! I'll be all right—"

"We've sent for Grant already, and—"

"What?" Sudden rage revived the billionaire. "Sent for him, have you? I won't have him, won't see him, I tell you! Get that? Hang it, can't a man smoke too much and get dizzy and drop over without turning the world upside down? If this gets out, if the Street gets wind of it—"

"But, listen, father!" And Hildegarde, grasping old Murchison's hand, tried to calm him. In her whole life she had never before seen him wrought to such a pitch, and she feared serious results.

Mrs. Murchison, distraught, gave contradicting orders to the frightened serving folk. Up went the big windows; the keen December breeze surged in, bellying the draperies.

Murchison, gasping for air, pushed his daughter away from him with imperative decision.

"No, I tell you!" he stormed. "I won't see him. When he comes send him back PDQ. And if he, or anybody, breathes a word

about this, there'll be some scalping. Do you realize what this would do to the market if it became known? Now, clear out—all of you! I reckon I'm boss here! Out, I say! No, no, mother, you can't stay. No, Hilda—out you go, too! Nobody but Jinyo—just Jinyo, that's all. Hear me? Am I master here, or not? Go!"

When, still protesting, everybody had departed except the Japanese, Murchison's own private valet, the financier scrambled out of bed with astonishing agility, and, though still weak and shaken, got hastily to work.

"Shut those windows, Jinyo!" he commanded. "Now, come here."

He gripped the wizened little man's arm with a violence that made the Jap stare.

"Yes, sar? What is it, sar? Tell me, I shall do."

"Listen!" The billionaire's teeth were chattering with excitement and cold, as he stood there only half dressed on the Kirmanshah rug, for the temperature was well down toward forty.

"Go quickly, quietly down the back way. Go to the library. Lock all the windows. Lock both doors and bring me the keys at once. Understand? Nobody must go into that room, nobody at all. If anybody does, your job's gone. Get that?"

"Yes, sar. I pick up library? Make order?"

"You pick up nothing, touch nothing, see nothing!" commanded Murchison.

Well he realized that he himself, personally, with his own soft hands, must clean that room and hide each speck, each trace of gold-ash.

"Just lock it up and get those keys to me inside of three minutes, or I'll know why. *Hyaku yuke!*"

Roughly he shoved the valet toward the door.

"Hurry! hurry! And put all the lights out, there—and don't say a word to anybody. Go on, now! Go on!"

Hardly had the door closed behind the Japanese, when Murchison stumbled across the room toward the high-backed chair of carved mahogany, on which his clothes had been flung at random in the excitement.

Shaken and trembling, he began trying to dress himself, a task he had not done alone for many years.

"Mad? Am I going mad?" he muttered as he pawed in a dazed manner at his clothing. "This isn't true! It can't be! Why, the thing's preposterous. Worse, it's an infernal outrage! Impossible! But he's

smart, Storm is—blamed smart, I'll grant that. A clever devil, eh?"

He tried to laugh, but dismally failed.

"He's huffy because I threatened him with discharge for not delivering the goods on that nitrate proposition. Trying to get back at me, what? Well, I'll teach him!"

HE TOOK up his garments and sought to turn them right-side out, but his hands shook so that they disobeyed his will. He cursed, and ripped at them.

"Clever as Hades!" he exclaimed. "But there's some catch to it, that's certain. Some smart scientific hocus-pocus—or maybe he had me hypnotized, staring so steadily at those bright gold pieces. How can I tell? All I know is that the thing's impossible. It isn't so—it can't be! But—eh? If it were? Nonsense! Why—"

Out from his waistcoat-pocket something fell—a small, hard black object.

"H-m! My fountain pen," said Murchison, and picked it up. With hardly a glance at it, he was about to lay it on the dressing-table close at hand, when a certain peculiarity in its appearance struck him.

With a strange feeling of impending disaster, he thrust it under the electric light burning beside the table.

"What?" stammered he.

Horror leaped into his eyes. All along his spine and over his scalp a crawling, tightening sensation spread. Suddenly he began to shiver violently. Long-forgotten sensations such as he had not felt since, when a boy, he had once had to pass a country graveyard at night, thrilled every nerve.

"My God!" he whispered hoarsely.

He stared at the pen aghast. On the hard-rubber barrel, where the elaborately carved gold filigree mountings had been, now there showed only a spraying intaglio design.

Of the gold no slightest trace or vestige remained.

He snatched off the cap. Terrified, he looked for the gold pen-point.

But that, too, had disappeared. From the cap a tiny pinch of white metallic powder filtered out as he held it in his palsied fingers.

With a curse, Murchison hurled the pen from him. It cracked against the wall and ricocheted back across the polished floor, leaving an ugly blotch of ink where it had struck.

Shaken with fright and cold to the very marrow, the billionaire staggered back to his bed and collapsed. Through all the

terror and confusion of his mind only one thought rose dominant:

"This must not be known! This must be hidden! Nobody must get hold of it! Storm must be seen. He must be intercepted. If the secret of his power becomes public—universal ruin!"

He hid his face in both hands, and for a moment sat quite motionless.

There Jinyo, presently returning with noiseless tread, found his master. Very pale now, sobered, and humbled was Murchison.

"Jinyo?" said he in an altered voice.

"Yes, sar?"

"The doctor—when he comes—"

"He maybe come now, pretty soon."

"When he does, show him up. I've changed my mind. And say, pour me a drink there. A stiff one, too."

He nodded weakly toward the little stand in the corner.

Jinyo deftly manipulated decanter and glass, and brought Murchison four fingers of Croix d'Hins cognac, thirty years old, with a soda chaser. The billionaire, though ordinarily most moderate, gulped the brandy neat, without even winking. The chaser he ignored.

"Library all locked up tight now?"

"Yes, sar. All locked."

"Nobody's been in there? Nobody at all?"

"No, sar. Just I come now from locking it. Keys here, sar."

Murchison accepted them with a tremulous hand. He started violently as a knocking sounded on the floor.

"Father! Father?" sounded Hildegard's voice through the panels. "We don't understand this at all. Mother says we ought to be in there with you, and—"

"Will you leave me alone?" roared the billionaire in a violent gust of passion.

And, already stimulated by the alcohol, he got up unsteadily from the bed and began pacing the floor. The Jap, with observant yet noncommittal eyes, watched him from a respectful distance.

"Will you go to bed now, sar?" queried he. "Till doctor comes?"

"Doctor? What doctor? I don't want any doctor. I'm as fit as a fiddle—all right every way. See here, Jinyo!"

Coming over to the valet, Murchison glared down at him.

"I've got another errand for you. Listen!"

"I hear, sar."

"Good! You go on down to the garage. If you can get there without being seen, so much the better. In any case, don't answer any questions. Got that?"

The billionaire's voice was regaining mastery of its usual timbre, its pitch of mastery. Jinyo nodded.

"Have Thomas run the racing-car out. The racer, mind. Out the rear door on to the Sylvan Avenue driveway. Tell him to get everything ready for a quick start, but not to light the lamps. He must wait right there at the wheel for further orders. And you put a fur coat into the car for me."

"Which coat, sar?"

"The Persian lamb. That's all now. Go!"

FIVE minutes later Murchison had huddled on his clothes in hit-or-miss fashion, dropped a revolver from his table drawer into his coat pocket, and—sneaking in his own house like a fear-struck criminal—had made his way by devious passages and stairs down to the tradesmen's entrance at the back of the mansion.

Here he paused a moment to listen. Nothing. No sound of alarm or of suspicion.

Noiselessly the billionaire opened the door and slipped out into the night.

A single incandescent was blurring the chill fog under the archway of the door, casting its light out on to the thin and glistening snow that had that evening fallen.

Murchison turned a switch in the door-jamb. The light died. Then quickly, furtively, he hurried in the thick gloom toward the garage, reached it unnoted, stole around it, and reached the driveway that communicated with the avenue at the rear of Edgecliff, Murchison's estate.

Thomas, already holding the car door open, was waiting for his master with the imperturbable aplomb that made him invaluable. He touched his cap as Murchison climbed into the limousine.

"Railroad station at Englewood, quick!" commanded Murchison. "But run out of the place here as quietly as you can. Light the lamps outside there on the road, not now."

His voice was strained and notably unsteady.

"Yes, sir."

"Go down Englewood Avenue. You know Mr. Storm, of course—the man you brought up here last week? All right. Keep close watch of the road for him. Most of the way down there's sidewalk only on one side. You can't miss him if he hasn't reached the village yet. It's highly important that I see him. Now you understand everything?"

"I understand, sir."

"Very well." And Murchison slipped into the huge fur coat that Jinyo had already laid on the cushions for him. "Drive on!"

Thomas closed the door with discreet gentleness, touched his cap, and climbed on to the driver's seat. A moment, and with a soft hum of gears, the racer was slipping in the dark down the long winding drive between the oaks and elms. Even the grit of pebbles was deadened by the snow.

Almost noiselessly the car swung through the huge stone gate nearly half a mile from the house. Here Thomas stopped and lighted the acetyline headlights.

"Let her out now!" Murchison commanded sharply through the speaking-tube as the chauffeur once more took the wheel and threw in the clutch. And, as if in direct obedience to his word, the magnificent machine sprang forward, spinning into a mad pace along the far-curved road toward the village.

At the first westward turn down Palisades Avenue they passed a tall, ulster-clad figure, sitting at ease on a stone wall and hidden by the trunk of a huge maple.

"I thought as much," this man thought to himself, smiling, as he watched the fading glare of the red rear light. "Looks as though Murchison were taking his first lesson in the value of theoretical science. Here's hoping he'll profit by it. My inoculation seems to have 'taken,' all right. Now for home. But, gad, I wish I had one of those Mindanaos for the tramp!"

Pondering regretfully on the priceless cigar, whereof the wondrous bouquet still haunted his memory, Storm slid off the wall and limbered into his long, loose stride. As he went he whistled, and with overflowing energy swung in circles the heavy walking-stick he always carried.

"In a day or two, three at the outside," he reflected, "I'll be ready to spring my proposition on him—or rather he'll probably be in a receptive state of mind to listen to it. I shouldn't wonder if that big dinner he's planning might be rather a neat occasion to drive things home, eh?"

Murchison's racer by this time had already roared down the first of the long hills toward Englewood. Another car, its lights flinging a momentary blinding glare, whirred past up the gradient. In spite of his horrible perturbation, the billionaire smiled grimly.

"Too late, doctor!" he growled. "Your bird's flown this time, which won't, however, prevent your sending in a scandalous bill."

Then with a word to Thomas—"Keep a sharp eye out, now," Murchison settled his glasses on his nose and peered eagerly out at the speeding roadside.

But, though they swept the whole length of the avenue, they found no John Storm. John was already far on his way down Hudson Terrace toward Coytesville, where he knew he could catch a car for Fort Lee ferry.

Swinging along through the light snow, now humming a bit of the sextet from *Lucia*, now reflecting on the Mindanao specials, again turning over in his mind the campaign he had launched against the unquestioned ruler of the financial world, he made good progress. Once he stopped to fill his pipe and light it with a wisp of paper at a flaring street-lamp, for matches he found he had none.

As he flung the paper down and set his foot on it he smiled.

"Ashes!" he said mockingly.

The billionaire had in the meantime reached the Englewood railroad station. He, the economic overlord of uncounted millions of men, now was hunting the scientist as a lost dog hunts its master's spoor.

"Quick, Thomas!" he ordered. "There's a train in two minutes. You look up and down the platform—everywhere. I'll take the inside of the station. Quick!"

"Excuse me, sir; but Mr. Storm can't have got here so soon."

"Yes—yes, he can. He may have caught a ride down on somebody's machine. Go, do as I tell you."

And while Thomas, amazed, began to scrutinize all the waiting passengers by the dim station lights, Murchison hastily disappeared into the building.

The train clanged in, stopped, pulled out again, and left Murchison alarmed and baffled.

He climbed back into the car, shaken with sick apprehension.

"New York City—and hang the speed-laws!" he directed. Then, as the racer wheeled in a quick circle up the station driveway and surged southbound along Dean Street, he flung himself back against the cushions and impotently gnawed at his mustache. His thoughts, who shall say?

But presently the details of his immediate plan recurred to his mind. Storm's address, until now a mere jotting in his memorandum book, all at once assumed a tremendous and overshadowing importance.

As the car shot through the night,

swerving to dodge trolleys, ripping over crossings, sounding its harsh siren-shriek at incautious pedestrians, Murchison fumbled this book from his inner pocket.

He switched on the little electric light in the roof of the limousine, a light fed by storage batteries; then with an abject eagerness which he was ashamed to admit even to himself, hastily thumbed the booklet.

"Ah, here we are—75A Danton Place!"

And, as though the insensate paper could feel, he smote it with his clenched fist.

"It's ruin, ruin—if it's true!" he thought. "That devil's capable of anything. I know the type. What's his game? A holdup. Wants a million, does he? Ten, perhaps? H-m! When I get through with him—"

With savage bitterness he tried to frame some countermove to checkmate Storm.

"It must be some smart trick, after all," he tried to comfort himself. "Gold is indestructible; that's the hard, cold, scientific fact. No getting around that. Some infernal legerdemain. He won't try it twice, that's all. Nobody yet has ever stood against me—no one can."

He leaned toward the speaking-tube.

"Thomas!"

"Yes, sir."

"Getting all you can out of the machine?"

"She's doing forty now, sir. I don't dare—"

"Make it fifty."

THE CAR swayed as Thomas let her out another notch. Her exhaust with the muffler cut out, roared like Nordenfeldts. The country road whirled back at a reckless, dizzy pace, ghostly-white with the thin snow through which the tires cut their long, straight slashes.

Bang!

The car lurched, swerved, gritted, stopped.

"What the devil now?" howled the billionaire.

"Inner tube, sir, I think. But—"

"Hang you, what d'you mean by putting on such rotten rubber?" To himself he groaned, "If that stupendous villain sees anybody or talks with anybody before I get to him, nothing can undo the possible damage." Then aloud, "How long now?"

Already he was out of the limousine, standing there in the snow with Thomas, glaring at the damaged tire, shaking with cold and terror. His teeth chattered in his jaw.



His hands were thrust out at the blighted cup of gold. . . .

"Five minutes, sir. Maybe ten—not more than ten at the outside. I've got to jack the axle up, sir, you see, and bolt on the spare—"

"Go on, get to work then! Don't waste time explaining. Get at it."

"Yes, sir."

And while Murchison tramped up and down in the December night, his soul aflame with haste and hate and fear, the chauffeur got out tools and started to repair.

He underestimated the time, for the chilled nuts and bolts, set by the frost, defied him. One wrench he broke; he bent another before the spare rim was clinched home. A full quarter-hour had passed, and Murchison was holding himself only by a strong exercise of will before all was ready once more.

"Right, sir," Thomas announced at length.

"Seventy-five A, Danton Place, New York!" he cried. "And if you want to hold your job, you make it inside half an hour."

"Yes, sir. But if we don't connect right with the ferry—"

"Not another word! Go!"

Luck held bad. They missed a boat by one minute and a half. This cost them a ten-minute wait. And on Manhattan Street, across the river, they were held for six minutes by a long freight which, alternately backing and going ahead, blocked the way. Not all Murchison's hot haste and bitter rage could clear that train from the street. Savagely he recalled that he himself owned sixty-five per cent of the stock of that railroad.

"Every man of this particular train-crew gets the blue envelope to-morrow," he thought. "And these tracks go underground before this time next year."

The reflection gave him some grains of

chilly comfort. But, none the less, his nerves were worn down fine long before the racer swirled and skidded around the corner into Danton Place, and with a sudden cramp of brakes hauled up in front of 75A.

Before Thomas could get down to open the door for him Murchison was on the sidewalk. He peered up and down the street. Good fortune, perhaps, might show him John Storm just getting home.

But no—no sign of him appeared. Murchison cast a quick glance at the building. Here a stationery store; next, a pretty little milliner's shop, with a ravishing display of feathers, hats, and gowns, at sight of which Murchison cursed savagely. No sign, however, of dwelling-places. Then the billionaire saw a doorway, recessed from the street.

He ran to it.

"Ah, here we are!"

Waiting not for Thomas, who stood astonished on the sidewalk, he pushed open the door and entered.

A row of letter-boxes and electric buttons were dimly visible at the right. Murchison drew out his cigar-lighter. By its pale flame he read the tenants' cards.

"Hanson? No. Burbank? Wilson? No. Ah, John Storm, Consulting Physicist!"

With a sudden thrill of nervousness he rang Storm's bell. But though he waited, rang again and waited, and once more rang, no reply sounded down the tube. No click of the inner-door latch bade him come up.

"The devil!" breathed Murchison.

He tried another bell, which was answered. Panting, he climbed three flights of dim-lit stairs. A fat woman in a wrapper, peering over the banisters, demanded his errand.

"No, I don't know anything about anybody here. Sorry, but I can't tell you where he is, or anything," said she, when he had stated the object of his search.

Then she vanished and a door closed.

Though Murchison tried every available person in the house, he got no information. Storm's door was impregnable. Only one thing the billionaire made sure of—the scientist was not at home.

Where the deuce is he anyhow, and what next? thought the financier, wrought to a bitter pitch of irritation as he stood before the physicist's unresponding door.

Then, realizing that undue eagerness might cause suspicion and subject him to unwelcome observation, he mastered his consuming impatience.

"See me at once at the Imperial Arms Hotel," he scribbled in pencil on one of his cards. "Failure to do so will entail serious results to you."

This card he thrust under Storm's door; then, morose and very angry, made his way down to the machine again.

"Imperial Arms!" he commanded Thomas curtly. To himself he said, "The devilish fool may have already told somebody how he hoaxed me this evening. Why, this very moment he may be laughing over it in some café with some of his cronies! All a fine joke, eh? But if it gets out—if there's any grain of truth in it—what then?"

He pondered for a moment as the car got under way once more.

"Truth? Bah!" he gibed. "Truth? It's impossible. It can't be so—it is not!"

But his face was grim and very pale as he leaned back, exhausted, physically and mentally beaten out, against the deep leather cushions of the racer.

CHAPTER II

CONVINCED AT LAST

JOHAN STORM, during this time of nerve-rack and distress for Murchison, was thinking of quite other things.

All the way in to town the memory of that precious, that incomparable Mindanao had haunted him. His pipe, after that priceless smoke, had utterly failed to satisfy. The stife in the men's cabin of the ferry had quite nauseated him.

It had seemed, by contrast with the Vuelta Abajo fragrance, like the reek of a soap factory to one who had just come from a flower show.

And John, ill at ease, haunted by a longing such as he never yet had known in all his years of tobacco connoisseurship, had gone to stand on the deck, to gaze on the far city lights wimpling in the river, to think with unspeakable longings of the wondrous treasures in old Murchison's humidor.

Only in the background of his mind now dwelt the scene of the gold transmutation, the sense of power, of success, and strife, and future conflict. The priceless weed from that far, southern slope—vague as a fable of the Blessed Western Isles, and seemingly as hopeless of attainment—obsessed his soul.

He mused, "If I only had the power, now, of turning havanas into those!"

Impatiently he walked the deck, unsatisfied. The one great physical need and craving he had ever known, ever been dominated by, the fine, discriminating, overmastering love of good tobacco, was strong at work upon him. No tiger, deprived of blood after its first taste, lusts for that joy more keenly than did John Storm for more—and still more—of those Mindanao miracles.

When he reached Manhattan, instead of going straight home, as a matter of course, Storm turned into Amsterdam Avenue, and walked south, three blocks, to One Hundred and Twenty-Third Street. Near the Corner, a curious old Porto Rican, who rejoiced in the title of Manuel Rincon y Barra, had long kept a tiny hole-in-the-wall shop, where he dispensed quaint philosophy, and the finest, rarest cigars to be found anywhere on the Island—odd brands, broken lots, special smokes with weird names from unknown places.

Storm entertained shrewd suspicions about the legitimacy of some of this business; there seemed a scarcity of United States revenue stamps in the establishment. None the less, Barra's wisdom and unparalleled weeds had long held his interest. And to the little shop he now betook his way.

He spent half an hour there, with the brown-faced, spectacled, smiling patriarch—half an hour of the same time when Murchison, with febrile anxiety, was seeking him.

Only when Barra had admitted that neither in his own shop, nor in any other whatsoever could *Vuelta Abajo Mindanaos* be procured, did Storm, with deep dejection,

take the subway, homeward bound.

All the way down-town his mind dwelt anxiously on this new problem, and more than once he softly swore to himself.

But Murchison's card, under the door, diverted his mind. Certainly that was a pregnant development.

"H-m-m-m!" mused the physicist, as he turned up the gas and read the penciled message. "I knew I'd hear from him, sure enough, but I hardly thought he'd follow me up to-night. He must be in a panic! So soon? What will he do when I really get down to business?"

Then, with an odd smile, he tossed the card into the waste-basket. And, quite ignoring the billionaire's imperative command of "See me at once!" he calmly undressed and went to bed in the little room opening off his study.

I might as well get a little sleep before he routs me out, he thought, as he stretched between the sheets. It's quarter of twelve now. I give him till two A.M. at latest. Well, we shall see what we shall see.

He turned over and began to think of Mindanaos again. Five minutes later he was sleeping the sleep of the absolutely healthy.

Storm's calculations proved correct within a reasonably close margin. For hardly had his little alarm-clock ticked out three hours when the trilling of his electric doorbell, persistent and compelling, aroused him.

"Gad! I've got company at last, I guess." He yawned, sitting up in bed. "No hurry, though. Let him have time enough to think things over. He won't go away."

With which he very deliberately got out of bed, put on slippers and bath-robe, and went into his study. He closed the bedroom door behind him again—for all the windows in there were open wide—then lighted the gas, and went to admit his distinguished guest.

"What? You, sir?" he greeted Murchison, with feigned astonishment. Then he smiled, and offered his hand, which the billionaire did not accept.

"Why—what gives me the pleasure of such an early call? Anything wrong? That is—anything I can do for you?"

Murchison stood blinking with anger and embarrassment, yet through it all Storm could sense the tremendous relief of the financier at having found him. The billionaire's face went a dull red. Then, not even waiting an invitation, he pushed past Storm.

"You got my card?" he demanded.

"I did," Storm answered calmly as he closed the door. "Sorry, but I really couldn't keep the appointment. After a hard day's work—"

"The worst day's work you've ever done!" snarled Murchison. "Now, let me tell you—let me say—"

He stammered, coughed, and struggled in vain for words.

Storm, a tall, powerful figure in his loose gown, ran his fingers through his unruly thatch of hair, and smiled again.

"By the way," he remarked, "If we're really going to discuss things, do you mind my inquiring whether you've got a stray Mindanao in your clothes?"

Murchison glared.

"You impudent hound!" he flung at the scientist.

Storm's face hardened.

"Beg pardon?" asked he. "Were you addressing me, sir?"

"Yes, I was! And I repeat it! I add charlatan and trickster, mountebank and—and—" He choked again. But his fist, clenched with passion, shook square at the scientist.

Storm kept a moment's silence. He coughed slightly, thrust his thumbs through the cord of his bath-robe, and began to pace the floor with long, even strides.

The faint slap, slap, slap of his straw Chinese slippers punctuated the tension. Then he stopped, faced Murchison, and eyed him with a smile of quizzical interest.

The financier advanced toward him, trembling with rage.

"What d'you mean," he cried, "by put-

ting up a game like this on me? Me? By coming out to Edgecliff and playing your infernal tricks? Think I'm a child, to be fooled by sleight of hand, by devilish buncombe like this? Think you can put this over me, and get away with it? If so—well—I reckon you've got a thing or two to learn, that's all. And you'll regret it, too! Hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you, all right enough," answered Storm quietly. "But what you're driving at, I don't know. Can it be you're laboring under the delusion that—that I've been deceiving you, maybe? That what I've shown you is mere claptrap and deception? If so, the quicker you forget it, the better!

"Tricks?" And Storm's long forefinger jabbed vigorously at Murchison, who stood shaking with excitement, a strange little figure in the bulky greatcoat of Persian lamb.

"Tricks, eh? See here, now—I've played no tricks on you! It's all dead earnest, this business. If you prefer to consider it make-believe, of course that's your own prerogative. But I warn you now, you're on the wrong track. Dead wrong! And the sooner you get off it, in dealing with me, the better! That's all!"

His jaw snapped shut. His eyes hardened with an expression Murchison never yet had seen in them. For a moment the billionaire met his gaze, but only for a moment. Then the elder man's eyes fell, and with a dry tongue he tried to moisten his parched lips.

STORM gripped the edge of the table and leaned forward.

"See here!" he said. "There's nothing in this matter but just hard, cold, scientific fact. Get that? I've got a purpose in view. A purpose, you understand? What's more, I'm going to get what I'm after. Going—to—get—it! That's flat!"

"Humph!" Murchison sneered. But all at once, with a cry, he clapped his hand to his face.

"Oh!" he cried. "My glasses!"

Storm grinned broadly.

"Yes, I shouldn't wonder if you would need another pair," he said. "Really, I hate to deprive you of any more property just yet. But it seems as though you weren't sufficiently convinced. Look out! Save the lenses!"

Dazed, Murchison was fumbling at his face. Came a sharp *clink* as one of the lenses fell to the floor. The billionaire's glasses, as such, had ceased to exist. Down

his fur coat clung little dabs of powder; some had been lodged in his mustache. And the silken cord which had held the glasses now dangled futilely from his ear.

"Your watch!" Storm cried.

Almost as he spoke, a muffled buzzing became audible near Murchison's equator. Cursing, the billionaire ripped open his coat. His fingers sought his watch-pocket. Then they recoiled as though a viper had been hidden there.

"Go on, see what's left!" the scientist gibed.

Murchison, deadly pale, tremulously dredged out a little of the same gray powder, together with an absurd, incongruous jumble of springs and tiny wheels, and, in the midst of all, an intact crystal—the utter wreck of his magnificent gold watch.

Murchison retreated toward the door, gasping.

"You—you hell-hound!" he gulped.

"Thanks!" Storm answered, bowing.

"That's better. No charlatan, now, eh? No trickster? You flatter me, sir. I congratulate you, too, on your final perception of the truth.

"But, sir, if you'll pardon my saying so, you're in no fit condition to-night for any rational discussion of the program I've mapped out. I hardly think you and I could come to an understanding just yet. To-morrow morning will be much better, won't it? Shall we make it eleven o'clock, here in this room? Agreed, then, since silence gives consent. But be on time, please. I've got an appointment at eleven-thirty.

"And now," he continued, yawning, "I really must ask you to let me have a little sleep. To-morrow there'll be time enough for everything, but we both of us need a good snooze. And—pardon me mentioning it—if you'll only be so kind as to bring a couple of those cigars, the discussion will be much facilitated. Good night!"

But Murchison gave no answer, nor did he make any sign of withdrawing. He only stood there, dazed, his pallid face all wrinkled and baggy and odd-looking, very, very old and drawn, as though the sap and life had all been drained from his flesh.

Storm shot a glance at him, then turned and slatted over to the window overlooking Danton Place. This window he threw up with one vigorous gesture. He leaned out.

There, at the curb below, Murchison's car was standing, its engine singing a quiet, contented little monotone. The fig-

ure of Thomas, patiently waiting, lounged against a mud-guard.

"Oh, there, Thomas! Thomas!" Storm hailed.

"Yes, sir," the man called back, starting to attention.

"You're wanted here."

"Yes, sir."

"Come right up, please!"

Storm closed the window. He turned, to find the billionaire fumbling at some object which he had already half drawn from the pocket of the great fur coat. A flick of light showed that this object was metal. Instinctively, Storm realized Murchison had a revolver.

"Put that toy back there!" he commanded, laughing dryly with caustic scorn. "Your hand's shaking so you couldn't hit a barn door at ten paces. More likely than not you'll hurt yourself if you try to shoot. Come, come, now, Murchison, don't make a fool of yourself!"

On the stairway sounded a step; at the door a knock.

"There's Thomas," said Storm. "Quick, get that gun out of sight before I let him in!"

With a thin-lipped grimace, the billionaire, overmastered, slid the revolver back into his pocket.

"Thanks," Storm remarked as he opened the door. "I'm glad you're going to be sensible, and not force me to get unpleasant. Now, Thomas," he added to the chauffeur, "Mr. Murchison isn't feeling well. He oughtn't to have come at all. If you'll pilot him downstairs, he'll be greatly obliged.

"He's broken his glasses, you understand, and can't see plainly. I advise you to get him back home as soon as possible. Mind the stairs. There's a bad place on the second landing. All right? Good night!"

In the doorway Murchison paused, turned, and with a ghastly, masklike face of fear and hate, raised his fist at the imperturbable Storm. Then he let Thomas, filled with vast wonder, lead him away.

After they were gone, Storm sat down in his big, shabby comfortable armchair by the littered table, carefully filled a pipe and lighted it.

As the first clouds of smoke puffed ceilingward he heard the faint slam of an automobile door. Then came a humming, the throw-in of a clutch, the vanishing cahoot-hoot-hoot of a siren.

"*Au revoir*," murmured he, leaning back contentedly, and with thoughtful interest

considering the eye-glass lens that still lay upon the floor. He picked it up and put it carefully away in his table drawer. "Some souvenir!" He smiled.

Then he turned out all lights and once more went to bed.

I guess you're convinced now, at last, he thought. That's the first step. And you'll take the second, too, my man, or there'll be plenty of trouble, that's all!

Whereafter, his conscience being good, and all things working according to schedule, he turned over and fell fast asleep, to dream of priceless Mindanaos by the million, which Murchison, who somehow looked like the Porto Rican tobacconist, kept changing into worthless golden bars as fast as Storm reached for them.

But all that long night through, after having with his own hands cleaned up the library, collected the gold-ash, and hidden it in his safe, the billionaire, in anguish, hate and futile rage, paced the floor of his fine bedroom at Edgecliff.

And the gray winter morn was not more pale, more cold and desolate, than he, owner of millions, master of the world.

"NOW, Storm, just what are you driving at? What is it you want?" demanded Murchison. "We're not children, you and I. We're men, practical men, men of sense and judgment. I admit, first off, you've put me in a tight place. Only a fool tries to bluff a royal flush with two pair. Show down — let's see what you've got?"

"No reason why we should play at cross-purposes. Let's get together! And if your demands are anywhere within reason, why, I reckon maybe I can meet them."

Storm smiled, that enigmatic smile of his, and passed a hand along his freshly shaven chin. Fit as a fighting-cock was he, after six hours' sleep and a cold shower. And the realization that Murchison had obeyed his will, had come back again at 11 A.M. sharp, was very good.

"Let me take your coat," he offered. "That's right; we can talk better if we're both comfortable. Now, won't you try my big chair? It fits the back better than any other I've ever known. So. In the third place, pardon me for asking, but do you happen to have an extra Vuelta Abajo you're not going to use? If so, I know where it will do lots of good."

Murchison sat down, and very grimly pulled out a leather cigar-case, highly tooled.

"I'm not taking any more chances with

gold, you see," he growled, with just the faintest trace of a sour smile. "Here, help yourself. I've got four with me. Take two. That's fair, isn't it?"

"One will do—for now—thank you," Storm answered.

For a moment he held the long, soft, black weed in his fingers, with an expression such as perhaps another man might show on receiving a love-letter from his adored. His gaze softened as he sniffed the ineffable aroma of the cigar.

At last he lighted it. For a moment he closed his eyes, sensing to the full the wondrous bouquet. Then, with a sigh of contentment, he opened them again.

"Now," said he, "I'm ready to talk business."

"What is it you want?" exclaimed the billionaire, his thin fingers drumming the chair-arm. "What's the game all about, anyhow? A hold-up? Money? Position? What?"

"Power!"

"What?"

"Power, I repeat. And, what's more, I'm going to get it. This is to be straight talk, Murchison, without any frills or evasions. Listen. You're used to power. It's your breath and life and soul. You're used to commanding, to dictating. You say 'Go!' and men go, by the million. 'Come!' and they come. 'Do so and so!' and they do it—they have to, or else starve.

"But now, Murchison," and he poised the cigar in midair, jabbing with it to emphasize his words, "now you are in for a new experience. You're face to face with something you can neither understand nor yet control. You're up against a fact, now, not a theory. A new kind of fact, altogether, a new force, outside of and vastly bigger than any you've ever so much as dreamed of. Understand?"

He paused, as for an answer. Murchison, fidgeting with his mustache, nodded evasively.

"Well, what are you driving at?" he asked, in a throaty, thin voice.

"You'll find out soon enough. This new force at my disposal can, and will, undermine all the power of you. There's no such thing as withstanding or combating it, or doing anything at all with it except just to placate it and surrender as gracefully as possible. From your hands, power is about to pass into mine."

"Go on!"

Before continuing, Storm smoked a moment in silence. Then he sat down on the table-top.

"Wherein rests my claim to power?" he asked. "In this one fact—that I can destroy the basis of yours; can, at will, annihilate gold; can utterly obliterate its value! The world's exchange medium is, in my hands, like so much cigar-ash in yours. I close my hand, and—it's gone. That's all."

"You're in my grip, Murchison."

"I've demonstrated my abilities. If you want to, I can go farther. In fact, I'll go as far as necessary to bring you all to your knees. But I advise you, for your own good, that the sooner you make terms with me, the better."

"Oh, drop all that!" ejaculated the billionaire. "Suppose I take you at your own word, what then? What do you want? Grant you all the power in the world—what are you aiming to do with that power? What?"

His voice had recovered a little of its usual tone; and back into his eyes—now blinking through silver-bowed glasses—something of their ordinary, keen, shrewd penetration had returned.

"What are you after, with your power?" Murchison repeated. "And why do you make your demands on me? I employ you to carry on certain research work for me, and all at once you spring this coup. If the thing's true, and I admit it looks true, you certainly have got us fellows into a most infernally small corner. You're possibly threatening the world's whole financial, social and economic structure. But from what I know of you, I don't believe you're out merely to destroy. A fanatic you may be, but I reckon you're decently honest. What's up?"

"I'll tell you, in a minute. But first let me make my game quite clear. I may not be able to extract a commercial nitrate from the air—yet; but I can certainly handle gold. I've been working on radio-

activities for eight years now, and they've led me a pretty chase.

"Where other men have courted woman-kind, I've courted X-rays, N-rays, cathode-rays, Hertzian waves, wireless projection, and all that sort of thing. The Curies, Becquerel, Lodge, Crookes, and the rest, have nothing to teach me. This sound like boasting, Murchison, but it isn't. It's just plain fact. And now, how am I going to apply it?"

"Yes, yes! That's the question!" Murchison burst out, leaning a little forward. "What next?"

"This: That you and yours hereafter do my bidding, or—"

"You try to wreck us all?"

"Not only try, but really do it! That's putting it into good plain English, isn't it? Whatever contains gold, lies in my power. No matter in what part of the world it lies, whether in your pocket, in Wall Street, in London, Berlin or Bombay or Hong-Kong, I can reach it!

"Your cigar-case last night was no harder and no easier to disintegrate than would be the British crown-jewel gold in the Tower. And just as easily could I crumble the Dragon Throne in Peking, the Czar's diadem, or the Sublime Porte's insignia on the banks of the Bosphorus. Which you will admit," he added, blowing a fog of smoke, "is going—some!"

"Bah!" Murchison jibed. "Don't try to make a fool of me, young man! Some little local influence you may perhaps possess, but—"

"I'm giving you this straight," Storm interrupted. "There's no particular advantage in a man's bluffing when he holds a royal flush, as you yourself have already remarked. Whatever contains gold, is 'meat' to me.

"The higher the quality, the more complete is my control. From 24K down to

about 18K, I can transmute it into a powder of more or less firmness, as you know. Below that, while I can entirely eliminate the gold, the remaining part of the alloy may retain some cohesion, so that the form of the object may remain, though the value sharply diminishes or becomes zero. The thing works out mathematically. And in every phase and aspect it spells power—over you, Murchison; you as an individual, you as a class. Am I right, or am I wrong?"

"You mean to sandbag me into enriching you?" And the billionaire, flushing slightly, clenched his bony fist.

"Not at all, sir; not the least in the world! I'm simply giving you the chance to avert ruin for yourself and yours by granting one demand. Just one! One, do you hear? Well? How about it?"

"What—what is it, damn you!"

"This!" And Storm stood up. He crossed his arms, gazed down at Murchison, and paused to weigh his words.

"Just this: International Disarmament, the Abolition of War, World-Peace. One demand, in three aspects. One!

"War must cease. You understand me? War must cease!"

FOR a minute the billionaire sat staring at the scientist with uncomprehending astonishment.

He had expected, perhaps, some crushingly heavy demand for money, property, position; and he had been more than half prepared to grant it, if at all in reason. But this turn of affairs utterly disconcerted him. It lay as far outside his concepts and his understanding as a request for the moon would have lain.

And it appeared grotesquely absurd. The idea of a generalized social principle inciting a man to action, was, to his self-centered soul, on a par with the antics of a whirling dervish or a self-torturing Hindu fakir.

So, for the space of a dozen breaths, he merely sat blinking at Storm, unable to formulate even a ragged scrap of answer.

"Well, how about it?" demanded the scientist, thoughtfully studying the long, white ash which had formed on the end of his own Mindanao. "Is it yes, or no? And in either case, why?"

"Wha—what d'you mean?" Murchison stammered. "War? Stop war? Want me—me—to—"

"To put an end to organized murder, yes, just that," Storm answered quietly. "To stop this international game of 'Beg-

gar My Neighbor,' otherwise known as increasing armaments. To limit, then diminish, and finally entirely do away with armies, navies, and all that sort of thing. And, in a word, to introduce an era of peace, in place of the present bulldog ape-and-tiger era of growling, fang-showing brutality. Do you get me?"

This man's a plain lunatic! He's mad, insane, clear through, irresponsible and highly dangerous! was Murchison's secret thought; but he made shift to parry for time.

"Why," he exclaimed, blinking nervously, as was his habit, "why, what in the world can I do about all these things? War, I admit, is a regrettable affair; and armaments are tremendous drains on national resources; but, for the present, they're necessary evils. And even if they weren't necessary, how could I abolish them? Why do you come to me with your—your altruistic demand?"

"Why? That's simple!" Storm's big, even teeth showed in a good-natured smile—the kind of smile he might have used in humoring some wayward, misguided, yet promising boy.

"I ask you, simply because you're the richest man in the world, a man of incalculable influence, whose every word is snatched by the press and hurled to the ends of the earth before it has time even to get cold. Because you're the representative head and spokesman of the whole capitalist system, its focus and personification in million of minds. Because—"

"You misunderstand!" Murchison interjected, starting forward. "I—"

"Now, now, let me finish, won't you?" And Storm's face grew very serious. "I know all about what you think you are; and I know what you are! Your word is the most important word to-day in the affairs of this country; not as a political idol, or a holder of high office, or openly as an executive head, but in a more vital sense altogether behind the scenes.

"All thinking men realize, today, that gold really rules. That gold, not the public, makes and administers the laws. And that in every other civilized country the same condition exists.

"You and your kind, Murchison, whether here or in Europe, constitute the real government.

"Lawmakers move and make noises and wave their little arms and go through the motions of governing, but you know infernally well who pulls the strings. You know, and so do I, and there's no use try-

ing to hand out any hot air about it. If you and your gang say: 'No war!' why, war ceases. That's all. Now you understand!

"Are you going to say it, and climb down, like Davy Crockett's coon? Or are you going to make me fight—and win from you, by means you already know something of? How about it, Murchison? What's doing?"

The billionaire got up stiffly from the huge chair. For a moment he faced Storm; then, with a poisonous grimace, began to pace the floor. Storm watched him with amused interest, smoking the while.

"How about it?" he repeated. "Is it yes, or no?"

Murchison whirled on him, livid with sudden passion.

"So it's a Frankenstein game, eh? See what I get now for having taken you up and patronized you and made much of you—given you money for research and—"

"There, there, cut that right out, Murchison," Storm demanded. "We're past exchanging personalities. Do you, or don't you, understand me? Do you give in?"

Beside himself with rage, the billionaire raised his cane, which he still held gripped, and shook it violently at Storm.

"You'll be in jail, sir, in the penitentiary, first thing you know, sir! With twenty years to serve! Twenty? Ha! A life sentence!"

"On what charge, please? Disturbing the graft?"

"Never you mind the charge; we'll land you, all right!"

"True enough, gold certainly can tip the scales of justice, I admit," Storm answered thoughtfully. "Only, this time, it won't work. Things aren't going to happen according to schedule. You can't 'plant' anything on me and fake up evidence and 'job' me, in the good old way. Why not? Because you won't dare, that's all.

"The first hand that's laid on me, the first charge that's made, will be the signal for a slashing, smashing center-drive right through your wealth. Your money and your power will run through your fingers like water. I'll drain you so dry, Murchison, and play such tricks with credit and finance, and banking and government, and the whole business, that you won't ever know what struck you.

"So look out!"

And Storm held up an admonishing finger, as though talking to an erring son.

"Your only chance of safety is to give in to me and leave me unmolested. Pro-

cesses are at work this very minute, which I am controlling. If I'm taken away from them—Heaven help you! In the smash that would follow, Black Friday by comparison would be a picnic."

SILENCE followed, a silence so thick that the breathing of the two men grew audible—that of Storm, even and regular; Murchison's, hurried and feverish.

Outside, the dull and vibrant hum of the city's life droned on and on incessantly. A hawker's cry rose from the street; half-heard, the Sixth Avenue L clanked dully.

Then Murchison, with a face such as you would hardly want to look at twice, spoke huskily and with a tone commingled of craft, hate, and consuming fear.

"See here, Storm," he said. "Why not come right out in this matter, and really tell me what you want? You aren't planning to smash things right and left, and bring bloodshed, chaos and hell on earth, just for the sake of mere destruction! What do you want? In plain words, let's have it!"

Gone now all Murchison's veneer of culture. Gone the language of diplomacy. Reduced to its lowest terms, the bartering. All his life accustomed to buying what he wanted, now he still tried the same tactic of raw purchase.

"What's your price, Storm? Name it, and let's dicker. How much? A million? Two, three, five? Or is it political power you want—or reputation? How about a governorship, or a seat in Congress? Anything doing on those terms? If not, there's the Senate, you know; surely, you can't be aiming higher than that!"

The old man's tongue, well-loosened now, clattered freely.

"I might even manage a seat on the Supreme Court bench, if you're insistent," he continued. "But I don't believe you care for politics, after all. Something good in the way of a traveling scholarship, unlimited time and stipend very generous, would be nice, now, wouldn't it? Or a big professorship—or even the presidency of a university built especially for you—or—"

"Stop there!" cried Storm. "You're on the wrong track there altogether. There's positively no use^o in your offering anything but just the one thing I want and mean to have. As I've already told you, I'm working for the abolition of war. War, organized murder, mass butchery. I don't believe in it; I hate it; and I'm going to

put an end to it. What's more, you're going to help me, or suffer terribly!"

"But, you unpatriotic hound!" croaked the billionaire, "war is, sometimes right, often necessary. The god of battles is a just god! Have you no patriotic pride? No sense of national honor? No thrill of reverence for the flag, the army, the navy, the defenders of our liberty and—"

"Sh-h-h! There, there, that's enough! That's all very well for schoolboys; but you know as well as I do, Murchison, that war is a big killing game for profits.

"The exploiting elements of mankind have for ages profited from man's inherent instinct to fight. D'you know what George Bernard Shaw says about that infernal tendency? No? I'll tell you.

"It's in 'Man and Superman,' where the devil speaks to Don Juan and Ana. He says:

"Is man any the less destroying himself for all this boasted brain of his? Have you walked up and down upon the earth lately? I have; and I tell you that in the arts of life, man invents nothing; but in the arts of death he outdoes nature herself, and produces by chemistry and machinery all the slaughter of plague, pestilence, and famine. The peasant I tempt today eats and drinks what was eaten and drunk by the peasants of ten thousand years ago; and the house he lives in has not altered as much in a thousand centuries as the fashion of a lady's bonnet in a score of weeks. But when he goes out to slay, he carries a marvel of mechanism that lets loose at the touch of his finger all the hidden molecular energies, and leaves the javelin, the arrow, the blow-pipe of his fathers far behind. In the arts of peace, man is a bungler. I have seen his cotton factories and the like, with machinery that a greedy dog could have invented if it had wanted money instead of food. I know his clumsy typewriters and bungling locomotives and tedious bicycles; they are toys compared to the Maxim gun, the submarine torpedo-boat. There is nothing in man's industrial machinery but his greed and sloth: his heart is in his weapons!"

"Precisely!" Murchison jubilated. "There you have it! It's not our fault! Men love to fight—they want to, for the sake—"

"You dry up, will you, till I'm through? It is your fault; your rotten, damnable fault, you men of 'light' and 'leading,' and all that kind of bunk! What have you done to stop the slaughter? Anything?"

"I guess not! You've seen in that instinct a chance to make money. You've aided and abetted it, perfected the tools of murder, glorified militarism, and beaten the tom-tom. What for? For profits, infernal hypocrites that you are!"

"Profits? What's—what's war got to do with profits? What—"

"Come, now, Murchison, you really must drop that bombast. You simply can't pull any such line of talk over on a man who's made a life study of science, international law, economics, and all that sort of thing. You know as well as I do that nine-tenths of all wars are merely disguised pirate expeditions for land, or trade, or some other form of loot.

"But the odd part of it is, Murchison, that the people who get the loot never do the fighting! They stay home and cut coupons, while the fellows without a share of stock or a bond to their name; they stop all the bullets. And the newspapers play up the flag! And the chaps like you rake in another wad. And the burial-squads work overtime, while Uncle Sam pays the bills—which he later hands along to Mr. Ordinary Citizen. Great historical pastime, what?"

"What rot!" snapped the billionaire. "If you knew the first principles of national expansion—"

"S-h-h-h!" And Storm, picking up a book from the table, opened it where a slip of paper marked a paragraph.

"Expansion?" he said ironically. "Here's what Zola says about it. You know his 'Débâcle,' surely? Listen!

"At Sedan, some lay face downward with their mouths in a pool of blood; others had bitten the ground till their mouths were full of dry earth; others formed a confused, intertwined heap of mangled limbs and crushed trunks. . . . Great livid clouds drifted athwart the sun and obscured his light, bearing with them an intolerable stench of soot and blood. . . . Men were dismounted as if torn from the saddle by the blast of a tornado, while others, shot through some vital part, retained their seats and rode onward in the ranks, with vacant, sightless eyes. . . . There was a handsome black horse, disembowelled and making frantic efforts to rise, his fore feet tangled in his entrails. . . .

A lieutenant, from whose mouth exuded a bloody froth, had been tearing up the grass by handfuls, in his agony, and his stiffened fingers were still buried in the ground. A little farther on, a captain, prone on his stomach, had raised his head to vent his anguish in screams, and death had caught and fixed him in that strange attitude. . . . After that the road led along the brink of a little ravine . . . into which an entire company seemed to have been blown by the fiery blast. The ravine was choked with corpses, a landslide, an avalanche of maimed and mutilated men, bent and twisted in an inextricable tangle, who with convulsed fingers had caught at the yellow clay of the bank. A dusky flock of ravens flew

away, croaking noisily; and swarms of flies, attracted by the odor of fresh blood, were buzzing over the bodies and returning incessantly."

STORM paused, and eyed the billionaire. "Nice, eh?" he said witheringly. "But it brought Prussia several trainloads of French gold at last, you remember. Trainloads, mind you! Which gold is still hoarded in the Kaiserhof Schloss, I understand, for future use in still more war. Oh, grand!"

Murchison winced.

"That's past history!" he exclaimed. "Modern warfare is humane and scientific. It's all bad enough, I admit; but not as bad as you try to make out. The world's outgrowing—"

"Oh, it is, is it? How about the Jap-Russian War, eh? Know anything about that—you, who hold \$4,000,000 worth of Trans-Siberian Railway bonds? You, who financed that last \$200,000,000 loan to Russia, to keep things going? You, who today draw interest by the barrel on that war? Humane, eh? See here!"

He tossed down the Zola and took up Kirkpatrick's "War, What For?"

"Here, on page 83," he said, "you'll note the humanity of that strictly modern affair:

"Countless corpses covered with blood lay flat in the grass and between the stones. . . . Some were crushed in head and face, their brains mixed with dust and earth. The intestines were torn out, and blood was trickling from them. . . . The bodies of the dead built hill upon hill; their blood made streams in the valley. Shattered bones, torn flesh, flowing blood, were mingled with shattered swords and split rifles. . . . percussion-balls fell about us and hurled up smoke and blood together. Legs, hands, and necks were cut into black fragments and scattered about. . . ."

"Enough!" cried Murchison, paling still more. "This must be rank exaggeration! It can't be that I—I am drawing dividends from—from that!"

"Can't it?" Storm retorted very dourly. "As a matter of fact, it not only can be, but is. And from this, too. Just hear what Andreief, in "The Red Laugh," has to say about another of those profitable Manchurian battles.

"No! No! Enough!" the billionaire protested, making as though to rise.

"Sit down there and listen!" Storm dictated. "It will do you good to know a little

—just a very little—one per cent, maybe—of truth! Some of your jeweled miniatures, your Byzantine gold placques, your reliquaries and Gobelin tapestries, and so on, certainly were bought with interest-money drawn from just such sources as these!

"Here's a nice bit, now—the storming of a barb-wire entanglement. Humane? Very! Good business. Fine!

"The live-wire, chopped through at an end, cut the air and coiled itself around three soldiers. The barbs stuck into their bodies; and, shrieking, the soldiers spun round in frenzy. No less than 2,000 men were lost in that one entanglement. While they were hacking at the wire and getting caught in its serpentine coils, they were pelted by an incessant rain of balls and grapeshot. . . . Ten or twelve lines of wire and a whole labyrinth of pitfalls with stakes driven at the bottom, had muddled them so that they were quite incapable of escape.

Some, like blind men, fell into funnel-shaped pits and hung upon these sharp stakes, twitching convulsively and dancing like toy clowns. They were crushed down by fresh bodies, and soon the whole pit, filled to the edges, presented a writhing mass of bleeding bodies, dead and living. Hands thrust themselves out of it in all directions, the fingers working convulsively, catching at everything; and those who once got caught in that trap could not get back again. Hundreds of fingers, like the claws of a lobster, gripped them firmly by the legs, gouged out their eyes, and throttled them. Many seemed as if they were intoxicated and ran straight at the wire, got caught in it, and remained shrieking, until a bullet finished them.

A loud calling, crying groan issued from the distorted mouths. . . . All those dark mounds stirred and crawled about with outspread legs, like half-dead lobsters let out of a basket."

"Don't! Don't!" gasped Murchison faintly.

"Sit down! I'm only giving you the merest tag-end and trifle of the whole, I tell you. Don't you want to know what kind of wine-press it is that squeezes out the juicy dividends and interest, the palaces and banquets and extra dry for you? What? Listen, now!

"The train was full, and our clothes were saturated with blood. . . . Some of the wounded crawled up, themselves; some walked up, tottering and falling. One soldier almost ran up to us. His face was smushed and only one eye remained, burning wildly and terribly. He was almost naked. ♯ . . ."

The ward was filled with a broad, rasping, crying groan; and from all sides pale, yellow, exhausted faces, some eyeless, some so monstrously mutilated that it seemed as if they had returned from hell, turned toward us.

I was beginning to get exhausted, and went a little way off to rest a bit. The blood, dried to my hands, covered them like a pair of black gloves, making it difficult for me to bend my fingers—”

“Stop! For God’s sake, stop!” croaked the billionaire. “Give me a drink—anything—brandy, if you have it!”

He hid his face in his hands and, for a moment, sat there sick and shaken.

Storm smiled bitterly at him, then flung down the book with a bang on the table and went to pour him a good-sized nip.

“Here,” he said curtly.

“Thanks—there, that’s better! Please—call Thomas. I—must be going now.”

“All right. But just one thing more. And I want you to remember it, Murchison, and think about it hard. As Kirkpatrick says, nowhere on all that battle-field, among the shattered rifles and wrecked cannon, among all the broken ambulances and splintered ammunition-wagons; nowhere in the mire and dust of blood and sand; nowhere among the carcasses of horses and men—nowhere could be found the torn, bloated, fly-blown corpses of international bankers. You wouldn’t care to be there yourself—now, would you, Murchison? Not nearly so much as letting the other fellow go, the thirteen-dollar-month Johnny, while you wave a flag and cheer and—clip coupons! Eh? How about it?”

Murchison, making no answer, got unsteadily to his feet and started toward the door. Storm gazed scornfully after him.

“Tomorrow night, sir,” he said, “your big banquet takes place at Edgecliff, does it not? Beauty and brains, high finance, and literature, and art will all be represented—yes, and military power, too. And there will be gold and jewels, champagne and flowers, and various pleasant things.

“I hardly expect to be invited, Murchison; but I shall be there, just the same. If not in body, then invisibly, with powers you can neither understand nor measure—yet. If you don’t come to my terms by 6 P.M. tomorrow, I shall consider that you don’t care to cooperate with me in ending human warfare. Is that understood?”

“Very well. Watch your table, then, at 10:30 sharp. That, I think, will be a proper hour, an appropriate moment of conviviality, for the ‘Mene, Mene, Tekel,’ to get its work in. Well?”

Murchison’s lips moved, but he could speak no word.

Storm smiled again, dryly.

“After that, the deluge,” said he quite calmly. “I warn you!”

He tossed the smoked-out remnant of the Mindanao into the grate. Then, as Murchison reached the door, Storm advanced toward him.

“In the meantime, as you’re planning out the banquet, which will cost a vast fortune, try to keep in mind a picture of those Manchurian wire-tangles and those well-filled pits, with the rattling hail of rifle-bullets sweeping everything. And recall Kirkpatrick’s questions:

“‘Wouldn’t it be a strange thing to see a banker, a railway president, a coal baron, all hanging on stakes in a pit, with scores of other men piled in on top of them—all clawing, kicking, cursing, screaming, bleeding, dying—following the flag? Such would indeed be a strange and interesting sight, but absolutely impossible.

“‘Naturally, such people are not there on the firing-line—up where bayonets gleam, sabers flash, flesh is ripped, bones snapped, brains dashed out, and blood spattered.’ Never in this world!

“Think it all over, Murchison. There’s a reason, if you can find it. If not, I’ll help you. Good-by!”

The billionaire was gone. As the door closed after him, Storm thrust both hands deep into his trousers-pockets, let his head sink, and for a moment stood there in thought.

Then he looked up.

“Come, come!” said he sharply. “This won’t do. The big banquet’s less than thirty-six hours off, now. In case Murchison doesn’t crawl down, my work’s cut out for me, good and plenty. I’ve got to get busy tuning up my radiojector for a big job.

“The den for mine!”

Five minutes later he was striding rapidly toward a little sky-lighted room on East Fifteenth Street, where wonders were preparing which soon were destined to startle the whole world.

IT WAS twenty minutes past ten, next night, when—the sherbets, the ices, and the rare imported fruits disposed of—Murchison’s guests scented with satisfaction the thick, black Arabian coffee which the butlers, impersonal as so many well-oiled mechanisms, served in Imperial Satsuma cups of eggshell thinness.

Gold dominant, gold triumphant, gave the key-note of that marvelous scene. Gold shone in ear-jewels, in hair ornaments, in chains and rings and bracelets of the women there; gold, pale and ruddy, on their warm, rounded bosoms and bare

arms; gold in the massive medieval service on the damask under the yellow glow; gold in the heavy, two-handled, ancient kanthardi—the Greek wine-cups from the ruins of Tyrrhens, cups once sacred to Bacchus, but now filled with sparkling Burgundy.

And Murchison, as he rose to speak, felt the heart within him warm at sight of it. He felt his courage and defiance rise again. For everywhere in sight was gold and power; and the menace of the thing he feared, obscured by the present and by the cheering glow of wine, seemed very far and very tenuous.

This moment, the billionaire realized, was, in a way, the culminant instant of his life.

He, he alone, by the power of his gold, his name and dominance, had brought this scene to being. He alone had here amassed these treasures; he alone had here united all these representatives of wealth, of science, art, literature, diplomatic and military force.

And though not one of all the guests would have admitted it, nor he himself have consciously tolerated the thought, still the subconscious realization that these men and women at this banquet—which would have shamed the feasts of Nero or Lucullus—had all gathered here to do him homage, dwelt in the depths of his triumphant soul.

Homage to him and to his house; homage to his wife, his daughter; homage to the vast and complex power of his wealth and name. Homage!

Turned toward him as in a golden haze, he saw the faces of these supermen and women, these people of the topmost pinnacle of human life.

Above the table, the embowering orchids and wistarias "brought from the Everglades and from Japan for this one eve-

ning" sheltered a thousand South American butterflies. Lives had been lost along the head-waters of the Amazon to procure them; dark, obscure, unknown lives.

The bill for flowers alone had run to sixty thousand dollars. The value in silver, gold, and glass was incalculable. Four thousand yellow English lilies—lilies which will not grow in America—had been imported especially for the banquet at two dollars apiece. Murchison had had special guards meet the ship, to see that these lilies reached Edgecliff in safety.

The whole interior of the mansion had been transformed into a flower garden. The stairways were lanes of multicolored roses, growing in magnificent, genuine antique Etruscan pots, each one worth a fortune in itself.

In the banquet-hall a pergola had been constructed, over which the various blooms were trained; the effect was that of an open-air garden—an effect heightened by the cleverly devised yellowish lighting, which perfectly simulated natural sunshine.

The whole world, civilized and savage, had paid its tribute to the decoration and the menu. This hour stood supreme in Murchison's life.

In deep content—save for one haunting fear—the billionaire sighed.

The masked orchestra, hushed at a signal from his majordomo, now grew still. Along the table the undertone of voices ceased. Murchison, sensing a dull anxiety despite himself, glanced at the wondrous ivory clock, with golden hands and numerals, over the fireplace at the other end of the banquet-hall.

Ten twenty-eight, he thought, angry with himself for even allowing thoughts of Storm's menace—idle threats and bluster now they seemed—to intrude at such a time. And, with a smile, he spoke.

"My guests, my friends," he said, very simply, slowly, and with well-marked pauses, "you know as well as I do that I am no orator. Whatever slight eloquence I may possess is that of deeds, not words. Deeds that have brought, I dare to believe, success, as the world measures it and weighs such things. Deeds that, I hope, have worked for the world's welfare, for the good of all, the wider spread of truth, the better understanding between gold and toil, the broadening—even though in a slight degree—of human life and human progress."

He paused and, a trifle nervously, glanced at the clock again. Its hands, actuated from Washington by an electric current, had already moved another minute.

The billionaire frowned slightly and cleared his throat. His sharp eye caught just the slightest involuntary quiver of an ironical smile on the lips of Andrew Wainwright, half-way down the table on his right—Wainwright, the Copper Czar. Mentally the billionaire made a note of this. Even though he considered the copper man his best friend, yet Wainwright should smart for this, and soon.

Half suspiciously he looked along the lines of faces turned toward his, picking up one celebrity after another—Stephen S. Baker, well-known financier; Griscomb, the venerable poet and literateur; the painter, Crewe; Sir Edward Gray-Huber, Britain's ambassador; Baron Iwami, of Japan; Bishop Maxwell; Professor Jassy from Rumania—and many others, too; in all, perhaps, the most imposing body of representatives of finance, the arts and letters, and science that ever yet had come together in one room in the New World.

Then his eye wandered to the face of Mrs. Murchison at the other end of the table. Not even her impeccable social poise could hide the fact that she observed his lack of ease, and was agitated.

He caught a warning frown upon her brow.

The tilt of her diamond-hashed aigrette spelled "Look out!" And with a slight start he recalled himself. Again he glanced at the disquieting clock. Ten-thirty, just! Softly it chimed.

Murchison's heart seemed to stop a minute; then it gave an unsteady bound. But the billionaire mastered himself. He took a deep breath and, nervously twisting his mustache, began again:

"Progress is dear to me, my friends, as to you all here assembled. For its sake,

even the burdens of great wealth, of gold, are not too heavy to be borne in patience."

He was speaking faster now, as though to avert the blow which, after all, he felt might smite him even at his zenith of power.

"The possession of wealth is no sinecure. It is—that is, I mean—it lays itself open to the—er—the attacks, the envy, and malice of the lower orders of society. We men and women, we of the upper class, into whose hands Providence has—er—" (he glanced at the bishop)—"has entrusted the property interests of the world, we must bravely bear the weight of it, and—that is to say, the stewardship rests with us."

Lamely he concluded the sentence. A paralyzing stage-fright, a living fear, despite all his efforts to forget Storm, had now, with the arrival of ten-thirty, begun to gain upon him.

Very warm the banquet-hall was, with all the clustering lights and the presence of those many full-fed human beings; yet Murchison felt chilly. He shivered as the clock-hand clicked to ten thirty-one, and on his forehead a fine dew of sweat beaded out.

The realization that several of his guests had noted something amiss with him, that here and there along the table a discreetly mumbled word was passing, stabbed him with panic. And, fixing his gaze on the heavily embossed Greek goblet of pure gold that stood before his place, he hurried on:

"The stewardship—yes—that is what I mean. On us devolves the task of protecting, of bulwarking property rights, of suppressing destructive iconoclasm and discontent, of—of—"

Murchison floundered hopelessly. Into his mind had just flashed an incongruous image. One course of the banquet had included lobster; and now the words of Storm vividly recurred to him:

"All those dark mounds stirred and crawled about, with outspread legs, like half-dead lobsters let out of a basket."

He shuddered slightly. A glint of the warm light, refracting prismatically athwart the champagne, flung a single beam of red into his eyes. Blood! That wine was blood, squeezed from the Manchurian pits!

"Bah!" Murchison scoffed to himself, passing a hand over his forehead to steady his nerves. "What rot! I've been taking a drop too much, that's certain. Now—what was I saying?"

Up and down the table significant looks were slyly being interchanged. Some of the

guests, too, shared the billionaire's opinion of his own condition; a diagnosis, by the way, entirely in error. One of the guests, a reputed wit, leaning most courteously toward Lady Gray-Huber, murmured between his teeth:

"Quite superfluous, was it not, for our host to tell us at the beginning that he was no orator?"

Mrs. Murchison, now really alarmed, was leaning forward, her eyes fixed on her husband. Hildegarde, too, flushed and anxious, sat watching him with both her fine and music-loving hands clasped tightly together.

But Murchison saw nothing of this. For his distressed eyes, shifting from the gold cup to the clock—now marking ten thirty-two—and back again, had sight for nothing else.

"It's past, the time's past, and nothing's happened, hang the rascal!" he was thinking, a sense of relief battling with his fear. "I knew it was all bluff and bluster from the beginning. Devil take him—I'll fix him later. Wait!"

Then forcing his mind back to the interrupted speech, humiliatingly conscious that—despite all his guests' politeness—he was more and more exciting them to covert smiles, again he faced the brilliant group, acme and climax of the system, type of exploitation, of rich florescence fed from the rich subsoil of labor, anguish, death.

"So, my friends," he hesitantly continued, "you, who in your kindness have gathered together here to-night to partake—ah—to share my—er—my humble fare, I pray you, harken to my deep-grounded opinion. On you, on us it devolves—that is, you understand, the greater privileges we enjoy heighten our social responsibility.

"It behooves us, as I was saying, to defend the rights, the God-given rights we possess. We must stand shoulder to shoulder. We must meet and silence the—er—the calumniator, the malcontent, the—h-m! h-m! I know I voice your sentiments in saying that, to the last ditch, the very last pit—ditch; I mean, we—"

The sentence was never finished.

For just as the clock ticked off ten thirty-three a ghastly change flashed over Murchison's face.

His eyes, fixed on the gold *kanthardus*, before him, grew wild and staring. They bulged with an expression of unreasoning horror. His hands thrust out, as though to repel some fearful menace. Then they grappled the edge of the table to steady him.

And with a single cry, "My God!" Murchison crouched there, ashen-pale and shaking, his bloodshot eyes glaring in a frightful panic at the blighted cup of gold.

CHAPTER III

THE HANDWRITING ON THE WALL

DEAD silence followed.

Then Mrs. Murchison cried:

"What is it? Are you ill? What?"

And Hildegarde, unmindful of conventions, sprang up and ran to her father's side. But Jinyo was before her. Already he had Murchison by the arm.

"Sick, sar?" asked he. "I help you, sar?"

"No—no! It's nothing—just a little dizziness, that's all," croaked the billionaire; but his gaze never for a second left the heavy carving of the cup.

There, already plainly visible to him, a great gray blotch had spattered all across the gold figure of a dancing satyr from whose horns one of the handles sprung. And, as he looked, the gray blight spread, rapidly confluent, just as it had been upon the double-eagles in the library.

All at once a little cry sounded near the far end of the table—a cry in a woman's voice:

"Oh! My bracelet! What's the matter?"

And, as though to echo it, Crewe, the artist, exclaimed:

"By Jove! I say—" And from his plate picked up a diamond that had fallen, clinking, there. "My scarf-pin! What the deuce?"

Griscomb caught at his shirt-front.

His gold studs had vanished; now the dress-shirt gaped wantonly.

Two or three chairs scraped. Mrs. Murchison, perfectly dazed, sat staring.

"Come, Jinyo—help me!" Hildegarde ordered in a low voice, and tried to draw Murchison away. "He's ill again." Then she looked up appealingly.

"Dr. Roswell?" she said.

The doctor, who had been sitting near the other end of the table, arose. But before he could even start for Murchison, the billionaire exclaimed in a harsh, dry tone:

"No, no! You—you don't understand. Sit down, doctor—all of you, please. It's nothing—nothing, I tell you! I beg of you, be calm!"

And Roswell stood there, embarrassed, utterly astounded, knowing not what to do; bounded by the rules of conventionality, yet fearing much for Murchison's mental status.

All up and down the table fear began to get its grip. Another woman cried out, as her ring went gray.

Sir Huber clapped his hand to his breast, where already two medals were crumbling.

Professor Jassy, seeing the *kanthardus* flecked with white before his place, leaned sharply forward with a stifled exclamation—an oath which, being in Rumanian, nobody understood.

Three or four more-guests, panic-stricken, stood up and clutched at their disintegrating jewels.

But of all this Murchison was for the moment quite unmindful. For, as though hypnotized, breathless, agonized, he was watching the swift destruction of his priceless treasures—worse, the crumbling of his hopes, his power, Gold!

Have you ever seen the surface of a mountain pool, calm, beautiful, golden in the sunset glory, suddenly kissed by some wanton breeze? Have you seen the irregular, flying touches of silver as the freshening wind sweeps over the still surface—watched the cat's-paw flick down, hither and yon, then coalesce and run into one gray and troubled whole?

Thus did the golden chalice transmute as the billionaire stared at it. Swiftly, inexorably, the Blight struck in, fastening itself in tiny, rapidly growing blotches, till right before his eyes the cup went silvery, then dull—till, even as Murchison's trembling hand stretched out to seize it, the thing began to crumble.

And all at once the farther rim, nearer New York, broke down; and over it, dissolving the friable stuff as water melts salt, the clear champagne began to trickle. Faster, even faster, it flowed. Suddenly the whole *kanthardus* slumped.

"Merciful Heavens!" gasped Murchison.

Where the wondrously carved beaker had stood now lay only a sodden little heap of wine-soaked dust. And in a quickly widening circle the champagne soaked away into the damask.

"Oh, look—look!" cried a voice.

Murchison raised his wild eyes.

Down the table Mrs. Griscomb was pointing at a similar golden ruin close beside her hand.

And now more than half the cups had crumbled; and out of the disintegrating fruit-dishes were rolling Normandy apples, hothouse grapes, Sicilian oranges—

"*Na mu amida Butsu!*" the Baron Iwami cried.

The gold lace of his broad ribbon had turned a dirty gray; the Order of the Ris-

ing Sun, upon the breast of his heavily braided official coat, had vanished. Only the empty red bit of Japan silk that had held it, remained, pinned to his uniform; while down his tunic a little line of ash was scattered.

Iwami arose, and with a darkening face, with lids drawn tight across his narrowing, angry, suspicious eyes, glared defiantly at Murchison.

Hissingly he drew in his breath, in the Japanese manner. He understood nothing; but the loss of the Rising Sun was a hideous, an irreparable, catastrophe. More easily might a blow full in the face be pardoned and atoned.

"Come, father, come!" Hildegard urged again.

And now Mrs. Murchison was at the other side of the billionaire. Both women, with Jinyo, were trying to get him away with as little struggle and confusion as possible.

THE table was in an uproar. More chairs slid; one even fell over backward, clattering on the polished floor. The servants, dumb-stricken, gaped in horror. Every semblance of order, of convention, was going to the board. Stifled oaths, cries, unanswered questions, all intermingled. Stark panic was at work.

But now Murchison, with a terrible effort, fought off his terror. Up came his head. His lips twitched. He began to speak.

"Listen, all you people!" he cried. "Silence! You must be calm; I'm master in this house! I must have silence here!" And a lull came.

Pale or flushed, angry or terrified, all listened. The ragged line of people, some still sitting at the disordered table, some standing, waited his words.

"You don't understand; you can't!" cried the host, stretching his tremulous hands to them. "Something has happened here, something incredible, something inexplicable—for the present. That's all. Now—no, no, don't interrupt me. We must try to keep cool. We mustn't lose our wits, or worse will come of it. We must be calm. Hear me? Understand?"

"Certain phenomena have shown themselves among us. Until we have the explanation, I command you to be calm, to keep still. In no other way can we save the situation. For your own welfare you must obey me!"

He paused. There came a little wait.

Strange looks passed here and there. Beside M. Fouchard a girl was weeping.

"Oh, my rings!" she sobbed. "My rings—my rings!"

"Silence!" ordered the billionaire. "Listen to me. If one word of this gets out of this room—one solitary word—terrible results may follow. I can't explain why just now, but the fact remains. I stake my life on it. Our first emergency measure is this: Silence!"

"You," and with a terrible face he whirled upon the servants, "you hear and mark my words! If any hint of this becomes known outside, through any of you—look out! You know what I can do, and will! I warn you! Not one word!"

"As for my guests," he continued, turning again to them, "I count on their integrity and their sense of self-interest to lock this happening away in their minds and hearts, for a time—for a week at least—as though nothing whatever had occurred. Nothing! Is that clear?"

"And now kindly retire at once. You shall have a full and adequate explanation within a very few days. Meanwhile, any loss incurred here, through this incredible accident, shall be made good by me—more than made good.

"Will the ladies immediately withdraw? As for the gentlemen—I am going to assume the character of chairman of an emergency committee and call on certain ones to remain; to stay an hour or so, for urgent and immediate conference here, right in this room. The others will accompany the ladies."

"Who stays, Murchison?" Wainwright spoke up, his drawing voice a strange contrast to the billionaire's staccato syllables. "If there's anything doing, any excitement in prospect, I'd like to be in on it, you know."

"I've already chosen you," Murchison answered. "You stay!" His eyes searched the double line of faces.

"Baron Iwami," he continued, bowing a trifle, "may I have the honor of extending my invitation to you, also?"

The Baron returned the bow with suavity.

"I serve, where called," he answered in impeccable English.

"Thank you. That makes two. I must have six in all, including myself. I name Professor Jassy, Mr. Baker, and Sir Grey-Huber. There, that completes the total, does it not? No objections? No resignations?"

The designated men, by a murmured word, a nod, a gesture of acceptance, signified their willingness.

The other guests stared at them in silence, as though already some supernal knowledge, some wondrous clarity of wisdom had already fallen on them.

Then, in the little ensuing pause, Dr. Roswell spoke up, in a deep, grave measured tone:

"Pardon my presumption, Mr. Murchison, but if you can use another man of science, I am wholly at your disposal. It's a frank offer. Accept or reject it, as you wish. I shall not be in the least offended if you decline. There's no personal interest involved, because my gold is strictly a minus quantity. I speak only in the interest of pure science and pure truth."

Murchison considered a moment. Then he said:

"That's certainly a frank offer and a manly statement. I shall answer you with a question, equally frank. Have you at any time specialized on radio-activities, as, for example, Professor Jassy has?"

Roswell smiled.

"Such," said he, "is a prophet in his own country. My three-volume work on 'The Interrelations of Etheric Vibratory Phenomena' has recently been translated into half a dozen European languages, and also Japanese. But here at home—" And he laughed good-naturedly.

Murchison flushed a trifle.

"I beg your pardon," he apologized. "The committee will then consist of seven members!"

"And now," he added, turning to others, "now leave us! I ask this in the cause of our common welfare. And—a last word—Silence!"

WHEN, still uncomprehending, dazed, speechless save for a broken exclamation or a muttered growl of displeasure, the guests had quitted the banquet-hall, and the servants—all save Jinyo—had silently followed them and shut the huge sliding-doors, the chosen six drew toward Murchison at the end of the table.

"Now, then if—" began Mr. Baker; but Murchison interrupted him:

"Got a pencil, there? A pen? Anything to write with?"

"Here you go, Murchison!" And Wainwright handed him a small, silver-mounted pencil.

The billionaire seized it without even thanking him.

He clutched a menu, all wet with spilled champagne, and in a hasty scrawl, wrote:

**Beaulieu, look out sharp for reporters!
Head them all off. Not one word of any**

of this must get out. If a line appears in any paper tomorrow, you're fired!

"Here, Jinyo!" he commanded. "Rush this to the majordom. Have him read it, then be sure you burn it. Smooth everything down as much as possible. And don't come back here till I ring—if I do. Stay out! And don't talk! Understand?"

"Yes, sar." Jinyo, salaaming, withdrew.

"Now, gentlemen?" said the billionaire. "To business!"

"Business!" echoed Wainwright. "What the devil is it, anyhow?"

"That's for us to find out!" And Murchison motioned the others to be seated close to him at the table-end.

Only Sir Grey-Huber, and Baker, however, heeded the invitation. The others remained standing. Jassy crossed his arms; Roswell lighted a cigarette; and the baron, his left hand fingering a vacant ribbon on his breast, laid his right—brown, and fine, and immaculate—upon the cloth, as he leaned forward to listen.

"Yes," continued the billionaire, "the very first thing for us to do, I take it, is to get an expert opinion on the—h-m—the ruins, as it were.

"Here, in five minutes as you see, some hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of gold have undergone an inexplicable change. More than that, absolutely priceless art-treasures have been destroyed. What's left? What's the residue? That's our prime inquiry, is it not?"

He tried to steady his voice, but it cracked and shook in spite of him. His face was gray as the ashes on the saturated table-cloth; deep were the lines in it, and eloquent of fear.

"Dr. Roswell, and you, professor," he added, "What do you make of—of these?"

He gestured at the mud-like piles of dust and champagne, and at two or three plates which, though still intact in form, yet were of a dull leaden hue under the golden lights.

The doctor, bending over the remains of one of the *kanthardi*, poked curiously with his finger. He rubbed the stuff between his thumb and index, spread some in his palm, and closely examined it. Then he shook his head.

"Without some sort of chemical analysis—" he began.

"You don't know, then?"

"Frankly, I don't. No use trying to bluff. It's a material I've never seen, that's certain. But if I had it in my laboratory—"

"This," Jassy interrupted, turning one of the plates in his hands, "seems to be the

silver, with a leetle, a very leetle off the copper alloy. But so porous haf I never seen a metal. Something haf gone away from out it, I t'ink. It iss strange, eh? Wery!"

"Here, let me see it, please?" asked Roswell, taking it from him.

"Is there any gold in it now?" asked Murchison in a strange voice.

"Gold? Hardly! It's silver, at best. There's certainly not one atom or particle of gold in it. But—what? See here—see the fine ash filter out, as I tap it!"

He gave it a sharp rap, then another. At the third, the plate broke in two. Its cross-section was honeycombed with infinitely little interstices, practically invisible to the naked eye.

"And you put your monogram on that, Murchison?" jibed Wainwright. "You blazoned your name on junk?"

"Extraordinary, my word!" exclaimed Sir Grey-Huber.

Baker picked up one of the fragments and studied it.

"Well, what the devil?" he exclaimed.

"Gentlemen," said the billionaire, "I assure you that, fifteen minutes ago, this light and porous stuff, brittle and worthless, was 21.6 K gold-plate. If it had been pure 24K, or practically so, like those *kanthardi*—well, you would have to pick it up with a scoop.

"Now do you grasp the idea? Do you understand the fact we're confronted with? Do you comprehend that, under the influence of this strange force, whatever it is, gold melts like sugar in hot water? And if you do, what then?"

"Incredible!" Grey-Huber cried.

WAINWRIGHT, a deep wrinkle drawn between his brows, examined a little of the wine-soaked dust, poking at it with a silver fork and spreading it across the cloth.

As for the baron, he glanced with eager, suspicious eyes from one to another of the party.

"It's surely not gold now? That's positive?" exclaimed Murchison.

Jassy shook his head in negation.

"But, gentlemen, it was!"

"H-m!" sneered Wainwright.

"The rings, the bracelets, Baron Iwami's decoration, here—the decoration that has vanished—all were gold. They all are gone!" insisted the billionaire.

"But, man—" exclaimed Baker.

"Listen!" cried Murchison. "Now I'll tell you all I know. For a couple of days past

I've been threatened by a crank—a sort of fanatic, I reckon, with a fearful grudge against, well, against gold. He's been making certain demands on me, you understand. And, and—"

"Put him in jail!" growled Wainwright. "That's the way to do with these infernal freaks. If I—"

"Let me speak, please! Of course I merely ignored the fellow. I thought his threats of—h-m—you know, of turning gold into this, were just plain insanity. But now, gentlemen, we're facing a condition, not a theory! And after this, what's to hinder—"

"Who is the crimson fool, anyhow?" burst out the copper czar. "That's the first thing to know. Then—"

"S-h-h-h! This is not the time to lose your temper. We've got to keep cool, now, and go slow. Once we start him in earnest, he'll sweep this world with a Blight such as it's never known! He'll wreck everything, in one general smash, and be glad to die in the ruins, like Samson, so long as he can pull society down—and us, too, with it!

"We need cautious heads now, and decisive action. And we, gentlemen, just we seven, right here in the room, must turn the trick.

"Nobody else knows this. Nobody must know! The whole campaign must be fought out in a day or two—and won. If even the faintest suspicion of this new power gets out, think what it'll do to the Street! Why, markets will tumble so fast, credits drop out, and business go to smash at a rate that will leave the whole world gasping like fish out of water. Quick action, gentlemen!"

He paused and glanced from face to face, trying to fathom them; to probe the effect of his words.

"Here we are, seven of us, well chosen.

We represent, among us, high finance, science of the most advanced type, military skill and power, and diplomatic relations with two of the greatest nations on earth. Great Britain, Japan, and the United States here join hands for the safety, the salvation of the world! Do you understand me? Shall we get down to ways and means?"

In the little silence that followed, Wainwright spoke.

"See here, Murchison," said he cynically, "this is all bunk! You know and I know, and we all know, that no such power as this exists on earth. Gold is positively indestructible! Some smart Aleck has put up a clever job on you, that's all. It's a good trick, I admit; but a trick, none the less. How done? I don't know! But I bet you my Santa Lucia string of copper-mines against your old socks, I can produce a stage-magician who can work the same racket!

"Well, take my wager?"

Murchison, smiling very grimly, turned to Professor Jassy, and to Roswell.

"Has any radio-active force been at work on this metal and this ash?" said he.

"It looks that way, to me," answered the professor, while Roswell nodded corroboration. "No other hypothesis explain the residue. But, vat force it iss, I cannot say—yet. Only I am off the opinion—"

"Bosh!" jibed the copper czar. "Give the fanatic a few hundred thousand dollars, whoever he is, and I guarantee you'll hear no more from him! Here, gentlemen, I'll start the slush-fund!"

Leaning back, heavily, he thrust his fat hand into his trousers-pocket and drew out a black leather purse.

Tap-tap-tap! sounded a knocking at the door.

"What is it? Who's there?" called Murchison.

"Telegram for you, sar," came the thin and penetrating voice of Jinyo.

"Bring it in!" ♦

A moment later Murchison had ripped the yellow envelope. At a glance he read:

Convinced yet? Yield, or widespread general campaign begins at once. Nothing can stop it but capitulation.

THE BLIGHT

"See for yourselves?" Murchison smiled bitterly, and tossed the slip of paper to the men, who fairly snatched at it.

Only Wainwright did not reach out an eager hand to grasp the telegram.

For, slumped far down in his chair, wordless, staring and very pale, he was gaping at his empty purse—his purse at the bottom of which, sifted down into the seams and crannies of the leather, lay a few pinches of a fine, white, metallic dust!

MURCHISON laughed dryly.

"Charlatanism, eh?" he asked. "Sleight-of-hand and mountebankery, what? I reckon you're settled, all right enough. So now then, gentlemen, how do we proceed? You've seen the facts. You see the message, the ultimatum. Has anybody a suggestion to make? Before midnight we ought to have mapped a plan of campaign. It's now—now—"

He glanced at the ivory clock on the far wall, then broke off short.

"The devil!" he cried. "If he hasn't hit that, too!"

All eyes turned toward the clock. Blank, now; and utterly devoid of information, the dial showed a clear white circle. Golden hands and figures alike had vanished.

Baron Iwami exclaimed something unintelligible, in his native tongue, with that same odd, hissing intake of the breath. Professor Jassy frowned behind his glasses as he rubbed his bald spot. Grey-Huber tugged at his mustaches.

Then said Baker, banging his fist upon the table:

"Let me deal with him! I guarantee that inside of twenty-four hours—well, he won't be sending telegrams, that's all!"

"You don't understand," replied Murchison, creasing the message nervously. "You don't grasp the thing at all. If he's—er—dealt with as he deserves, that (he claims) will turn the infernal plague loose upon society, wholesale. It's only by diplomacy, by seeming to yield, by temporizing until we get the position of advantage—only along these lines have we the slightest chance of beating him.

"The man's dead in earnest, let me tell you that. Money, or position, or success in any way, mean absolutely nothing to him. Neither does the probability of martyrdom. He's backing—this fool idea of his to the limit—and the limit's high!"

"Excuse me, sar," murmured Jinyo, bowing, "but other messages come also, just now. By the telephone. Mrs. Farquhar, she says that her gold—how do you call it, sar?—her—"

"Something lost, eh? How many people have called up to report losses which they think have taken place on the way home? About how many? Quick!"

"Seven, six, maybe. They—"

"No matter! I don't care about details now. Tell Beaulieu to smooth everybody down. Tell him to phone 'em all that everything shall be investigated and all losses more than made good, as I've said before—if they'll keep their mouths shut! Understand?"

"Yes, sar."

"All right. Clear out now! *Yuke!*"

When he was gone, Murchison said very slowly:

"Gentlemen, this has got to be a Fabian game. We must seem to surrender, then suddenly close in on him. We must get his secret first. Since he's unbribable, that complicates matters. But there must be a way. And we've got to find it!"

Silence. Then in an altered voice, Wainwright said:

"There's the devil to pay! If this is true—and that's the way it certainly looks now—there's bright blue Hades dead ahead for everybody that is anybody. Oh, I can see the fire all right enough!"

"Right you are for once," assented Murchison.

He sat down wearily.

"This time we're not up against any kind of deal we're used to. It's not a raid on the market, a big strike, a panic, or anything we can handle in the usual way by manipulating the press and pulling the right legal or judicial wires.

"We're face to face with a single determined, powerful individual, a hitherto obscure scientist, chemist, physicist, or whatever you want to call him. His name is John Storm. He lives at 75A Danton Place. He's going to have his way about abolishing armies, navies, and war in general—or else he's going to wreck things right and left.

"We're damned if we don't, and we're damned if we do, gentlemen. We've got to fight. But how?"

He paused and looked from one to another of the Emergency Committee.

The baron, arms crossed, was sunk in thought. Roswell, an odd smile on his face, was poking at a pile of ash. Only Wainwright seemed to have a definite idea.

"Has this Storm made any written demands? Anything actionable, along the lines of blackmail?" he asked.

"Nothing, so far—save this." And Murchison tapped the slip of yellow paper that still lay, crumpled, on the ravaged table.

"Humph! That's a pity. But, how about having a sanity commission appointed to examine him and put him out of the way?"

"And have the gold-rimmed glasses of the experts, their watch-chains and cuff buttons and all that sort of thing drop off while they're double-crossing him? And let the secret out, eh? That shows your caliber!" sneered Murchison. "Trouble enough as it is to keep things dark till we can strike."

"A little hydrocyanic acid gas would settle him," said Wainwright very sarcastically. "Settle him and his fool notions mighty quick."

"No, that won't do. That would only let the pestilence loose on the world in a single moment. You can catch more flies with sugar, Andrew, that you can with vinegar. You've been a financier long enough to know that."

"Bah!" said the copper czar. "When we can kill, why trap? We can't be beaten more than temporarily. Nobody can hand it to us. We've got all the power, and you know it."

"And against us is pitted—what? One man! Why, it's like Napoleon's army attacked by a lunatic—"

"One lunatic with a machine-gun in 1815 could have wiped out the Old Guard in five minutes," broke in Murchison satirically.

"But, gentlemen, this is quite plain to me; we've got no program yet. This conference has really accomplished nothing, except to strengthen the decision that we'll fight—to a finish."

"Let me suggest that we adjourn now. Each of us should sleep on this. Each should ponder; should formulate some coherent plan. To-morrow I'll summon you again, and we'll put our heads together for a final settlement. Is that all right? Meanwhile, leave Storm to me—I'll dangle him along."

"So now, gentlemen, if there are no further remarks, I declare the meeting closed."

A little pause followed. Then Jassy gathered up a little of the dust, folded it in a menu, and slipped it into his pocket.

"For analysis," he said.

"Good!" assented Roswell. "I'll work on the fragments of one of these plates."

The baron arose, bowed, and turned toward the door; and Sir Grey-Huber, shaking a puzzled head, followed him. The little party drifted, wordless and glum, out into the huge entrance hall.

While Jinyo and two other valets were putting on the guests' coats, Murchison maneuvered Baker and Wainwright into a corner.

"Don't criticize," he growled beneath his breath. "I know what you want to say, Andy; and it's dead right, too; I ought to have excluded Huber and the baron. But under the circumstances I couldn't. It would have played up all kinds of international trouble."

"They're done now. They'll wait for my summons—which won't come till everything's settled and through with. So will Roswell. Jassy we need. You two men meet me at my office, 10 A.M. sharp, to-morrow, and we'll get down to brass tacks. Are you on?"

He turned, smiling, to grasp the hand of Sir Grey-Huber, who now—muffled in heavy furs—was coming to say good night.

With a few commonplace conventionalities, the guests took their leave.

Only when they all were gone did Murchison realize the frightful tension he had been undergoing for the past few eventful hours.

Exhausted, beaten out, almost on the verge of a nervous collapse, he locked himself in his own rooms. He positively refused to see either his wife or daughter. For their amazed queries he had no answer—nothing but one stern command: "Silence!"

And until far into the hours of early morning his slippers tread sounded across the polished floor over the precious Shiraz rugs; pacing, repacing—pacing, repacing, as he wrestled with the problems of impending ruin.

HIS face was drawn and hard, as at quarter to ten in his office, on the southwest corner of Broad and Wall, he greeted Baker, first to arrive.

Luxurious the place was; more like a salon than a place where the reins of world power centered, and where deals involving uncounted millions of lives and dollars had been put through.

Only with dulled and distant echoes the vital tides of the city's life reechoed at that height and through those thick plate-glass windows, those heavy silken draperies.

The shades, partly drawn, excluded the cold glare of the December morning, dour and ugly. Hidden cornice-lights, tinted a ruddy pink, glowed warmly through the room; and on the hearth a fire of costly first-growth Georgia cedar diffused its pleasant, characteristic perfume.

Baker and Murchison, each hesitant to broach the vital question, passed a few trivialities about the weather. Before they had veered round to the matter in hand Wainwright arrived, heavy and rubicund—a bull of a man. Held tight between his lips a Mindanao exhaled its perfume on the air.

He shook hands with both men.

Murchison, with a quick up-peering from beneath his brows, asked:

"Well, Andrew, any data yet from Jassy?"

"Data? Rather!" He spread his hands before the cherry blaze. "If we're ready now to cut out theorizings and get down to hard-pan, I'll report."

"Pray do," said Baker. "The sooner we get to work, the better."

"Right you are. On my way downtown I dropped in to see J. According to him, the thing's real enough. Here's his written analysis."

Wainwright drew a folded paper from his pocket and glanced it over.

"Translating this out of the scientific hocus-pocus jargon," said he, "it seems that Jassy has tried various tests for gold, including the touchstone, the cyanid, the pyrogallic salt method, and several others. No gold, gentlemen. None at all. Nothing doing, absolutely."

"But the ash? What is it?" interjected Murchison sharply.

"He doesn't know. Can't tell. And I'll give the old wart credit for being honest enough to say so and not to try to bluff. He can't analyze it—yet. It reacts to no recognized agents; it has nothing in common either with a metal, a salt, an acid, or an alkali. It's no known element. In short, it's something entirely new in the scientific world—so Jassy swears."

"And the piece of plate that Roswell took?"

"No gold. Roswell was about right in his snap-shot judgment last night. I called him by phone this morning. Gold, minus. Nothing but a flimsy, friable honeycomb of

silver and copper—the residue of the alloy, you understand, after the gold vanished out of it.

"This fact is worth knowing. As a practical mining man and a student of metals as commercial propositions, these data are certainly invaluable to me. Suppose the scarlet lunatic should turn his rays or whatever he's got there on my Mexicali properties or my Rand holdings? The ore—the ore right in the solid earth—wouldn't be worth a continental except for ship-ballast. Grand situation, isn't it?"

Murchison turned, and for a moment looked in silence out of the window, far across the roofs and chimneys to the slow-moving river, freighted with a world's commerce, spanned by bridges, flowing between incalculably populous human hives—and all, river, commerce, bridges, cities, all bearing tribute unto him.

The billionaire gazed silently. Then he said:

"I want to add a few words to that report. Other things have happened since the dinner. Other and very serious things. See here!"

From his pocket he took a little paper parcel, secured with rubber bands. This he opened. Inside it appeared a pinch of that now all too familiar gray dust.

"I reckon you can't identify this," he remarked. "Last night it was the solid gold tiara of King Chlodovic, the Goth. Intrinsic value maybe only about twenty-five thousand dollars; but historically considered as an antique and an *objet d'art* beyond all calculation.

"I kept it in my house-safe, you understand, in a special flint-glass box, cased in mahogany. This morning when I happened to think of examining it, to see if anything happened—well, you see all that was left in the bottom of the box!

"Steel is no protection against this vandal. Neither is glass. Lead might be, or some other substance. But while we're trying to find it, and to get our art treasures and our various forms of gold properly encased, he may easily obliterate the whole business at one blow. We must act at once—immediately!"

"Diplomacy? Force?" asked Baker.

"Buy him off—that's the easiest way!" exclaimed Wainwright. "Saves trouble and publicity. Something generous, of course. What you said last night about his being incorruptible is mere bunk, Murchison. Nobody is. Not one man or woman in this world—not one! Provided, of course, the price is right, in quality or quantity or

what not. Recipe! Find what's wanted, and give it. Doctors call that a placebo. I've changed my mind about opposing him, because, as you say, while we were at it he might wreck things right and left. The placebo treatment for mine!"

HE FOLDED Jassy's report as he spoke, creased it carefully and put it back into his pocket.

"Well?" asked he, drawing at his Mindanao and squinting at the fire.

"I think, before we take up any line of action at all," suggested Baker, "we'd better see this—what's his name? Storm?—this Storm individual, and have a good fair talk with him. It's just possible he might be made to hear reason. H-m! h-m!—to take the treatment suggested by Mr. Wainwright here, and to save all parties concerned a great deal of trouble."

Murchison grimaced.

"You don't know the maniac!" snapped he. "If you want to know him, though, it can do no harm. I grant you that."

"Can you get him on the phone?"

"Of course!"

He pressed a button at the side of his desk. Almost at once the door of the outer office opened.

"Hanscomb!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Call up 935 Gramercy and plug it in on this instrument here!" And Murchison nodded at the equipoise bracket at his elbow.

"Yes, sir. In a second, sir."

The clerk, perfectly trained, withdrew.

A minute later the bell *brr-r-rd* sharply. Murchison swung the bracket round and took down the receiver.

"Hello, hello? Storm?"

"."

"Good! Say, see here, Storm, I must admit, right off, you certainly kicked up a devil of a row with us last night. Yes, we're ready to talk business now. No more backing and filling. I reckon it's time for us to dicker with you, before you cut up any more such capers. Can you drop down to see us?"

"."

"Oh, just a couple of my friends, and myself. They're both, like me, likely to be hard hit, if you run amuck. You know my office. Yes, take the subway, express to Wall. You can get here in fifteen or twenty minutes, without half trying."

"."

"What? The deuce you say! But, I tell you, they're in this game just the same as

I am! After what happened last night, you can't expect this thing won't leak out! That's all right—you can talk to them the same as you would to me—no bluffing, Storm; they're all right!"

"."

"Oh, one of them is a Mr. Baker, from Seattle, the automobile magnate. The other is Wainwright, my old friend. You know—Wainwright, the copper man. I told you about him the other night—the only other man in the world who's got any of those Mindanaos. You'll enjoy meeting them both. Eh? What?"

Came a long pause. Far away at the other end of the wire John Storm was doing some quick and earnest thinking. Wainwright! Mindanaos! His eye brightened with a gleam of expectation, and a faint smile curved his lips. Then he spoke:

"I'll be there at 10:30, ready for business," he said.

"O.K. Agreed. Good-by!"

Murchison hung up, pushed the bracket away, and swung round in his big swivel-chair.

He quietly announced, "Like a bird into the hand of the fowler, he cometh."

The half-hour had not struck when Hanscomb ushered the scientist in from the other office. Murchison met him at the door, with a hand-shake of unfeigned relief.

"Mr. John Storm!" said he, and gave the others' names.

Then, when the conventional words had been exchanged, he bade Hanscomb set big leather chairs conveniently before the simulated good cheer of the hearth.

They all sat down. Storm, awaiting overtures, gazed noncommittally into the fire. Murchison took off his glasses—silver-bowed glasses, now—and began polishing them on his handkerchief.

As for Wainwright, he leaned back, clasped his thick hands over his head, and narrowly eyed the newcomer, exhaling meanwhile, the last few puffs of the almost consumed *Vuelta Abajo*.

"Well, now to business!" suddenly spoke up the billionaire. "No explanations are necessary, Mr. Storm. These gentlemen were both among my guests last night. They are equally interested with me in adjusting matters. They have been helping me keep everything quiet, so that no hint or rumor of this thing shall reach the business world or the general public.

"You can deal with all three of us as though we formed a unit. We're ready to make terms."

"TERMS, that's the word now, Mr. Storm," spoke up Wainwright.

He tossed the last inch of the Mindanao into the fire.

"Terms!"

Storm looked regretfully at the shriveling bit of tobacco. Had Wainwright another of those infinitely precious cigars? And if so, how could he, Storm, get possession of it without violating the conventions and making a direct request?

His mind gravitated resistlessly toward these problems, but he tried to put them away. And, speaking a trifle slowly, to make each word quite plain, he answered:

"Terms! My terms are very simple. They're the same to-day that they were yesterday; the same as they'll be to-morrow and next week and next month—if this matter takes as long as that to settle; which it won't.

"The whole thing simmers down to this: I have a new, wide-spreading, irresistible radio-active force at my command. I have Power. I am utterly and irrevocably opposed to military and naval expenditures, to standing armies, militarism, and warfare. I intend to use my power to end those things. That's all. Nothing hard to grasp there, gentlemen!"

"But, sir," interposed Baker, a little warmly, "aren't these institutions necessary to civilized life?"

"No. On the contrary, they retard and injure it at every point of contact. They bleed civilization almost to death, not only by the slaughter of hordes of able-bodied males, but also by unproductive expenditures of money. And there's the question of sickness, too. In time of peace and war alike, the herding together of military forces, as you know, always breeds frightful and extensive diseases.

"Add to this the fact that soldiers consume and do not produce, that infinitudes of non-combatants must suffer in time of war, that races subjected to long conflict show diminished stature and strength—witness France and Italy—and I think you may get some idea of my reasons for opposing militarism."

I know, my dear sir," answered Baker; "but in the present imperfect state of the world—"

"Rubbish! I'm going to hasten evolution, that's all. You know the alternative; you know what I can and will do!"

"Yes, yes, I know!" interrupted Baker. "But—"

"Hold on a minute!" persisted Storm. "One single modern battleship costs three

times as much as all the buildings of the University of Chicago built before 1905; and such a ship is junk in a few years. It's horribly, criminally, barbarically wasteful, this war business, and it's got to stop. What's more, it's going to!"

"The war waste, in property alone, is equal to a fire, burning continuously, devouring seven homes every minute, each home worth \$1,700 and containing \$475 worth of furniture.

"Suppose these seven homes sheltered among them a fair estimate of forty-two people. Now imagine 'an unbroken stream of people—men, women, and little children; pale, shuddering, the children screaming, the women in tears—fleeing past you through the street, driven by this fire from these homes; forty-two people rushing past you every minute, day and night, year after year, on and on, an endless stream of people plunged in misery!'

"Or imagine 'a fire rushing faster than a strong man at a brisk walk—imagine a fire traveling eight miles an hour, consuming fifty such homes per miles, making each year thirty-six round-trips from New York to St. Louis'—imagine this loss, and you can get some faint idea of what it costs civilization to 'brag and strut and piously prepare to settle disputes as tigers settle theirs—by force!'"

Wainwright, forgetting even to smoke, shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Admitting, for the sake of argument," said he, "that all this is true—and you seem to have your figures handy—"

"I have," interrupted Storm. "I've been specializing in them for a long time. Well?"

"What can we do about it? How can we put an end to all this?"

"I'll tell you later. Meanwhile, I want you to remember that what I've told you is only a small part of just the money cost of war. There's the life cost, the blood cost, to be considered yet."

"Don't, I pray!" cried Murchison, holding up his hands. "I—you—you've already told me quite enough of that!"

"Never mind, sir," retorted Storm. "You don't know the hundredth part of it yet; and these gentlemen here have perhaps not even considered the matter at all. The best available authorities give the total killed in war for the past one hundred years at about twenty million. These, mind you, leaving the weaklings to breed at home. The wounded and enfeebled reach about one hundred million. Non-combatants, women and children, killed, come to

twenty million at a moderate estimate.

"So the grand total is forty million human beings 'actually slaughtered or otherwise destroyed as a result of only one hundred years of "splendid" and "grand" and "glorious" war—forty million working-class people. One century—a gash in the breast of the workers, an ocean of blood, a sea of tears!' All through the past century, Mars has 'hour after hour, day after night, devoured one human being, has drunk more than two gallons of human blood every twenty minutes!'

"Your kind of human beings, gentlemen? Hardly! For years, you people have urged others—"

"Hold on there!" cried Wainwright. "You forget the vast disproportion between rich and poor. If more working-men than millionaires have been killed in the war, that's only because millionaires are so comparatively few!"

Storm laughed.

"No, indeed, you leading citizens who reap all the bonds and bonuses, you take almighty good care to stay discreetly in the rear. Gad! but the spectacle is nauseating! You never will lead or be led to war! You have nothing to fear from hissing bullets, burning fever, and the death-grip of devouring diseases in war. The plain cheap wage-slave, the common men, the fifteen-dollar-a-week clerks, the grease-stained mechanics, the soil-stained farm toilers know that 'our very best people,' decline all glorious opportunities to have their smooth fat bodies exposed to the steel-belching machines."

"Enough there!" cried Baker, his face hard and white. "I refuse to sit here and listen to such outrageous, such damnable aspersions on patriotism!"

Storm rose and stood before the three; and at them he thrust his long, big-knuckled forefinger.

"Gentlemen, my ultimatum: War must cease! It's going to cease—I'm going to make it. You're in my hands, you and yours are. When I close my hand, you get squeezed, that's all. Do you force me, gentlemen, or do you yield?"

He paused, took a few steps along the richly carpeted floor, then returned and gazed at the triumvirate in silence.

"Well?" said he.

Murchison was the first to make an answer.

"Surely," said he, his voice trembling a little despite him, "surely you'll be moderately reasonable. You can't expect a question of this magnitude to be answered in a day, or even in a week. Surely you'll give us—"

"I'll give you just half an hour; just thirty minutes! For once, you men are going to be spoken to by another man on equal terms at least. For once, you're going to be treated like ordinary human beings, not demigods on wheels. You're going to realize facts; going to toe the mark and take another's will for law.

"There's no use in delaying this affair. I don't intend to have you framing any crooked, devious plans to try and checkmate me—not by a long shot. Half an hour is time enough for Yes or No!

"It's now 11:30. If you phone me Yes by noon, all well and good. We'll get down to the first, real, practical step. If you say No, or don't call me at all before then, look out! Incidentally, my hours open for negotiation with you will be 11:30 to 12 each day. The rest of the time, whatever happens, you needn't hope to get any attention from me, for I won't give you any. Understand?"

"What—what do you—intend—" stammered Baker.

"Never your mind. Watch Wall Street, that's all. You yield, or I'll give you a fif-

teen-minute-long sample demonstration.

"And now, gentlemen," he continued more calmly, with an enigmatic ghost of a smile, "now, really, I must be leaving you. I've got one or two little matters of some importance to look out for. Remember, everything's up to you. I've given you my program. Let me have yours—by 12, sharp. I bid you all good morning!"

He bowed curtly. Then, without another word or look, he strode out of the office.

And the door, closing behind him, hid him from the sight of the three angry, speechless, half-stunned men.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEATH PACT

FULL two minutes passed before a word was spoken.

Then Murchison, tugging at his ragged, gray mustache, said with an ugly laugh:

"You see? I reckon there'll be some lively happenings before long."

"Just an ordinary lunatic!" cried Baker, with a thin-lipped smile. "One of the kind that ought to be put out of the way on general principles, *pro bono publico*, and all that sort of thing. The quicker we do our manifest duty, the better."

Wainwright pulled at his cigar, but it was dead. With an oath he flung it, precious though it was, into the fire. He stood up.

"I guess he means to force our hand, that's a fact," said he, and took a turn up and down the office. "There doesn't seem to be any probability of compromising. Any fool with half an eye could see he's 'way out of the line of bribery or graft. I diagnose him as a monomaniac of a particularly visionary type. Bad luck has given him some unknown, but extraordinary power. The only thing to do is stamp him out—at once!"

"Incidentally," he peered keenly at the other two, "it ought to be clearly realized by all three of us that the emergency is unspeakably vital. Under the circumstances, the death-penalty for any one of us who by word or look or sign, directly or indirectly divulges this secret to any human being whatsoever, would be a mighty small punishment. I, for one, seal my mouth and numb my hand against any such divulgence. And I swear this, with all the earnestness of my being on—on—"

Murchison raised his right hand fervently. "I swear it, too!"

"And I!" Baker joined in. "We three hold the world in our hands to-day. We three must save it! Nobody can help us; nobody can advise. We must decide right here, this very morning. And what we all agree on, we must do!"

For a moment no one spoke. Then said Wainwright:

"I don't want you men to accuse me of shifting my opinion too often, but I must confess the developments of the past hour have turned me back again from my compromising tendency.

"For a while I was willing to abandon violence toward the lunatic. For a while I thought we might divert his mind and get him off the track. But I see differently now. We're up against a blank wall—in bad, every way, so far as makeshifts are concerned.

"Leave Storm to me. We'll soon have an end to all this bunk and chatter, this crazy idiotic rot!"

Then Murchison spoke:

"You forget," said he, "that if he's done away with, or even molested, he'll leave things working in such a way that—"

"Ha! Ha! You believe that, do you? Well, say— Look here, Murchison, I'll take my chances, so far as I'm concerned, with any of his posthumous activities. There's a good old French maxim, 'Kill the beast and you kill the poison,' that fits in here to a T. Come, come, where's your nerve, man? You aren't getting old, are you?"

The billionaire flushed slightly at the taunt, but made no answer.

"I think you're right," said the third man. "You've analyzed the situation correctly. Legal means won't reach him. An insanity commission or an arrest with conviction on any charge would get this into the papers and play the deuce with everything. We can't handle a cobra, according to law. The only thing to do is smash its head with the first thing that comes to hand!"

Murchison coughed uneasily.

"You forget the immediate and pressing question, my friends," said he. "We've already wasted ten minutes of our time of grace. At 12, sharp, unless we capitulate in the meantime and enter into further *pour-parlers* with him, he means to spring some kind of a coup on us.

"What he means to do, I don't know, but I reckon it will be mighty painful. That experience at the little dinner out at Edge-cliff hasn't made me overanxious to try any encores. In view of the possible contingencies, wouldn't it be the part of wisdom at

least to call him up, when we calculate he's home again, and tell him we're ready to concede something?"

"Concede nothing!" shouted Wainwright. "There's no such thing as mutual concession, with a mule like him! He wants it all, or nothing. I know the type! Didn't I once have to handle a blackmailing crank in my office, three years ago? That was when I was over on Beaver Street, you remember. Did I concede anything? Hardly! You both remember the results—to him. The police took him away in three wastebaskets.

"No, sir, there's nothing doing with diplomacy now. Let the lunatic do his worst, that's all. Inside of twenty-four hours he's through. Let him go it while he can. That's my last word!"

"Right!" exclaimed Baker, nodding vigorously. "You're clearly in the minority, Mr. Murchison. There can't be any further negotiations. All that remains to do now, is to choose—er—the means, and—h-m!—the person."

"Leave it to me!" exclaimed Wainwright, snapping his jaws. "I'll settle him and do it right. And if there's any trace or clue, if he doesn't just simply drop out and vanish, like a pebble down a mineshaft, you two are free to blow the game and send me to the chair!"

Murchison laughed and caressed his chin.

"You always did like a joke, Andrew," said he. "That sort of thing doesn't happen to us, you know. Still, it might be embarrassing if anything leaked out.

"Of course, I'm not doubting your ability, and all that; but I've had a little experience myself in handling men, and I reckon maybe I've got a few ideas. The fairest way, all things considered, will be for us to ballot for the—the job, eh? Then, whatever happens, there can be no come-back, no ifs, ands, or buts. I insist on balloting. That's the only fair way, all round."

Speaking, he had drawn some letters from his breast-pocket. He tore from one of these a half sheet of blank paper. This he creased and neatly divided into three small slips of equal size.

He took his fountain pen—a plain rubber-barrel now, with a platinum pen-point—and removed the cap. The two men, watching, saw his hand move as though making a little cross on one of the slips of paper.

"I've marked one ballot," announced Murchison. "I drop them into this hat."

Leaning forward, he took the tall silk hat from the top of the unit book-case where it stood. "I now hold this hat above the level of your eyes, so. The man who gets the marked ballot is elected to the high honor of freeing the world of the most dangerous calamity that has ever threatened it.

"But, note this! Whoever it may be, says no word! Not a word, gentlemen; not a sign. So, you see, all that will happen is just this: Storm disappears, and only the man here who does the job knows how. He alone knows who the savior of society really is. This will keep all parties concerned from even the trifling discomfort that might result were the ballot known. You get the idea? Yes?

"All right. I reckon we're ready for business then. Draw, gentlemen!"

In silence they thrust their hands up and into the hat, first Baker, then Wainwright. Each, holding his slip concealed in his palm, glanced at it—Baker, with nervous haste, paling a trifle; the copper czar almost eagerly.

Murchison took the remaining slip, gave a look, crumpled the bit of paper and tossed it into the fire. It smoked, flared, and vanished a gray ash.

At sight of the ash, he started slightly, but his face was masklike in its noncommittal calm.

The three men silently gazed at one another; and in their eyes already a strange, furtive suspicion lurked. You might have said they were seeking each to fathom the other's thoughts.

Had Baker and Wainwright been able to read the billionaire's, this is what they would have seen:

"Infernally good idea of mine, that was, to leave all three of the slips blank, eh? For now they are both out of the game. Now I've got carte blanche—now I, and I alone, can deal with this Storm my own way!"

But there was little time for reflection. For, down below in the street, far, faint and vague, yet steadily growing louder and more ominous, a sound was already growing audible.

A sound—the sound of men in turmoil, of confusion, fear, panic.

"God!" Wainwright cried, springing from his chair. "Noon already—and he's at his work again, down there in Wall Street!"

THE copper czar was no sooner at the window than Baker and Murchison joined him. With a feverish, impatient

hand the billionaire ripped the curtains aside. And the triumvirate peered out.

Such was the vantage of the office that nearly the whole length of Wall Street, eastward from Broad, lay there before them like a map. The curve of Broad, too, gave them a partial view of it almost to Beaver.

Diagonally across from them, the low, massive, iron-barred Sub-Treasury squatted over the incredible hoard in its vaults, like a grim and fabulous bird brooding a nest of gigantic golden eggs.

Further down, the three plutocrats could see the fluted columns of the City Bank façade. Within their field of vision lay the vast central aorta of the whole world's money system. And in this pulsing artery they saw at once that some very grave disorder was at work.

At first glance it was impossible to analyze anything, to disentangle the complex elements, to gain an adequate conception of that swiftly growing panic.

The Street was, indeed, not yet very conspicuously crowded. So far as that was concerned, one might have thought the usual noon-hour throng was hardly doubled down Wall and along Broad.

What struck the senses was rather the intense agitation of the individuals composing that mass—the quickly forming and as rapidly dissolving groups and knots that swirled, stopped, eddied, and struggled on, now this way and now that, aimlessly; the loud and ever-increasing tumult of voices, cries, jeers, yells, oaths that, as Murchison threw up the window, swelled into a hoarse and terror-smitten roar, the mob-roar of frightened, uncomprehending men.

"Look! See that chap; gone mad, I swear!" ejaculated Baker, pointing, as he seized Wainwright's arm. "Nobody but a madman runs like that!"

The others looked.

There, rushing where a free space offered, fighting his way along with blasphemies where the crowd impeded, a hatless man, perfectly out of his senses, was making way directly toward them.

The coat was well nigh torn from his back. Both hands were raised and shaking; his face, as they glimpsed it, showed white and set and staring.

They saw his mouth open and close, close and open, as he yelled; but no word reached them. Then, all at once, he vanished; and the mob passed over him.

Murchison pursed his lips in a long, low whistle.

"I know him!" he cried, in a shaken voice. "Why, that was Carter—Carter of the Butchers' and Drovers' National! And he had a leather belt on; he had a satchel. Didn't you see it?"

"Going to make a deposit—gold! All gone—lost—only ashes left! My gold, in part! My gold! God!"

Baker gasped, but found no word to speak.

"No wonder the wretch went wild," muttered Wainwright. "But—see there!"

He pointed at the steps of the Sub-Treasury.

There, a well-dressed man, also hatless, was on his knees, clawing at the stones. They got only one glimpse of him, before he, too, was swept away.

Another man, two men, five, they saw kneeling here and there, one on the sidewalks, others in the gutter.

"The fools!" sneered Baker. "Thinking of their own petty losses; the dribbling ash that's leaked out through their pockets or fallen from their rings or pins!"

Murchison turned and ran to a table at the other side of the room. He jerked open a drawer and hastily snatched out a magnificent pair of prism-binoculars that at times he used for diversion, to watch the river and the harbor.

Back at the window with them, he quickly adjusted the lenses. Then he leaned both elbows on the sill, and sighted down into the howling pack below.

He was not the first to think of glasses. Already half a dozen pairs were visible at different windows up and down the two streets affected by the Blight.

And every window was already crowded. Stenographers, all were leaning out; even here and there upon the roofs and along the cornices peering individuals were visible.

"Where's the fire? The fire?" hundreds were asking. "What's the riot about? Who's killed? Police! Police!"

Somewhere, out of the range of vision, sounded the brazen *clang, clang! clang!* of an ambulance gong. The street was rapidly filling.

"I reckon somebody's hurt, or fainted," said Murchison, passing the glasses to Wainwright. "Here, you take a peek. Think of the destruction that lunatic has let loose!"

Down below, in front of the Exchange, a louder tumult rose.

Wainwright leaned far out, to look.

"Fight," he announced laconically. "Looks like somebody had accused somebody else

of pocket-picking. Holy cats! What a wallop! Ah! Now the cop, eh?" And in spite of his wrath, he chuckled; for Wainwright loved a knock-down row.

The other two, looking where he pointed, saw a bluecoat breasting through the surge of the mob. The long stick rose and fell, rose and fell again; and men went down at every blow. Then on the run a squad came pushing.

A revolver squibbed. There rose a yell. The crowd broke and ran—a shoving, howling, frenzied horde, along Wall and down Broad toward the "Curb."

And, hardly a moment later, with a clatter of hoofs, a patrol arrived. Someone was bundled in; then a limp figure was half-dragged, half lifted up and vanished in the Black Maria.

Dense, now, was the press, angry and wild and brutalized with fear.

A shrill howling voice pierced through the tumult.

"See there!" snapped Murchison. "The inevitable prophet!"

Up onto the pedestal of the Washington statue, in front of the Sub-Treasury, a gaunt, disheveled man had climbed. Hanging on with his left hand, he waved his right in frenzied gyrations. Now he shook his fist at the swift-gathering audience, now vibrated it at the tall buildings all about, now raised a shaking forefinger to heaven.

It was all plain enough, even though his words were lost. The three watchers understood.

Wainwright laughed, as he squinted through the binoculars.

"He's certainly giving them blazes," he announced. "And—funny!—there's a listener who's just lost his gold cuff-buttons. He's clawing around for them. The Wrath to Come doesn't interest him any more! And—now the police again!"

"There—see the prophet fight!" continued Wainwright. "Ah! Now he's kicking at their hands—now they've got him! He's down. There he goes! Ninety days for him, all right."

Baker and Wainwright drew back into the room. Murchison closed the window.

Deadened now, the noise of the panic rose only as a dull hum to their ears.

"This session is ended," announced the billionaire. "Even before Storm's fifteen-minute gambit is ended, I move we begin the checkmate."

"Agreed!" said Wainwright.

"That's the talk!" Baker assented. "Come, let's be going."

A couple of minutes later they were ready for the street.

"To work!" repeated Murchison, as, all together, they left the warmth and luxury of his office.

INTO the outer, the active business office they passed. Already Murchison was thinking. The seal is on the death sentence. Has Storm attacked the Sub-Treasury hoard yet? Heaven forbid! No matter; even if he hasn't, he's done. If he had stayed his hand before precipitating this riot, he might have been spared. But now, now that the secret's out, now that he's tried to stampede us by throwing down the gauntlet, we fight. Storm has got to die!

He shook hands with the other two conspirators. And though all three of them assumed cordiality, yet that secret, lurking unspoken repulsion smouldered in their eyes.

Who was to be executioner? The question, in spite of them, oppressed both men who did not know.

With a forced ease they took their departure.

"To-morrow at this time, shall we meet here?" asked Murchison, bowing them out. "I assure you, by that time, the matter will be definitely settled. Good day. Good-by!"

When they were gone, he had his hat and coat brought, ordered his car from his private garage on William Street, and in a few minutes—leaving word that he might not be back that day—went down in the elevator.

Already, by the time he reached the secure comfort of his tonneau, the newsboys' shrill cries were echoing through the cracks and gashes that New York calls her down-town streets.

Murchison leaned out of the window of his machine.

"Boy! Boy!"

He took all the papers that the swirling, snatching throngs had left the lad, counted them quickly, and paid over the exact price, sixteen cents; then ordered:

"Thomas, drive up Nassau, past the newspaper offices. I want to see the bulletins."

Eagerly Murchison's eyes, blinking behind their silver-bowed spectacles, devoured the scare-heads, read here a line, then a paragraph, and, with ever-growing anger, glanced up at the all but impassable swarms that packed the narrow streets.

Lucky I'm getting away from the office

so soon, he thought, as the car stalled at the corner of Liberty. A few minutes more and telephone messages, telegrams, and reporters by the hundred would have been piling in on me. Nothing to say, of course; but no matter what I might have said, or refused to say, it would have gone into type a foot high. Better, all around, if I'm not visible just now. I reckon my game, and Wainwright's, and the game of all us fellows, will be just to lay low till this insane spasm of terror dies down a little.

He reached out and pulled the curtains of the car, leaving however, a two-inch space to peek through.

But the car, which had succeeded in making another block northward, now again came to a dead halt at the intersection of Maiden Lane.

Not only financiers and their henchmen, stenographers and brokers and petty clerks, were thronging through the streets, but already thousands of curiosity seekers, and other thousands, impelled by hot hopes of picking up substantial treasures in the gutters of Wall Street and Broad Street, were momentarily arriving by electric, by subway, and on foot.

For the wildest rumors had already spread, wavelike, with incredible rapidity all over Manhattan and the outlying districts. Most of this misinformation must have been carried by the telephone-nexus; in no other way could it have traveled so swiftly.

Reports had already reached a million or more people that the financial area had been wiped out by earthquake; that a deep vein of solid gold had been uncovered in Wall Street by laborers blasting for telephone-conduit work; that a huge force of black handers had looted the Sub-Treasury, and that, fleeing, they had been forced to drop their gold; that a sewer-gas explosion had scattered untold wealth in bullion and diamonds over half a dozen streets; that an unknown billionaire had suddenly gone mad and was showering gold-pieces by the bushel out of his office windows.

ALREADY, by the time Murchison's car reached Maiden Lane, more than four thousand five hundred police—regular, special, plain-clothes, and mounted—had been poured into the district with all the speed that riot-calls could bring them.

Cordons were immediately established down Broadway and Whitehall, through Stone to Hanover Square, up Pearl and across John to Broadway again, with posi-

tive orders to let no more private persons enter the district, under any pretext whatsoever. Only a police permit or proof of official character were to be recognized.

"Shoot to kill!" the order had been given, in case of looting.

Yet, in spite of all this, and of six fire companies added also for possible use in case of conflagration or to repel mobs by the use of the hose, should need arise; in spite of every emergency precaution, it is estimated that probably one hundred thousand persons, perhaps one hundred and fifty thousand, succeeded in invading the prescribed area before the lid, so to speak, had been clamped down.

The lure of possible gold, of excitement, of wonder and mystery and adventure-lust worked as a magnet works on steel-filings. Inside the cordon, the throng was dense; outside, it was solid.

Murchison soon discovered that there was no possible exit from the district, which now was held as in a state of siege.

Everybody was trying to get in; nobody wanted to go out. Before the police began to control the "L" exit at Hanover Square, fully twenty thousand persons must have got in by that means. Later reports state that more than a dozen entered by aeroplane, from various outer points, alighting on the tops of tall office-buildings, and making their way down the roof-stairs to the hallways and elevators.

Innumerable cases of fainting occurred. Two hundred or more persons were seriously crushed or otherwise injured in half an hour; and eight fatalities are known to have occurred; yet for the most part the police ambulances could not get through.

Under such circumstances, small wonder that Murchison's machine made slow progress.

"Thomas!" the billionaire shouted into the speaking-tube; for the roaring tumult precluded all possibility of otherwise making himself heard. "No use trying to go up Nassau. Better get across Broadway, if you can. You must find some way out of here!"

"Yes, sir," came the chauffeur's reply, though Murchison could not hear him. He nodded, and the raucous yell of the siren preceded a slight forward movement of the machine.

Slowly, foot by foot, sometimes inch by inch, often not moving at all, then gaining a little through a less dense whirl of fighting, yelling men, the car rolled along Maiden Lane, where already the fear-

smitten wholesale jewelers had in most cases put down their shutters and barricaded their doors. It won past Liberty Place.

Near Broadway the car was held up again by a fire-engine which was stationed there, hose all coupled for emergencies. Here the police ordered the machine back, saying the only exit was up Nassau again and across Fulton; but Murchison declared his identity, and opposition quickly changed to active assistance.

Police and firemen immediately cooperated then to lay planks, supported by bricks, across the lines of hose. On these the billionaire's machine rolled out into Broadway.

The crowd here got rough handling as a line of officers with night-sticks battered the wall of humanity back, splitting the jam to let the financial master of the world pass into Cortlandt.

As the machine trundled at a slow pace past Trinity Place, some unknown person fired upon it with a high-powered rifle from a window of the second story of a building on the left-hand side of the street.

The bullet ripped a long splinter from the top of the tonneau, glanced upward, shattered a plate-glass pane across the street, and fell, spent, into the mob.

This same bullet, picked up and carefully saved, later brought \$500 from a Cohoes curio collector. Its discharge redoubled the pandemonium. The building was immediately rushed by the police, and numerous arrests were made. But Murchison had no stomach for investigation.

"Go on! On!" he shouted to the chauffeur, pale and livid with a new, deep, personal fear.

For the first time he was beginning to realize the character of war.

"Let her out, there!" he shouted in the speaking-tube. "Drive through 'em! Over 'em! On! On!"

Only when the car, with the aid of the police and firemen and its own magnificent engines, had forced its way into the thinning, outer areas of the horde, on Greenwich Street, did he dare peek out again.

"Thank God," he breathed tremulously, as Thomas put a little speed to her and began making way northward, "thank God, I'm safe at last!"

"What a time—what a frightful, unheard of time! Why—they—I might have—might actually have been injured! Even killed! Great Heavens—just think of that!"

For a while he remained silent, lying unnerved and weak against the soft, thick cushions.

No desire now had he to skirt back into the press again, to verge toward Newspaper Row, to see the struggling, fighting, roaring masses of people—thousands, tens of thousands of them—trampling each other for a sight of the bulletin-boards where tired, excited men were scrawling huge announcements:

**UNSOLVED WALL STREET MYSTERY
—GOLD SWEEPED AWAY BY UN-
KNOWN FORCES!**

**Prominent Men Lose Large Sums—
Many Injured—Numerous Fatali-
ties—Broker Blaisdell Stricken
With Heart Failure—
Dies of Shock!!**

No, all this had ceased to interest the billionaire. For now his sole desire was just flight—just to get away, up-town, anywhere, away, away, away from it all, away into peace and quiet; away from danger and the strife and wrack of angry men.

Murchison, in a small way, in a very

small way, had had his first experience of what might, perhaps, have been considered some of the minor aspects of war. To a very minor, an almost infinitesimal degree, he had had his first baptism of fire.

He did not fancy it at all.

Death, as an actual possibility; death, or even some slight bodily injury, nay, just delay and inconvenience and the temporary thwarting of his will, by others, possessed for him no patriotic charms.

And as some mesur e of strength returned to his enervated body, anger began to burgeon out again in his exasperated soul.

Once more he began to think of John Storm, cause of all this hurly-burly, of all this possible peril to himself.

Bitterly Murchison cursed the scientist, beneath his breath, as the car sped on and on, now through the almost deserted stretches of upper Hudson Street.

Vengeance came back into his mind, surged back, more bitter and more hot than ever, ten times more virulent and keen.

"Thomas!" called he, remembering his campaign.

"Yes, sir?"

"Drive up Tenth Avenue to Twenty-ninth."

"Yes, sir."

Faster now and faster sped the car; and Murchison, absorbed in the delicious contemplation of his plan, leaned back and forgot the Wall Street riot, his own heavy losses, and his recent terror.

For now revenge was very near, and he must formulate the execution of it to the smallest ultimate details.

IKE A man who knows exactly where he is bound, and how to get there, the billionaire bade Thomas stop the machine at the designated corner.

Here he got out and gave the chauffeur certain careful instructions.

"Go on up-town as far as Seventy-second," he said, "then come back to the esplanade in front of the Pennsylvania depot. If I don't meet you there, make another ten-minute run, and return to the same place. Keep going and coming at intervals of ten minutes till you pick me up.

"Be sure not to exceed the speed limit or get held up or run into any trouble. You mustn't let the machine stand anywhere. Keep moving! Answer no questions and give out no statement of any kind, if the car is recognized.

"Watch out that nobody follows you. I reckon a lot of people want to talk to me just about now, Thomas; but I'm not going to let them. You must help me, understand? Get the idea?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, start along! And remember, the depot, up here, at ten-minute intervals, beginning a half-hour from now. Move on!"

As the car started, Murchison turned and walked briskly east down Twenty-ninth Street, past the long, dilapidated fence of the West Side freight yards—rather an unusual locality for the richest and most powerful man in the world to be promenading, lunchless and hungry, and every moment increasingly furious, at 1:30 of a frosty December afternoon.

Already on the tiny newsstand near the corner, as he turned north into Ninth Avenue, big, black headlines of the Wall Street panic stared at him.

He only swore hotly, under his breath, and hastened onward under the clanking, roaring structure of the "L."

The wide-brimmed gray felt hat which—like the Southerner he was—he always wore, helped his upturned fur collar to conceal his face. Nobody, he felt positive, had noticed him. No one suspected, there, the presence of the man responsible for all the vast turmoil of that day; the man whom already two-score newspapers, press associations, and syndicates, a hundred detectives and reporters, a thousand banking houses were straining every nerve to locate.

Without hesitation he turned into a doorway not far from the corner of Thirty-first.

Up the dark stairs he toiled to the third landing.

This is my first—and last—personal contact with these gentlemen here, he thought as he knocked on a door at the far end of the hall. I'm sure of that! But in an emergency like the present, there's no use being too lily-fingered. Positively nobody but myself can negotiate this now!

A scraping of chairs in the room at the other side of the door answered his knock. Then, after a little silence, a voice asked: "Who's there? What's wanted?"

"Is Mr. Collins in?" asked Murchison.

"No such man here at all."

"Nonsense! Let me in, at once, or you'll be sorry for it. It's all right—nothing to be afraid of—important business!"

Another pause. Then a key grated, and the door opened a crack. Murchison pushed

impatiently against it, but it was held by a chain.

"Come, come!" exclaimed the billionaire. "I can't be kept standing here all day! Let me in!"

The chain clanked slightly. Then the door swung wide. By the dim light, Murchison beheld a square-built, red-haired man of Celtic extraction, a man with a rough and bristling mustache. The curious fact that his right eyebrow and half his left were brown, while the other half of the left had for some reason or other turned pure white, added a disconcerting touch to his already sinister-enough expression.

"Well, sir?" demanded the square-built man.

"I'm a friend of Mr. McShane's," answered the billionaire. "I'd like to talk with you a few minutes, strictly on business. Are you at liberty?"

"Ho! Friend of McShane's, are you? Walk right in, sir; walk right in. Sure, I didn't know. You'll be excusing me, sir? Come right in!"

Murchison entered. The door was closed behind him, and locked again; and the chain was hooked on.

He stayed a trifle more than thirty-five minutes, then, with a well-satisfied air, took his leave. A few minutes later Thomas picked him up at the appointed spot, in front of the huge façade of the Pennsylvania, where Murchison calculated the hasty come-and-go would better veil his identity than would the seeming security of some less public place.

Even at the moment when he stepped into the car, a shrill newsboy thrust almost into his face a huge-typed extra:

**MURCHISON SHOT AT BY
LOSS CRAZED FANATIC!**

**Reported Seriously Wounded! !—Billionaire
Vanishes; May Be Dead! ! !**

THREE MORE BROKERS FAIL!

**Heavy Runs on Many Banks! !—Sub-
Treasury Hoard Safe, but Wall Street
and Entire Country Shaken! ! !**

Cursing, the financier slammed the door. "Home!" he commanded.

Thereafter, for a while, as the motor bears him to Englewood—in his elation now unmindful of the still profoundly agitated condition of the city, the exchange, the people, and the press—he passes into the background of our story, along with Wainwright, Baker and the rest.

For the strict seclusion in which Murchi-

son hid himself at Edgecliff was merely passive. And active matters are now pressing forward in this difficult chronicle.

These matters, for the most part, have to do with Storm. How was all this violent social ebullition affecting him? Where was he? How passing his time? What doing and what planning?

The answer is simple. Storm—having from his hiding place on Fifteenth Street, launched his fifteen-minute coup by means known only to himself—passed a quiet though an interesting afternoon in noting the effects produced.

HE WAS quite calm now; much calmer than when he had been laying down the law to the triumvirate in Murchison's office. Though he refrained from going down-town personally, to watch the aftermath of his first public application of the Blight, still by means of the telephone and of the various newspapers he bought from time to time, he managed to form a fairly accurate idea of what was taking place.

He allowed for exaggeration and wild rumor. Discounting seventy-five per cent of all sensationalism, even ninety per cent, he was convinced that even so slight a trial as this had shaken the city to its base.

And now he frowned, now smiled, now showed the pity that lay in him; for, in the righting of the wrong some innocent lives, he knew, must suffer. Some few must be wounded, some even die; in the emancipation of the whole wide world, the freeing of it from all war and hate and greed and misery.

Thus he passed his afternoon.

He neither expected, nor would he have received, any communication from the triumvirate, as a unit or individually. His appointed time for conference, as he had already told them, was from 11:30 to noon, of each day. Whatever might happen, he did not mean to extend his open period.

Every day, regularly, he thought, I'll hit 'em. Harder and harder, every day! They always know when and where they can find me. So it just becomes a problem of endurance. When my load equals their coefficient of resistance, the factor of safety disappears and they break. Nothing simpler.

I give them, at a fair guess, three days to capitulate. Three; perhaps four. Not longer; because if they don't yield by then, their lives won't be worth a sheet of my blotting-paper.

At quarter of six his telephone bell rang.

Without quitting his big, well-worn chair, he answered the call.

"Hello, hello!"

"You, Storm?" came a voice over the wire.

"Yes! Mr. Murchison? No use trying to interview me now. Nothing doing! You know my hours. Good-by!"

Storm put on his coat and hat, and went out to supper.

The streets were full of the interminable extras, and the crowd was still eagerly buying, reading, discussing. At the restaurant, where he ate his simple bowl of rice and milk, with crackers, everybody was poring over the latest canards; the whole place was full of the rustle and crinkle of newspapers.

Utter strangers fraternized in discussing the Blight. Just that one topic—the Blight! Sports, politics, the market, the Detwiller-Hawks divorce suit, the Hammett murder case, the Vanderpoel turquoise robbery, all had dropped out of public interest.

The man across the table from Storm tried to engage him in an argument concerning it. He, so he claimed, had personally witnessed part of the affair, and had lost a valuable gold stick-pin directly in front of the City Bank. As evidence, he displayed a pinch of white ash, carefully done up in tissue-paper.

Such a crowd immediately gathered around the table that the manager had to interfere. Storm, only mildly interested, took his leave and pushed out into the street again.

As the door swung behind him, an enterprising hawker shoved a sample of what was, palpably, cigar-ash, into his very face.

"Only a dollar! One dollar only! Sample o' the Blight! Here y'are—Blight ash! One dollar!"

Storm muttered "faker!" and shoved on; but not before an eager citizen had bought the fraud. Whereupon the hawker pulled another little paper box of ash from his pocket and once more set up his barking cry: "Here y'are, gents—genu-ine Blight ash—only a dollar—worth ten!"

After an hour or so spent mingling with the tremendous Broadway crowd, Storm worked his way up to Herald Square, and for a while amused himself watching the public swallow buncombe, wholesale, from the bulletin-boards and from the great cloth screens that had been spread, whereon stereopticons flared wondrous lies.

Tired of this, at last, he turned home-

ward, only to come across a moving-picture show which advertised the first authentic films of the Blight crush. The whole street in front of this place was packed to suffocation. Storm had to make a detour to get south of it again.

IT WAS 9:15 by the time he regained his rooms in Danton Place.

Thoroughly tired out, he smoked a little, made two pages of terse entries in his record book, and went to bed.

Ten minutes later he was sleeping as peacefully as though no such things as the Blight and the triumvirate existed, unmindful of the vast social upheaval already precipitated throughout the city, the nation, and—to a less degree—the world.

As he lapsed into unconsciousness, the hour was 3:45 in Berlin, Germany.

There, in a severely plain yet elegant study in his palace on Behren-Strasse, a man was sitting, deep in thought.

Over his huge chest his great beard lay as he contemplated a cube of gold which he held in his sinewed hand. Above his head a single tungsten burned; its light cast deep shadows across his rugged, powerful face.

So? the man mused at length.

He raised his eyes to a great chart of the world that hung against the wall, at the back of his broad mahogany desk.

Three thousand miles? I think it well within the bounds of the possible; but there's the matter of the silver cargo to consider, too. Possible? Certain! If I command, it happens!

A tap-tap-tapping at the study door disturbed him.

"Come."

A valet entered, bowing low.

"Graf Braunschweig," he hesitated, "pardon my breaking your orders and interrupting you, but the message is urgent. An envoy from the chancellor requests your immediate attendance at the palace. His Imperial Majesty desires to see you at once."

Braunschweig frowned.

"Convey my respectful regrets to the envoy," he answered grimly. "But make it clear that it will be impossible for me to attend. This is the first time I have ever opposed His Majesty's will; but to-night greater matters are in the air. I respectfully decline the invitation."

"But, Your Grace—"

"Silence," roared the count. "Not a word! Now listen. Here are three tele-

grams. One to Glanzer, at Bucharest; one to Heinzmann, at my Dusseldorf laboratories; one to Captain Kurz, on board the *Sieger*, at Amsterdam. Have these sent at once. Immediately, you understand?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Very well. Any further news from König & Breitenbach, in New York?"

"None, Your Grace, since that wireless at 3:32."

"The instant another arrives, rush it to me! Not one moment's delay—not one second!"

"I understand, Your Grace."

"Very well. Now go!"

The valet bowed again, and departed. Noiselessly the study door closed behind him. Braunschweig once more took up the cube of gold, and studied it. Then from a drawer of the great desk he extracted a silver cube and carefully examined that, too.

A moment he pondered.

At last he said:

"Six thousand tons of silver ballast should suffice, for the present. Later, we shall see; we shall see."

He took down the receiver of his house telephone.

"Kramer?" he inquired.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Notify Holz to prepare all the papers at once. We leave at 4:15. The motor must be ready at 4, sharp. And be sure to transmit to me, on the train and on the *Sieger*, every word that comes from Heinzmann and from America."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Braunschweig hung up the receiver.

"Now!" he exclaimed. "To work."

Vigorously he began to arrange despatches, paper, data, and all the material already in hand.

He, the money-overlord of Europe, had received authentic reports of the Wall Street Blight, via his own private cables and wireless, as early as 7 P.M. Berlin time. From that hour he had been in constant communication with his New York agents, König & Breitenbach, Broadway.

Not one of all the European metropolitan papers had a quarter of the information that had come to him.

First of all of the financiers of the Old World, he had perceived something of the truth. His all but infallible instinct had told him that far vaster issues were at stake, infinitely deeper problems and possibilities involved, than outwardly appeared.

By 3 A.M., scorning rest or sleep, he had

definitely arranged his vast affairs so that they could be managed by his staff during an indefinite absence. By 4:05 his motor was whirring him and his secretary from his Behren-Strasse palace, across the River Spree, to the Alexander-Platz station.

The 4:15 Holland Limited delayed thirty-five seconds to couple on his private car—seconds that had to be made up, unfavourably, on the run to Amsterdam.

Already Captain Kurz had taken ballast, as ordered, and had got up a fearful head of steam on Braunschweig's quadruple-turbine, thirty-two-knots, ocean-going yacht *Sieger*.

Before noon the financier knew he would be well out of the Zuyder Zee, scudding swiftly southwest toward the English Channel, on the first lap of a long, straight, record-shattering run for Sandy Hook.

Meanwhile John Storm slept peacefully as any child.

STORM was awakened suddenly by a vivid nightmare, a dream that a steel safe filled with bags of gold had fallen on his chest, pinning him, crushing him to earth, without the power of moving hand or foot. All that saved him from death, it seemed, was the fact that a thick coating of ashes in some mysterious way softened the metal of the safe.

With a strangled grunt he tried to turn over—and found he could not. The dream, his returning consciousness discovered, was based in some degree of truth.

Unreasonably terrified, as men often are when hardly yet awake, he made a mighty effort to cry out, to sit up in bed.

To his infinite astonishment he found he could do neither.

Then he got his eyes wide open, even though his mouth remained sealed; and his uncomprehending sight informed him that the room was dimly lighted. This added to his confusion.

When he had gone to bed he had, as usual, turned out all the jets in both his rooms, closed the door from his study into his bedroom, and opened both windows in the latter.

Now he found the door was open and the windows shut, the shades pulled down and one gas-jet lighted near his chiffonier.

Again, still not realizing exactly what it was that held him, he fought to rise; to shout. But the futility of this effort, joined with a sense of pain, made him desist.

And now, lying for a moment quiet, he perceived that he was bound to the bed. His mouth was filled with something soft, yet silencing. He bit against it.

Cloth! A bandage, a gag of some sort!

Again he struggled, with no better success.

Now he realized that strips of cloth had been passed over him and under the narrow bed, wound and rewound and lashed in place, his entire length.

He was swathed like a mummy, with no more power to escape or yell for help than the oldest Ptolemy in the Metropolitan Museum.

How this could have been accomplished without having awakened him he could not even think. But by nature supremely intelligent and analytical, he almost at once realized that in some way or other, somebody must have chloroformed or otherwise stupefied him while he slept.

He lay quiet, looking all about the room, taking in the largest radius that he could possibly command by straining his eyes in every direction. His head, he discovered, had an inch or two of leeway. This helped him also.

And though a strange, nauseated, numb sensation told him that certainly some narcotic had been used upon him, yet he fought it off and tried to think, to understand, to plan.

He had no data to guide him save the already discovered facts about the bandages and the gag, the door, the windows, and the dimly lighted gas-jet. The intruder, whoever he might be, had seemingly left no trace.

Seemingly, at first; but as with an extra effort, Storm wrenched his head a trifle higher and turned his aching eyes far around to the left. He suddenly got a dim vague perception of some unfamiliar object on a chair at the head of the bed.

His heart gave so mighty a leap that he lay back faint and weak. But this weakness passed; and now once more Storm struggled to see what the object might be.

Try as he might, he could not get it into the direct line of vision; but, even despite the dim illumination and the fact that he had to see with the extreme edge of his retina, he presently satisfied himself that the thing on the chair was some sort of a small, black, leather hand-bag or satchel, such as doctors often carry.

Closing his eyes, he lay quiet; he tried to grasp the correlation of the factors involved. But though he turned the matter logically in his mind, he got no answer.

"To dope and rob a man like me, who hasn't got anything at all to steal," he said to himself, "isn't worth the while of skilled crooks such as these seem to be.

"That is, unless in some way or other they know I'm responsible for the Blight and want to get my secret out of me. As though," and he smiled, despite his pain, "as though anybody else on earth could use it, even if they knew the apparatus from A to Z! Is this Murchison's work? The old man's no idiot! He remembers what I told him, that if I'm put out of the way, the whole system goes to smash at once. He's wise, Murchison is. He wouldn't wreck the world and himself along with it, just for the sake of getting square with me!"

Yet though he tried to convince himself of this logic, the consciousness still remained that now, in all probability, he lay fastbound in some devious, far-reaching tentacle of Murchison's octopus power.

The thought transfixed him with chill forebodings. Though Storm was brave enough, as bravery is reckoned, he was no stranger to fear. Personal fear he had none; fear for his work in life, his ideal, his hope and plan, was very real to him.

And should he be killed, he well realized the results to the world at large.

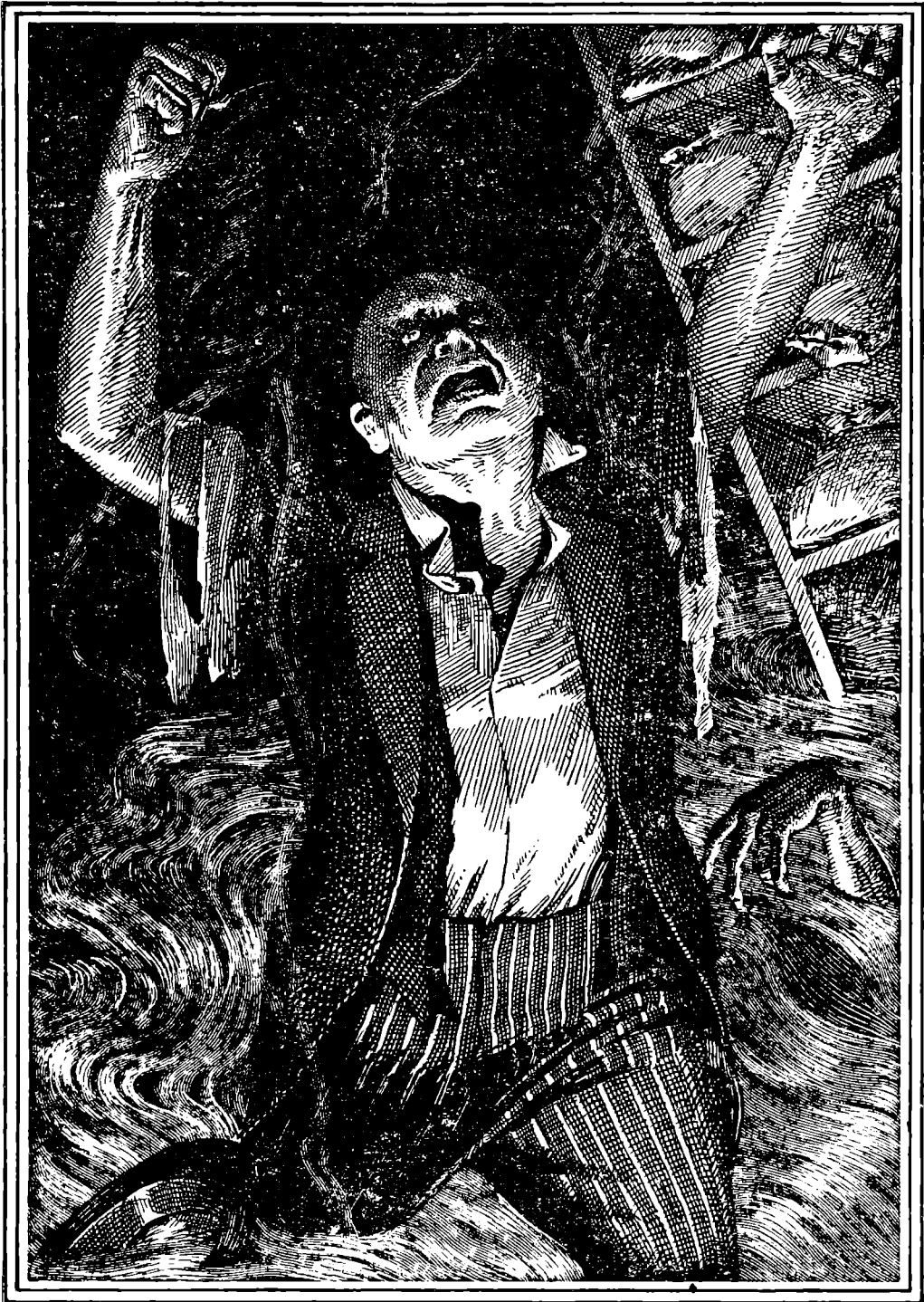
Instead of a progressive, upward-moving civilizing force, his Blight—now out of control and working its blind will wholesale and at random—would in a few days wreck the world.

His own hand, guiding, checking, releasing, was all that stood between mankind and the most disastrous panic in the history of civilized life. At thought of this Storm groaned.

He wanted to live! He must live! He could not die—yet! He was young; he loved life and work and the joy of fighting the world's battle to the end. Above all else, he wanted to see the triumph of the vast idea, to behold the working-out of his tremendous world-campaign.

And as these thoughts came to him, he once more began to struggle. With sudden fury, like a madman lashed to an asylum pallet, he moaned, gnashed at his gag and wrenched at the constraining bandages that held him prisoner. Once more he tugged, fought, wrestled desperately with his bonds.

Then suddenly he heard a sound that set the goose-flesh prickling all over his body. At the nape of his neck he felt the hair stirring. The better to listen, he lay very quiet now, holding his breath, all his



Braunschweig, hands in the air, stood burned
and blackened in the stream of molten gold.

perceptions quickened, sharpened into the one sense of hearing.

Out there in the other room, the study, a faint metallic noise was audible.

A key turning! thought Storm. Now—the hall door's opening. Now somebody's coming in!

Gently the hall door closed. Again Storm heard the slight rasp of the key. Then soft-shod footsteps sounded on the floor, and the gas was suddenly turned on in the other room.

A voice, low, quiet, steady, said:

"Now, Danny, to work! And if you make any more bulls or forget anything else, I'll fire you. Think I want to leave a job half done and go staving round for proper materials this time o' night? What good are you, anyhow?"

Storm lay low. The voice, though muffled, was indisputably Irish. And the answer came in similar accents:

"Forget it! No harm done. Sure, it'll be as slick a piece o'work as ever was—you'll see!"

Storm's heart began to flail. It almost choked him, yet he held his breath to listen.

Came then the scratch of a match. Storm heard the soft, regular puff! puff! puff! of a cigar being lighted. With hot anger through all his distress, he realized that an intruder was smoking one of his cigars—one of his precious Conchas de Samar, the closest approximation to Mindanaos that old Manuel Barra, the Porto Rican cigar smuggler, had been able to find for him. And thoughts of vengeance dawned within his brain.

"Well, Bill, let's get busy!" said the first voice presently. Then footsteps approached the door of the bedchamber.

CHAPTER V

SUICIDE BY PROXY

STORM'S native wit prompted him to make no outcry, no motion, no sign of consciousness. Instead, he closed his eyes, relaxed, and lay inert. For thus, perhaps, he might overhear some word, some hint, that would give him a key both to what had happened and to what was written on the cards of fate. Between almost closed lids he watched, breathing slowly, regularly, like an unconscious man.

Two figures entered the room. One, he saw by the dim light, was small and spare; the other a tall, square-built man with red hair—a powerful, ominous-looking fellow.

They approached the bed.

Storm knew they were peering down at him. He smelled the smoke from the smaller man's cigar; heard their breathing; sensed the keen attention they were concentrating on him.

Then the square-built man spoke.

"Not out of it yet? So much the better! Cinch! All we've got to do then is fix the letter, give him the needle and take off the bandage. Then open things wide—and beat it!"

The other did not answer. Instead he stepped over to the chiffonier. Suddenly the light grew strong. Storm knew he had turned on the gas.

"Faking!" he heard the little chap sneer. "He's awake, all right. See how he's moved the bandages? Oh, he's no fool!"

Storm heard a step, then felt himself roughly shaken by the shoulder.

"Come, come, buddy!" ordered the skeptic. "Wake up, you. No use trying to work the 'possum racket. We're wise. Come out of it!"

Storm realized the futility of bluff, and opened his eyes.

"What does all this mean? What do you want with me? What do you think you're going to do?" he tried to ask; but the only sound that got past the gag was a stifled: "Wawawa dada wawawawawa!"

The big fellow laughed.

"Yes, I guess so," said he. "That's all right, mister. But I don't exactly get the whole of it. Sure, you understand yourself, it's a little hard to catch. So you'll be excusing me, eh?"

"Drop that!" growled the other. "We've got no time for funny business. It's past three now. In fifteen minutes we've got to be on our way. Get the needle, Bill, and don't be all day about it!"

He gestured at the black bag on the chair beside the bed. Storm vaguely saw, with suddenly alarmed eyes, that the square-built man was opening the bag. Then he caught a glimpse of a delicate nickel-plated hypodermic syringe in the man's fingers.

"Wawawawawawaaaa!" he mumbled hotly.

Against his bonds he threw his full strength, writhing, fighting, straining to be free, until the veins in his forehead swelled, his face grew purple, and the very bedstead creaked.

But the two men paid not the slightest heed to him. They did him not even the honor to seem interested in his violent exertions.

Instead, the smaller one stepped over to Storm's wash-stand, drew a half-glass of water from the faucet, and then dropped into it a couple of tiny tablets, which he shook into his palm from a slender glass tube.

"Now, while the peter's dissolving," he remarked casually, "you fix up the farewell note, the last good-by to this hard and cruel world. You know the wording already. Don't leave out anything. It's got to be as pathetic as possible, Danny; that's what hits the papers hard.

"I'd do it myself if I was half the scratch-man you are. Since you forgot the stuff and made me go hunting it at 2:15 A.M., I hate to leave any part of this job to you; but I've got to, I guess. You certainly have got the knack with a pen. Go on, get busy!"

The big fellow withdrew into the other room. Storm heard him opening the desk-drawer, rustling papers, and drawing up a chair, to write. And once more his frantic anger surged.

More frenziedly than ever he hurled himself against his bandages. Dumb-mad, he fought. The little man, eying him now with a mild interest, sat down in the chair by the bedside.

"Come, come, mister," he remarked. "That's no use. No use at all. It only plays you out. You can't bust 'em. It took Red-top there and me half an hour to make you all O.K., while you were lying in sweet dreams of our own private manufacture. The cloth's strong, and the knots all strictly scientific. No go. You better keep still."

He paused, then added thoughtfully:

"Still and quiet. Better save your strength for praying, if you believe in it!"

Storm desisted from his furlous contortions. He felt sick and dizzy and faint. Cruelly the gag hurt his lacerated mouth. The blood hummed loudly in his ears.

What would he not have given for one moment's chance to yell, one half-minute's free use of even one hand and arm!

He glared with fevered eyes at the mocking, wizened face. But he did not try to speak again. For that, he realized, was not only futile, but—still worse—it furnished amusement to his tormentors, his executioners.

He lay quiet a moment, trying to think.

Outside, in the street, he heard the purr and honk-honk-honk! of a passing motor. From Broadway, even, penetrated the faint clang of an electric. The dull, somnolent hum of the metropolis, never stilled by night or day, reached his pulsating ears.

And, like a premonition, in to him was borne the certainty that when the dawn once more should break, red and sullen, over the eastern sky-line, he, John Storm, would be past hearing, seeing, thinking, struggling and more—forever.

A moment the two men looked at each other by the unsteady light of the gas-flame, which burned low.

Then the intruder spoke—while from the other room the scratch of pen on paper sounded faintly. He said:

"You've got about ten minutes more, Bo. Maybe a trifle less, according to how your system takes it. At any rate, not over ten. It's a rotten game two can't play at. Isn't it fair you take a little Blight yourself?"

He smoked a bit with evident satisfaction.

"Good tobacco, mister," he commented. "If you don't mind giving us two men a sort of legacy, we'll borrow a few of these when we leave. But nothing else. Not one other blessed thing. By which token you'll know, of course, we're not here to lift your coin, or any vulgar business such as that. No, it's bigger game we're on the track of, and mean to get, and have got!

"If you're a praying man, get busy.

Pretty soon you're going to sleep. You'll wake up in whatever other world there is or none, according to circumstances and facts. But before you go, it must give you some satisfaction to know this is no coarse work, like a knockout on a street corner or a puff from a canister in the dark.

"Nix on that! This is an A-1 job, first-class in every respect. Of course, it's anonymous. That's a pity, too. Danny, in there, and I—we get no credit, no public recognition. But it's good to know the work's well done. You're a scientific man, mister; you understand how it is. Slick, neat, ship-shape every way. Truly artistic and O.K. A well-conducted experiment, that's all. Fine! You see—"

He was interrupted by the square-built man coming in with a freshly written sheet in his hand.

"Here we are," he remarked cheerfully. "Here's the late lamented's last adieu. Farewell, proud world, I'm goin' home! Faith, it's a corker! See?"

THE LITTLE chap took the note from Danny. He read it with a critical, approving eye.

"It is good, that's a fact," he admitted. "You certainly missed your calling, boy, when you side-stepped scratch work. It's not too late for you yet to commence—not too late! The living spit and image of his writing, so it is. Will it pass in the shuffle? I'm a preacher if it don't!"

He held the paper out before Storm's eyes, turning it so the gaslight fell across it.

Storm, dazed and sick with loathing and despair, read as in a dream this message—written in so close an imitation of his hand that it seemed his very own:

Life, the supreme problem, soluble
only by death, the ultimate reaction.
By my own act I die, as I have always
lived, seeking knowledge.

John Storm.

"Classy, what?" remarked the little man. "Literary, too! Nothing cheap about that! Oh, we may not look it, mister, but we've got some education. We put in a lot of time framing that. I used to—but never mind about me.

"Put it out there on the table, Danny, and set an inkstand on it, so it can't get lost or anything. It's important."

He arose, stretched, dropped the smoked-out cigar to the matting and set his heel upon it. Then he took up the hypodermic needle again, screwed it together, and

walked over to the glass of solution on the wash-stand.

"When you're found here, to-morrow," he remarked impersonally, "asphyxiated in your own bed, not tied or anything, but lying nice and peaceful, with that on the table, you see how fine and dandy everything will go?"

"Faith it'll be one lovely case! The papers will, maybe, give it half a column, inside page—some of 'em may even run a cut; though I can't guarantee it, account o' the Blight news being so urgent and the public mind upset.

"Anyhow, it'll be pretty big for you, considering the time it's pulled off! Well, are we ready to be blighted?"

Speaking, he dipped the fine needle-point into the solution and drew up the ring.

"Now, Watson, the hop yeh," he said mockingly. "Quick, the needle! Will you help me give the insomnia treatment, please? In the neck. You just hold his head firm; that's all you got to do, my lad."

The square-built man stepped to the bed-side, and with his tremendous gorilla hands seized Storm's head. Over to one side he wrenched it, exposing an open space on the scientist's neck.

Storm howled muffled imprecations, and hurled himself against his bandages, quite in vain.

Calmly as though he were a doctor soothing a fevered, painracked patient, the wizened man brought the "sub-cute" against Storm's neck.

Storm felt the man's thumb and finger pinch up the skin into a tight fold; then came the slight jab of the needle. A somewhat numb, chilly sensation followed there.

Then, with an exclamation of satisfied accomplishment, the little man withdrew his hand.

He squirted a remaining drop of liquid on to the floor, carefully wiped the needle, and put it again into its case. The square-built man released Storm's head. He stood back, grinning at the victim's vain and furious efforts to get free.

"Nothing to do now but wait till he goes to by-by," said the little fellow contemptively. "Then off with the bandages, open everything wide, and dust out! A pipe! And speaking of pipes, reminds me. Join me in another cigar, Danny? There's half a box of fair smokes in the other room."

"Smoke is my middle name," answered the other.

Then, with a final glance at Storm, to make positive his bonds still held, both men sauntered leisurely out into the study.

Storm, drugged and bound, heard in his anguish the striking of a match, then the creak of his favorite chair.

But over him a strange and numbing change was beginning to creep.

The drug, he realized, had already begun its soporific, deadly work.

BITTER his fight was against it; but in its very nature the battle was a losing one. Will-power, determination, and furious rage all alike were powerless to combat the oncoming of stupefaction.

In two minutes Storm was dazed and drunk, his brain reeling, his senses all distorted with the powerful lethal stuff now pumping through his arteries.

Sick with the realization of death close at hand, he flung his failing will against the poison—and lost. In his ears, the blood hammered loudly; sweat covered his whole body; his respiration grew shorter, quicker, till he panted as he lay there writhing.

And his ideas, his apperceptions, began to fade, to become distorted and absurd. Hallucinations seized upon him. He seemed to see faces—then a vision of his precious machine, his radiojector—then swarms of swiftly flying, interweaving things.

He beat them back, only to find them pressing ever thicker, ever more grotesque.

Then a dull, languorous peace began to steal upon him, a popped calm, such as the fabled lotus-eaters must have felt.

He seemed now to be sliding down a long and smooth incline, ending in a precipice deep, formless, black. Before his eyes, which with a mighty effort he still managed to keep open, a thin gray veil began to float, to wave, to lower. Thicker it grew and denser, till it pressed against his face and stifled him.

He struggled then anew, and for a moment pushed it back; but still it came again, this time more swiftly. And, blinded now, he seemed to behold with his mind's eye a vast and swift succession of scenes, too huge, too rapid for realization, like De Quincy's phantom armies, opium-born.

Came a period of rest, of half-unconsciousness. Then the thought: "This is death!" flashed in his brain.

And once again he fought—fought, as it seemed, with a hundred, a thousand grinning, dancing, leering men who, phantom-like, evaded every blow, turned to wraiths, mocked him and gibed, the while they struck.

Warmth, comfort, lassitude possessed him finally; a sense of the futility of life and struggle; a dreamy peace and rest.

He lay quite still. For a moment he managed once more to open his eyes. The ceiling, he perceived, was gyrating in long, smooth, beautiful curves—wonderful ellipses, parabolas, volutes, arabesques, constantly changing, always more and more complex.

Far in the back of his expiring consciousness admiration welled.

If I could only trace those curves and draw them! he thought vaguely.

But now the curves were centering in one spot, directly over his head. Around and round they whirled, lower and lower; he seemed to lie at the bottom of a spiraling maelstrom, the point of which was coming closer, ever closer to his face.

When it touches me, I'm gone, he realized; but he no longer even tried to struggle. For a great peace, a painless beatitude, were his.

Ebbing, flowing, his consciousness rose and fell in slow and rhythmic waves, diminuendo. Only on the crests of these waves, now, could he grasp anything of what had happened, what impended. In the hollows he lay inert and blessed, near the Karma, the longed-for annihilation dreamed of by followers of Buddha.

Nearer, much nearer, spun the giddy vortex of the whirl above him.

He closed his eyes and waited; and his soul yearned for the touch of it.

All at once, far away and resonant with a strange timbre, he seemed to hear a voice. Then a sensation of light grew vaguely in his mind.

Is this—death? he wondered, listlessly.

Spinning above him, he seemed to see a human face; but it was very small and distant, seemingly at the end of an infinite vista. In spite of all, however, he seemed to know the face—wrinkled and wizened and smiling down at him.

Faintly he realized that his eyelid had been raised.

"I guess he'll do now," he heard a humming sound. "See here, Danny? His pupil's dilated to the limit. The quicker we get these things off him and roll out o' here, the better. Come on, go to it!"

Though every sense was numb, yet he knew he was being moved, being unbound. Even while this was going on, he lapsed from consciousness.

Some faint glimmer returned, after what seemed an eternity. Free now though he was, he could stir neither hand nor foot;

not only was power lacking, but will also. Had he been able to move, even, he would have chosen rest. For the peace that now lay on him wrapped him in the mantle of Nirvana.

"Straighten up everything, Danny, while I call Englewood and tell the old man the deal's closed, as per agreement," came a voice. "That's right—now, the sheets over him, so. All O.K.? Fine job, I call it."

Silence, then a mumbling, from the other room, and the click of a telephone receiver being hung up.

"Now the satchel. Got everything? Careful's the word—mustn't leave anything lying around loose here. All right. Now the gas, boy. Best dope there is. All jets—yes, wide open. We're done now. Come on, boy, come on."

Fine-stretched as a tiny silver wire, Storm's last flicker of consciousness perceived the slight hiss-hiss-hiss of unlighted gas escaping.

Even the sickly smell of it reached his nostrils.

But it concerned him not. Nothing mattered. Nothing, only peace and rest and the long sleep.

As a candle-flame is blown out suddenly by a gust of wind, so all his last sensation vanished.

The silver wire broke. A soft, enfolding darkness wrapped him.

"Death!" thought he gratefully, and knew no more.

SICK, very sick, weak and dazed and trembling, with a stabbing pain in the forehead, a dull, numb lassitude shrouding him, John Storm came gradually up, back again to life, to consciousness.

He lapsed; then, groaning, half revived; then for a time lay agonized and sensing only pain. But thought, returning, urged him to the task of life.

And, scraping all his scattered forces, as a miser might claw together some few pence overlooked by looters, he managed to raise himself on his right elbow and with bleared eyes blink round.

God! I still live? he thought vaguely. My room? My bed? I'm here. But—

Exhausted, he fell back. A little while he lay inert, waiting for the throb-throb-throb of agony in his head to abate. His mouth was dry and bitter. A horrible lassitude enveloped him; his muscles were mere lifeless tissue, his bones no stronger than their marrow.

But the will-power in him spurred him on. Dimly, as in a dream, he saw the

pulled-down shades, the gas-fixture near the chiffonier and—with a wave of recollection—the stop cock turned full on.

"Gas!" he exclaimed. "But—I am still alive!"

He sniffed the air. Close and foul and stifling though it was, it still had not proved fatal. Yet some gas was present.

What the devil? he wondered.

A moment later he again reassembled his strength, and with a huge effort managed to drag himself to the edge of the bed. Here he slowly rolled over, with the calculated result that he fell heavily to the floor, dragging half the bedclothes with him.

There for a little while, wrapped like a monster cocoon, he lay waiting, resting for the next move.

This move was longer. It took him, crawling feebly, laggingly, some minutes to reach the rear window overlooking the air-shaft—the window nearest his bed.

Here he stopped a while. Memory was coming back now; memory of the two invaders, their diabolic ingenuity and murderous, cool skill; their banter and brazen viciousness. And with memory dawned anger through all his trembling feebleness. A vow for payment of the score registered itself in his confused and tortured mind.

Two pairs of shoes stood by the window. Storm reached out a shaking hand and seized a shoe. He knew his strength would not suffice for him to stand up and even try to open the window. But the shoe would solve his problem.

He raised it, and with all his force rammed it against the glass of the lower pane. So palsied was his hand that only at the third nerveless blow did the glass shatter. Again and again he struck, enlarging the aperture.

Then he fell back, and lay there under the window, eagerly drinking in the cold, reviving air that poured through the hole.

The sudden inrush of oxygen was too much for him. A humming grew in his ears. Everything got black before his eyes. In a kind of syncope he lay gasping on the floor.

But presently he revived.

Stronger now, he was able to stagger to his feet by holding on to one of the brass rods of his bed. Then, step by step, wavering and uncertain as a baby learning to walk, he made his way to the gas-fixture and turned it off.

A thought struck him—the renewal of his first wonder.

"Why am I alive at all?" said he.

From where he stood, he could reach matches in a little tin affair nailed to the door-jamb. He took one, weakly struck it, and, in his eagerness risking the chance of explosion, turned on the gas again.

Then, with a shaking hand, he applied the flame to the jet.

Nothing! No result—no flame!

"What?" cried he.

Too astonished for a moment to probe the cause of this most fortunate failure, he stood there, leaning against the wall. But the spirit of investigation, his life instinct was momentarily growing stronger in him as his own strength revived.

And, still pale and sick and trembling, a strange and haggard figure in his gaily striped pajamas, Storm tottered into the study.

"What? Four-thirty? But—I've been doped here more than twelve hours? And it's now late afternoon?" he exclaimed as he caught sight of the clock. "And—and noon's past without—great Heavens without me at the machine! Gad! What has happened?"

The thought set him shaking again with sheer weakness and nerves. Here certainly was an uncounted-on contingency. For all he knew the country might have been swept clean already.

He pressed his hand to his aching head and tried to think; but, dazed as he still was, he could not possibly remember just what condition he had left the radiojector in. Everything seemed blurred and vague, and far away, even now.

"No use," said he, sinking into his big chair a minute. "I can't think—yet. I must just try to live."

Half vacantly, still very sick and shaken, he gazed about him.

Here in the study, too, all the windows were tightly locked and every shade pulled down. He raised his aching eyes to the gas-jets.

Yes, all the stop-cocks on the chandelier, as well as on the lights at either side of the mantel, were wide open. But, though the room smelled rather strong of gas, the air was still respirable.

By dint of much grit and effort he tested all these jets with a match. At all the same result followed.

There was no gas!

"Himmel!" croaked Storm, with a ghastly imitation of a laugh. "What's the matter, I don't know. All I'm reasonably sure of is that I'm alive. At least—I think I am. Ghosts don't have rip-snorting headaches,

so far as I've ever heard from the psychic researchers. No, and they don't have a big brown taste in their mouths, either—or a thirst on 'em like a camel ten days overdue.

"Oh, I'm alive, all right—and I've just begun to fight, whatever happens!"

He was strong enough by now to get up and put on his heavy bath-robe and his slippers. This done, he managed to open one of the windows looking out on Danton Place. Then, while the good December air surged through the room, clearing away the last traces of poison from the atmosphere, he lay back in his easy chair, breathed deeply, and let the magic potency of oxygen bring him back to life and sanity.

Only then did the true answer of his riddle strike his mind. And, all shaken and unnerved though he still was, he laughed with something like his usual heartiness.

"Blessed be poverty—and quarter-meters!" he exclaimed. "I remember now I haven't put a quarter into that darned machine for three days! There couldn't have been fifty cubic feet in it, all told—probably about enough to asphyxiate a baby. But if I'd been flush and stuffed the slot full of quarters, where would I be now?"

"Ha! This is Murchison's work, all right enough—and blamed rough work, too! Clever crooks, eh? To frame a deal like this—and then pull it off with an empty gas-meter! Clever; I don't think. Intellect—oh, yes!

"The fools! And they're trying to down me! Me!"

For a while he sat there, steadily reviving, as he reflected.

The room grew very cold. He got up and shut the window, then with some difficulty turned on the steam.

After this he mixed himself a good stiff drink of his best Gazinet cognac. This braced him to the point where he could take a hot shower, followed by a cold one, a thorough head-soaking under his icy needle spray, and a fairly brisk rub-down with a towel rough as a currycomb.

IT WAS A revived John Storm who at five-fifteen sat in robe and slippers, ruefully counting his depleted store of cigars. Beyond the fading remnants of a headache, a stiff and sore jaw and a bruised mouth—where the gag had cut—and a somewhat numb spot on his neck where the needle had penetrated, he felt no particular ill effects from his manhandling. Many an average fellow, after an average "night out," is worse done up.

The room was growing dark. Outside a fluffy snow had begun to fall. A soft gloom, through which the street lights and the shop-window illuminations glowed cheerily, had settled over the city.

Dark though the room was, he could not bring himself just yet to hunt for a quarter to feed to the meter which had saved his life. Instead, he lighted two of his mantelpiece candles, and set them, in their pewter sticks, on the table before him.

At one, he lighted one of his few remaining cigars. Then, as he prepared to smoke and ponder, his eye fell on a slip of paper with his inkstand set carefully upon it.

"Ah, there it is, sure enough!" said he, with quick memory and keen interest. "My last and only farewell to the dear, old world, eh?"

Cynically he took it up, and by the wavering light of his candles, studied it word by word, letter by letter, stroke by stroke.

It's certainly one grand bit of forgery, he admitted with real admiration. A dandy, or I'm no judge. Who'd ever think a big, burly oaf like that square-built man—whom, by the way I intend to meet again soon—could turn a trick like this? H-m-m-m! If I didn't know, hanged if I could hardly tell if from my own writing!

See that "John Storm", there! Isn't that magnificent? Where the devil could they have got specimens of my writing to copy and to practise from?

And—"the ultimate reaction," he thought, reading the words of the forgery. Where did they ever rake that combination together? Men like those don't invent "ultimate reaction"! Where the deuce?

Suddenly he realized the truth. He up started, with an oath.

"So then—my own report, to Murchison?" cried he. "That atmospheric nitrogen report, last Tuesday night? It certainly contained those words: 'Nothing can be definitely stated until the ultimate reaction has taken place!'"

"And they called Englewood on the phone when the job was finished. They reported! I remember, I remember now!"

He pressed his head with both strong hands, and tried to recall the vague, dreamlike incidents of his drug-intoxication, just before consciousness lapsed.

Dimly, faintly, yet with sufficient clarity to make itself sure, the impression remained regarding that Englewood call.

Murchison's guilt was clear. The "ultimate reaction" clinched it.

"The infernal villain!" growled Storm,

as full realization brought anger in its train. "The coward, to hire crooks to chloroform and bind me, turn on the gas, and try to make me out a suicide! The fool—to dare me to risk what I can do—and will!"

"Ingenius, though; I've certainly got to admit that," he added with a twinge of involuntary admiration. "They even figured out they'd have to do the forgery right here, so as to use my paper, ink, and pen. Nothing was overlooked—except that gas-meter. Good old meter! I'll have to buy it and keep it for a souvenir. Gad! It ought to have a Carnegie medal for life saving! But never mind about that. There's work to do, and scores to settle. Incidentally, think of the state of mind the old man must be in, out there at Edgecliff! He won't dare come around here, or send around, to find out what's happened. I think he'll have his people let this vicinity severely alone. But he'll get every paper in New York, every edition, and eat 'em alive—waiting for the suicide news that somehow doesn't come!"

"Well, that's for him to worry over, not me. Here's where I get busy!"

He arose, and, his cigar clamped tight between his teeth, began to pace the floor. As he walked, he thought. Once he paused to pull down all the shades.

"I want no opera-glass work into this room here, from any hired place across the street," he muttered.

With now a gesture, now a half-voiced word, now a long draw at the cigar, he mapped out the next step in his world-campaign.

"Gad!" he exclaimed at last triumphant-ly. "I've got it. When this strikes Murchison—"

STORM'S first move was practical in the extreme. He went out into the hall, and—making sure nobody saw him—dropped a quarter into the slot of the meter.

This would give him plenty of light, as well as gas to run the little portable stove he sometimes cooked over, when too busy to leave his work.

Now if I only had a paper, he thought. But it wouldn't do at all for me to risk going to the newsstand on the corner. My whole game now is to avoid being seen by anybody.

Fortune was kind. By the flicker of the solitary jet in the hall, he saw the evening journal of his neighbor, Menard, lying on the floor.

"Justifiable forced sale," he remarked, taking the paper and leaving a dime in the place.

As he once more locked himself into his room, and unfolded the paper, huge scare-heads leaped at him—news, the substance of which already was well known, by wireless, to Graf Braunschweig on the *Sieger*, now well past Calais and through the Straits of Dover on the race to America.

The tall type screamed:

**MYSTERIOUS PERIL SPREADING—
BOSTON HARD HIT!**

Philadelphia Gold Blighted—Albany, Providence, Hartford in Panic!

Latest Extra.—The unexplained disaster which yesterday struck Wall Street, has again smitten the country. In a huge radius centering in New York and sweeping the seaboard from Massachusetts to Delaware, the Blight—

"H-m-m-m! Yes, it's working, all right!" commented Storm, much relieved that his radiojector had actually functioned in his absence, and that—on the other hand—it had not exceeded its planned limit and "run amuck." His eye kindled with satisfaction as he glanced hastily down the columns of big print, skimmed the sub-heads, and here or there picked up a paragraph:

Utterly unexplained, sudden and paralyzing as a lightning stroke, the Blight fell over this whole area at exactly 12 P.M. For fifteen minutes only it operated, but in that brief time the loss is estimated—

Impatiently he scanned the entire paper, but found no satisfaction.

"One thing's certain," he concluded. "There's not a word or line about John Storm in print. The old fox there, is wise enough to keep a tight stopper on his jaw

about me. Alive or dead, nothing gets in concerning me via Edgecliff. His game's to play in the dark, stab in the dark, and trust to luck that somehow he'll head things off."

To all appearances, the country was going—or had already quite gone—mad. Storm's general impression from the paper was an utter, sweeping demoralization, grotesquely out of proportion with the actual damage inflicted.

Far beyond the present limits of the Blight, vast waves and circles of terror, of unreasoning, insensate fear, were spreading.

In every city from ocean to ocean, tremendous and record-breaking runs on banks had taken place or were still in progress.

Every depositor seemed determined to get his money out, at whatever cost. Everybody seemed possessed by the childish idea—at which Storm smiled—that if only the actual cash, gold, silver, or bills, could be hidden ingeniously enough, no loss could result.

He glanced at the paper again.

Blight! Blight! Blight! Nothing else! The pages teemed with disjointed and exaggerated accounts of endless, curious ways in which gold had vanished within the stricken area; with stories of frantic fear outside; with tales of hasty, insane, idiotic attempts to head off further inroads.

One reported a calling of a hasty joint commission of metallurgists, scientists, and bankers, at Washington; another denied this. The news was all distorted, vague, exaggerated—Storm saw at once it was wholly unreliable. In a mad world, mad news. Even wild, hot vaporings of war were beginning to issue from the press. Rumors that this calamity had been brought on by some foreign power, with a view to wrecking the United States and then invading

and overthrowing it, were being banded hither and yon. "We must fight! Fight!" already rose the cry.

Fight what? Whom? Nobody knew, or cared—so long as the spilling of human blood was in prospect. The old, waning, dying blood-lust of mankind was flaring up again. Struck, man was burning to strike back—at anything in sight.

Storm frowned at this news; but presently he smiled again.

"War," mused he, "means gold to carry it on. Let them try to fight—just let them try, that's all!"

Prophets were beginning to spring up by the hundreds and thousands. Speculators of all kinds were running mad, in myriad crooked, intricate, and unheard-of forms of gambling. The insurance companies were swamped with applicants for insurance on their gold; outside the safe-deposit companies, mobs fought to gain access, to hire vaults or boxes where perhaps some especial treasure, some precious heirloom might be saved.

New sects were swiftly forming and old ones growing with incredible rapidity. Huge camp-meetings were spontaneously taking form, with monster baptisms in rivers and lakes or even—along the seaboard—in the ocean.

AND ABOVE all, over all, lay the unseen hand of John Storm. His power, at work even while he had lain drugged and senseless, had done its resistless work. Swift, accurate, stinging as a nagaikash, it had struck and annihilated an infinitude of personal adornments, coins, and household plate; but as yet no bank or government hoards.

"That," said the scientist, "is the next step. If Murchison won't listen to reason before the supreme crash comes, then he's responsible, not I. Eh? What's this?"

A curious item caught his glance:

GILDED DOME STRIPPED!
Boston's Famous State House Loses Gold
Leaf—The Hub Stupefied at Loss of
World-Renowned Landmark!

"Rot!" he exclaimed, throwing the paper down. "What's that to me? Sensationalism, always and everywhere! The whole social, economic, and political structure of the country, of the world, is trembling to the great change—and the newspapers are printing rubbish to increase sales. People—blind, groping idiots—are bewailing the loss of a ring or pin or a few coins. A city is mourning the destruction of a few hun-

dred square feet of gold leaf! What can I do with a world like this?"

He got up, and for a moment stood there smoking with great irritation. Then he pitched the cigar-end into the grate.

"I'll save you yet, you stupid, blundering, bat-eyed, doddering old world," said he. "Save you, in spite of yourself—for after all, you're a good world. You're all the world I know—and I love you!"

Briskly, now, he turned to the active carrying out of his further plans.

The time was 6:15. Storm had eaten nothing for almost exactly twenty-four hours. He realized that the first thing to do was "stoke up," as he called it.

So he boiled himself a couple of eggs and made some coffee on the little gas-stove, and cut two slices from a scandalously dry loaf which had long lain in a pasteboard box, a prey to mice, on top of the bookcase.

These delicacies consumed, the while, he pondered, using his work-table as a festal board. He washed his dishes and methodically replaced them.

Nice tableau this is, what? he grimly thought. Master of all the world's gold, whether on top of domes, in banks, or government vaults, or deep in the furthest drift of the Rand mines, yet I scrub a plate of tin and rinse a rusty coffee-pot. No matter, it's all in the cause of science and the world.

Quickly, yet methodically, he packed his hand-bag with a few necessaries, including his precious note-book. The forgery he carefully put away in his bill-fold.

Three minutes later, having turned out all the lights and locked the door, he said good-by to his room for an indefinite time.

Cautiously, he descended the stairs, still a bit weak, but almost himself again. Without meeting anybody, he reached the street door. Here, he paused for a careful look up and down Danton Place, then muffled his face and tramped away quickly toward Fifteenth Street.

It's the den for mine now—till the end of the fight, thought he, as, hunching his big ulster collar still higher till it almost met his roomy slouch cap, he hastened on.

The thick falling snow helped blur his personality. Such few pedestrians as he met passed likewise protected without a glance. Over on Broadway resounded some kind or other of turmoil; but this side street was almost abandoned.

STORM felt certain no one was heeding him as he made his way toward the goal.

This den of his, which he had already prepared about three weeks before in anticipation of a time of need, was a single room, windowless save for a skylight, on Fifteenth, near Third Avenue.

Under the name of Benton he had hired it from an excellent Italian family occupying the house. These Italians, very well-to-do, lived in the upper part. In the basement and first floor, they ran a well-patronized restaurant, much frequented by writers, artists, and various Bohemians.

The very publicity of the place, its busy life and happy-go-lucky character, exactly suited Storm's purpose.

Here he could do about as he pleased without question, provided he paid his rent promptly. By the use of only very moderate ingenuity he could pass as a crack-brained musician, photographer, or whatnot. Nobody would bother about him. And still better, he could eat without having to risk a sortie.

"Mighty fine thing I've got a placé like this to duck into," he told himself, as he tramped up the steps and fumbled at the latch with his key. "I don't need any visit to my laboratory on Twenty-first to assure me it's been ransacked clean before now, and every blessed piece of apparatus there sifted full of emery-powder or broken or carted off. If it weren't for my den, now, I'd be right up against it hard."

In the hallway he met Angelica, the plump, olive-cheeked, and sloe-eyed daughter of the house. The hall was redolent of a good dinner in progress; from the inner rooms sounded a cheerful clink of steel knives and forks, a somewhat polyglottic chatter of voices and hearty laughter.

"Buona sera," he gave back to Angelica's greeting in Italian. "Some snow, eh? Lots of business to-night? No," in answer to her question, "I've had my chow already. Supper. *Capite?* I won't be down."

She flashed a white-toothed smile at him—for the big, erratic American had already pleased her well. Then Storm, with no further parley, climbed to the topmost floor, up to his little stronghold under the eaves.

As he switched on the incandescent he glanced with satisfaction at his emergency accommodations. A cot, bureau, washstand, and bookloaded table of plain pine sufficed for him. On the left-hand wall hung a very large, linen-mounted Mercator's projection of the world; the entire land area was laid off in accurately drawn hexagons, traced with India ink by a very

fine pen. Each division bore a number in red. Circles of various sizes in green also covered the map. All these circles were concentric, with New York as their common center.

Beyond these things there was little to note, except a newly-installed telephone that stood on the bureau; and, against the further wall what seemed an ordinary trunk of medium dimensions.

It was at this trunk that John Storm looked with eager and affectionate eyes, as he took off his cap, coat and gloves, and with characteristic disorder threw them all on the cot.

"Ah, my beauty, still safe and sound, eh?" he exclaimed. Over to the trunk he walked, and fondly patted it as though it had been sentient.

"They'll never find you here, that's certain. The fools, to tackle me personally, and try to put me out of business! Fools, to raid the lab., as I know well enough they've done!

"Gad! While you're intact, this thing goes on and on and on, whatever happens to John Storm; and you are intact and going to stay so, too. That's a thousand-to-one shot, every time!"

He picked up his corn-cob from the tin biscuit-box cover that served him as an ash-tray; filled it with the fine and complex blend of his own making, which he always smoked; and, striking a match, again eyed the trunk.

"How can they find you, my beauty," he asked, "when they don't know even where I am? Oh, a cinch! Too easy, eh? Robbing a cripple would be Herculean beside it!"

He sat down in his single wooden chair, tilted back onto the hind legs and, drawing deeply at his pipe, once more surveyed the trunk with eminent satisfaction.

His pleasure in that sight and in the taste of the famous blend might have been lessened had he known that a man who had been watching from a doorway opposite 75A Danton Place, had followed him at a safe distance all the way to Fifteenth Street, and now at that very moment was supping on macaroni and cheese, fried smelts and red wine, in the basement far below.

The man, smiling, quick-eyed and eminently polite, had already made at least the preliminary step in getting acquainted with Angelica.

But of all this John Storm—happily for his peace of mind—suspected absolutely nothing.

CHAPTER VI

THE LAST DEMAND

AT THIS same hour, an angry and fear-struck conference was going forward at Edgecliff.

When the second day's Blight had promptly at 11:45 smashed into the tremendous area from Boston to Philadelphia, Wainwright's rage and consternation had known no bounds. Of violent temper and overfull of body, he had just missed apoplexy.

A physician rushed to his office on Broad Street on a hurry call, barely pulled him through by copious blood-letting. Then he took Wainwright home to the vast marble congeries of clashing architectural style which the copper czar's unbounded egoism had built on Fifth Avenue.

And thither, despite all the specialist's positive injunctions regarding at least twenty-four hours' absolute rest in bed, Wainwright—at the first possible moment of release from the physician's watchful eye—summoned Baker, third member of the triumvirate.

The conversation of these two men was short and to the point.

"It's ripping into us again, this hellish plague is!" roared Wainwright. "Inferno's loose. If this keeps up a week, I'm broke. So are you. No time now for fine hair-splitting or oaths of secrecy or anything but action. Did you get the marked ballot? And if so, how about it? Is the crimson idiot dead yet?"

"I don't know! I drew a blank."

"Same here!"

"So then Murchison's the man?"

"He is—damn him!"

Wainwright jerked the telephone toward him.

"660-Q Englewood!"

A pause. Baker paced the floor nervously.

"This Murchison's? Yes? Murchison there? What? Not back till six? See here, you tell him Baker and Wainwright are coming out. We've got to see him. If we don't, there'll be a big smash. Got it? Six sharp! Good-by!"

At six-fifteen the three men were in conclave in the billionaire's library with the door shut. Murchison looked worn down pretty fine; Wainwright, pale with loss of blood as well as with consuming anger, seemed to have grown flabby. He sat there glaring at the richest man in the world.

"You," Wainwright said distinctly, "are a devil of a success, aren't you? A great one to carry out a job, what? This thing was left in your—"

"Now, see here! I—"

"Stop! Listen to me! It was left for you to carry out. You could take care of it, all right. Oh, yes! As a result—"

"Didn't he tell us himself, no matter what happened to him, the Blight would go on? Didn't I tell you all along that we'd better treat with him and humor him until we found out what the secret really was, what his apparatus consisted of, and where he kept it—then close in on that? Didn't I? And you opposed it? Baker here knows I did!"

Murchison nodding vigorously, thumped his fist on the greenstone table.

"You wouldn't have it so!" he cried. "Put the blame where it belongs, hang you!"

Wainwright thought that over for a second.

"Is he dead?" he blurted. "If so, I guarantee we can put a quietus on the rest of it. I've set things in motion to fix his workshop so that won't bother us any more! But the man, the blazing, scarlet, howling fiend—is he dead?"

"I have every reason to believe that he is."

"Oh, you have, have you? Reason to believe! You take a job of cardinal importance, the most important job in the world, and then—have reason to believe! You are one corker—not!"

Murchison drummed nervously on his chair-arm with trembling fingers, but found no word to answer. Just as Baker opened his lips to speak, the telephone-bell rang sharply.

"Hello, hello!" replied Murchison, pulling the instrument toward him on the table. "Telegraph-office calling, you say? All right, yes, this is Mr. Murchison talking now. Eh? Wireless, in code? Go ahead, let's have it."

He added to Baker:

"Take this down, will you? I'll give it to you as it comes."

The secretary drew out his fountain pen and across the back cover of a Brazilian consular report which lay on the polished tabletop, transcribed the message:

Intent level omicron velum energy
loam unequal cam indirect lunar leave
empire white intent tram health abbott
large lien metal yea hour effect art
respice travail.

Braunschweig.

At sound of the name, Murchison started and grew pale.

"What?" cried he. "He?"

"Who?" exclaimed Baker. "You mean—"

"Maximilian Braunschweig!"

Wainwright flung out an oath. The three men, struck with annihilating astonishment, stared blankly at each other.

The traditional devil loves holy water, by comparison with the hate wherein these three bore the stupendous personality of the great German financier. And for a moment no word was spoken.

Then Murchison flung the receiver onto the hook with a bang.

"What on earth does he want?" snarled Wainwright. "What the devil?"

Murchison made no answer, but very grimly seized the consular report and stared at it.

"H-m!" he grunted savagely.

Then he adjusted his glasses on his thin nose-bridge.

"It's in the L. G. code," he said.

"Go on, read it!" blurted the secretary eagerly.

Murchison jerked open the table drawer, rummaged for a moment and brought out the small, leather-bound book containing all the codes he used.

"Let's see now, let's see—the L. G.!" he said in a shaken voice which he tried in vain to render steady.

The others watched him in grim silence. Some vast, overshadowing, ominous factor had suddenly made itself felt in the game. Something hated, something feared—something they could not meet or fend away.

And in the room things grew very tense.

Baker got up, and, as was his habit, began pacing the floor. Wainwright lit a Mindanao, which presently went out because in his perturbation he forgot to draw at it. The billionaire, his brows wrinkled, his mouth very hard and tight under that sparse moustache of his, turned and returned the pages of the code, piecing the sense together bit by bit.

"Well, got it yet?" grunted the copper czar savagely.

"In a minute now. Only a few words left!"

Then, presently, with startled look the billionaire glanced at Baker.

"Singular!" he cried.

"What is it?" exclaimed Baker. "Quick! What's up?"

"Freely rendered, here's the idea." He paised a little as though marshalling his thoughts.

"Go on, go on, can't you?" urged Wainwright.

"Braunschweig evidently knows what's happening!"

"He ought to; with his private cables and wireless. But—come on, let's have it!"

"He says, in effect:

"If you know the person causing gold-destruction, do not oppose or impede him in that work. I hope to cooperate with you. Incalculable profits possible. Shall be in New York in four and a half days.

"Braunschweig."

FOR a moment silence. Then Wainwright roared:

"The deuce you say! What's he butting in for? Haven't we got trouble enough of our own without any more 'made in Germany'? He'd better keep off our grass, that's all I've got to offer!"

Murchison looked up quickly. He was calmer now.

"This is certainly a new complication," he said. "I reckon a lot depends on just how we meet it. Evidently he scents a kill, or he'd never start for the States, like this. Question is, if there is a kill in prospect, are we smart enough to find it out for ourselves, and get it; or have we got to wait for a German to walk in here and retrieve it out from under our very noses?"

"All this about cooperation with me is so much rubbish. I know Braunschweig! He cooperates with nobody! If he does, the other party's rake-off is always minus zero. We've got to think this thing over. There's time yet, if we hit it right, to head him off and win out, all round. If he gets a 'thank you,' I reckon that'll be enough for him!"

"A 'thank you'?" inquired Baker. "What for?"

"For the tip, of course!"

"You don't mean," retorted Baker, "you're going to pay any attention to that? And let this howling, gibbering maniac wreck the whole of our organized society? And trust to luck to snatch a few scraps of his leavings?"

"After the way Murchison has handled the case so far," growled Wainwright, "I certainly don't credit him with any more sense than to do just that!"

The billionaire flushed, but held his temper.

"Gentlemen," he said, "there's nothing gained by indulging in personalities at a time like this. We're dealing with a tremendously vital, serious, dangerous set of problems. We must all hang together, as

what's-his-name said, you know, or I'm damned if I don't think we stand a mighty good chance of all hanging separately!"

"The Dutchman had better keep out of our private preserves, that's all I've got to say!" interrupted Wainwright angrily.

"It's our job, anyhow. Storm is our job, and his infernal radium stunt or whatever it is; all ours. The country's ours! We'll manage it—no Heiny need apply!"

He slapped his knee with a big, well-groomed hand, and set his jaw at an ugly angle. Murchison considered before he answered.

"Yes," he said at last, "but if Braunschweig understands things better than we do, and if he sees a way for us to clean up—"

"If your grandmother!" roared Wainwright. "Forget that, can't you? The main thing just now is where is Storm? And where's his machine? And how blue-blanked quick can we put 'em both out of commission? That's all—just that!"

Murchison was about to reply when a sharp rapping at the door interrupted him.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Jinyo, sar," answered a voice. "Message for you, sar."

For a moment the triumvirate kept silence. Instinct seemed to warn them some vital thing was forward. Then the billionaire cried:

"All right—let's have it!"

Jinyo brought in the letter, salaamed, and retired.

Murchison peered curiously at the writing on the envelope.

In an ordinary clerical hand, it told him nothing. Yet he seemed to sense that the message was from Storm and none other. True. For Storm had telephoned it to Englewood and had a messenger on a wheel carry it up to Edgecliff. Murchison's face as he took the envelope, grew paler even than its wont.

In a hardly audible voice he articulated:

"Yes—it must be from him!"

Wainwright sneered.

"Of course!" he jibed. "It's only natural that the man you guaranteed to put out of the way yesterday morning should be writing you billets-doux to-night!"

"No matter about that," put in Baker, leaning forward and staring in excitement. "Go on, open it! What does he want now? What does he say? Open the letter, can't you?"

So nervous was the billionaire that, in ripping the end off the envelope, he tore the fold of the letter within. The sheet

came out, raggedly divided into two pieces.

With an oath he spread them on the table-top and fitted them together.

The three men, crowding close beneath the opalescent light, read by leaps and bounds:

New York (address not important),
Today.

Van Horne Murchison, Esq.,
Englewood, New Jersey.

Dear Sir:

Here's a new proposition. Since the original one has not been satisfactorily acted upon, I make another.

Unless you comply with my demands before tomorrow at 11:45, I shall exercise a coup of tremendously more importance and vastly larger scope. It will involve not only America, but part of Europe as well. On your head be the consequences!

Following this coup, I shall do nothing for three days. This will give the world time to take account of stock and make up its mind regarding some course of action to pursue, when the blame is placed.

On the fourth day I shall make announcement, through the Associated Press, regarding the demands and certain possible other results, in case of noncompliance. Your name will figure, specifically, in this announcement.

On the fifth day, developments will take place which you cannot, at this time, even imagine. The results to you, both financially and personally, cannot fail to be disastrous.

Again I warn you not to attempt to interfere with me or with my apparatus. In the first place, you will fail again, as before; in the second, you will only hasten disaster to yourself.

At any time, the process of disintegration can be stopped by surrender. The signal that you have given in will be a large white flag, to be flown from the top of the Metropolitan Tower. No other will be needed or accepted.

You now have all the essential facts. You know my demands. You can possibly foresee the results of not yielding.

The sooner the flag flies, the better for you, for the nation, and the world at large.

Your move!

THE BLIGHT

IN THE well-hidden little attic den on Fifteenth Street, Storm was at this hour preparing for the next momentous step in his war against war.

Having thrown consternation into Murchison's camp, via the telephone, he was now calmly making ready to overhaul his radiojector for tomorrow's work. Although it would have functioned even without him, yet the billionaire's attack had greatly changed his plan. And now he purposed striking a far harder blow than he had otherwise intended.

He lighted one of his few remaining

cigars, then took from his pocket a key-ring, chose one certain key, and approached the trunk which stood against the further wall.

More than a week before his first demonstration on Murchison's double eagles at Englewood, he had had this trunk sent to the den. Outwardly exhibiting no peculiarities, it none the less constituted the very heart, the crux of the entire Blight!

Its lock, apparently simple, was in reality a complex combination, made of tool-steel by Storm himself after his own designs.

Under the wooden strips and canvas cover of the trunk lay thin, laminated plates of chrome steel; the trunk was really a light but excessively powerful safe, masked with appearances of flimsiness. Hinges and lock were riveted solidly to its frame.

Even old Max Shinburn himself, king of cracksmen, would have an interesting hour or two trying to "crush" this, and that's a fact! Storm thought, as he inserted the key that let fall a plate exposing the combination lock.

This he deftly manipulated. In less than half a minute the trunk was open.

Inside appeared a curious mechanism. At the left a powerful series of storage batteries, very compact and potent—also designed by Storm—occupied about one-quarter of the space. Induction coils and certain other apparatus which only Storm himself could have named, and of which certainly no plans ever had been registered in the Patent Office, came next.

At the right a large, flat, hard-rubber plate was pierced by serried rows on rows of binding-posts—or, rather, hollow copper pegs. Of these there must have been between five and six hundred.

On the inside of the trunk lid itself, another Mercator projection was fastened, pierced also by a host of copper pegs. From such of these as formed a circle around the point indicating New York—a circle with its circumference approximately cutting Boston, Albany, Harrisburg, and Baltimore—fine, green-insulated wires extended to a similar circle on the hard-rubber plate below.

"I guess I'll widen the field of operations enough this time to show 'em. I'm in earnest," said Storm to himself, as he drew up his chair and sat down before the radiojector.

Then, like a man who knows his job from A to Z, he began breaking the connections and plugging them in on a vastly larger scale.

Steadily he worked for about ten minutes. From time to time he took more and more wires from a small but deep drawer at the extreme right of the apparatus. By the time his connections were all made, a complicated nexus of wires stretched like a coarse green web from the chart to the plate.

"There, I shouldn't wonder if that would do the business!" he concluded at length, leaning back and puffing at his weed. "Now for the time-adjustment, wavelength, rhythm, and velocity."

Down along the sides of the Mercator and across its top ran a series of brass dials, switches, knobs, buttons, and small, glistening levers.

Storm busied himself for another five minutes with these, arranging, rearranging, altering, combining, and adjusting his effects. Once he got up and went over to the table, where he covered a couple of sheets of scratch-paper with a tangle of formulas, X's, Y's, Z's, sines, cosines, and logarithms.

"H-m-m-m!" he grunted. "Lucky I thought of that!" Then he went back to his machine, and for a few minutes longer busied himself in readjusting the combinations.

"That's right now, dead right every way!" he judged at last. "Now I'll add just a little extra power and then she'll do nicely."

From the drawer he took a long double wire with an ordinary electric light connection at each end. He unscrewed the incandescent from one of the two lights in his room, screwed one plug into this socket and the other into a socket placed between the batteries and the rubber plate.

Then he turned on the current. A low, gradually rising hum issued from somewhere in the interior of the radiojector, and a small black needle on one of the dials began to mount very slowly.

Keen-eyed, Storm watched this. When it registered 1,000 he turned off the current, disconnected and stowed the wires away.

Then he threw a handle and turned on the remaining light.

"Got to be sure everything's O.K.," he said, sitting down again to watch.

A singular effect began to grow visible. In the dark of the room the outlines of the trunk gradually commenced to show—shadows in a vague and ghostly light which, pulsing with extreme rapidity, pierced the steel as easily as sunlight traverses plate-glass.

White at first, the light gradually assumed a yellowish hue. As it strengthened, the whole interior mechanism became apparent, infinitely complex, adumbrated by the unearthly and auroralike gushes of illumination.

The light, from yellow, went green, then blue, then a dazzling purple.

Storm glanced behind him at his shadow on the plain, white-plastered wall.

There, seated on the merest dim-shaded suggestion of a chair, sat a human skeleton. As Storm, smiling, raised his hand and worked the fingers, the skeleton hand, utterly fleshless, did the same.

"Regular vaudeville stunt, eh?" said he. "Nice for elderly nervous persons and children! But it wouldn't be a circumstance to them by comparison with what tomorrow's real performance will be to the gold-grubbers.

"Well, no use wasting power. The whole thing's working to perfection. Give me another uninterrupted week and I'll have 'em all so far in quod that they'll be so much putty in my hand. Putty? Soft mud!"

He leaned forward and threw off the switch. The light went blood-red, flickered a few times and died. Then Storm stepped over to the incandescent and was about to turn the button, when all at once he stopped.

He stood stock-still, listening. He held his breath to hear.

ABOVE him, at the skylight which looked down upon his bureau and table, but did not command a view of the trunk, a faint scratching sound seemed to have made itself audible.

Motionless, Storm gave ear. But he heard nothing.

He did not, however, turn on the light.

Instead, he tiptoed to the bureau where, on coming into the room, he had set his hand-bag.

This bag he noiselessly opened.

From it he took his flash-lamp. Then, pointing the tube upward toward the sort of shaftlike box at the top of which the skylight was, he pressed the little button.

The white arrow of light showed that on the snow-covered pane above, a little space had been scraped clear. No eye appeared at it, but the peep-hole was conclusively eloquent of furtive observation. Storm knew somebody had been trying to spy on him—somebody who, when the room had gone dark, had probably shrunk back into

the lee of the chimney to hide himself.

The scientist pushed the button again and extinguished the electric beam. Then, angrier than he had almost ever been in his whole life, he flung himself down on the cot to think. Rather, to try to think; for rage blurred his reason.

"Blast them!" he growled. "Can't I shake them off? How the devil does anybody know I'm here now? How did that ruffian get up there onto that roof; how did he know which skylight looked down into this room? Search me! But no matter—I'm up against it now if I don't 'get' him some way before morning."

For a while, grown calmer now, he pondered.

If a man's house, or his room, isn't his own castle, then there's no such thing as law, he concluded at length. Let's see, now. I reckon it this way. That devil there won't go far. He'll probably hide behind some chimney-stack or other and wait for developments. If he's caught, he's got backing that would clear him on any charge from housebreaking to murder. But he doesn't expect to get caught. There's no reason to believe he suspects I know he's up there.

No, he thinks I'm still in blissful ignorance on that score. All right; my game is to keep him so. He's doubtless waiting for me to go out. Shall I accommodate him? Rather!"

He reflected a minute, trying to visualize the lay of the land.

If I figure rightly, he thought at last, the roof slopes pretty sharply toward the rear—the eaves ought to overhang the alley-way. There's no back yard; just a narrow court. I'm sure of that much, from what I saw out of the kitchen window. Also, this new snow makes things good and slippery. I think, with the proper momentum, a body would land in the alley all right enough.

But how to give the momentum? Ah! I have it! By gad, it's some idea, what? As one man feeling for another, I'm sorry for the poor devil. But this is a war against war I'm carrying on, and it can't be helped. Spies and informers caught inside my lines can't expect any mercy. They've got to die!

Storm, his mind thoroughly made up, climbed off the cot and went to work. He turned on the incandescent. Then, keeping well out of range of vision from the skylight, he began improvising his man-trap. In less than five minutes he had connected a long wire with the socket which

he had already used for charging the radio-jector. He put the powerful induction-coil of the machine into his prospective circuit. Then turning out the light again, he set his chair under the window in the roof.

Standing on the chair, he could just reach the window. A cord hung from this, passing over a pulley-arrangement to raise and lower the pane for ventilation. Storm detached this cord. In its place he fastened the end of the insulated wire, scraped bare, making a rough but good connection with the metal catch.

The strain and effort, in his still weakened condition, brought the sweat starting out all over him; but he persisted until everything was arranged to his complete satisfaction. Working thus in the dark was slow; his deft, skilled fingers, however, served him admirably.

At last everything was ready. The wire hanging from the catch would, he knew, make an excellent imitation of the cord which had previously been there. He felt certain the intruder, if he returned to peer through the little peep-hole, would not stand one chance in a thousand of ever detecting the substitution.

As for the other end of the wire connecting with the radiojector, that was invisible from the roof.

Storm descended and drew the chair away, made a light, and tested his new circuit. He found it gave a voltage of 12,000.

"Good!" said he.

From the bureau, which lay in the line of sight of the skylight, he took his hat and the traveling-bag.

"Now I make my discreet exit. Here's betting that inside of half an hour my unknown friend up there will take another peek. What does he see? Hat gone; hand-bag gone.

"Ah, Mr. Storm is out for a few minutes, eh? Time enough to slip in and jam an iron bar through the vitals of the machine! Of course. All right, he's welcome. That's all. Here's where I give him a clear field for suicide."

Leaving the light burning, he went out. He locked the door and made his way downstairs.

"Well," he inquired of Angelica, "anything left to eat? I've changed my mind about not having any supper, you know. It's too good to lose. Any macaroni left? And if so, can I have some?"

Angelica smiled her hospitality. Compliments of the family cooking, direct or implied, pleased her mightily. The quick-

eyed stranger who had dined there only an hour before and who had asked a question or two about the rooms, and lodgers, and the price of accommodations, he, too, had praised the macaroni. Now Signor Benton had come downstairs again, expressly to try a plate of it. This was flattering.

Yes, indeed, there was plenty left, *con formaggio, signor—ah, molto buono, sì!* And he would be served at once, if he would only be pleased to take a seat.

Storm was so pleased. Also, he finished by ordering everything on the menu.

Got to give that chap time enough, whatever happens, he thought, toying with the Gorgonlike serpentine masses of the macaroni. He must have all of forty-five minutes, if I burst!

By dint of a well-simulated interest in Italian cookery, Storm got access to the kitchen. This added another quarter hour to the time during which he was out of his room and in the presence of people.

Nearly a full hour had passed before he once more regained his room.

To his huge satisfaction—though it surprised him not at all—he saw at a glance that the metal catch of the skylight had been tampered with. Not opened; just merely moved a little.

Across the glass, a long, five-fingered clutch had scraped the snow—a clutch of agony.

Storm smiled, nodded, reflected a moment, and then smiled with honest satisfaction.

"Gad!" remarked he. "Electricity is rather handy at a pinch. Rather handy!"

Then he undressed and went to bed.

The mystery of the well-dressed man found dead in the alley back of Capotosto's restaurant early next morning offered no data for solution.

He seemed to have been killed by a long fall; but the snowstorm had obliterated any traces that might have led to determining the spot whence he had dropped, or the cause of that accident.

One curious feature of the case was that the fingers of his right hand were burned, as though by a powerful electric current. And yet no cables ran through the alley.

The case, in fine, utterly stumped the police. In the great prevailing excitement of the Blight, the matter faded to oblivion inside four-and-twenty hours.

But there were two men living who could have told a few essential facts in the matter. Storm, catching the news at close range from the excited Capotosto family,

however, was no less reticent than Murchison, who picked up the information in a two-stick item on the fourth page of his *Evening Cosmos*.

It turned the old man sick and trembling. The paper rattled in his hand as he sat there by the fire which no longer warmed him, trying to smoke a Mindanao whence all savor had departed.

"Is he man or is he devil?" groaned the billionaire. "I hire the cleverest sleuths in New York to kill him—and he comes up smiling, strong, and insolent. I have him trailed, with a view to smashing his machine—and my man is found electrocuted in a back alley!

"No way to reach him? No redress? No vengeance? And Braunschweig now every moment nearer and nearer New York? And the world gone mad?"

"Great God! I'm going mad, too—I—the master of the world! Mad! Mad! Ah—that white flag—must I raise it? When? Which way shall I turn now? What do?"

Then all at once he sprang up and, with a frightful imprecation, shook his fist toward New York. His old and wrinkled face went white with hate and rage and passion. His teeth showed, worn and yellowed, despite all care—like an old dog's teeth. His face was transformed an instant to a beast's. In a high, shrill, horrible voice he crackled:

"I'll get you yet! Get you—yet!"

TRUE to his carefully calculated and calmly made announcement, Storm next day ripped savagely into the living, palpitating heart of the financial world. For, though he had watched the Metropolitan Tower, off and on, all that morning—through a periscope in his skylight—he had observed no signs of capitulation.

"No white flag yet!" said he grimly at 11:30, as he turned to make some final adjustments on the radiojector.

"That means war, for fair—war to a finish, on the power of gold. If they want it, and mean to have it. Gad! I can give it to 'em all right enough!

"Will the fools never learn? Never—till it's too late? Well, that's their lookout. It's no concern of mine. Here goes!"

That day, not only did he transmute into worthless ash the gold reserve of every private and national bank, but he also blighted the ultimate hidden treasure in every safe-deposit vault of the entire United States.

And in a far-flung circle that swept London, Berlin, Paris, and Rome, on the

east, and the whole American continent on the west, a circle that clipped the value from the bolivars of Rio as well as from the kroner of Scandinavia, a circle that gripped a full third of the entire surface of the globe, Storm-unloosed the lightnings of his vibratory force.

Nothing was spared, nothing save just the national gold-hoards. In Christiania, London, Madrid, Paris, and all the capitals of the Old World countries (save Greece, Turkey, Russia, Austria, and the Balkans), stark panic reigned on the bourses. Terrible scenes, reported thence by the disorganized cable services and by wireless, found their parallels in Mexico City, all over the northern half of South America, and throughout the United States.

Yet not one national fund in any country was touched. The Blight spared, alike, the four-hundred-ton hoard in the Wall Street Sub-Treasury, and the stacked-up canvas bags, which—tier on tier like so many coffee sacks—held one thousand two hundred tons of yellow metal, deep in the subterranean vaults beneath the Treasury in Washington.

The British public funds were spared, as well. Storm had no motive for damaging foreign governments for the benefit of his own. He understood right well that there was but one government in the world—the international, standardized government of gold. And this, in its final redoubts, he was reserving for his final assault.

For the present, only private wealth suffered. Though the English government, panic-stricken, removed all its wealth, its massed bullion and minted golden surplus from the vaults of the Bank of England—"the Little Old Lady of Threadneedle Street"—to hastily prepared, lead-foiled oubliettes in secret vaults, the precaution was unnecessary. Storm would not have smitten this reserve. Not yet!

Intact remained the Danish national wealth in the Rosenborg Slot at Copenhagen; the French funds in the Banque de France, and the Crédit Lyonnais; the Italian gold in the Banca Nazionale; the Spanish in the Escorial. All other funds of official governmental character likewise escaped.

So accurately attuned, so finely adjusted had the radiojector been, that these incalculable hoards all were reserved for the final act of the world drama, the last crushing broadside of his attack.

But even though the national reserves still existed, the private losses drove the world insane.

Before the sudden, smashing impact of the Blight, all privately owned gold, inside the huge zone, faded and blanched, crumbled, disappeared. And over the stricken continents a vast tumult, an incalculable wave, a seething, whirling, cosmic uproar now surged in tremendous arcs.

A battle-ship falling from the height of one mile into a mill-pond, might agitate the minnows and the tadpoles in some such proportion as now the Blight did with mankind, as it crashed every human relationship into disorder, wrecked social intercourse, set brother against brother and burst all the thin, artificial integuments of so-called civilization.

Everywhere the effect was instant, crushing.

"Gold—gold is perishing!" This cry sufficed to set the whole world stark, raving mad.

In London, terrible, incredible scenes resulted.

So precisely adjusted was Storm's radio-jector, that now the whole city was swept. The entire northeastern section still escaped.

The circumference of the circle of destruction shaved through the Bank of England, just included the Tower, and so shot off in a gigantic southeasterly curve.

Up to the actual moment when the Blight struck London, the Britons had pooh-poohed it.

"All very well for America!" the verdict had been. "Most extraordinarily clever person back of it all, no doubt; but he simply cawn't touch us, you know!"

Had you seen the white-gilled, frightened clerks and dignitaries swarming out of the bank, their quill-pens still in their hands, their papers and books and balance-sheets still with the sand upon them—for as everybody knows, the great bank

uses no blotters, but only sand, in the fashion of 1700—had you observed the gasping, pale-faced stammering and distracted officials dragging out sacks, empty save for a little dirty gray dust at the bottom, you would have changed your mind about British conservatism.

Not even the Royal Lancers and the Scots Guards, joined with practically the whole London reserve police, could hold back the terrific mobs from about the financial district of London. In the vicinity of the Tower, stark panic reigned.

SINGULAR scenes occurred among the stodgy old "Beef-eaters" or guardians of the venerable pile wherein the crown jewels and much of the royal treasure had been kept since time immemorial.

One guard, Henry Grimshaw, dropped where he stood, in the Stuart treasure room; dropped with apoplexy and died before a doctor could even be summoned. Another went raving mad; several had to be restrained by force. One stripped off his fantastic uniform and ran into the courtyard, screaming in a falsetto that the Day of Judgment was at hand.

The sight of the crown jewels melting away, fading before their very vision, crumbling down in the solid crystal cases and in the steel safes of the vaults, was beyond words terrifying to English eyes.

It seemed as though the heart and soul of England was rotting, failing, perishing. These, the ultimate, inmost, sacred treasures of the throne and of the realm—which every loyal Englishman would have defended with his last drop of blood—at the first wasting breath of the Blight simply ceased to be.

And all that splendor, all that glory now was brought to a few confused, hideous heaps of dust, sprinkled with dulled jewels and loose, unset gems.

The heart of England bled, bled fast and hot, that day; and in the houses of Parliament, jingoes began to howl for war, war, war!

That night, no man slept from Land's End to John o' Groat's house. And over the smitten realm a vast, inchoate, monstrous panic reigned; a crawling, sickening fear—an anguish such as since time was, England had never known.

Russia flared into quick revolution as the Blight smote her. St. Petersburg and Moscow, quickly laid under martial law, became vast military camps; but no Cossack horde, no Preobjanski Guards, could stem the torrent. Against this unknown force saber and rifle and knout were impotent. And the nation, from Czar to peasant, reeled under the shock. From the Neva to the Urals the stricken empire staggered.

Paris was one red seethe of delirium. The vast open parks and spaces were crammed with surging mobs. The Tuileries, Louvre, Champ de Mars—all contained hundreds of thousands, uncounted, clamoring, yelling, fighting, even bleeding in the frightful violence of that terrorized struggle for news.

In the Place de l'Opéra, the mounted gendarmerie had a pitched battle with the mob; five men were killed, scores wounded; the populace even began to throw up barricades.

From the top of the Eiffel Tower gigantic bulletins were flung against the façade of the Trocadero, across the Seine. And all that night, millions watched while bit by bit the terrible news of the Blight was hurled there by the blinding rays from the tower.

After the first panic, quiet gradually settled down. By morning Paris was in tears. All churches were packed. Special services were held, continuously; and before nine o'clock of the second day, the greatest religious procession in the history of the city had been organized.

Not even in the fatal months of '71 had there been such universal mourning, such frightful despair and social wreck. The suicides in Paris, alone, are said to have exceeded fifty in the first two days of the Blight.

Berlin received the blow more stolidly, full in the face; she staggered, reeled, but kept her feet. Though huge mobs swarmed up and down Unter der Linden throughout the city, yet the superior political character of the German proletariat made for better order.

Another factor here, too, was the fact that Storm was not yet striking the national war-funds.

In Berlin, the Prussian jackbooting war-hoard—that famous hoard looted in '71 from prostrate, bleeding France—still lay untouched.

Safe it still remained in the dungeons of the Kaiserhof Schloss; while pale-faced spectacled German savants made quarter-hourly tests upon it, working like huge rats in the dim, groined recesses of the vaults, and while the Kaiser, unnerved, paced the palace floor at Potsdam, waiting in anguish for some signal of disintegration. Once his war-fund was gone, right well Hohenzollern knew what lay in store for him!

DURING this first period of panic, while the power of gold, the thought, the superstition, the intangible "unseen empire" of the yellow metal still dominated men's minds, anarchy reigned.

Not yet had come any understanding of the great change that impended over the world. Still one dominant idea persisted—the hope of rescuing something from the wreck. To get rid of gold, men bought everything, anything—land, houses, silver, diamonds, even infinitudes of trivial, useless, foolish trifles. And as the fear of keeping gold increased, its value fell.

Fell? Dropped, rather; plumed down at one sheer swoop. In two days after the Blight struck Europe, the price of gold shrank in London from £4 4s 5½d per ounce, to less than £1 10s.

Tremendous speculation in gold began all over the world. The three-day period of immunity, granted by Storm, had now set in. During this time vast movements of gold began to develop. Banking houses, exchanges, and bourses remained open day and night. The streets of the capitals in both worlds seethed at midnight as at midday.

Spontaneous markets established themselves. "Curbs" were formed and dissolved as by magic. Gold changed hands—what little private gold was left—at irrational figures. Enormous migrations began of individuals who still had saved a trifle of their wealth, and who were now fleeing to Asia, Australia, and the southern half of South America, outside the stricken zone.

Began, also, the first premonitory symptoms of the trading in gold-ash, which as you shall see, later played so tremendous a part in the whole drama.

News of astonishing incidents filtered in

from strange sources. Even from the Sahara and from Algiers came wild tales. The Arabs, Berbers, and Algerians, when their gold vanished—especially the age-long hoarded and infinitely precious golden ornaments, nose-rings, anklets, and coin-necklaces of their women—screamed in vain to Allah Il Allah for vengeance on the Frank, the infidel dog whose magic had wrought this sacrilegious evil.

And at Jihad, a holy war of consuming, flamelike savagery leaped instantly from Alexandria to Tangier; the green banner of the Prophet flung itself snapping broadly to the sirocco!

Swarming like locusts from the desert, the hill-men, the desert-men, the men of the oases and the hinterland all met; and before any of the European powers could even mobilize relief columns, in all of northern Africa, outside of the walled towns, not one white face remained.

The famed Foreign Legion of daredevils, bullies, and gun-men of all nationalities—they and LeBaudy's followers in the "Empire of the Sahara"—singularly enough put up no fight at all.

Scared bloodless by the Blight, soaked in superstition, these wasters, whose only thought was loot, gain, gold, now suddenly found in their lonely desert camps and among their camel-trains that all their wealth was dross.

Even the gold braid and buttons, the gold sword-hilts, the show and panoply of power—all, all dropped away and vanished like a dream.

And, fast as camels' padded hoofs could carry them, fast as, with parched tongues and bent backs, sweating beneath their *cache-nuques*, they could plod in wild fear, fast as muscle and bone could drive them on, they fled!

Fled the desert, fled the hills, fled to the towns—to the reassurances of the plaza, the galvanized iron table, the green-eyed, milky glint of the exhilarating iced absinth in the tall glass.

Thus they fled the Blight—they, who with gold behind them, gladly would have faced the Mahdi, had he a thousand times as many men. Thus Africa once more, for a time, became all brown, all black.

No historian has a canvas broad enough, nor yet a brush sufficiently wide, to sketch in the total of the world-panic. Shelves full of volumes would be necessary to depict the sum of it. It resolved itself into one vast, incalculable nexus of buying, selling, fighting, struggling, fleeing, falling, killing, dying—of gold offered without tak-

ers; men and women figuratively and literally clutching each others' throats; of fraud, and force, and rumor triumphant; of mad, insensate social stampede, which even the still intact national reserves could neither quell nor check.

THAT history never will be written in its entirety. From stricken bank to suspended industry; from hoarding miser to cowering plutocrat, hiding—like the triumvirate now—in close-guarded estates, away from the frenzied mobs of starving men and women that had begun to roam and wreck; from rich to poor, from high to low; all grades and strata fell apart in prostrate impotence and panic. Even the army itself, hastily yet vacillatingly called upon for service, snarled with ugly, bared teeth at its former masters.

John Storm, meanwhile, continued to watch through his periscope for some signal of capitulation, some flicker of the huge white flag on top of the Metropolitan Tower—the tower whose golden pinnacle now was dull as lead. And two days passed, yet still no banner flung itself abroad upon the winds of heaven, hundreds of feet above the tortured city.

He thought bitterly, to himself, So, then, still stiff-necked? The idiots in their insensate blindness must have their final lesson.

Thus came the third and ultimate day.

That night, the last before the supreme crushing of the gold clique, and the power of war, John Storm mingled once more with the howling, roaring mobs that now for two days and a half—mocking both police and military which dared not shoot them down—had held possession of Broadway and all the city's vital arteries, as well as the financial district.

Storm was amazed and horrified by the tremendous forces he had let loose—astounded, yet filled with a vast, soul-enkindling pride.

"All for good," said he. "All working for ultimate good, as atoms work in a reaction; though they don't know it, these men and women, any more than the atoms do. But the result—that comes!"

The whole aspect of the city was entirely changed. Shops were boarded up; special guards, heavily armed, swarmed everywhere; business was at a standstill.

Even the complete disappearance of all gold from the shop-windows and signs of the town, produced a strangely depressing effect. All saloons and bars were closed, closed tight.

With the loosening of the power of gold, a spontaneous demand for silver payment had sprung up. People feared gold certifies as much as they did the coin itself. Immediately the available silver coin supply ran short; and all the mints of the country could not keep ahead of the demand for silver, silver, silver!

Hundreds of thousands of tons of silver plate, bars, jewelry, and trinkets were hastily bought in by the government. The mints were jammed with sellers, eager to exchange metal for the new issues of government-bonded merchandise checks, in all denominations.

Crooks reaped vast harvests. In the terrific confusion, the products of innumerable bold "breaks" were thrown into the public coffers. Police protection utterly went to pieces. Crime, violence, and frauds of every kind leaped up like fire in a naphtha-works.

Business lay paralyzed. Collections became impossible. Credit vanished. People refused to pay. All the finely interwoven, intricate, incredibly complex machinery of civilization was warped and twisted awry, and new machinery had not yet been built to take its place.

A chain-shot fired through a telephone switchboard could not disorganize the service more than the Blight destroyed the lines and contacts of trade, commerce, banking and credit.

In the cosmic discord every relation of life seemed awry, inverted, unreal. The world, deprived of its age-long fetish, gold, was going mad!

The wolf-instinct of mankind for a time seemed getting the upper hand. Every individual now grabbed, fought, struck for his own. "I must get mine! Mine!" the world's thought had become. Altruism perished. Self dominated.

Organized society became a stampeded pack of animals, fighting, rending, tearing, bleeding—and understanding nothing of what was really taking place.

Strange the ways in which the Blight struck home. Multifarious the bits of its incredible action, which Storm picked up as he mingled with the people of the distracted metropolis.

Here he caught a word, "But, oh! When I went to look at the chain my mother gave me—"

Again, "That was my lucky piece, old man. Had that five-dollar gold piece since '48. Never even let it go out o' my pocket. Well—"

Storm heard a haggard cabman saying:

"Thirteen years' savin's, that's wot. An' when I come to git 'em—oh, oh!"

On the corner of Thirty-third Street and Broadway he overheard this bit:

"Ain't no use tryin' to save it by hidin' it, Bill. That's straight! Now there was our union funds, I'm tellin' you. And—"

Still another, "The worst of it was, Mac, I'd just had that big gold sign put up the very day before this struck. So I'm out—"
Storm grimaced.

Gad! thought he. It's a rotten shame, all right, to have had to do this to all these innocent people—just to get the skunks! But war is war—it's hell! And here's one case where the innocent have got to suffer with the guilty—for a time, just for a little time, till everything's made "better than well."

He made his way to a leading hostelry. Here he entered. The offices and corridors were packed with a shouting, gesticulating mob. Not the great financiers here, but the lesser lights of the gold reign—the brokers, smaller bankers, speculators, and Wall Street men somewhat below the apex of the golden pyramid.

STORM watched a while, wandered about, pushed through the crowds of well-dressed, excited, frightened men and women, peered into the dining-halls where they were still making pretense at revelry, and at last came back to sit down in the long, main corridor.

The man in the chair next his own attracted Storm's attention.

Haggard, ashen-gray, he was horrible to look upon. His clothes, of elegant cut and fine material, were wrinkled and covered with dust. His eyes were those of a suicide.

Storm spoke to him.

"Hard hit, stranger?"

The man groaned, then suddenly burst into tears.

"Last night I had one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in gold in the strongest safe-deposit box in Brooklyn," he stammered. "Tonight, d'you know what I've got? Sixteen and a half pounds of white ashes!

"Oh, merciful God!"

He sprang up. He staggered blindly through the crowd. He vanished. Storm shook his head.

If he'd spent that intelligently, now! he thought. Land, houses, broad fields, woods, anything! But no—they worship gold, gold, gold! And, by the Almighty, they must feel the lash, for their idolatry!

He arose, too, and, as though he were a

stranger in the city, stared about him.

An agitated hotel employee was struggling to get through the press.

Storm helped make a way for him. As the man came through, Storm got him by the arm, and asked:

"What's up? What's wrong here? I'm just in from Rio. Tell me about this!"

"Let go, you!" retorted the employee.

"Not till you tell me!"

The man stared at Storm. Then he began to laugh bitterly.

"Gee! Here's something big—a man that don't know what's doin'! Here you, come with me. I'm on my way, now. I'll show you!"

Storm followed.

They went up in the elevator, which was packed full, to the ninth floor.

"Know the gold room?"

Storm shook his head.

"I'm a stranger, I tell you. What's the matter? Everybody in New York gone crazy?"

The man flung open a door.

"Look!" cried he. "That's what I've got to see about cleanin' up!"

Storm peered in.

"Gold room? I don't see any gold."

"No, not now. Y'oughta seen it, though, before the Blight struck. Now look at it!"

Still Storm shook his head.

"I don't understand," said he, slowly. "What's it all about? Blight? What Blight?"

But the employee, with a sudden savage oath, turned on him with upraised fist.

"Aw, get out o' here!" he cried, in passion. "You're crazy—I'll have you run in! Don't know about the Blight? Go on, go on! Beat it!"

Storm, still pretending mystification, withdrew.

Five minutes later he was listening to a hot, many-voiced argument in the lobby. But he refrained from getting involved.

To a man at his elbow, however, he remarked:

"I'm wiped out by this. You?"

"Never touched me," chuckled the other. "First crack out o' the box, bought silver! Oh, a cinch! That was before the news struck Galveston. Regular wires down with a storm. But I had a tip by private wire. Quick work! Not too bad, eh? Good thing to have a live broker in little old New York, to put you wise!"

Storm drifted out into the street again. He walked a couple of blocks down Fifth Avenue, then turned west and once more struck into Broadway.

Under the red "flaming arcs"—for still the city even in its seeming dissolution, kept its myriad galaxies of lights blazing, its sky-signs gleaming, darting, sparkling vividly in the winter night, the night of approaching Christmas—life swarmed with inconceivable abandon.

Beggar and drunken spendthrift rake jostled each other; wan out-of-work women jostled each other; the idle, the ruined, the curious, the crafty-scheming—all drove on and on together, through the whirl of speculation, wild disorder, and unbridled license.

And blood flowed, too; and tumult reigned. London, with its most ferocious hooligan forays, was calm by contrast with New York on the last night of the truce.

Storm stopped for a few minutes at the corner of Broadway and Thirty-first Street, to harken to one of the innumerable street-preachers—a man sweating with fear and zeal—hurling denunciations at the jibing horde as he stood there on an upturned barrel.

One hand grasped a lamp-post. The other vibrated eerily in the electric-lighted night. And the white teeth gleamed, the eye-balls rolled as ecstatic frenzy seized the howling fanatic.

Somebody kicked in the barrel-staves. The preacher was down. Over him the mob passed, over and on, as Murchison had seen it pass, the first day of the blight, over another man in Wall Street.

Storm shuddered, and buried his face still deeper in his upturned collar.

Gad! he thought, as he drifted onward with the tumult, toward the flaring, fighting, roaring bulletin-board area of Herald Square. If it were known that I, John Storm, had started all this; and if the wolf-pack here should recognize me—what then?

He put the vision away with a grim set of the jaw.

"To-morrow!" he whispered to himself; and in his ulster-pockets his hard fists gripped like iron—the fists that now held the whole world and squeezed and wrought it as a potter works the clay upon his wheel.

At the same hour, Graf Maximilian Braunschweig's powerful yacht, the *Sieger*, was cutting across the Grand Banks, splitting the fog and brine in the last lap of its swift and untiring trajectory to New York.

On her gale-swept fore-deck stood the massive figure of the financier. Though night and mist enshrouded the Atlantic, still his eyes were turned toward America.

Arms folded, he gazed into the blackness.

High up the mast against which he leaned, the faint, incessant, crepitan sparkle of the wireless bespoke the messages hurled out ahead of him.

Thus Braunschweig drew near his prey. To-morrow—what then? To-morrow!

CHAPTER VII

THE MAD REIGN OF ASH

AT HALF past ten of the culminal day, a notable meeting took place in the inner private office of Hudson D. Campbell, director of the Wall Street Sub-Treasury.

Secretly arranged at the instance of Murchison—who, now that the final blow was about to be struck, had once more emerged into activity—it comprised a dozen of the overmastering financial and governmental "supermen."

Silence held them as the director's bronze clock ticked on the mahogany desk; silence, save for a muttered word, a cough, a sorry mockery of a smile. Silence, till Campbell, leaning a little forward, struck the desk-top a single sharp blow with his ruler.

"Gentlemen!" said he.

All looked at him. Nobody answered. Nobody thought of tobacco. When men meet to talk and do not think of smoking—watch them!

"Gentlemen," repeated Campbell, his voice dry and rasping, his gray eyes shifting nervously from face to face, "we all know why we are here. We all grant that the case, so far, is proved. Furthermore, I think we all agree that a real danger may possibly threaten the national treasure today. I do not say it does so threaten; I merely intimate that it may. But even the possibility is worth our most serious attention. I now declare this meeting open for a free discussion of the issue."

He ceased. Murchison, glancing keenly about, said with emphasis:

"We all know each other here. I reckon anything that's said, in this room, goes no further. It had better not, that's all! But before we begin I want to say just this: We men here can handle this situation. There's enough of us as it is. All right. Nobody else must come in at that door. I want at least one hour for uninterrupted discussion. One hour!

"At 11:45, as I understand the situation, the threat made against the Sub-Treasury

deposit here may possibly take effect. If we decide to quit by 11:30, we shall have time enough to phone up to the Metropolitan and have the flag hoisted. You all understand the terms, I know.

"The point at issue is just this—does the flag go up or does it not? Do we yield to that—" and he jerked this thumb eloquently at an old steel-engraving of "The Baltimore Riot" that hung over the director's desk—"do we give in to the mob, and to one single, vicious, hidden anarchist; or do we stand for individualism, freedom, and untrammelled Americanism?"

"That, gentlemen, is the question now up to us!"

He leaned back in his chair and, tapping the arm nervously as was his habit, waited an answer.

The answer was not long in coming; and, after it, another and another.

Fifteen minutes had not passed before the inviolable quietude of the director's office was shattered by loud and angry words, by threats, accusations, and countercharges, by personalities and the lie direct.

All parliamentary convention thrown aside, these men, cooped there together like wolves in a cage, fought for what each conceived his own advantage.

One shouted advice to cede, to hoist the flag while there might still be time, and thus rake from the fire of destruction the remaining chestnuts.

Another advocated subterfuge and trickery, a false truce with some chance of laying hands on John Storm's person and dealing summarily with him.

"Sweep New York with fire!" vociferated a third. "That will clean out his infernal apparatus, anyhow—it's bound to! Better lose one city than the whole world!"

Just how the stranger entered, or at what precise moment he arrived, they could not tell.

His presence became known among them, that was all. Suddenly, there he stood at the far end of the room, a strange, tremendous figure of a man.

Tall, robust, huge-chested; with a gray beard; with level-sighted eyes and a great spatulate-fingered hand that he raised as though demanding silence, he remained motionless just inside the doorway.

He spoke no word, but merely looked—and waited.

Silence fell.

The cask of oil, broached on a combing sea, so was this unknown in the room of bitter, fruitless strife.

But the calm lasted hardly a moment.

Then Murchison, white with passion, leaped up.

"Sir!" cried he.

The stranger bowed. He smiled, and with an indefinably suave gesture that seemed to epitomize ages of European culture, indicated that he awaited their pleasure.

"Who is this man?" shouted Murchison, hardly containing himself with the most tremendous effort. "I gave orders, positive orders, that nobody should be admitted to this room!

"Nobody! Hear me? Nobody! Not even the President of the United States! And here—"

He choked, stammered, and could articulate no more.

"Yes, here I am, an interloper, I admit," broke in the stranger with perfect fluency, though a slight accent. "An intruder, you call it? But you should make me welcome! I come not to bring a sword, but peace. I—"

"Who the devil are you, anyhow?" burst out Murchison, clenching both fists. "And how—"

"Did I get in past the watchmen? Ah, it is easy to do so with a few paltry handfuls of coins. But I do not wonder at your surprise, gentlemen. I do not blame you that you fail to recognize me. Publicity I never allow. My picture is not printed in the reviews or papers. No. Yet, never mind; I can save you none the less. For, you see—"

"Who are you?" roared the billionaire, smiting the secretary's desk so hard that ink spattered from the bronze well. "Your name, or by Heaven, out that door you go!"

"I can still save you, gentlemen, for my name is Maximilian Braunschweig. Gentlemen, at your service!"

A GAIN he bowed his head, with his broad hand laid on his breast. Then, lifting his eyes once more, he fixed a satirical, untroubled gaze on that startled assembly, that "gold-lust syndicate of dollar-mark statesmen."

Murchison turned livid.

"You—" stammered he.

At Braunschweig he stared with eyes of hate and terror.

"You?"

For years, for many troubled years, he had felt the pressure of this impersonal, invisible force, half-mythically summed in the name "Braunschweig." For years he

had rebelled against this looming, ever growing, always-mounting European power; this intangible, self-obliterating menace.

For decades he had, with increasing frequency, been forced to recognize the presence of the world-financier's hand in even some of his most intimate, most jealously cherished monetary ventures.

This South African diamond-field, newly opened, he had, for instance found already invaded, preoccupied by him. That war-bond issue coveted and incredibly rich, the billionaire had—too late—discovered privily bought in by this man. Yonder Chinese railway concession, long jockeyed for, had somehow at the last moment fallen into Braunschweig's ever-gaping coffers. These, to serve as only three cases out of a score. Always Murchison had sensed, of late years, the growth, the menace of this power.

Unable to check it or to effect consolidation, he had fought—and often lost. And, gradually, a bitter personal hate for the name and all it implied had grown up in the billionaire's soul.

The wireless message from Braunschweig had been bad enough. Bitter enough the thought that the man was coming, was

trying to interfere in this momentous crisis.

But now, now that—alien and uninvited, hostile and menacing despite his smile—the man himself actually stood there before him, deferential, yet with a glint of prescient victory in his eye, Murchison felt the bonds of self-restraint all bursting.

And Wainwright, too, sprang up; Wainwright, who at the Englewood conference had sworn "no Heiny need apply!"

The two men faced Braunschweig. Not yet understanding, the others gasped and stared.

Then, for a moment, tension drew to the fine breaking-point.

Murchison broke it.

"I protest!" he cried, and raised his fist in air. "You, sir, are entitled to consideration as a foreign nobleman; I grant you that. But as an uninvited intruder at this important gathering of financiers and government officials, I frankly state that we cannot welcome you."

"Same here!" cried Wainwright, mottled with rage. "We don't want any infernal—"

"There, drop that!" Baker choked him off, clapping a firm hand over the copper czar's mouth. In Wainwright's ear he whispered:

"This man owns more than twenty per cent of the whole of Europe! Kings and Czars obey him. He's the 'Unseen Empire,' I tell you. Insult him, and we're in for it! Keep quiet, will you?"

Turnmoll reigned.

Everybody tried to talk at once. Hands waved in air, fists shook, and faces darkened with passion; veins stood out on the foreheads of world-renowned financiers; government officials of the highest rank forgot their dignity and shouted epithets, bawled gutter-filth at one another.

Alone, unmoved, courteous, patient—yet still with that vulpine twinkle of the eye—Graf Braunschweig stood near the door. His tall silk hat he held over his heart. On his bearded lips lingered a faint suggestion of a smile.

Murchison, hatefully staring at him, could not but modify his opinion. Where he had expected a red-jowled, domineering "junker" of the *nouveau riche* variety, he now beheld a broad-browed, calm, and massive nobleman, poised, level, strong.

And, as by intuition, he realized that, however much the assemblage there in that office might discuss, argue, and debate, eventually Braunschweig would get a hearing.

"The quicker, the better," thought Mur-

chison. "Whatever he offers, I'll check-mate him. But let him speak, at least!"

He raised his own hand; and, as his voice began to sound, some measure of order returned.

"For this reason, if no other," he concluded, "we must modify our first hasty judgment. This matter is not national alone. It effects the whole civilized world. No doubt the baron, here, brings some message from Europe which may perhaps help us solve the imminent problem?"

Braunschweig nodded, and his smile broadened.

"My friends," said he, "gentlemen all," and shot one quick glance at Wainwright, "I come with a message of hope. With salvation, to speak so. No, your guards should not to keep me out; you should not to exclude me. On the contrary, better you might open all doors and invite me in! For I, gentlemen, though I myself say it, I, Maximilian Braunschweig, can save you all. And will—should you so elect!"

He paused. From one to the other he looked, quizzically, with an intangible mockery that struck in deeper than an open gibe.

"Go on, sir!" exclaimed Murchison, reddening. "We Americans, I believe, can save ourselves, if salvation is necessary, without any foreign assistance. But, nevertheless continue. If you have any business proposition to lay before this gathering, we're here to listen to it. And if it's a good one, I reckon we can take it up in one-two-three order. Kindly continue."

"I will. I speak to you of the great Gold Blight which has come over the world. It has struck me, too, gentlemen, hard, ah! terribly hard. Nevertheless, I am hopeful. I have abandoned gold. I have turned to silver as the means to save modern civilization. Do you understand me?"

"Another of these 16-to-1 silver-basis fanatics!" thought Wainwright, with a mental groan. "I thought he really might have some kind of decent proposition!"

"We must sink ourselves, personally, in this effort to secure the world from destruction," continued Braunschweig, still smiling. "Let this unknown fanatic do his worst. Do not interfere with him. It is as I wireless—telegraphed you, *nicht wahr?*"

"Let him do all that he wishes to gold. Silver remains. If we get enough silver out in circulation in the whole world to replace the gold, nothing much can result. Oh, yes, of course, it will make some disturbances, but no world-panic or overturning of civilization. Believe me, gentle-

men, there is no other way. Silver—that iss all!”

“Yes, but,” interposed Murchison, perplexed, “what about it? What do you offer? What d’you mean to do?”

He had expected some sort of deal, some vast proposal, some complex, far-reaching financial scheme. This simple, obvious idea, containing only the merest rudiments of A B C suggestion, disappointed him.

“What’s your specific plan? Why have you crossed the ocean at top speed to tell us this kindergarten stuff?”

BRAUNSCHWEIG smiled again, more cynically than ever.

“Kindergarten, yes, I admit it,” he murmured, “but, after all, it iss the practical application that has value.

“Gentlemen,” and now his voice went a tone deeper, his words fell more slowly, and his smile had quite vanished, “gentlemen, I come not to you with empty words or meaningless phrases. I come with cash, cash, gentlemen, to help make good all your present or your possible losses!”

A kind of communal gasp rose from the assemblage, now silent and frozen to keen attention.

“Cash?” exclaimed Murchison, starting forward. “What—what d’you mean?”

“This!” And Braunschweig, thrusting a hand into the pocket of his vast Kamchatkan sea-otter coat, drew out two metal cubes.

One was small and yellow, obviously gold. The other, larger far, shone with a silver hue.

“Gentlemen,” continued the European, “this smaller cube is one ounce of pure gold, under normal conditions worth \$20.673. The silver cube has the same value. They were equal—or were, before the Blight struck the world. Now that so much of the gold is ashes—”

A loud, persistent ringing of the telephone-bell on the director’s desk interrupted Braunschweig. He did not even frown, but remained there, calm and easy, waiting till the disturbance should have subsided before attempting to finish.

“Hello, hello!” cried Campbell, his ear at the receiver.

A voice, far off, yet slow and very distinct, came over the wire:

“You’ve got only two minutes more! I’m watching the tower. If the white flag doesn’t go up at 11:45 sharp, look out!”

Campbell, clutching at the instrument as though to catch the man at the other end of the wire by the throat, gasped:

“Hold on there! Wait! Let me—”

But the voice said: “Nothing to discuss. No argument. I demand unconditional surrender. Good-by.”

Then came the click of Storm hanging up his receiver.

Campbell, chalky, whirled around and faced the silent gathering.

“He, the Blight, is going—to strike us, strike the government gold, in two minutes, if—”

Braunschweig interrupted with a laugh.

“Why alarm yourselves, my friends?” asked he jovially. “Why let anybody interrupt my offer? See now, I continue, as before. Let this individual do all he wishes to; I still save the situation!

“Gold! He destroys gold? I buy the ashes, *ja!* I, Maximilian Braunschweig—I purchase all you bring me, from everywhere, paying silver!

“My yacht, *Der Sieger*, on which I have arrived, now lies at a pier in the East River. Do you know what it is balasted with? Silver! A six-thousand-ton ship, gentlemen—and not one pound of rock or water ballast.

“Silver coin, gentlemen, *kroner, thaler*, all kinds. And silver bars, eh? *Ach ja*. tons of silver bars!”

He paused a moment and looked slowly round at the dumb-stricken money ghouls.

Then he said:

“In the ratio of five to one I buy. One pound of ashes, five pounds of silver. No theoretical deals, gentlemen; no speculative trading. The actual, physical, cash purchase! Do you understand me?”

“I weigh out five pounds of silver; you give me one pound of gold-ash. So! Simple, yes; but it saves you all. You lose something, I admit, but not everything. The monetary system changes. But business continues. Civilization goes on. I buy! If I have not silver enough here, I bring more. I buy! Do you hear me, gentlemen? Do you—”

Again a disturbance interrupted the financier’s harangue.

At the door a violent pounding was heard.

“Open! Open!” cried the terrified voices. Somebody flung back the door.

In staggered a gray-bearded man in blue uniform and official cap—one of the Sub-Treasury assistants. High in his shaking hand he shook a canvas bag.

Flaccid and loose it waved in air.

“Oh, my God!” sobbed he; and tears rained down his wrinkled, anguished face. Murchison sprang up roaring.

"What now?" demanded he.

"Look!" gasped the man.

He twitched the binding string.

"They're all like that!" cried he. "The vaults—are empty—now!"

And out in a fine, trickling stream on Campbell's desk he poured a stream of that same hideous, gray, metallic dust.

"The Blight!" gulped he, and—his arms outflung—fell fainting on the heap of ruin.

THE white flag did not wave over the Metropolitan tower.

Braunschweig's entry into the situation instantly checked all thought of capitulation.

Even before the Sub-Treasury meeting broke up, that point was settled. His offer of silver for gold-ash rendered possible a volte-face movement on the part of all hesitants.

"Fight!" now the watchword became. And "Fight!" alone.

"Let Storm do his worst—it will cause only a temporary disturbance," said the gold-jackals. "Silver can replace gold without necessarily wrecking the System. And, above all, the 1,200 tons of national-reserve gold still in Washington are as yet untouched.

Buried in the deepest vaults, with heavy lead-foil wrappings, then layers of isinglass and still more "ray-shields" of a secret composition, the final redoubt of the System still lay intact.

Even though all the outworks had been successively taken and destroyed, this yet resisted. Together with a few of the vastest European hoards and perhaps half a dozen in Asia—such as the Manchu treasure of \$50,000,000 cash, the Sultan's \$100,000,000, and the \$245,000,000 of the Ameer of Reznalgh—it still existed as gold!

But, so far as could be discovered, every known bit of yellow metal on earth, whether in the form of coins, jewelry, ore, or what not, had now been swept into seeming oblivion.

And the ash began to come to Braunschweig in envelopes, in buckskin bags, in metal and wooden boxes, in barrels, in vans and trucks and car-load lots.

Uncle Sam sold to him. Murchison sold, and Wainwright, and Baker, and all the capitalists, big, little, medium; banks tumbled over each other to unload; trust companies forwarded their wreckage by special armed messengers—and fights took place in the public streets of the cities for ash.

Thugs knocked down and killed ash-

carriers. Men embezzled ash. Safeblowers with nitroglycerin wrecked safes and vaults for the white and powdery stuff.

Endless ash burglaries, involving not a few murders, began to occur.

Ash, from being worthless, instantly became highly valuable. Men now regretted having tossed it away. Drawers were rummaged, floors swept, catch-basins and plumbing dredged, houses turned topsy-turvy to recover it. And a tremendous wave of disturbance, greater than even the first crest of destruction, swept the world.

For Braunschweig's operations were world-wide.

The news of his offer was not five minutes old before it was flashing from Labrador to San Antonio, from the Yukon Valley to Punta Arenas, from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

The banker's silver supply seemed as inexhaustible as the inpouring floods of ash. His series of operations covered the entire earth. On the very afternoon of his arrival in New York, less than an hour after his interview with the startled bankers in the Sub-Treasury, he gave the order for the opening of a vast series of offices.

These offices, already secretly arranged for by wireless in America, through the mediumship of his agents, Konig & Breitenbach; and, in Europe, via his divers correlated banking houses, all threw open their doors simultaneously for the sole, exclusive purpose of buying gold-ash. Asia, except Japan, was handled by connection with the Jhejeeby's Banking System. The Dai Nippon Ginko covered Japan.

A map of the world, showing each of these singular financial nuclei as a red spot, would have looked like an exaggerated case of smallpox on a cosmic scale.

Estimates place their number, in the entire world, at from 28,000 to 30,000. There may have been more—perhaps as many as 35,000, all told. In North America alone (including Mexico), Braunschweig established 7,328.

At each of these offices, wherever located, the baron's duly qualified agents either paid out, by weight, the actual silver coin or bullion for the gold-ash, in the ratio of five pounds of silver to one pound of ash; or else, in case the seller preferred, they gave silver certificates of Braunschweig's own issue.

No government interfered in this arrogation of the money-issuing power, for every government felt itself tottering over an abyss. At any moment the last and greatest hoards of gold, in national hands,

might crumble. And what happened then?

Braunschweig had become, to the world as a whole, the figure of a universal redeemer; and from reviling him, the press and pulpit, the universities and great public agencies of information began to laud him to the zenith and to couple his name with those of the world's illustrious benefactors.

Murchison raged secretly, immured at Edgecliff with his shrunken but still enormous fortune in silver. Yet he held his peace—and waited.

Revenge, he felt, might still come to his hand. Not even the fact that Braunschweig had kept him from being utterly wiped out could soften the billionaire's heart against "that pig of a German," as he still thought of him.

All this time, Braunschweig silently, methodically, persistently bought ash.

Presently he was purchasing not only the ash itself, but also properly certified ash-certificates, representing the existence of a certain quantity of ash of specified fineness.

His action inevitably led others to imitate him. Not that anybody understood; but many felt that, if the foreign banker foresaw something, this something must be of tremendous importance.

Murchison was not drawn into this speculative tide. Neither was Wainwright. Both held aloof. But Baker, in secret, through his brokers, took a fling at it; and so did scores of others, the biggest names in the financial "Who's Who."

Every bourse and stock-exchange in the

world, from San Francisco to Tokyo, and right round through Vienna, Paris, Berlin, and London, to New York, began to handle gold-ash, common or preferred.

Financiers of every race, color, creed, and language plunged into this new gamble. What remnants of manufacturing and commerce had been left now stood in danger of being swept wholly away on the flood-tide of this fresh madness.

HISTORY does not record that epoch clearly; those days have all but escaped it. For news was disorganized. The press was deaf to all but ash! ash!! ash!!!

Head-lines, editorials, market quotations, all hung on ash.

Madness reigned, indeed.

Everywhere, now, men were buying and selling outright, short, or on margin, dealing in gold-ash as they once had dealt in the fictitious values of oil or coal or railways.

Quick-shifting, elusive pools were formed, to make some pretense of fighting Braunschweig and his chain of purchasing offices; but so bitterly was each man at his neighbor's throat, that little concerted action was possible.

Yet, for a while, buyers were secretly sent out, post-haste, both in the Old World and the new; sent even to the uttermost highways and hedges, to root out more and still more of the precious stuff.

Thus the ash accumulated.

Scandals sprang up apace; ash deals, beside which the *Crédit Mobilier*, the United States Bank fraud, the South Sea Island

Bubble, and all past speculative or legislative frauds were as mere nothings.

Law vanished. Greed and might and the baseness of the human heart lusting for sudden, unearned wealth, now ruled supreme.

Yet the great foreign financier, calmly smiling, patriarchal still, sat in his heavily guarded inner offices on Broadway, quietly, patiently, systematically gathering in what others culled and reaped for him, what others sought and travailed and died for—in their own interest, as they thought, but truly in his.

For to him the world-wide game now fighting itself out was as mother's milk to the lips of a babe. Though with the unloading of silver its value dropped; and though ash mounted as its speculative worth leaped up, yet he remained unfaltering.

His coffers gaped wide open; his incalculable silver supply swirled out like waters through the penstocks at Niagara. He only smiled, and waited.

With the astute skill of a master, he played the strings of the world-harp; and the harmonies wove themselves higher, fuller, day by day—they crystallized in the form of a strange treasure-heap, a bursting, overflowing mountain of seeming nothingness, such as, since time was, the world had never seen—a hoard of dust, of ashes!

Load by load, after it had been assayed and sorted and packed in specially prepared buckskin bags, Braunschweig shipped it to Washington by special trains, with his own guards, heavily armed, in attendance.

For at Washington existed the only zone of actual order and safety now to be found in the entire United States. Elsewhere, danger threatened at all times. There, at least, some semblance of rule still persisted.

Since Braunschweig at last, in his own person, absolutely dominated the world governments—even banding together as they now were into a Weltverein—he demanded and secured the right to store his hoard in the vast, unused subcellars under the north wing of the Treasury Building and under a portion of the center.

Here, day by day, the ash accumulated.

And under the arches, dim lit with dusty incandescents, toiling figures patiently stacked tiers on tiers, massive shelves upon shelves, of bags of ash gathered from Nome to Coolgardie, from Yokohama to Quebec.

Thus, hour by hour, Fate drew her snares.

Thus she meshed the cords and twined the net about her victims, blindly, impersonally, inexorably.

Thus "the moving finger writ."

Thus was the stage set for that scene whereof the memory—even to-day, in these newer, better times—brings the frown to men's brows, the hard and fearful look into their eyes.

Yet all this time John Storm remained both calm and full of sober, contemplative foresight. Forgotten, now, was he—almost forgotten by the world in that huge, indrawing, vortical madness which constituted the last days.

Insane with fear and the mania of gold-ash speculation, the public forgot even its unanswered wonder as to the cause of the Blight. Safer, more secure than an anchorite in a cell, Storm prepared the formula and worked out the complex diagrams, the combinations, and permutations of Hertzian, cathode, N, and Z rays for his final blow.

Between times he studied his periscope for some sign of the white flag; or carried forward still another reaction in his experiments on atmospheric nitrogen; or again read the disjointed papers with their screaming falsehoods, smoked his pipe and dreamed of the unattainable Mindanaos.

THE great white banner of submission did not wave from the tower next day, nor yet the next.

Though Storm waited patiently, even hopefully, he saw no signs of capitulation.

All that he observed was a progressive growth of license and anarchy, which even a now tremendously strong and growing social-philosophical influence was unable to do more than check; a still further development of greed and force and fraud; a tremendous efflorescence of the ash gambling mania, a general drift of the country and the Weltverein-governed world as a whole, toward—what?

Toward an abyss, certainly, whence not even he himself could clearly see as an issue. None, unless he struck to save the world! Struck and at once!

"So, then, the blow must fall," he decided. "I must hit—hard! Patience, too finely drawn, breaks at last. The milk of human kindness, kept too long, goes thick and sour.

"Let Braunschweig buy and buy and buy if he wants to. Let the world go mad. Selling to him! All this will do small good

to him, or to the world, once the Great Change sets in.

"It must come now, at once! The final hoards must perish!"

Well-informed observers state that the first outward sign of the ultimate disintegration was given by the dulling of the golden cap of the Liberty statue on top of the Capitol at Washington.

The news of this portent, running like flame through magnesium powder, quickly brought together a tremendous concourse that filled the open areas about the huge building, packed the streets and parks, crammed every roof and window commanding a view of the structure, and turned the city of magnificent distances into one vast observatory.

Silent, awed now with a sense of impending national ruin, the people watched and waited. No rioting this day, no fights, no speculation for the time being.

The nation's heart, they felt, was being invaded by the swift-striking, unknown, irresistible venom of the Blight. And thousands, as by an instinctive impulse, bared their heads in the raw, chill December morning air.

In full sight of these innumerable watchers, a simple, rough-clad, grimy-handed steeple-jack, Frank Hamlin by name—history will long take cognizance of him—climbed out through one of the eastern windows of that magnificent dome raised by the genius of Major L'Enfant; and by a deft use of slings, ropes, and tackles, scaled the statue itself.

His inspection was long and very careful. After he had finished it, he managed to scrawl his report on a sheet of paper.

This he rolled into a ball. He hurled it far out onto the stiff breeze blowing at that hour, eleven o'clock, up the valley of the Potomac.

The ball fell, whirling, flickering, in a vast arc.

Numbed into silence, the vast assembly watched it drop. There was no crowding, no jostling or quarreling to snatch at it; yet many hands sprouted in air, where it fell.

It was caught by a postal-clerk named Dudley Buchnam.

In his ague of eagerness, trying to unroll it, he tore the paper in two.

Somebody grabbed one half.

"Read! Read it!" cried unnumbered voices.

Buchnam was unable to decipher it.

It had been written in such a cramped attitude that it was almost illegible. The

missing part, too, was vital to the meaning.

"Here, let me see!" shouted a thin, gray-whiskered man, eagerly forcing his way through the press. "I'm foreign clerk of the Dead Letter Office. I can read anything—any hand."

Buchnam relinquished his part of the paper.

"Here!" cried a voice. The other half came handed in to the clerk.

Now somewhat jostled about, he nevertheless managed to fit the halves together. For a minute he studied. Then with a strange and troubled look upon his paling face, he read:

"It is all off, men! The statue of Liberty has lost her gold cap. The finish is right on us now!"

As a whisper, fine and tense, the news spread out. Men dared not speak aloud at first.

The whisper strengthened to a murmur; it spread faster, louder now; it became a vast, confused, inchoate welter of sound; it rose to a roar, a bellow—a gigantic cataract of sound!

Before the steeple-jack had had time even to descend to the base of the heroic statue, three hundred feet in mid air, the news had flashed through those massed hundreds of thousands, had been flicked onto the wires and darted to every corner of the land—even flung across the Atlantic:

"The Capitol has been attacked! The Statue of Liberty has lost her golden cap. The end is at hand!"

The instant result of this portentous final declaration was a swift, half defiant, half panic-stricken gathering of the world-financiers, the government chiefs, foreign bankers, diplomatists and representatives, and of accredited officials in a building in Washington which shall be nameless.

Braunschweig was there, and Murchison as well. The apoplectic, angry face of Wainwright contrasted strangely with the old-ivory features of Baron Iwami. The antithesis seemed to typify the cosmopolitan character of that, the strangest gathering of chiefs, lackeys, and retainers ever known in the history of the world.

Cosmopolitan indeed; for during the past fortnight a drift had been taking place from Japan and China, from all over Europe, from South America and Mexico—a drift of controlling world-forces, or, rather, of the men who once had saddled, bridled,

and ridden the world, but who now were merely being carried, Mazeppa-like, to their doom.

This drift had set in strongly toward Washington.

Now, in the great assembly-hall, men from East, from West, from distant lands and near, were coming together with that instinctive reassemblment which draws the threatened wolf-pack close, or herds a fear-stricken bunch of steers, with lowered horns, upon the midnight prairie.

Fear reigned supreme. No one even smiled.

The air hung dead, heavy, oppressive. Like a funeral chamber the place was—the funeral of the hoar, cruel, wolfish System, the burial-place of Gold.

Sounded, all at once, the sharp tap-tap-tap of a gavel.

"Gentlemen!" exclaimed from the rostrum, Stanley M. Whitney, presiding officer.

At sound of his deep, grave voice, papers rustled, chairs moved, men sat down.

Silence fell. The tension grew acute.

Braunschweig alone remained himself.

He, only, saturnine, titanic, calm, watched the assembly with his broad-browed gaze; and as he watched, he fingered his great beard and smiled.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FLAYING OF THE WOLVES

THEY waited, eager now for Whitney to speak. But, even as the first words rose to his lips, a stir took place at the rear of the hall.

Confused words floated to them; then the sound of footsteps.

Those who craned their necks beheld a page, startled and capless, hurrying down the long aisle.

He reached the rostrum, ran up the steps, and—in eager haste—whispered some inaudible words to Whitney.

"What?" Whitney exclaimed. "There's a—but—no, no! He can't come in here, I tell you! Impossible!"

"You go back and tell him this is a private, official conference. No unauthorized person can even come in, much less address the gathering. And if he makes any trouble or raises any disturbance, call a guard. Go now!"

The page bowed and turned to obey; but already there in the aisle, a tall and vigorous figure of a man was standing, near the door.

This man smiled slightly as the page,

with a startled cry, a leveled index-finger, shrilled:

"Why, there he is now, sir! There! He's in already—he's coming!"

Before Whitney could even adjust his glasses, the man was striding up the aisle toward the rostrum.

Edouard de Sallier, the French ambassador, started toward him with an upraised, repelling hand. The stranger only waved him away.

At his look, at sight of the slow, deep fire that burned in his eyes, the Frenchman paled suddenly and fell back.

But now the newcomer's gaze had sought and found Graf Braunschweig, who sat close by the aisle.

He paused, folded his arms, and for a moment looked the German full in the face. Their eyes met and struck fire, as in a rapier duel of two souls.

At length the stranger spoke.

"So!" exclaimed he. "So you're the great one? By Heaven, I'm glad you're here! You are—a man! Let me congratulate you on what you've done. Not because of its motive, but because of its infernal intelligence.

"Gad! What a brain! You, Braunschweig, you alone have seen farther than all the rest of the world put together. Besides you, these purblind money-grubbers here have been so many moles and bats. You have imagination—vision—insight—understanding. They have been blind. But you—you know!"

"Braunschweig, even though you're on the wrong side of this fight, rotten wrong, you're a man after my own heart."

The hearers gasped. Yet Braunschweig only smiled still more broadly.

"Yes, John Storm," answered he, "I understand. I foresee. You and I—we alone know. These others here—pfui!"

And with a subtle glance, he swept them with good-humored contempt.

Storm nodded.

"Your hand!" cried he.

Their palms met and clasped. And through the vast hall silence hung tense.

You might have thought, by Braunschweig's expression, that this man before him, the most feared, denounced, and hated human being in the world, had done him some stupendous kindness, some incalculable benefit. For in his look lay eager sympathy.

But Wainwright, now that he had caught sight of John Storm's face and heard his name, sprang up with a violent oath.

Even as Whitney's gavel poised, the cop-

per czar ran forward, bull-like in his purple rage.

Toward Storm he stumbled, cursing, with raised fist.

Murchison, too, was on his feet.

Pointing, he screamed:

"There—there he is! There—Storm! Look—that's the man—there! My God! Catch him! Arrest that man! He's—"

The billionaire, overwrought, staggered and sank gasping into his chair.

Angry men of half a dozen races, not yet understanding, but furious at disturbance in this crucial moment, pulled Wainwright back.

Bubbling oaths and passion, as a stirred-up lobster foams, the copper czar was forcibly suppressed.

Storm smiled contemptuously.

Then, with another look about him, he once more advanced toward the rostrum.

"Mr. Secretary!" he exclaimed.

Whitney was dumb. Astonishment and fear robbed him of speech.

Storm shot a quick glance at him, then quietly mounted the richly carpeted steps; his tread elastic, soundless as a panther's.

He was somewhat pale, and on his face new lines were graven deep.

SINCE that night when he had first launched his world-wide war against war and had blighted the double eagles on Murchison's library table at Edgecliff, he seemed to have lived months, years. But vigor thrilled him still; and life; and untouched plentitudes of power.

And, simple in his strength, he stood before these angry vampires and looked them in the eyes and waited—with a smile.

And all the tawdry, murder-connoting fripperies of the uniforms, all the frock coats, all the silk hats that seemed to typify the ultraessence of bond-holding, coupon-snipping respectability, all the scheming, plotting, gold-thirsting, blood-spilling gentry contrasted strangely with John Storm.

In the same old ulster he had worn now for four years—the very ulster, because the only one he had, in which he had journeyed to Englewood on the first night of the blighting—he stood before them.

And his boots were muddy, too; red with the singular Southern clay of the region, for he had just come in from one of his long, indispensable, thought-clarifying tramps.

No gewgaws, no medals, no uniforms or decorations of crowned assassins; no purple or fine linen had he. Yet his presence, his look, his hand stilled those self-appointed masters of men.

Wainwright subsided.

Murchison, crumpled forward in a heap, head hidden in both palms, remained motionless.

Baker stared at Storm, as though hypnotized.

Each in his own way, that great and polyglottic throng awaited listening.

"Men of all nations," began Storm very slowly, very gravely, "you, rulers and financiers, bankers, dividend-eaters, gold-worshippers, and makers of war, now listen; for to you I speak!

"You have for some time now known my demands. You have suffered and must still suffer the results of your own folly and obstinacy, of your blind passion for gold. At the last moment you will save yourselves, or must I strike the final blow as well?

"Gold! You have worshiped gold!"

His voice rose, now, and in his eyes the light of battle gleamed.

"You, like Israel straying in the wilderness, have bowed and groveled before the golden calf—and it will yet betray you—soon!

"Gold!

"Surplus!

"These have been your sacred words; these, and none other. Different in all else, you have agreed on these. And to attain them, you have stopped at nothing; no, not even at mass-murder, known as war!

"Surplus!

"Ah, fascinating surplus, indeed. Surplus for you, oh, you 'very best people' that you are! Surplus, hot with hell-fire, red with human blood!"

He paused and spurned them with a look of loathing. But no one stirred or spoke. Only on the lips of the great Braunschweig the smile broadened a trifle.

"Slavery was a surplus game," continued Storm. "So, too, was serfdom. The reign of gold depends on surplus, taken from the lives and bodies of men.

"This surplus is to you the sacred golden wafer, your heart's desire, your lodestone, your one and only deity. All creeds are here and many races; yet you all agree on gold as your god!

"Surplus—stolen life—pumped from the veins of the world's toilers. Blessed be its name, to you!

"But," and now he took a different tone, "but, oh, you surplus lovers, all this involves foreign markets, and war. Even though millions of honest workers whose labor produces this wealth, even though millions of their wives and children starve and shiver for the use of this surplus, still, part of it must be shipped out of the country—to make trade!

"So now we come to the use of the bayonet and the Gatling gun. We come to war!

"War! What for? For profits! For gold! You know the answer. You understand! That you and yours may roll in gold and wallow deep in surplus, millions fight and die; and debt crushes every nation on earth."

He paused a moment, as though to let the arraignment strike home.

But now Murchison, somewhat recovered from his emotion, stood up. His crooked finger vibrated in air, as with hoarse rage he cried:

"Here, you guards! You police, there—arrest this man! He—"

Strong, angry hands dragged him down.

"Let Mr. Storm conclude his very interesting statistics, please!" exclaimed Braunschweig. "No doubt his figures will be of value to us all. What we shall do with them—and him—later, *ach!* that remains to be seen. Proceed, sir!" he ended, with a broad-gestured wave of the hand.

"Thanks," answered Storm dryly. "I will. Maybe I've got a few more facts and figures on hand that may be useful to you people, you sharks that tag the ship of state to fatten on the carrion of its battles and its woe!

"Sharks, yes, trailing a ship steered by lunatics! Statesmen you call yourselves, you people down there in the solemn flunkery of black broadcloth? Ha! Idiots, rather—imbeciles and knaves!

"Knives, pirates, guiding the state galley—whither? To the rocks! Like derelicts of the nations, ruled by you and your gang of polished cutthroats, 'stagger round and round in a stupid circle, the statesmen planning international wholesale butcherings, the working class blinded with blood and sweat and tears!'

"All for the reign of gold—gold, your god!

"Damn you!" roared Wainwright. "Treason! If you had what's coming to you, you'd get a lamp-post and ten feet of hemp!"

"You're generous," retorted Storm grimly. "Do you know what I'd like to give you in return? You, and this gang gathered together here? I'd give you all the prominent position right on the firing-line of a good, lively, up-to-date battle. Maybe you might learn a thing or two about the sources of wealth and markets and gold—and patriotism, too, and 'treason'!

"Do you profit-lusting wolves know anything about the practical details of market-getting and money-making, via imperialism and expansion? No? Well, as a mere common, ordinary engineer, I do. And I propose to tell you just a word about them, here and now.

"Take a modern Gatling, for example. Equipped with an electric motor, it will hurl out three thousand bullets a minute. It will tear a high board fence to pieces in four minutes, at a distance of one mile. How would you, King Copper, like to buck that proposition—for gold?

"Oh, a machine gun is a live-wire, all right enough. When you people howl for war, and plan for war, and pour out oil on the human fighting-lust to bring on war—remember that! Don't forget which end of the gun you mean to stand at. Remember what Sakuri wrote about the Russo-Jap war, you gold-lovers.

"Listen to this:

"Machine guns can be made to sprinkle their shots as roads are watered by a hose. They can cover a larger or smaller space, or fire to greater or less distance as the gunner wills. If one becomes a target for this terrible engine of destruction, three or four shots may go through the same place, making a wound very large. And the sound it makes is like a power-loom—a sickening, horrible sound!

After one battle, we discovered one soldier

with no less than forty-seven shots in his body, and another received more than seventy. Some of the dead had photographs of their wives and children in their bosoms; and these were spattered with blood."

Storm paused a moment; then with bitter scorn cried:

"What a place a battle-field would be for you, all you prominent citizens, you bankers, financiers, capitalists, Senators, lawyers, captains of industry! A hurricane of blood and steel! Delightful, eh? But there's no danger any one of you will take a chance there, or on a dreadnaught, or skimming high in air in a military plane, dropping bombs and getting shot, all for the sake of gold.

"But suppose you had to do a little of the actual killing and dying—for gold? What then? How do you like this picture of Sedan?

"Imagine masses of colored rags glued together with blood and brains, pinned into strange shapes by fragments of bones. Conceive men's bodies without legs, and legs without bodies, heaps of human entrails attached to red and blue cloth, and disemboweled corpses in uniform; bodies lying about in all attitudes with skulls shattered, faces blown off, hips smashed, bones, flesh, and gay clothing all pounded together as if brayed in a mortar; all this recurring perpetually for weary hours—and then you cannot, with the most vivid imagination, come up to the sickening reality of that butchery!"

AT THE rear of the room, a sudden disturbance arose. Some one—an old, hoary-headed man—had fainted. But Storm paused not.

"Ha!" he shouted, his face irradiate with wrath and zeal. "So then, I'm striking home, eh? Cowards! Who cannot even bear to hear news of the things you do—for gold!

"You blood-sucking profit-leeches, you sicken when you learn a little of the truth about the blood you suck, safely at home!

"Did any of you human vultures ever see a real, self-supporting vulture? A vulture with at least enough decency to find his own carrion? If you should go to 'glorious' war in the tropics you have so benevolently assimilated, you'd see some, all right enough. How would you, Murchison, like to have a vulture pick out your eyes so that some other millionaire could rake in gold?

"And you, Wainwright, how would you like to do picket duty, rifle in hand, on a dark, sleet-drizzling night? You, Baker, and you, and you," and Storm's long finger jabbed viciously at the dumb staring magnates, "you'd certainly look fine, wouldn't you, digging trenches with heavy shovels, stopping at noon to eat some salt pork, embalmed beef, and stale crackers?

"Imagine Baron Iwami, there, 'as a freighter hurrying rations to the front and taking care of six mud-covered horses at night.' Imagine Campbell, or Whitman, here, or His Excellency the Most Honorable Graf Braunschweig, or any king, emperor, or czar, or even any of our own patriotic Senators and Congressmen, 'on the firing-line, with their breasts exposed to the hellish rake of lead from a Maxim gun!

"Yes, indeed—just imagine a whole regiment of big bankers and manufacturers dressed in khaki, breakfasting on beans and bacon, then rushing, sword and gun in hand, to storm a cannon-bristling fort belching fire and lead and steel into their smooth, smug faces—for fifty cents a day!

"Bah! You swine! You cowards!"

He snapped his fingers with bitter contempt. His face drew into a sneer so savage, so hateful, that you could scarcely have recognized the man.

"You jackals!" he flung at them. "Your instincts haven't changed one jot since Wendell Phillips' time, when he exclaimed in anger at your traitorous schemes: 'The time will yet come in America when we shall have to hang the bankers!' They haven't changed since the great Lincoln himself—he who tried to bear malice to none, charity to all—was forced by your infernal looting of the nation's wealth, by your detestable Civil War and railroad robberies, which bled the country nigh to death—was forced, I say, to cry in bitter rage that the gold-manipulators 'ought to have their devilish heads shot off!'

"Words like these, think! from two of the noblest, most magnanimous souls that ever breathed the air of heaven! Do you hear them? Do you understand?

"Now, only one more picture, and I am through with you. My work is almost done. Yet for a moment listen. Then your own doom be on your heads!

"Just one more view of war—war, the gold-maker. After that, I'm done with you. God! To think I have to breathe the air of this foul place, contaminated by your buzzard-breath!

"If you do not believe I paint the picture

truly, go read my source. Read Barry's 'Port Arthur.' Then you will find this view of—glory!

“Toward three o'clock a second advance is ordered. Nearly 15,000 men close in. Now they are through the wire fence, half-naked, savage, yelling. Up to the very muzzles of the first entrenchments they surge, waver and break like the dash of angry waves against a rock-bound coast. Officers are picked off by sharpshooters, as flies are flecked from a molasses-jug.

Up they go, for the tenth time. Hand to hand they grapple, sweat, bleed, shout, expire; they spit and chew, claw and grip as their forefathers did, beyond the memory of man!

The cost? The fleeing ones left five hundred corpses in four trenches. The others paid seven times that price—killed and wounded—to turn across the page of the world's warfare that word Nanshan. A hospital-ship left every day for Japan, carrying from 200 to 1,000. . . . I lay in the broiling sun, watching the soldiers huddle against the barbed wire, under the machine-guns, only to melt away like chaff before a wind.

The pioneers met with the death-sprinkle of the Maxim. . . . I was carried back, in memory, to a boiler-factory and an automatic riveter. Of all war sounds, that of the machine-gun is least poetic and most deadly. The regiment under fire of the machine-guns retreated precipitately, leaving one-half its number on the slope. . . . Overwhelmed on all sides, tricked, defeated, two-thirds of its men killed or wounded . . . out of that brigade of 6,000 men, there are . . . uninjured but 640.

Moreover, in throwing up their trenches . . . corpses had to be used to improvise the walls . . . The dead were being used to more quickly fill the embankments. . . . Soon dawn came, and with it hell. The battle was on again. Within my sight were more than a hundred dead, and twice as many wounded. Groans welled up like bubbles from a pot.

All the way up the base of the hill . . . they were almost unmolested. This made the regiment confident. But the Russian general had ordered his men to reserve their fire till we got within close range, and then to give it to us with machine-guns. The aim was so sure and the firing so heavy, that nearly two-thirds of the command was mowed down at once.

The thud of a bullet! A different thud from any we had heard up to that time, and though I had never before heard bullets strike flesh, I could not mistake the sound. It goes into the earth wholesome and angry; into flesh,

ripping and sick, with a splash like a hoof-beat of mud in the face. . . .

The parapets of four forts were alive with bursting shrapnel. A hundred a minute were exploding on each (at fifteen gold dollars apiece). The air above them was black with glycerin gases of the mortar shells, and the wind . . . held huge quantities of dust.

No, the truth about war cannot be told. It is too horrible. The public will not listen. A white bandage about the forehead, with a strawberry mark in the center—is the picture they want of the wounded. They won't let you tell them the truth, and show bowels ripped out, brains spilled, eyes gouged away, faces blanched with horror!”

John Storm hurled the last words point-blank at that aghast and eminent audience.

“For gold!” cried he. “Gold, you vampires! Gold! Gold! the long curse of this bleeding, war-racked earth! ‘Gold, poison to men's souls, doing rank murder in this loathsome world!’ Gold! Symbol of power, luxury, crime, vice!

“Gold reigns! Gold—and its foul Medusa-headed sister, war!”

He ceased, and with a long, deep breath gazed at the assembly there before him.

“Yet, mark you this, you sleek hyenas—to-day the reckoning comes. To-day, at noon, unless you all capitulate to me, the final blow will fall on you and on your war-hoards.

“At twelve your power ceases. My demands you already know. Unless you cede to them and take immediate steps forever to abolish war, the values you have bowed before and worshipped will become dross and ashes. You must yield, or witness the degradation of capital, of exploitation, of surplus, of all that you hold dear!

“Intellect must rule, humanity triumph, war cease, the reign of gold forever perish!”

He stopped, and for a long, silent minute fixed his gaze upon them.

Then saying no further word, he walked slowly and with a kind of impersonal abstraction down the long aisle.

Unmolested, he reached the exit.

He turned, swept them all with his gaze, and stood a moment with a brooding, scornful look upon his face. They thought perhaps he might hurl some parting word at them, some final and excoriating denunciation; but no word came.

John Storm had said his say. In silence now he pushed the swinging leather-covered doors—and was gone.

Then Graf Braunschweig stood up and laughed.

"Ach, so!" quoth he. "So intelligent a young man—so entertaining, iss it not? But I regret that he iss mistaken. Let me tell you now, gentlemen," and he laughed again, a hard, mirthless laugh that made the flesh crawl, "I have all this foreseen. And something has happened already, which I am sure our friend has not anticipated."

The financiers, officials, scientists, and eminent men of arms, recovering now a little from their shame and stultified abashment, shifted to see the great man and to draw a little nearer. Silent, yet, was Stanley Whitman on the rostrum; silent was Murchison; silent all of them save Braunschweig.

He made no haste to speak; but, slowly pondering his words, remarked with great deliberation, after an appreciable pause:

"Our friend, I take it, has so arranged his machine as it will to-day at noon strike the remaining national hoards in different lands far away. Also here.

"But, my confrères, one thing he has not taken into account, nor have you. It is this—and now that it is an accomplished fact, I have no hesitancy to speak it to you. It is—"

"For God's sake, what?" cried the billionaire, his face aflame with hate and eagerness. "Have you found some way to beat that hell-hound? If so, by the Eternal, the whole world ought to belong to you! Go on—let's have it! Quick!"

BRAUNSCHWEIG laughed.

"I thank you, sir," said he. "The world? I do not want it. I want only the gold-ash, all the gold-ash that iss left now. And this, my friends, is vat I haf already got, at present. To the best of my knowledge, every ounce off gold and off gold-ash is in the entire world iss now either mine, or I haf an option on it. I own it all!"

Into his voice crept a strong Germanic accent. The excitement that now was gaining on him showed in his deep-set eyes and breaking speech.

"All! All!" cried Braunschweig. "The gold off der whole world iss mine!"

He leaned forward, clutching with both hands. He stammered, gasped, fought for words and found none.

"Gold! All, all der gold!" he gasped.

A financier at the back of the room cried out some quick unintelligible thing.

Wainwright, leaning over to Baker, swore hotly under his breath.

"The damned German!" he snarled. "He's got something up his sleeve, that's sure. It's a big game he's playing, you bet, or he wouldn't be playing it. What the deuce can it be?"

"We'll know, soon enough!"

"Bet your neck! But whatever it is, we've certainly let the Heiny beat us to it, after all! I'd like to wring his hellish neck."

"Wring it!" replied Baker. "Why not? Wait! This game's not through yet!"

Groans, murmurs, curses, and fervid excretations, now scantily veiled by the exigencies of polite society, droned through the hall.

But Braunschweig paid no heed. He was struggling with his own excitement, striving to dominate himself. A moment he kept silence, then spoke again:

"Pardon me, gentlemen, I apologize for relapsing into such forms of speech. The stress—that explains it. At such times I cannot help reverting to the dialect.

"Yes, gentlemen, when I perceived the inevitable, I prepared for it. I did not await the last blow. Unknown to you all, I have already negotiated with all the governments in the world, making them advantageous offers for their war-hoards—in silver, of course.

"Governments and nabobs alike, occidental and oriental, they have all secretly accepted, after a certain amount of negotiation by code. It was not really so difficult a task as you might think, gentlemen, considering that I have so many thousands of agents in all parts of the world, eh? No, not so insuperably difficult.

A disturbance, midway of the hall, interrupted him. He smiled and waited for order to be restored. Then at last he said:

— TO OUR READERS —

We are constantly experimenting in an effort to give you the very best reading surface obtainable. For this reason, there may be occasional slight fluctuations in the thickness of this magazine. Now, as in the past, every magazine bearing the Popular Publications seal of quality will continue to have the same number of pages, the same wordage, the same unparalleled value in top-flight reading entertainment that has been and will continue to be our Popular Fiction Group guarantee—the best reading value obtainable anywhere at any price!

"All I wish to point out is the fact that, by one means or another, I have already bought in most of gold supply and ash supply of the entire world; that the remaining governmental war hoards are not now where our friend Storm thinks they are; that his attack will consequently miss fire; and that, at this very moment, gentlemen, practically the whole available ash of the world is now located—"

"Where? Where?" burst our Murchison. "Tell me how to beat this devil and all I have is yours! Where's the ash, Braunschweig?"

"Here! Right below us, gentlemen," answered the great financier, pointing downward. "In the vaults immediately under our feet! Ash, truly—some news for you, my friends, is it not?"

Silence greeted his announcement; the silence of utter, stunned amazement.

Man looked at man, but no one spoke.

On every face the thought was painted, the prescience clear, that now they all (and the world, too) stood on the brink of some vast, till then unforeseen, incalculable change, some overturn, some breaking of the social integument—an issuing into new and other things, whence there could be no turning back.

That all the gold or gold-ash in the entire world had at last been collected by one supremely powerful and daring man, collected and stored in one Titanic, monstrous hoard—this concept was too huge, too comically overpowering, to take instant root even in those minds used to thinking in terms of millions.

So, for a moment, no one uttered any word; and through the vast and silent hall even the ticking of the broad-faced onyx clock over the rostrum sounded audibly.

From without rose the murmur and hum of the gigantic, awed, slowly-moving multitude which now blocked alley, street, and square, filled park and terrace, blackened wall and roof, and jammed each window whence by an possibility the Treasury building could be seen.

Save for the exhortations of "soap-boxers" striving to spread the truth and show the way, whatever might arise, there seemed but little energy or purpose in that press.

Men were waiting, that was all; waiting for midday, for the anticipated final blow. After that, what? Nobody seemed to know, or care—nobody save the exhorters, around whose improvised lecture-platforms thicker nuclei had gathered.

BRAUNSCHWEIG, meanwhile, had almost finished speaking. His smile, as he surveyed the assemblage of bankers, diplomatists, and financiers, seemed to broaden.

Said he:

"Now, gentlemen, now that you know the situation, I make you an offer. As a matter of interest to you, I will—if you like—show you this hoard of mine.

"Certain facts, known to me by the aid of the truly most highly superior German science, facts evidently unknown to you, make it certain that to-day at noon certain developments will take place, of a most extraordinary character. *Ach, ja*, quite so! And, if you choose, you may witness them.

"Shall we visit, now, the vaults? After that, perhaps, we shall perhaps, be better able to answer the demands of Mr. John Storm in an intelligent manner. If we descend, there is no time to lose. Already twelve o'clock is near.

"Shall we go, gentlemen? Yes? Good! So be it! Permit me, then, to extend to you the freedom of my own private vaults, leased from your government. Shall I now have the honor of showing you all the way?"

Silent, amazed, wholly unable as yet to correlate their thoughts or voice their profound astonishment, the distinguished company followed him.

He, now, in his own person, walked visibly there before them as the embodiment, the summing-up, the supreme climactic personality of capitalism, the rule of gold.

For, since the System itself had developed, toward the beginning of the nineteenth century, never yet had one individual gathered to himself so preponderatingly vast a majority of the world's wealth.

Never yet had one human hand held so long, so barbarously heavy a lash over the back of man.

Even Murchison himself, still many times a millionaire though he was, felt poor and mean and weak by contrast with this overwhelming, physically huge and financially inconceivably vast figure of the mighty man, who now, standing at the open tool-steel door of the subterranean vaults, waited for his one-time competitors and rivals, his present inferiors and guests, to enter.

Despite the many red-glowing incandescents that burned beneath the groined vaults and down the long, dim corridors, still a half-darkness shrouded the place.

The footsteps of the financiers and the

officials sounded dull and hollow on that steel and concrete floor; their voices murmured eerily, with strangely sibilant re-echoings.

Awed, despite themselves, overwhelmed by the vast tiers and ranges of buckskin or of heavy yellow canvas bags on every hand, that stretched away down the gloomy, dim-lit corridors, they grouped uneasily, peered, shifted their fine-shod feet, and pried about with mingled envy, curiosity, and impotent malice.

So, perhaps, might a pack of hungry mice inspect—by sufferance of the cat—fine cream cheese and pans of rich, yellow milk set aside in a cellar.

A door clanged metallically. Then Braunschweig appeared among them, pocketing a key. He began to speak.

"Gentlemen," said he, his voice low and carefully modulated, "you now see before you practically the entire residue of what once was the world's gold. Some of the great hoards have not yet arrived, but at all events, not one of them is now where Mr. Storm believes. We do not need to consider them; enough is now here, as gold or as ash, so that we may say a vast majority of the entire world's material now lies in these vaults.

"You haf wondered, perhaps—you must have, I am sure—why I, a man reputed somewhat keen in such matters, should have exchanged silver for ashes, disbursed car-loads, ship-loads, mountains of silver, for what seems mere dross, eh?"

"Well, let me tell you; now that the coup is an established fact; now that practically all is over, save reaping the harvest. Let me explain!"

He crossed his huge arms, sunk his beard a moment on his breast, and from beneath leonine brows peered at this pagan gathering, there before him in the dim, silent, thick-walled impregnable last redoubt of capitalism.

"Let me tell you now, my friends! It iss so astonishingly simple—when you understand. At once, at the very first news, I consulted Professor Glanzer, of Bucharest, and Mme. Curie, in Paris. By telegram, instantly. I also took council with Professor Heinzmann, of my private laboratories at Dusseldorf.

"They differed as to details, but all agreed as to one essential fact. Not that I let any of them know all of what I wanted to know—*ach!* no indeed! But by correlating their answers, gentlemen, I discovered the truth.

"I learned that gold is truly indestruct-

ible. That even though certain radio-active forces may temporarily disintegrate it, yet reintegration must eventually follow. That, once the destructive power is past, so comes the gold back, as before. That—"

A cry, harsh and piercing, interrupted him. It was Murchison's voice.

"Do you mean to say," he shouted, "that you've beaten us all to it? Done us all? Left us all holding the sack, while you, you have grabbed the bait?"

"I learned," continued Braunschweig, utterly ignoring the American, "that, whatever this Mr. Storm might do, his machine would by a certain date absolutely exhaust the total cosmic supply of the one particular radio-active force or Zeta-ray, producing this effect.

"After that, I knew reintegration would inevitably at once set in. The gold would return—it could not help returning! All I needed to do was ascertain the date exactly on which the process would reverse. This—"

"Fool! Fool that I was!" suddenly cried a loud voice. "I might have known!"

It was Professor Jamieson, of Stamford University—far and away the leading metallurgist of the New World. Now, clutching his brows, he ground his teeth with rage.

"God!" he gritted. "The world was in my hand—and it escaped me!"

"The exact date," continued Braunschweig, "was all I needed in order to make one universal sweep—"

"But do not wince, my friends. Do not recriminate. It can do no good. Listen, only. I must have your attention. Because, mark you, this day at noon—this day when Storm plans to strike the final hoards which are not where he thinks they are—this day is the day set by science and by the immutable laws of nature, for the beginning of the reintegration.

"This day—"

BRAUNSCHWEIG could not finish. Spontaneous in its rage, bitter and unbridled, the hot resentment of the tricked and cheated financiers burst out tumultuously.

The turn played on them, the ruse, the coup of this huge, formidable man smarted their profit-thirsting souls like Cayenne pepper in their eyes.

Hard-clenched fists rose in the close, stifling air. Canes brandished. A hubbub of angry voices, gruff and furious, echoed and reechoed; and oaths, howls, curses flew at Braunschweig.

"You villain! Dog!"

"*Accidente!*"

"He's done us! He has stung us all!"

In a score of tongues, many maledictions rained on the world-master.

Even Baron Iwami, his Japanese aplomb now forgotten, hissed as he glared at Braunschweig with a darkened, swollen face in which his gleaming eyes flicked lights like a cobra's.

For a moment it looked as though the mob of outraged plutocrats—struck in their tenderest part, the pocket—were going to rush him; but Braunschweig, standing a full head above them all, only smiled right scornfully.

"Bah!" he giped, and snapped his fingers. "You are what you call the good sports, eh? I think not! So long you win, all is good! You bow, you smile, so. But when you lose, then you swear, you spit at me. Not now 'eminent German financier,' and 'savior of society,' but 'dog' and 'villain.' *Ach*, yes, I understand. I know your different languages, you men. I know! I will repay you yet!"

His face grew terrible. There in that darkened place, where only the garish trembling gleam of an incandescent fell downward and aslant across his powerful, deep-lined features, silhouetting his brow, nostrils, and scorn-curved lips, he seemed Titanic.

His eyes, half-seen and cavernous, glowered like those of Lucifer surveying the lost souls which all had fallen that he might rise to evil power.

But even as he stood there, irradiate with joy, thrilled and swollen with the pride of vengeance on these exploiters, hated once as competitors, scorned now as dupes and fools and beaten weaklings in the cutthroat game, a startled, tremulous, gasping cry thrilled all the darkened vagueness of the treasure-vaults.

"Look! See! My God—look there!"

"Twelve o'clock!" roared Braunschweig in a vast, triumphant bellow. "Now watch!"

But he had scant need to tell them, or to announce the truth.

For now the cry was echoed by another; now in many tongues and accents the babel of that wonder echoed up against the heavy concrete arches.

"The gold! The gold! Look—see! The gold is coming back again!"

And there was pointing now; and there were runnings to and fro.

Grave men, silk-hatted men, and men with long, black frock coats, men with spectacles and canes, or—perchance—with

swords belted to their waists; men with ribbons and decorations; statesmen, financiers, great bankers, and captains of industry; these stared like children, mazed at the wonder.

Like children they cried out; and, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, filled and shaken with almost superstitious terror, watched that miracle swiftly taking place, which from the very first Braunschweig had fore-known and planned upon.

"The gold! The gold! See there, the gold once more!"

Down along the aisles where the still unaltered metal lay, no change was taking place; but in every corridor and chamber of the ash-catacomb, where lay the relics of the world's one-time gigantic hoards, a swelling, an integrant revival was in motion.

Crepitant, with at first a slow, slight, shifting sound, like sands, perhaps, blowing up over the edge of a wind-swept dune; then faster, louder, and more strident, the change was taking place.

And the whole vaults were filled with that slithering, sliding noise, and here a bag broke, there a shelf cracked and fell with the sudden strain.

Where dust had been, now shone the sign of yellow once again!

Dumb-stricken, the watchers stared.

They knew not—in that deep, heavily vaulted treasure-house, with steel doors closing them in, how could they know?—that out in the great, broad, sunshiny December world, the same stupendous thing was taking place as well.

Wherever a little dust had been left by the sweeping besom of Braunschweig's search for ash, wherever a pinch of the gray powder still lay, overlooked by the great financial wizard's agents or preserved for old association's sake, there gold came back again.

No longer the form was kept, but molecule by molecule, the element, the metal was reintegrating!

Storm's radiojector, almost at the moment of its final foray on the world's gold, had tapped and drained the last available waves of Zeta-rays. And gold, released from the invisible yet blighting force, once more was reasserting its indestructibility, its indomitable power and its life.

Here, there, everywhere, the overlooked grains flashed back to gold! On the Metropolitan lantern in New York; on the State House dome in Boston, the particles of ash still left lodged in interstices, now met the noonday sun with a

faint yet revivifying sparkle that thrilled men with an abandon of joy.

Old family heirlooms, rings, brooches, frames, and gewgaws of all kinds, which had held a certain amount of gold in alloy with baser metals and had mechanically retained the gold-ash, now recovered their sheen and brilliancy.

In pockets, in bureau-drawers, even in gutters and all sorts of inconceivably strange places, myriad little nuggets and glistening beads of gold began to be discovered.

Mushroomlike, these curious growths sprang up, the results of that strong, together-drawing, reintegratory force now set free by the exhaustion of Storm's Zetaray, as Braunschweig's savants had predicted.

All in all, some millions of dollars' worth of such curios must have been found, either by their former owners or by strangers; and for a while, all over the world, strange scenes and lawless ones took place.

But the total of this miscellaneous gold, all told, was not one per cent of that which now, close mured in the vaults, was rushing back like a tide, rising, filling, overflowing with resistless force.

CHAPTER IX

SUNSHINE UPON THE HEIGHTS

NOW ON every hand the buckskin and canvas bags were bursting with ripping sounds and dull reports. Shelves groaned and creaked, broke down and crashed to the floor; and the spilled dust, reintegrating as it fell, flung a shining, shimmering wealth across the concrete.

The startled men, knowing not which way to turn, saw wonders on all sides. Here a passage was already choked with the swift rush of the reintegrated treasure, there a whole tier of sacks came rolling, tumbling down, breaking open as they fell.

And through the huge and rapidly growing confusion, the saturnine, deep laugh of Braunschweig reechoed loudly.

But—what was this?

Already a distinct change of temperature was to be felt; already the vast, the sudden liberation of all that molecular activity was beginning to produce its inevitable effect—heat.

An Argentine banker, stooping, touched some of the newly restored, quickly expanding gold. With a cry he drew back his hand, scorched.

Far down one passageway, a thin, bright molten stream appeared.

Serpentlike it advanced its glistening head; it wavered, ran forward sinuously, hesitated, then with accelerating speed and quickly swelling volume cascaded forward.

"Great God!" exclaimed in Russian a grand-duke, a broken, dissipated man who was reported to own twelve million rubles' worth of Russo-Japanese war bonds. "*Bozhe moy!* The pressure—it melts the gold!"

No other result was possible. The elementary principle was at work, that an expanding body, constricted, was developing heat.

Glaciers move forward over a coat of pressure-melted ice, which cannot freeze because of the great weight. Compressed air grows hot. Long-hammered iron becomes red-hot, or even white.

So now this dust, suddenly leaping back to gold again, rose to the melting-point, then fused, and now in ever-thickening torrents, rolled along the concrete passageways; and as it rolled, it licked into its jaws still more gold and still more.

Added to that intense molecular activity of the radio-active reintegration, was the physical effect of the pressure.

Under the double urge the gold melted like tallow on a stove; and ever, always, more and more dust swelled, changed, melted, and began to flow and flame.

Alarmed now, with all thought of gold-lust forgotten and only startling cries to voice their fear, the men of Mammon were retreating.

No longer Braunschweig laughed; no longer his beaten competitors thought to curse or to revile him.

Life, now, they sought—they who had caused so many millions deaths that they might fatten. Life, life alone!

But now all was confusion.

In the limited space of those vaults was stored dust which represented a volume of gold at least three times larger than the entire cubic area of the stronghold.

Gold from South Africa, tundra gold, Alaska beach-gold, now mingled in a shimmering yellow tide with the returning wealth that once had been the war-hoards of Europe and the New World.

And faster now, faster still, the temperature was rising.

As the scared men, gasping, choking, feeling their way along the few remaining corridors still practicable, stumbled toward the door of tool-steel, a thermometer

on any wall there would have registered a minimum of 115 degrees.

Not merely did the heat mount; it soared—it leaped aloft like a vast, venomous, strangling serpent that caught its victims by the windpipe and seared them with its blasting poison.

Cries, screams for help, wild ejaculations and frightful blasphemies in many tongues all mingled in supreme confusion.

Bankers who with the utmost complacency had sent thousands of their fellowmen out onto the crashing, flaming battlefield or staggering up the maxim-scoured hills, now with the sudden squealing terror of trapped rats fought to find the exit through that blistering haze of smoke and poisonous vapor.

Toward the vault doors, blinded, wheezing, panic-sick, the Mammonites, "the civilized, fur-lined, orthodox cannibals," staggered drunkenly.

Unheeded, the tall hats rolled away. Canes fell to the hot concrete. Monocles and pince-nez dropped and were crushed beneath the stumbling feet.

In two minutes the sleekest, smoothest, fattest plutocrat among them was more grimed and torn, more savage, frantic, and bestial than a prehistoric cave-man scuttling through his caverns to escape some volcanic upburst of the infinitely long ago.

Here a glimpse of a pale, distorted face and rolling eyes, through the fast-thickening murk.

There a clutching hand appeared—then vanished.

Further, dim-seen like a drove of Dante's lost spirits in the fiery rain, a jostling group of world-masters fought, tooth and nail, to get through some last available open passageway.

And murder-blows were struck; blood ran; full-fed bodies went down, screeching, clutching, engulfed in the ever-rising, ever-oncoming golden flood.

Where now was Braunschweig?

They no longer knew, or cared. Once he appeared, vast in the cyanid smoke and swirl; then vanished.

Forgotten now was the great man and all his power. Forgotten their hate of him.

With skins parching, shriveling, turning black, hair crisping in the glow as they retreated away, away from the doors, back into the furthest runways and alleys of the vaults for some slight temporary relief, little they thought of him!

Panting, lips baked and cracked tongues bloating forth, the men of gold scrambled

away, away—yet found safety nowhere.

No longer did they lust for the rich yellow metal. No longer desired they aught save to escape its death-bringing touch.

Gold, which under their control so long had poisoned, stifled, garroted the world, now blindly and inexorably had turned upon them all. Once their slave, it now had leaped to power as their savage, their insensate master and destroyer.

Cut off already, blocked and rendered inaccessible the doorway was, by tides of livid metal. Past these they could not penetrate. Howling, praying in hoarse screams, cursing, they retreated, with ashen faces already scorching, with fear-writhen lips.

And the soft hands, wherewith they sought to fend their eyes from the white glare, blistered and shriveled to the bone.

One might almost have thought the vault a scene in a steel-trust mill, when some imperfect crucible or some defective furnace bursts and lets the molten iron loose upon the slaves of steel.

HENDRICKS, steel magnate and prominent opponent of labor legislation, may have had some dim thought of this likeness just before he stumbled on the body of a fellow plutocrat and went down, strangling, writhing, never to rise again.

But in that Hell of Gold there was no time for thought.

Up, swiftly up the heat still swooped, like a monoplane released against a strong head-wind.

Four, six of them were down now—ten—a dozen!

Seared, scorched, blinded, smoking, they fell, clawing in vain at the unyielding, deadly walls of steel.

From the further alcoves and recesses, still untouched save by the vapors and foul gases, strangling screams of anguish jaggedly split the dun and verberating air.

Penned into the last few aisles, numbed, dying, groping vainly for they knew not what, the still surviving gold men still staggered to and fro, grappling, weakly thrusting their groping way past and over each other, crawling on bodies, gouging and snarling impotently at each other.

Baker fell, trying to clamber up onto a smoldering shelf—fell, and was trampled by Wainwright, and died with imprecations on his blackened lips.

Wainwright, stone-blind and seared, seized Murchison and thrust him, like a shield, against the oncoming lava tide of gold.

Thus, for a moment, the writhing, howling billionaire furnished a screen for the copper czar.

But Wainwright's respite was brief. For now the gold was on them both.

Breath failed.

It seared and scorched the lung tissue.

Death was welcome.

Braunschweig, at bay, staggered to his feet for a brief instant.

Gone, now, his beard—scorched clean from his blackened roasted face. Gone his hair.

And now his crackling skin broke, as with a fiendlike grimace of defiance he flung both mighty arms aloft.

Still, to the end, his huge strength seemed to vitalize that tremendous body. Stricken, blinded, gripped at the throat by stifling gases, poisonous and hot, the great financier stood erect, unyielding, proud.

Gold! All his life a slave to him, a willing serf and tool, not even now when it had turned on him to slay him, would he bow to it.

"Gold! Gold! The whole world's gold!" he roared. "All mine—mine! All—"

Crash!

Down on him collapsed a scorching partition.

A spurt of flame—a rolling, tumbling flow of scintillant gold!

Then smoke and fumes covered all.

Silence!

Silence, save for the crackle of the flames, the rippling, crawling tourbillons

of gold that swirled, rose, mounted ever; that filled the vaults clear to their arches; that unchecked, swifter and ever swifter still, expanded, burst upward through the solid roof in a vast deluge of bright glory.

Silence!

Death!

EPILOGUE

Comfortably leaning back in his big chair at the very windows of the Planters' and Traders' Hotel, John Storm drew for a moment at his cigar before concluding his long letter of refusal.

The sun-soaked radiance of that Southern Christmas morning beat warmly on the table before him. He pondered a moment with wrinkled brows, then wrote:

So then, in spite of what you kindly interpret as a strong popular demand, I cannot accept. My services could be of no further advantage to the country. I am no statesman—only an engineer. I gratefully appreciate the unwarranted honor done me; but still I must refuse. With all the gratitude in the world, I positively must state that I cannot now, nor can I at any future time, even remotely consider accepting any public office of whatsoever nature, kind or character.

My work, so far as it concerns the people as a whole, as a political unit, is done. The science which I serve shall always be at their disposal; but I, personally, must remain a private citizen, unrewarded save through the realization of my dreams.

This decision, then, is final. With the heartiest thanks, again, and all regrets that I cannot see my way clear to the acceptance of the signal honor offered me, I remain,

Faithfully yours,
John Storm.

He reread the entire letter, sealed it and made it ready for mailing.

"Thank Heaven that's done!" he sighed, much relieved. "What a dog's life a writer's must be!"

For a little while he smoked in thoughtful silence.

"Dreams," he said to himself at length. "Yes, I, too, have had my dreams, even I. And now they're coming true!"

"Dreams of an epoch, now at hand, when this old world of ours shall be, as it never yet has been, a place truly free, emancipated, civilized. When the night of ignorance, prejudice, servility, superstition and bigotry all shall be finally and forever swept away by the dawn of intelligence, by universal education, scientific truth and light—by understanding and by fearlessness.

"When science shall no longer be 'the mystery of a class,' but shall become the heritage of all mankind. When, because much is known by all, nothing shall be dreaded by any.

"When that," and he flung a vigorous hand out toward the city and the outer world, "shall all be absolutely free!"

He got up, went over to the window and opened it, then for a while leaned on his elbows, looking out.

A pearly haze obscured the horizon, that Christmas morning. Away and away the Potomac stretched, a crinkled ribbon of blue-watered silk. Over all, through all, brooded quiet and calm and joy.

Content, Storm smoked.

"H-m!" he said to himself at length. "Before long I sha'n't have to be putting up with pipes or ordinary every-day cigars. Before long now, I'll be having about all the Mindanaos I want—genuine Mindanaos, from my own ground down there in Cuthbert, Georgia!"

"Singular how I happened to discover that patch of ground, eh? Nestled right into a cozy corner of old Mother Nature's lap, with the south-wind blowing over and the sun, mellow and clear on it—some soil, and that's a fact.

"Same identical composition, too, as that of the Vuelta Abajo—only excepting just the touch that my new atmospheric nitrogen process will give it. When those plants reach me, and I get to work setting

'em out—dressed in a pair of overalls and a corn-cob—say!

"And yet they're trying to force that office on to me!"

He broke into a deep chuckle of content.

"Mindanaos!" he exclaimed. "From my own sifted, petted, watered, nitrogenized, glass-roofed little bit of sunny Georgia! Mindanaos!"

THE sunlight on his face showed it a trifle thinner, a bit paler than before the blight; still the same strong, half-humorous, half-stern, kindly, determined, very human wrinkles marked it with their generous lines.

All at once, far off, a bell began to ring.

Another took up the chime; a third, a fourth; many and many joined the chorus.

Pipe gripped in teeth, he harkened the Christmas peals.

A sparrow, perched on a projecting cornice near at hand, cocked a bright, curious eye at him.

Storm smiled again.

"You're living under a new dispensation this day, know that?" he asked the sparrow. "I guess by the look of things there'll be more crumbs for all of us, from now on. Enough for everybody, eh?—and not too much for anybody—and no more quarreling!"

Away with a flick of brown wings the sparrow darted.

"Freedom!" Storm mused. "How good it is—how good the world is now, and the people, and everything—now that the chance exists! How good those Mindanaos are going to be!

"I'll have a right—a right such as no one ever yet has had—to enjoy them too, in the world as it is going to be."

Louder the bells sounded now: louder, clearer, more triumphant.

"Is it possible," wondered the man, awed by the tremendous thought, "that I, I have given this Christmas gift to man? This gift of life instead of war and death; this gift of hope and joy and plenty?"

"No, not I! Not I! Science has worked this miracle; and by her hand she shall yet bring mankind to perfect knowledge, perfect light!"

He bowed his head and listened, his heart a-thrill; and to his soul the brazen bells cried, in a paean of wild triumph:

**"Ring out old shapes of foul disease,
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold!
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace!"**