

THE GOLDEN BLIGHT

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"THE ALIBI," "DARKNESS AND DAWN," ETC.



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DEDICATED TO
COMRADE JOSEPH WANHOPE,
FOR MANY YEARS MY "GUIDE, PHILOSOPHER AND FRIEND."

"THE GOLDEN BLIGHT" IS MEANT TO BE BOTH A NOVEL AND AN ALLEGORY. SHOULD THE READER FIND ONLY ENTERTAINMENT THERE, WELL AND GOOD; BUT, LOOKING DEEPER, SHOULD HE CHANCE TO SEE THE INNER MEANING, THEN I SHALL KNOW THAT HE, TOO, HAS READ THE PORTENTS OF THIS TROUBLED TIME.

IN GIVING THIS BOOK TO THE PUBLIC, I WISH TO MAKE ACKNOWLEDGMENT FOR ASSISTANCE IN FACTS AND PLOT TO

ROBERT H. DAVIS,
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JOSEPH WANHOPE.

FOR HELP IN REVISION AND PREPARATION OF THE PROOFS, TO
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THE GOLDEN BLIGHT

CHAPTER I

A QUESTION OF ASHES

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 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.

"H-m!" he grunted.

In the fireplace of Pentelican marble a log snapped

briskly, throwing a brand out on to the tiles. The billionaire kicked it back into the ashes.

“Nothing definite, then?” queried he 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. Say so, and it goes into the fire. Lots of other work on hand, you know.”

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 concrete 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 gibed. “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 Griswold 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 on to 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 Gragonard 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 manila. But there—well, you see the result.”

"That's right, I do," said Storm, nodding. "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 Requin. 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 Wainwright. 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.

“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,” said he, 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.

CHAPTER II

GOLD

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."

"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!" snapped he.

"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-failing 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 strength and woman's beauty and virtue come beneath its yoke. 'Saint-seducing gold' indeed! And so the world adores it.

"It buys everything. Everything! Even Science herself sometimes plays the jade for gold. Universities

and pulpits teach only what gold approves; and the professor or the clergyman who dares stand up and tell the truth about it, gets the sack—you know *that!* 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. Gold dictates policies of state and international law, grave speeches and solemn functions, and the marionette activities of politicians and diplomats. It makes and un-makes dynasties. It declares peace and war. At last analysis, gold names the very President of these United States, and all those in authority, right up to the Supreme Bench itself. Gold is King!

“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! 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. “Your— But no matter; why name the treasures even here, alone?

“Each is a symbol of gold; of mankind wrung and tortured with toil, and poverty, and blood, and sweat; of exploitation, and of war! They all mean your power over Man, the scourge-marks of your whip upon the human race. 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; his bitter hate of Labor; his brazen subsidizing of press, and university and church; the industrial battles he had fought—memories of barricades and gunmen, of prostituted courts of justice; the maimed and slaughtered multitudes in his mills and mines and railways; wars waged, even, at his secret bidding; always and everywhere a ruthless beating-down of human life, that *he* might rise to power. Of all these things and others Storm thought; and his face grew hard as flint.

"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. What you have made yourself a human harpy for—a vampire, fattening on the life-blood of the race! 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 rotten sham, Murchison. I'm going to prove it to you. I, with a little of the Science you despise, am going to bring you fawning to my feet. Gold? Why, of all the monstrous jokes, since time began, gold is the

most monumental! The 16th Century Imperial gold plate you mean to use at your big banquet, next week, is all a mockery and a delusion. Your Tyrian jugs, your ancient Greek gold wine-cups, all your golden bibelots and coins, your specie hoard itself, 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.

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.

"Up-stairs 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 greenstone 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?"

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST TOUCH

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!” said he. “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

1075°, 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 and woman's chastity, 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 single 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'm 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 priceless-ness 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 dulness began to appear, leprous and gray as though drops of mercury had been sprinkled over them. Every blotch was rounded at one side, pointed at the other, drawn out into a long tail; and all these tails 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 quicksilver. 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!" stammered he.

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

“Look out, there!” ejaculated Storm. “Your ring! What’s the matter 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,” smiled the physicist, 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, crumbling 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,” commented Storm 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," suggested he. "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. Your situation, just at present, is one where violence, bluster and threats won't avail you in the least. You can't handle me as you've handled thousands of others. For once, I'm master—as you'll soon see. 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 pow-

dered 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 on to 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—as though struck down by a bullet—plunged full length to the floor.

CHAPTER IV

MURCHISON COMES TO HEEL

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 Hildegarde 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 coöperating, 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 down-stairs 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 an 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.

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 with imperative decision.

"No, I tell you!" he stormed. "I won't see him. When he comes send him back P. D. Q. 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."

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.

"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 yuké!*"

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.”

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—damned 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 Hell!” 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 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.

At the pen he stared, 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—I'm a ruined man!"

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 door.

"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 non-committal 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 something of its usual timbre, its pitch of mastery. Jinyo nodded.

“Have Thomas run out my closed car. The closed car, 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!”

CHAPTER V

PURSUIT

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."

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 onto the driver's seat. A moment, and with a tiger-purr of gears, the car 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 switched on the lights, and two dazzling shafts of electricity painted the Avenue that came racing toward them like a rushing ribbon of white.

"Let her out now!" commanded Murchison sharply through the speaking-tube. 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," smiled this man to himself 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," reflected he, "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 and clinch them, eh?"

Murchison's auto 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!" growled he. "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!" said he 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!" ordered he. "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.

Back into the car he climbed, shaken with sick apprehension.

“New York City—and on the speed-laws!” directed he. Then, as the car 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, 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, 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 in with his clenched fist.

“It’s ruin, ruin—if it’s true!” thought he. “That devil’s capable of anything. I know the type. What’s his game? A hold-up? 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 fifty now, sir. I don't dare—"

"Make it sixty."

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. Far ahead, the searchlights leaped and wavered. And flickering past, the wide-spaced street-lamps flung momentary gleams on the varnished metal of the machine.

Bang!

The car lurched, swerved, gritted, stopped.

"What the devil now?" howled the billionaire.

"Blow-out, 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, his fate and all his millions now in the skilled hands of this chauffeur, this simple proletarian. At the limp and flattened tire he glared.

A great gash had been ripped across it; and from this a lolling tongue of rubber mocked at him, through the sardonic grin of the blow-out.

Shaking with cold and fright, he could not restrain the chattering of his teeth.

“How long, to repair?”

“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 set to work.

“Thomas!”

“Sir?”

“Can’t you run on the tire, as it is?”

“No, sir. I can’t make speed, that way. Besides, sir, the tire would chaw up and maybe wreck us. It’ll be money in your pocket, sir—”

“Go on, then—and be quick, quick! Your job hangs on your making good, now!”

“Yes, sir.”

Thomas had underestimated the time, for the 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,” announced Thomas at length.

Without a word the billionaire jumped into the car.

“Seventy-five A, Danton Place, New York!” cried he. “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,” thought he. “*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 auto whirled 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. Up and down the street he peered. Good fortune, perhaps, might show him John Storm just getting home.

But no—not a 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.

“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 was 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 innerdoor 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 gelatinous 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. But he had to hear a number of caustic commentaries anent the rousing-up of weary folk at that hour of the night. Meekly enough the financial suzerain of the world endured these slings and arrows. 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 said he: "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!" gibed he. "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 limousine.

CHAPTER VI

CONVINCED AT LAST

JOHN 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.

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.

“Gad!” mused he. “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.

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 Rincón 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.

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 problem, and more than once he softly swore within himself.

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

"H-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 un-

dressed 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," thought he, 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 door-bell, 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, never fear!"

With which he very deliberately got out of bed, put on slippers and bath-robe, and went into his study. He closed the bed-room 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.

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 passed 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," remarked he, "if we're really going to discuss things, do you mind my inquiring whether you've got a stray Mindinao 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 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.

"What d'you mean," cried he, "by putting up a game like this on me? *Me?* By coming out to Edgecliff and playing your infernal tricks? 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 there 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!" said he. "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!" sneered Murchison. But all at once, with a cry, he clapped his hand to his face.

“Oh!” he ejaculated. “My glasses!”

Storm grinned broadly.

“Yes, I shouldn’t wonder if you *would* need another pair,” said he. “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 even lodged in his mustache. And the silken cord which had held the glasses now dangled futilely from his ear.

“Your watch!” cried Storm.

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!” gibed the scientist.

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.

Toward the door Murchison retreated, gasping.

“You—you hell-hound!” gulped he.

“Thanks!” answered Storm, 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 in 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 figure of Thomas, patiently waiting, lounged against a mud-guard.

“Oh, there, Thomas! Thomas!” hailed Storm.

“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!" commanded he, 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 an ass of yourself!"

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

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

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

"Thanks," remarked Storm 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 a 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!" smiled he.

He smoked a while, in thought, then took a note-book from the table drawer and entered half a page of notes.

This done, he turned out all lights and once more went to bed.

"I guess you're convinced now, at last," thought he. "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 magnificent 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.

CHAPTER VII

JOHN STORM'S DEMAND

“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,” offered he. “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, richly 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," answered Storm.

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 its 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, 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 mid air, 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?" asked he, 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 and of your class. 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—and when I say 'you,' I mean your class, the capitalist class as a whole. I represent the other class, the proletariat. Am I clear, or am I not?"

"Go on!"

Before continuing, Storm smoked a moment in silence. Then he sat down on the table-top and swung his leg easily over the edge.

"You're in my grip, Murchison, you and your whole class, the class of exploiters, parasites and war-makers—the spoilers of the world.

"I've demonstrated my abilities. If you force me, 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 it? 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?” repeated Murchison. “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. 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’ve been working on radioactivities for eight years now, and, Gad! they’ve led me a pretty chase. A few times I’ve just come off alive, and no more; and if you cared to see them, I could show you a dozen scars from the pitiless bombarding of ions and all that. Yes, I know the game.

“Where other men have courted womankind, 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. I’ve begun where they’ve left off. The human race, in regard to radio-activity, Murchison, stands to-day just about where it stood in regard to fire, when only a few of our anthropoid ancestors knew how to make it—when it was all a red, roaring mystery, heaven-sent, to the hairy hordes that roamed the jungles.

“But I—well—I understand the matter. Yes, quite

fully. I can produce strange forces, and direct them. This may 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!" burst out Murchison, 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? I'm going to use my power to bring you and your kind to heel. To make you do my bidding. Not to extort money from you—never fear. This is no Black Hand affair. I don't need or want a penny. What I'm after is domination over you mischief-makers that keep the world perpetually in war and ferment and hot turmoil.

"Wherever you people go, you capitalists, you set Hell in motion. Like noxious ferments, like malignant bacilli invading a body, you set up every kind of pestiferous reaction—and, so that you may have your gold, the world has strikes, gun-men, murder, starvation, plague, adulteration, corrupt politics, broken faith, hate, lies, ugliness and war.

"For you the machine-guns sweep the mining-camps. For you are women and nursing babes mangled with explosive bullets, piled into heaps, saturated with kerosene and burned in hideous pyres by thugs and offscourings from the slums! For you—"

"Stop! Stop, I tell you!"

"For you and your ~~damned~~ gold some human fiend yells 'Fire!' at a miners' celebration, and seventy chil-

dren are trampled to a bleeding pulp! For you, hiding behind your monstrous fraud of 'Follow the Flag,' the blood of millions of strong men is poured out in war. For you—but why say more? The list of outrages and horrors would take all day, in the mere telling. Your hands, there, Murchison—white as they seem—are dripping red with human blood—the blood of men, women, children. Look at them, do you? See it there? Ugh, you beast!"

Storm slid off the table and strode over to the billionaire, who now had sunk down in his chair and was staring at this terrible accuser.

"Listen!" cried Storm, shaking a long forefinger in the billionaire's face. "Listen, now! The world is tired of you and your class, sick and weary of your mean and bloody work. It's ready for a change, and I—I'm on the job to help it.

"I've got the whip-hand, now, and I'm going to lash you to a fare-ye-well. You and your kind have long flooded the earth with the workers' blood. Now I'm going to strike back at you. But don't be alarmed for your own precious skin, you coward! I won't touch a hair of your hypocritical, charitable, missionary-promoting, pious old head. Not a hair. And you'll lose no drop of your cold blood. But I'll lay the lash on where it will hurt you worse and make you jump higher—on to your pocket-book, damn you!"

"What?"

"That's what I'm going to do—unless you tag my heel like a whipped cur, you and all the others like you. No beating round the bush now, Murchison, no mincing words or diplomatizing. I've got you people in bad,

and I'm going to boss you to a finish. You're going to obey, or—well, your power and magnificence, your vast properties, your trade and commerce, your everything won't be worth *that!*”

He snapped the ash from his cigar and ground it beneath his foot.

“You—you'll pay for this, you—you—” stammered the billionaire; but Storm laughed in his writhen face.

“Pay, eh? Yes, I'm likely to—I don't think. Just try to start something, and see. Gold is God, for your class and for you. Well, you're worshiping dust and ashes.

“Whatever contains gold, lies in my power. No matter in what part of the world it is, 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!” jibed Murchison. “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,” interrupted Storm. “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 fineness, 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.”

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

“Not at all; not the least in the world! I’m simply giving you the chance to avert ruin for yourself and yours by granting one demand. I might make a dozen, looking toward social justice, but that would possibly complicate matters. So I’ll be reasonable and go at the worst deviltry right off—at the thing I hate more bitterly than you hate poverty itself. Just one demand, get me?”

“What—what is it, doctor?”

“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!*”

CHAPTER VIII

CLASHING WILLS

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.

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 Mindanao. “It is yes, or no?”

“Wha—what d’you mean?” stammered Murchison.

“To put an end to organized murder, yes, just that,” answered Storm quietly. “I intend to apply a styptic to society, to stop the flow of human blood. The world, through you and yours, is all one reek of rottenness, graft, cruelty and barbarism. And, out from among them all stands preëminent the supreme savagery of War!

“War is Hell. That’s a bromide, but it’s true. Satan himself, the real old fire-and-brimstone Satan

of past generations, never invented anything more stupidly savage than this idea of killing human beings for the enrichment of the few. War, private or public, is all murder—and it's got to stop!"

Murchison gasped, inarticulately; and now, fully convinced of Storm's insanity, cast a measuring glance at the door. The scientist understood.

"Don't be alarmed," said he. "I haven't the slightest disposition to harm you, personally. You already have my promise. And beside, what good would it do? You're far too useful, Murchison, to be molested by any direct reprisals. I need you in my campaign of War against War. My campaign to stop this international game of 'Beggar 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 era of growling, fang-showing brutality. Does my idea convey any meaning to your gold-sodden intellect?"

"War?" gulped the billionaire. "What—what do you mean? Stop war? You want me—*me*—to—?"

"To get together with the other vultures that fatten on the world's battle-fields, and end the whole infernal saturnalia of carnage. In a word, stop murdering!"

Murchison gasped.

"Are—you sane? And in earnest?" he managed to articulate.

"Never more so! Absolutely!"

"Had—had you asked for—"

"I know—money! Arrrh! Money. *Money*! Is that all you can think of, money, you gold-grubber?"

I fancy you'll have something else to occupy your attention, before very long! Now then, what's your answer? Are you going to do my bidding, or not? Come! Speak up!"

"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," exclaimed he, 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—"

"And tremendous revenue-producers for the manufacturers of armor-plate, guns, ammunition, clothing, canned carrion and cheap coffins!" interjected Storm. "Just what part of *your* fortune had its origin in any of these industries, eh? How much influence have you ever exerted on the press, to stimulate militarism, so you could sell your rotten—?"

"But, for the present, they're necessary evils," the billionaire interrupted, raising his voice. "War begets patriotism, too, and brings out all that's best in the nation—"

"Kills the flower of our youth, you mean; wakes the ape and tiger, in man, and sets the cup of blood to our lips! No, no, Murchison, your specious patriotic bunk won't go, any more. It may fool the Henry Dubbs, and all that; but you're talking to a man who *knows*, now—one who understands the game, flag-waving, brass bands and all—one who is wise to the way our boys are tricked to the trenches and death, while

you fellows sit secure in Wall Street, cutting coupons!

“You can’t put any of your mouldy old platitudes over on me. I know the whole matter from A to Z, and I demand the cessation of murder—murder of the working class for the benefit of the shirking class. Understand?”

Murchison pondered a moment, or seemed to. Then said he:

“Even admitting you’re quite right, what can I do? War? How can *I* abolish it? Why do you come to *me* with your—your Utopian demand?”

“Why? Simply because you’re the richest man in the world, a man of incalculable influence, whose every word—mostly buncombe—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 millions of minds. Because—”

“You misunderstand!” interjected Murchison, his face livid. He started forward in his chair. “*I* have no part in—”

“Silence! I know all about it, and the people are beginning to know, as well. With the radical press spreading the facts before them, day in and day out, do you imagine you and yours are going to be immune, forever? It is flinging the truth broadcast to millions, every week—and you, cowering on your estate, believe you can still hide behind the mask? Only a madman, drunk with power and gold, could entertain such nonsense! I tell you, Murchison, you’re the chief

sinner of the whole unspeakable lot; and you're the man I've picked to help me right the wrong!

"I may involve others, later. Probably shall. But you're the one I've chosen to begin with. You have vast power, and that power I'm going to use, both economic and political. And—"

"My dear sir! I never held an office in my life! I take no part in politics—beyond voting, like any good citizen. I'm a business man, pure and simple—"

"Impure and complex, you mean," interrupted Storm, throwing away the butt of the smoked-out Mindanao. "It's quite true you never have held office, but you pull the strings and make the marionettes dance your tune. 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, to-day, 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 class, Murchison, whether in the United States or in Europe, constitute the real government. This so-called 'People's Rule' bunk is all rubbish, and you know it! Of course, there are elected officials and all that; but with the exception of certain ones whom I won't name, but whom you know right well, because they carry red cards in their pockets, they're all so many puppets!

"They 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 trying 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.

"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!" commanded Storm. "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!*"

“True enough, gold certainly can tip the scales of justice, I admit,” answered Storm thoughtfully. “Only, this time, it won’t work. Things aren’t going to happen according to schedule. Up to now, you’ve been able—you and your bunch of silk-stockings burglars—to ‘plant’ any kind of evidence you’ve needed, against anybody you’ve wanted to get. You and your private detective agencies and all the rest of the outfit, with their dictagraphs and perjury and strong-arm work and gun-men have been able to get away with anything and everything. Your ‘frame-ups’ and ‘jobs’ have usually worked to a T, but they won’t touch *me*. You won’t start anything on me, Murchison, in the good, old, capitalist way. Why not? Because you won’t dare, that’s all.

“I’m not an ordinary agitator who can be suppressed and hustled off behind the bars on the first charge that comes convenient. I’m a scientist, aching for a fight; and in the hollow of my hand I hold you and yours, absolutely. Even though I know you’d like to, you can’t send me to the Pen, nor to the electric chair. At every turn I can and will checkmate you, Murchison—so be warned in time. Be good!”

“I’ll see you in Hell first!”

“Doubtless you’ll be there, but I decline to make any appointment. All I want to impress on you is the fact that you’d better crawl down while the crawling is good. The first hand that’s laid on me, the first charge that’s brought, will be the signal for a slashing, smashing center-drive right through the house of cards that you call your wealth, your property, your system. You and your whole class will be involved. It won’t

touch the workers, for *they've* got no gold; *they've* got nothing to lose. But *you*—what it will do to you will be a plenty!

“I tell you, Murchison, your money and your power will run through your fingers like water. I'll drain you people 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. Processes are at work this very minute, which I am controlling. If I'm taken away from them—God help you!

“In the smash that would follow, Black Friday by comparison would be a picnic. Your whole hellish system will cave in! Lucky for you and your kind, Murchison, if Red Revolution doesn't raise its head, the barricades go up on Broadway, and the guillotine arise in Wall Street to do its bloody work with you and yours!”

CHAPTER IX

WAR

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," said he. "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 Hell on earth, just for the sake of a Utopian attempt to stop warfare. Your campaign itself would bring anarchy and bloodshed far worse than the evils you complain of. Why, you'd have absolute chaos, if you made good your threats! You'd have panic, unemployment, mob-rule, rapine, arson and red murder! No, no, I can't believe you mean what you say. You've got some other game up your sleeve. What do you really want, now? In plain English, let's have it!"

Gone now all Murchison's veneer of culture. Gone the language of diplomacy. Reduced to its lowest

terms, his bartering. All his life accustomed to buying what he wanted, now he still tried the same tactics 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,” continued he. “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 altogether. There’s positively no use 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 the system and 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.”

“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 wholesale murder of the working-class in defense of the interests of the ruling class.

“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.”

He stepped to his book-case, jerked “Man and Superman” off the top shelf, thumbed it over and, turning to Murchison, read the Devil’s speech to *Don Juan* and *Ana*:

And 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 to-day 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!

He paused, slapped the book down on the table and looked at Murchison.

“Precisely!” jubilated Murchison. “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? Have you or your banqueting peace-societies, or your Hague Conferences or your canting clergymen and bishops, ever really waded in and stopped a war?”

“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, bidden your fat bishops pray for victory, and created the warlike integument of capitalist society, glorified militarism, and beaten the tom-tom, you and yours have! What for? For profits, infernal hypocrites and scoundrels that you are!

“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 at 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 game, what? Oh, a beaut! But it’s going to stop before long, and—”

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

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

“Listen to how Dr. William J. Robinson describes one little incident of the Pan-European war:

Whoever has seen the Belgian refugees run for their lives from their invaded and burning towns and villages will never forget the spectacle. Old and young, men, women and children, all were running. Terror was depicted on the faces of all. After the flight from Antwerp the physicians at Maastricht had in one day to treat *over 300 women who during that flight had had miscarriages*. The women belonged to all classes of society—rich, middle class and poor. Just imagine, if you can, the horror of the situation—what the exhaustion, what the physical suffering, must have been to bring on an abortion, and what terror, what horrible sufferings, these women must have experienced if, in spite of the hemorrhage, and the pain induced by the abortion, they had to run and run without stopping!

“Fine business, eh?” gibed Storm, turning a few pages. “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. . . . 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?” said he witheringly. “But it brought Prussia several train-loads of French gold at last, you remember. Train-loads, mind you! Which gold was hoarded away in the Kaiserhof Schloss, I understand, and was used in the Big War. Oh, grand!”

Murchison winced, and thrust out a hand in protest.

“That’s past history!” exclaimed he. “Modern warfare is humane and scientific. We have asepsis, now, and the Red Cross, and all that. 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? Really, Murchison, you amuse me! Perhaps you stopped reading the papers, during the Big War? Perhaps you never heard of men burned to a crisp by German liquid fire or gasping out their lives, with gangrened lungs, after having been ‘gassed’! Perhaps you never knew about whole companies being shattered to bleeding fragments by a single 42-centimeter shell, or about soldiers of the Allies going mad after weeks in trenches half-full of stinking water, where they had to stay with rats and vermin and rotting fragments of human flesh? Go a little farther back and recall the Japan-Russian war.

“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 to-day draw interest by the barrel on that war? Humane, eh? See here!”

He tossed down the book and took up Kirkpatrick’s “War, What For?” from the table.

“Here, on page 83,” said he, “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. . . .

“Enough!” cried Murchison, paling still more.

“Just hear what Andreief, in ‘The Red Laugh,’ has to say about another of those profitable Manchurian battles.”

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

“Sit down there and listen!” dictated Storm. “What? You run a slaughter-house and refuse to learn about its operation? Keep still, now, and pay attention! It will do you good to know a little—just a very little—one per cent., maybe—of the 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 one 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. 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. . . . 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. Hundreds of fingers, like the claws of a lobster, gripped them firmly by the legs, gouged out their eyes, and throttled 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? Hark, 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 smashed 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,” said he 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 mush of blood and sand; nowhere among the carcasses of horses and men—nowhere could be found the torn, bloated, fly-blown corpses of bankers, bishops, politicians, capitalists, and other elegant and eminent ‘very best people’! 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-a-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. Not defiant, this time, was he. Neither did he threaten or bluster. All the come-back had gone clean out of the man.

Storm, his long arms folded, watched him with most mordant scorn.

“To-morrow night, Murchison,” said he, by way of ultimatum, “your tremendously swell 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. It will be a representative gathering of the elect—the ‘sons of Mary,’ and all that sort of thing. And there will be gold and jewels, champagne and flowers, music and the

light of women's eyes, and various other pleasant and expensive things.

"I hardly expect to be invited, Murchison; but I shall be there, just the same. If not in the body, then invisibly, with powers you can neither understand nor measure—yet. If you don't come to my terms by 6 P. M. to-morrow, I shall consider that you don't care to co-operate 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!"

"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 corpse-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 bishop, a railway president, a coal baron, a judge, a senator, 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 fringeline—up where bayonets gleam, sabers flash, flesh is

ripped, bones cracked, 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 Twenty-sixth Street, where wonders were preparing which soon were destined to startle the whole world, to shake it to its deepest core.

CHAPTER X

BELSHAZZAR'S FEAST

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 keynote of that marvelous scene. Gold shone in ear-jewels, in hair ornaments, in chains and rings and bracelets of the women there; gold, pale or 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 evening) sheltered a thousand South American butterflies. Lives had been lost along the headwaters 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 trans-

formed 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.

With deep content, save for one haunting fear, the billionaire sighed. What more could man desire? Power, wealth, adulation all were his. He was to address these folk; and his speech was to be flung broadcast for the world's plaudits.

The orchestra in the Italian marble balcony at the far end of the hall, hushed at a signal from the 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,” thought he, 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,” said he, 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, United States Secretary of War; Fouchard, the world's foremost aviator; Griscomb, the venerable poet and *littérateur*; 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, science and military power that ever yet had come together in one room in the New World.

Then his eyes wandered to the face of Mrs. Murchison at the other end of the table. Not even her implacable 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-hasped 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 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 propertied 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. Winter, and cold, and snow outside, all were as though they had not been; yet Murchison felt chilled. 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!” scoffed Murchison 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?”

He reached for the golden beaker and took a swallow of champagne. Up and down the table, more and more 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. The Bishop, quite merry with wine, grew red in the face with suppressed laughter. Fouchard, the French aviator, pressed with his foot the slipper of Griscomb's daughter, with whom he had already begun a cavalier flirtation. Secretary Baker, reputed a 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?"

"The old fool's drunk, and don't know it!" growled Wainwright, sotto voce, to Mrs. Crewe, at his left.

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 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, damn the rascal!" he was thinking, a sense of relief battling with his fear. "I knew it was all bluff and bluster from the beginning."

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 high 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 realize our—er—sacred trust—”

“Which trust, Henry? Oil, beef, mines or railroads?” murmured Wainwright quite audibly, draining his glass.

“With all our power 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 massive cup of gold.

CHAPTER XI

THE HANDWRITING ON THE WALL

DEAD silence followed.

Muted and breathless, the guests sat statue-like, a moment.

Then Mrs. Murchison cried:

“What is it? Are you ill?”

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, maybe?”

“No—no! It’s nothing—just a little dizziness, that’s all,” croaked the billionaire.

“Father! Father!”

Hildegarde, her mind distraught with visions of apoplexy, once more, circled his shoulders with her beautiful bare arm. Musicians, servants, guests and all waited spellbound with astonishment and fear.

“The—the cup!” gasped Murchison, pointing at it with a shaking finger. His gaze never for an instant left its heavy carvings. “D—d—damn it! *Look!*”

His voice broke, in a kind of wail. Here and there men and women were standing up, in panic. Mad? Had the billionaire gone suddenly mad? Or was he only drunk?

“*The cup! The cup, I say!*”

There, already plainly visible to him, a great gray blotch had spattered all across the 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. “What the deuce?”

Griscomb caught at his shirt-front.

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

Fouchard clapped a hand to his jaw, where all of a sudden two gold teeth had crumbled to bitter, acrid ash.

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

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

“Dr. Roswell?” said she.

The doctor, who had been sitting near the other end of the table, arose.

“If you need me—?”

“Oh, Dr. Roswell!” cried the billionaire's wife. She caught him by the hand. “This has happened before—some kind of unexplained attack! What shall we do?”

Roswell started toward Murchison, and everybody

stared, some standing, some still in their places at the table. But now Murchison 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; bound 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 magnificent gold chain went gray, then turned to powder, scattering jewels all down her dress and even on the tablecloth.

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 cuff-links, watch-chains, ear-pendants, bracelets and rings.

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-paws 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, ever faster, it flowed. Suddenly the whole *kanthardus* slumped.

“Great God!” choked Murchison, recoiling.

Where the wondrously carven 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 ruin close beside her hand. Other cries arose.

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!*” ejaculated the Baron Iwami.

The gold lace of his broad ribbon had turned a dirty gray; the Order of the Rising Sun, upon the breast of his heavily braided official coat, had vanished. Only the empty red bit of Japan silk that had held it re-

mained, 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!” urged Hildegarde again.

And now Mrs. Murchison was at the other side of the billionaire. Both women, with Jinyo and the doctor, 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.

More dishes kept crumbling, and the stiff tablecloth became a muck of wine and débris.

The servants, all dumb-stricken, gaped in horror. Every semblance of order, of convention, was going by the board. Stifled oaths, cries, unanswered questions, all intermingled. Stark panic was at work.

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

“Listen, all you people!” cried he. “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 harkened. 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!

“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!

“And now grant me a supreme favor; 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—far 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—and remember, not a word of this is to leave my house!”

“Who stays, Murchison?” spoke up Wainwright, his drawling 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,” answered Murchison. “You stay!” His eyes searched the double line of men’s faces, as already the women, pale and wondering, began to drift out of the great dining-hall.

“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 chill 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, the Secretary of War, 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 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 said he:

“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 consist of seven members!

“And now,” he added, turning to the men who were still left there in that strangely disordered room, “now all who are not on the committee will leave us, at once. I ask this in the cause of our common welfare. And—a last word—*Silence!*”

CHAPTER XII

THE VOICE OF THE BLIGHT

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 musicians and 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 the Secretary of War; 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 to-morrow, you're fired! M.

“Here, Jinyo!” he commanded. “Rush this to the majordomo. 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? You invite me to dinner, Van, and my watch and chain melt off me like ice-cream in Hell! Come, now, what’s up?”

The billionaire shot a penetrating glance at the copper czar.

“This is no time for joking,” he answered incisively. “If what we have seen here is true, we’re up against a fearfully critical situation. Just what it all means—well, that’s for us to find out.”

A pause.

He sat down at the end of the devastated table, and 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 the vacant ribbon on his breast, laid his right—brown, and fine, and immaculate—upon the cloth, as he leaned forward to listen.

“Now,” exclaimed 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 has 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!”

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 showed 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,” interrupted Jassy, turning one of the plates in his hands, “seems to be the silver, with a leetle, a wery 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?” asked Roswell, taking it from him, while the others watched with intense interest.

“Is there any gold in it now?” queried 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. With each, out sifted a fine white dust. At the third, the plate broke in two. Its cross-section was honeycombed with infinitely little interstices, practically invisible to the naked eye.

The copper czar took, and for a moment examined, a piece of this strange, spongy metal.

“And you put your monogram on *that*, Murchison?” gibed Wainwright. “You blazoned your name on *junk?*”

“Extraordinary, my word!” exclaimed Sir Grey-Huber.

Baker picked up one of the fragments and studied it, while Iwami with a slim forefinger began feeling a dust-pile on the table.

“Well, what the devil?” ejaculated he.

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

“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 and watches and scarf-pins—the ladies' bracelets, chains and earrings—Baron Iwami's Order of the Rising Sun—all were gold! And where are they now?" insisted the billionaire.

"But, man—" exclaimed the Secretary of War.

"Listen!" ejaculated Murchison. "Now I'll tell you all I know. You won't believe me. You'll call me insane—but here are facts, right here on this table, to prove I'm not! 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 his threats were far wider than just breaking up my banquet or destroying a few hundred thousand of my gold. He swears he'll make a clean sweep of all the gold in the world!"

"Preposterous!" put in Roswell.

"Is it? If he can do *this*, what's to hinder—?"

"Who *is* this crimson idiot, anyhow?" burst out the copper czar. "Who is this run-amuck Malay? That's the first thing to know. Once we get hold of him—"

"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!"

“The Hell we are! Give him the Pen—or the electric chair!”

“S-h-h-h! This is no time to lose our tempers. We’ve got to keep cool, now, and go slow. Once we start him in earnest, he will—I believe he really can—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!”

“Kill the swine!” cried Wainwright.

“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 capitalist class gasping like a 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! You can sell the public 650,000 shares of P. W. E., in two months, and put over whatever you choose on the Interstate Commerce Commission—to say nothing of a hundred other strokes of genius—but you can’t come this blight business on *us*! 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 look that vay, to me,” answered the professor, while Roswell nodded corroboration. “No other hypot’esis explain the residue. But vat force it iss, I cannot say—yet. Only I am off the opinion—”

“Bunk!” shouted Wainwright. “Stuff and nonsense! Give the damned fanatic a few hundred bucks—if you don’t dare slug him—and let him fill up on whatever dope he gets his pipe-dreams from. 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.

“Here goes for easy blackmail!” sneered he. “I head

the list with one hundred dollars in gold—all in big double-eagles—on condition that each of you chips in the same amount!”

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?” bitterly smiled Murchison, 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 only a few pinches of a fine, white, metallic dust!

CHAPTER XIII

THE SEVEN CONSIDER

MURCHISON laughed dryly, as the copper czar, dumping this dust on the table, recoiled from it in terror.

“Charlatanism, eh?” queried he. “Sleight-of-hand and mountebankery, what? I reckon *you’re* settled, all right enough. It all depends on whose ox is gored, Andrew. No more objection to our campaign, I take it? And no more idea of buying off the attacker? Very good, then.”

He turned to the others, while Wainwright still continued, in a dazed fashion, to stare at the dust which now represented his gold.

“So now then, gentlemen,” he dryly continued, “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 short off.

“The devil!” he ejaculated. “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 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! We have ways to do things in our department!”

“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!”

“Excuse me, sar,” murmured Jinyo, bowing, “but other messages come, also, just now. By the telephone. Mrs. Farquhar, she say 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! *Yuké.*”

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—find how he’s working, and where, and wreck his damned machinery or process or whatever it is. 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 said Wainwright:

“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.”

“Right you are for once,” assented Murchison.

He sat down wearily, leaned his head on his hand, and thought a moment.

“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, New York City, in cheap little rooms. He’s a poor man, with nothing to lose but his liberty or his life, about neither of which he cares a hang. And—”

“What’s his demand, Van?” interjected Wainwright.

“His demand?”

“Yes! Why not give him what he wants, and have done with him?”

"Give him what he wants? Why, you're crazy! He wants—he wants us to abdicate!"

"What?"

"It comes to the same thing. He's demanding that we abolish armies and navies, altogether, and put a stop to war. That is, make an end of our expansion, our markets, our—"

"He must be an absolute lunatic!" put in Baker.

"Naturally. But he's got power! And what could be more dangerous than a madman with power? He's like a maniac running the streets with a bottle of nitroglycerine in either hand.

"I tell you, gentlemen, this thing is bigger and more serious than any of you realize, as yet. The man is absolutely determined to have his way with us. He means to put an end to war. That involves the finish of every moneyed man, every military man, every trust and big business, and the whole capitalist world, in general. It simmers right down to that; there's no alternative save universal wreckage. He wants us, *us*, to abdicate!

"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?"

"Nothing, so far—save *this!*" And Murchison

tapped the slip of yellow paper that still lay, crumpled, on the ravaged table.

“Damn! 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, than you can with vinegar. You’ve been a financier long enough to know *that!*”

“Bah!” ejaculated 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. We hold the political machinery, the banks, railroads, mines, mills, factories, practically every official in the country from President down to Podunk dog-catcher; the schools, universities, press, army, navy, police—everything worth having.

“And against us is pitted—what? One man!”

“There may be more, later.”

“Well, what of that? If the people start to follow this maniac, give ’em Napoleon’s infallible prescription, ‘a whiff of grape.’ I guarantee that’ll settle things.

Why, this man assailing *us* is like a lunatic attacking Napoleon's Grand Army, itself, and—"

"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," said he.

"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 and the doorman summoning their cars, 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. Dead wood, both of 'em—not a spark of initiative or genius. 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, tomorrow, 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 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 slippered tread sounded across the polished floor over the precious Shiraz rugs; pacing, repacing—pacing, repacing, as he wrestled with the problems of the impending ruin of the System.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TRIUMVIRATE

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 an office 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 echoings the vital tides of the city's life reëchoed 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 first-growth Georgia cedar diffused its pleasant, characteristic perfume.

All poverty, want, care, hunger, and human suffering seemed but dream-wraiths in that atmosphere, impossible to realize, to render concrete or intelligible.

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.

“Good morning, Secretary! Hello, Van, how goes it?” He tried to speak casually; but a tension was evident between all three rich men—a strained endeavor to appear natural and quite at ease. Truth was, they all sensed the inherent capitalist instinct of suspicion, ever existent among even the closest so-called friends of that class.

The lack of real faith and trust and confidence made itself manifest. No true fraternity in a common cause, but only an alliance in face of peril, now united this triumvirate; a bond developed by the accident of having shared the secret at the banquet of the night before.

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

“Well, Andrew? Any news? Have you seen anything like a leak, in the papers?”

“Not a word. I’ve looked ’em all over. Absolutely mum, thank God!”

“I guess you’re right,” answered the billionaire. “I’ve bought them all, too. Haven’t found a line of trouble in any of them—but I thought I might have missed it, somehow. And you, Secretary?”

“Everything’s quiet, so far as I’ve been able to learn,” answered Baker.

“Good! That’s the first step. Any data, yet, from Jassy?”

“Data? Rather!” He spread his hands before the cheery 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.

“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.”

Wainwright blew a cloud of smoke, spat and looked from one man to the other.

“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. Sup-

pose the scarlet lunatic should turn his rays or whatever he's got there on my Mexican properties or my Rand holdings? The ore, gentlemen—the ore right in the solid earth—wouldn't be worth a continental except for ship-ballast. Grand situation, isn't it?"

Silently pondered the billionaire. Then said he:

"I want to add a few words to that report, gentlemen."

He faced the other two.

"It's evident we're dealing with an irresponsible fanatic, an avowed enemy of the existing order of right, law, order, and profits. One who hasn't the slightest consideration for established institutions or vested interests, if only he can work his will.

"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," remarked he. "Last night it was the solid gold tiara of King Chlodovic, the Goth. Age, fifteen centuries, roughly speaking. 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 had happened—well, you see all that was left in the bottom of the box!

"Steel, gentlemen, 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!”

“We went all over that ground, last night,” said Baker. “It’s easy to say ‘Act,’ but how?”

“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 the Secretary of War, “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 985 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-r-r-rd* sharply. Murchison swung the bracket round and took down the receiver.

"Hello, hello? Storm?"

". . . ."

Murchison clapped a hand over the transmitter.

"Got him!" he announced, in a swift aside. "The spawn of Hell!" Then, once more speaking into the instrument:

"Good! Say, see here, Storm—Eh? You—you object to my comment on your person? But—but, man—! How could you have heard *that*? Are you the devil, or what?"

". . . ."

"All right, I apologize. Forget it! See here, now, 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?"

""

"Eh? How do *you* know Wainwright and Baker are here?"

""

"All right. Come on down, anyhow. We'll smoke one of those famous cigars together, and— All right!"

""

"Ten-thirty, then, ready for business. O.K. Good-bye!"

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

"What d'you think of *that*?" he croaked. "He's got wireless beaten every way for Sunday! I tell you men, if we go on the assumption we're up against a simple, A B C proposition, we're making a fatal mistake. Storm is a hard nut, a damned hard nut. If we get away with him at all, we'll be doing well. I warn you now, think twice before you speak, and *then* only say part of it!"

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, chose cigars and fired up. Storm, awaiting overtures, gazed non-committally into

the fire. Murchison took off his glasses—silver-bowed glasses, now, like his silver watch and chain—and began polishing them on his handkerchief.

As for Wainwright, he leaned back, clasped his thick hands over his head, narrowly eyed the newcomer, and belched smoke.

“Well, now to business!” suddenly spoke up the billionaire. “No explanations are necessary, Mr. Storm. These gentlemen were both among my guests last night.”

“Of course. I know it.”

“So? And you know all that happened there?”

“Naturally.”

Storm spoke in even tones, without a trace of boastfulness, but as merely stating a simple fact.

“Very well—so be it,” answered Murchison. “You needn’t, therefore, waste any time convincing Baker and Wainwright, here, of your power. To misquote Cæsar, they came, they saw, they were convinced. They are both equally interested, with me, in adjusting matters satisfactorily. I reckon we can get together, somehow or other, and—and settle things right for all parties concerned, without the least hard feelings. They’ve been helping me keep everything quiet—”

“Why do you want to keep this quiet?”

“Why? Oh—ah—well, you see—naturally, it’s best for this matter to remain in our hands, and not get to the general public. It might—hm!—disturb confidence, you know, and—and—in short, Storm, you can deal with all three of us as though we formed a unit.”

“You’re ready to make terms?”

“Terms! Just that! Terms!”

CHAPTER XV

THE ULTIMATUM

“TERMS, that’s the word now, Mr. Storm,” spoke up Wainwright. **“Terms! What’s doing?”**

The scientist squinted at the fire.

“It’s quite simple,” he answered. **“I’ve already explained to Mr. Murchison.”** He spoke a trifle slowly, to make each word quite plain.

“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, imperialism, and warfare. I intend to use my power to end those things. That’s all. Nothing hard to grasp there, gentlemen!”

“What are you?” demanded the copper czar. **“One of these crazy radicals?”**

“No, I’ve never joined them—not politically, that is. But in so far as they oppose warfare, I’m with them. And that, you know, forms a considerable part of their program, anti-militarism does. But we’re not here to

talk politics. We're here to get together on this anti-war proposition, and the sooner we do it, the better."

The Secretary of War coughed.

"But, sir," interposed he, 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 unparalleled expenditures of money, all unproductive."

"You exaggerate," put in Wainwright. "Compared with the size and wealth of the country as a whole, our bill for military purposes is no heavier than yours for pipe-tobacco, or, at most, cigars."

As though to illustrate, he took another weed from his waistcoat-pocket and lighted up.

Storm answered:

"No, sir, you're wrong. Just in money cost, this item—including loss of producing power by the men involved, interest on our public debt, pensions, and so on—comes to more than \$450,000,000 a year. Do you realize what that money would do in the way, for instance, of education? It would keep 1,800,000 young men and women in college a whole year, for one thing.

"A single shot from a single big gun of a single warship burns up the price of 20,000 loaves of bread; and men, women, and children are starving right here in New York City, not a mile from this office! One broadside volley costs—think of it!—\$20,000! The total war-bill of the world, even prior to 1914, was *eight billion dollars a year!*"

"Impossible!" cried Murchison, trying to sneer.

“No, not impossible, but true. And all paid by the masses to enrich *your* kind of people,” Storm continued. “All spent for expansion, for markets, for profits, gentlemen. Of such is the Kingdom of Gold—which I am going to destroy.

“Just try to imagine at least a little of this ghastly situation—leaving aside all thought of the hideous pain involved, the mutilation, blindness and agony, the sufferings of the millions of widows and fatherless children—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. It is as if the fiends of Hell were crazed and loose on earth. And this is statesmanship!’ This is the Reign of Gold!”

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 the story. When you sum up the totals for the past century, human reason fails to grasp the truth.”

“Don’t, I pray!” cried Murchison, holding up his hand. “I — you — you’ve already told us quite enough!”

“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 thirty million. These, mind you, comprising the best and strongest men, 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 150 million human beings ‘actually slaughtered or made feeble and unfit as a result of only one hundred years’ of “splendid” and “grand” and “glorious” war—150 million working-class people.’

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

“Hold on there!” ejaculated Wainwright. “You forget the vast disproportion between rich and poor. If more workingmen than millionaires have been killed in war, that’s only because millionaires are so comparatively few!”

Storm laughed.

“So?” answered he. “Yes, of course. You rich fellows are always so eager to go to the front! How about New York City’s crack regiment of business men and millionaires, many of whom ride to their drills at the Armory, in autos? When the Spanish war broke out, did they go? Nothing doing! They voted *not* to—promptly and intelligently voted to stay right at home, and be safe. Only one member went, ‘for a lark,’ he said. He got it—in the neck. And the pa-

pers played him up for more space than they gave a thousand ordinary, common soldiers killed!

“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. *You* are never found where ‘the lean, locked ranks go roaring down to die!’ The plain, cheap wage-slaves, the common men, the fifteen-dollar-a-week clerks, the blistered miners, the tanned railroad men, 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.

“*You* people know how to escape wallowing in the blood-vats, how to avoid the horrid, rotten-edged, tetanic, gangrenous wounds; the shells that, when they strike, slough the flesh in large masses, with muscles protruding through great rents in the skin; the madness that comes from long exposure to the thundering of siege-guns or from the sight of men shattered to fragments, the feel of hot blood sprinkled over you, the stench of the rotting bodies of your friends as yet unburied. Such things are for the common herd, not for the masters of Gold.

“‘The common earth mustn’t drink up *their* rich, aristocratic blood; no rough army surgeon shall carve and slice and saw “leading citizens” and carelessly toss *their* severed arms and legs into a bloody heap of flesh! Certainly not!

“Such people as bankers, manufacturers, mine-owners, senators, congressmen and the like are safe. Their blood is richer and more sacred than the wage-earner’s cheap red ooze. They keep well out of danger—and clip coupons—while the common herd is rushed to the front where modern butchering-machinery is ready to mow men down by the thousands, and befouling disease is ready to rot the unspilt blood!”

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

“You be quiet!” commanded Storm.

He rose and stood before the three; and at them he thrust his long, big-knuckled forefinger, as was his wont when growing excited. “I haven’t told you one per cent. of the truth yet! I’ve only outlined things to you. You know as well as I do that Ridpath merely stated a fact when he wrote:

To the capitalist it is all one whether this world blooms with gardens, ripens with oranges, smiles with a harvest of wheat, or whether it is trodden into mire and blood under the raging charges of cavalry and the explosion of shells; it is all one to him, if his coupons are promptly paid and his bond is extended.

“And my old finance professor, back in the University of Michigan, Professor Adams—do you know what *he* says—and says truly?

It has been the immemorial policy of the money power to foment wars among nations; to edge on the conflict until both parties pass under the impending bankruptcy; to buy up the prodigious debt of both with a pailful of gold; to raise the debt to par; to invent patriotic proclamations for preserving the national honor; and finally to hire the press of two generations to glorify a crime!

“Rubbish!” ejaculated Wainwright, angrily. “That’s all damned rot!”

“Oh, indeed?” retorted Storm. “And perhaps Ruskin was indulging in rot, too, when he said:

Capitalists, when they do not know what to do with their money, persuade the peasants that the said peasants want guns to shoot each other with. The peasants accordingly borrow guns, out of the manufacture of which the capitalists get a percentage, and men of science much amusement and credit. Then the peasants shoot a certain number of each other until they get tired, and burn each other’s houses down in various places. Then they put the guns back into towns, arsenals, etc., in ornamental patterns, and the victorious party puts also some ragged flags in churches. And then the capitalists tax both annually, ever afterwards, to pay interest on the loan of the guns and powder.

“Such, gentlemen, are some of the facts—some few of the facts. 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?”

And folding his arms, he faced all three of them, with an expression far from good to look upon.

Baker was the first to frame an answer.

“Suppose,” said he, laboring to curb his anger, “suppose we admit everything, what then? What’s your program?”

“This!” And Storm tapped off the items on his fingers.

“First, call an international conference of bankers and big financiers.

“Second, insure widespread newspaper publicity for

all your deliberations, which will instantly fix public attention and prevent any renegeing on your part. I'll see to the publicity end of it all right enough.

“Third, get into coöperation with the Proletarian Peace Secretariat at Brussels.

“Fourth, adopt my graded plan for international disarmament.

“That's all. The alternative: I smash your gold and the world's gold to powder!

“Your gold! Your ‘pail of gold’ that buys the nations' lives! A pail of gold, condensed from a sea of human blood! Brains don't rule to-day. Intellect is dethroned. Conscience has abdicated. Soul is no more. Honor is forgotten. Common human decency is a thing of the past.

“Gold! In its train come war and want, famine and pestilence, disease and death—child labor, unemployment, prostitution, drunkenness, tyranny, extortion. Gold! Why, if one of you men should ever happen to reach heaven by some fluke, you'd be like Mammon in ‘Paradise Lost’—

E'en in heaven his looks
Were always downward bent, admiring more
The riches of heaven's pavement, trodden gold,
Than aught divine!

“Gold, indeed! But now I've got the whip-hand of you people. The coin in your pockets and the rings upon your fingers are no easier for me to annihilate than the heaped-up sacks of gold in the national treasury—it's all one to me!

“No matter where gold is, I'm its master. I warn

you—and, through you, the whole capitalist class of the entire world. I am going to have my way with you. Mark that—I'm going to have it, to the full!"

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 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, to decide whether you'll take a hand in stopping all this, or not. 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 you mind. Watch Wall Street, that’s all. You yield, or I’ll give you a fifteen-minute 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, but with a look that swept them all in one common mispraisal, he walked out of the office.

And the door, closing behind him, hid him from the sight of three of the angriest, most disconcerted men who ever sat and plotted in the robber-caves of Wall Street.

CHAPTER XVI

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!” ejaculated 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, gentlemen, 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.

“Right you are, Secretary,” he answered. “We were pinheads to ever let him get away, like that. We ought to have nailed him, while we had him. How? Cinch! A scrap—a knock-out—then a frame-up. Self-defense. We could have put him in the morgue, or Bellevue, and never batted an eye. Got away with it as easy as a cat lapping cream. But now—!”

He took a turn up and down the office, clenching and opening his hands, as though the powerful fingers itched to be at Storm’s throat.

“I guess he means to force our hand,” said Mur-

chison. "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. The only thing to do is stamp him out—at once!"

"Bump him off, quick! That's the talk!" chimed in the copper czar. "Put the Blackertons onto him—they'll do the job, and nobody the wiser!"

"Shhh!" cautioned the billionaire, glancing round, nervously. "Not so loud! Still, 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, gentlemen, with all the earnestness of my being. 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 guess I know a thing or two about 'direct action,' as it's called, if it comes right down to a scrap. And all I know is at your disposal. If you've got to hit, hit only once, and *hard*; that's my say, and to Hell with the Constitution! When it comes to a frame-up, I'm there with the goods. I haven't been through a dozen strikes without learning a whole lot. You remember how I handled that Coatli Valley strike in '99?"

They wouldn't mine gold for me, the sons of dogs, so I gave 'em the lead treatment. They started in talking about their rights and the law and all that line of bunk. They even had the nerve to put up the flag over their tents—the American flag—what d'you know about that? Did I argue or arbitrate? The Hell I did! I turned about six hundred gunmen in there with a dozen Maxims—and the men went back to work, on my terms—what were left of 'em! We spaded in about seventy-five, in all, counting the women and their brats. No more strikes *there*; no more Constitution or flags, you bet!

“And that little mix-up with the Rio Hondo bunch? Huh! After I flooded the two lower galleries, *that* was settled mighty quick! I bet the survivors are talking about that unfortunate accident to the pumping-machinery even yet! Oh, it broke the strike, all right enough. Total expense to me: Pumping the galleries dry again, and paying for two hundred and thirty-six pine coffins, cheap by the dozen.

“Leave Storm to *me*, gentlemen. We'll soon have an end to all this bunk and chatter!”

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—”

“You believe *that*, do you?” spoke up Baker. “Well, say—look here, Murchison, I'll take my chance, 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!”

“I don't know French,” broke in Wainwright, “but

I know U. S. A., and my motto is *Slug!*" He turned on Murchison. "Afraid he'll bite you after he's dead, are you?" he gibed. "Where's your nerve? Ain't getting *old*, are you?"

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

"I think you're right," said the Secretary of War. "You've analyzed the situation correctly. Legal means won't reach him. An insanity commission or an arrest and 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 pourparlers 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 Edgecliff hasn't made me over-anxious to try any encores. In view of 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. "No more stalling on this game! Send a slugger up there to 'get' him, would be my way. A little strong-arm work is what I vote for, P. D. Q.! There's no such thing

as mutual concession, with a mule like him! He wants it all, or nothing. *I* know the type!

“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 mine-shaft, 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—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 if’s, and’s, or but’s.”

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 of yours, Mr. Baker.”

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! The two who lose, must never know who the favored one really is! Do you understand?”

“I get you, Van,” answered Wainwright. “Come on, let’s go to it!”

Baker nodded comprehension.

“So you see,” continued the billionaire, with a smile, “what 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 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 non-committal 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 Storm in my own way!”

But there was little time for reflection. For as they stood there, the big clock over the fireplace chimed twelve strokes.

And hardly had the echo died, when, down below in the street, far, faint and vague, yet steadily growing louder and more ominous, a sound was already audible.

A sound—the sound of men in turmoil, of confusion, fear, panic.

A sound the like of which none of them ever yet had heard—a sound that shot them through with sudden apprehension.

With a brutal curse, Wainwright sprang toward the window and peered far down.

“Blue Hell!” he shouted. “Noon already—and Storm's at his work! At his work, down there in Wall Street!”

CHAPTER XVII

PANIC!

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.

Already the mob-psychology was at work—terror stimulating terror, reason swept away, the thousands lashing themselves into blind panic.

“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 and obliterated him.

Murchison pursed his lips in a long, low whistle.

“I know him!” cried he, 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! *My* God!"

"Yes, it's your God, all right!" sneered Wainwright. "You certainly hit it that time, Van!"

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, some on the sidewalks, others in the gutter. Still others were clutching at their cravats, staring at their hands, even turning their pockets inside out, as the hurly-burly jostled them along.

"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, when Hell's to pay!"

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 with.

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. Most were open. Brokers, clerks, stenographers, all were leaning out; bank-president jostled messenger, and financier elbowed telephone-girl in the perfect democracy of sudden excitement; even here and there upon the roofs and along the cornices, men were creeping, holding on at perilous heights and peering with extended necks and pale, anxious faces. And every door of every office-building was spewing out crowds. Torrents of anxious or sensation-seeking men and women were cascading through the swiftly-whirling revolving doors, out into the rapidly-increasing jam upon the street.

“Fire! Fire! Where’s the fire?” hundreds were shouting. “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.

“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 blue-

coat 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 of reserves came pushing.

A revolver squibbed. Rose a yell. The crowd broke and ran—a shoving, howling, frenzied horde.

And, hardly a moment later, with a clatter of hoofs, a patrol arrived. Some one was bundled in; then a limp figure was half-dragged, half-lifted up and vanished in the Black Maria.

Dense, now, the press was, angry and wild and brutalized with fear.

A shrill, howling voice pierced through the tumult.

“See there!” snapped Murchison. “The inevitable prophet!”

Up on to 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 office-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,” announced he. “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 Wain-

wright. "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."

"Ninety years would be better," snarled the Secretary of War. "If we had the soldiers we need, and the guns, we'd soon put an end to such infernal rubbish.

"Give me a single Maxim, up here—"

"Good work! They've got a hose on the mob!" And Wainwright bellowed with joy as a squad of firemen, battling down Nassau, began ripping into the mob with swift white water. The crowd dissolved, with terrific uproar, only to form still further down.

"Give me one Maxim, I repeat," continued Baker, "and I, personally, would guarantee to clear the Street in five minutes. Five? Three? A good Gatling would be even better. It throws eighteen hundred nickel-steel projectiles a minute, and every one can rip through ten men! The swine! *I'd* teach 'em!"

"You forget," said Murchison, "that *these* are not the rabble! We're not on the Bowery, now—this is Wall Street!"

"That's right," acknowledged Baker. "I forgot. But never fear, there'll be rioting all over the city. Guns will be needed, all right.

"You see now, Murchison, see with your own eyes, what you big financiers must back me in? I hope this lesson won't be lost on you? We need Gatlings in every police-station in New York and all our cities—we need loop-holes and towers—every bit of stone paving should come up, and wooden blocks go down. Barricades of wood are no good against machine guns.

"We need a hard-hitting, straight-shooting State

Constabulary all over the country. One of these days you're going to regret it bitterly that we haven't got an army of five million men here in America. Why, any fool of a farmer knows he's got to have a long, sharp goad to drive oxen with!"

"I reckon that's right, too," answered the billionaire. "Well—we'll see, we'll see, at once! But there's no use watching this cage of insane monkeys any longer. It's cold at the window. Enough! To work!"

The Secretary and Wainwright drew back into the room. Murchison closed the window.

"Damned good scrap, all round!" approved Wainwright with enjoyment. "Only it was too much water and not enough claret. Well, there'll be claret enough, later, once we get at Storm!"

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.

CHAPTER XVIII

THROUGH THE MAELSTROM

INTO the outer, the active business office, they passed. Already Murchison was thinking.

“This puts the seal on the death sentence. Has Storm attacked the Sub-Treasury board 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 smoldered 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 limousine, the newsboys' shrill cries were echoing through the cracks and gashes that New York calls her down-town streets.

"Hextry! *Hex*-try! Mystery hits Wall Street! Gold melts like snow! Here y'are! All about de Blight o' Gold! Hextry! *Hextree*."

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."

"Yes, sir."

The car vibrated with the acceleration of its powerful engine. Then, grumbling, it moved slowly away from the curb, and, plowing like one of Alexander's battle-chariots through the Persian hordes, began to make way up Nassau.

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," thought he, as the car stopped 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 and Broad, 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.

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 Blackhanders 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.

Some of these canards even got into the columns of the yellower journals, whose sales went into the millions of copies. Practically everything was told, repeated, exaggerated, telephoned, telegraphed, printed, except the plain truth—that a fifteen-minute Blight, ending as suddenly as it had begun, had fallen on all gold coin and objects on the street-level of Wall and Broad, for a space of three blocks east and south of their juncture.

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 with which 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 positive 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 proscribed area before the lid, so to speak, had been clamped down.

The whole lower end of Manhattan was now a roar-

ing, howling, fighting maelstrom of humanity. Competent observers reported, later, having heard the tumult as far down the Bay as Staten Island.

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. No efforts of the police to disperse the multitudes and drive them away, seemed to have the slightest effect.

Gold! Gold! The obsession quivered through the very air. *Gold!* A kind of temporary madness gripped the people. They fought together, knowing not why, save that each unit, each striving human being hoped some wondrous treasure might fall to his hand.

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. Thousands gained access to the area through buildings and cellars, making their way by devious passages. Many made their way in even over fire-escapes and planks laid across dizzy chasms. Some crept in through telephone-tunnels and sewers. 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 accidents and cases of fainting oc-

curred. 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.

Wine-shops and saloons were raided. Great excesses took place. Hundreds of windows were smashed in, and loot incalculable was ravished therefrom, especially on Maiden Lane, center of the jewelry trade. The sum-total of fighting and pocket-picking will never be known. In a word, Pandemonium burst over New York, and for a while Hell broke loose.

Under such circumstances, small wonder that Murchison's machine made slow progress.

"Thomas!" shouted the billionaire 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, inch by inch, more often not moving at all, then gaining a little through the pack of fighting, howling men, the huge machine pushed along Maiden Lane.

Here Murchison got his first actual sight of mob-violence. Some of the jewelers had already managed to get up shutters and barricades; but the crashing of glass and the swirl of looters horrified the billionaire. He caught disjointed glimpses of battle—here a policeman striking, there a man pitching headlong;

again, proprietors with revolvers holding the crowd at bay while frenzied employees nailed up rough boards over gaping apertures. He saw blood flowing, too—then, terrified, cringed back into the car and pulled the curtains tight.

“Merciful God!” stammered he. “If—if they knew *I* was in this car—!”

Now the limousine had won past Liberty Place, and Broadway was drawing nearer.

“Go on, Thomas! Go on!” shouted Murchison, quaking and cowering. His soul weltered with rage and fear and hate—fear for himself and his own precious skin, rage and hate against Storm, who had let loose this fearful scourge, and against the shoving, crushing, fighting, yelling mob.

“Oh, for a Napoleon, here!” thought he. “Oh, for a battery of Maxims!”

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 coöperated then to lay planks, supported by bricks, across the lines of hose. On these the billionaire’s machine rolled out into Broadway.

He trembled like a leaf, in this emergency, but the greater fear of going back into that raging tumult forced him to press onward.

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.

Recognized, as he leaned for a minute or so from the window to confer with the police, Murchison's presence revived the excitement.

That wiry gray hair, that hawk-nose and those spectacles of his, world-famous in uncounted cartoons, had instantly betrayed him.

Wild stories licked through the crowds, as fire licks the prairie.

"Murchison! Murchison's here! He's lost all his money! He's thrown it all out his windows!—He's turned all the gold in the world to dust!—He's just cleaned up another billion, damn him!—He's just been assaulted!—The Blackhanders are after him!—He's wrecking the city!—"

Bricks and stones began to fly through the air. Thomas was struck by a jagged piece of iron, which deeply gashed his cheek; but, stoic and impassive, merely cursed with fervor and still stuck to his post, bleeding yet competent.

Crash! went one of the car windows, then another. Murchison, ghastly and quivering, crouched on the carpeted floor among the splinters of glass and tried to pray; but all the words he could lay tongue to were boiling curses against John Storm.

As the machine ploughed past Trinity Place, with the police on either hand battering off the clutching mob, 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 Cortlandt.

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 just then.

"Go on! On!" shouted he 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; for the first time to understand the vital difference between coupon-cutting and facing the chattering rapid-fires or trying conclusions with the business end of a rifle.

"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 engine, had forced its way into the thinning, outer areas of the horde, on Greenwich Street, did he dare peek out again.

"Thank God," breathed he 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—think of that!"

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 SWEEP AWAY BY UN-
KNOWN FORCES!**

**Prominent Men Lose Large Sums—Many Injured—
Numerous Fatalities—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 from it all, away into peace and quiet; away from danger and the strife and wrack of angry men.

Murchison, in a small way, 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 slight, 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 measure 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 him—to him, Van Horne Murchison!

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.”

And Thomas, mopping the blood from his face with his buckskin gauntlet, gave the engine a little wider throttle.

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.

CHAPTER XIX

A THUG AND A NOBLEMAN

LIKE 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,” said he, “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 in spite of these precautions the car is recognized.”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right—start along. And, say, Thomas.”

“Well, sir?”

“Better drop in at the nearest drug-store and get a bit of plaster on that cut. It’s rather ugly. You can do it in a minute or two. Only, don’t take too long about it. I don’t want the car recognized.”

“I don’t need no plaster, sir. I’ll be fine, just as

soon as the damned blood dries a bit sir, beggin' your pardon, sir."

"No, no! Go get yourself fixed up. I wasn't thinking about that, but you'll attract attention, this way. Now drive on. And remember, be at the station, here, at ten-minute intervals, beginning half an hour from now. That's all!"

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 news-stand 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," which still was pouring masses of eager men southward to what they hoped was El Dorado.

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, hundreds of detectives and reporters, a thousand banking-houses were straining every nerve to locate.

"Confound them!" and Murchison smiled an ugly smile of triumph. "Even though they don't suspect

yet, that I'm actually, though unwillingly, behind this thing, I know they're after me, just the same. 'Interview! Interview!' they're howling. A word from me, just now, sends things up like a rocket or drops 'em like a stone. Fortunes are to be had for the picking, or ruin scorches men and firms by the train-load lots. But do they get the word? I reckon they don't—not if I see 'em first!"

Thus cogitating, his thoughts divided between the tumult he had left behind and the errand that now impelled him, he reached his goal, and without hesitation turned into a doorway not far from the corner of Thirty-First. Up the dark stairs he toiled to the third landing, as though familiar with the way.

"This is my first—and last—personal contact with these gentlemen here," thought he as he knocked on a door at the far end of the hall. "I'm sure of *that!*"

A scraping of chairs in the room at the other side of the door answered his knock. Then, after a little silence, a hoarse voice demanded:

"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 the voice said:

"What's the weather?"

"Looks like snow," replied Murchison promptly.

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, who are *you*?” demanded the square-built man. “You’re wise to the weather, O.K., but you’d better come across with your monaker.”

“No matter about that, 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, in that dark lair. When he came out, he shook hands with the square-built man, who was grinning. He seemed well-pleased, as he took his departure. 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!” commanded he.

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 Murchison hid himself at Edgecliff was merely passive. And active matters are now pressing forward in this difficult chronicle.

Enter, now, John Storm once more.

How was all this violent social ebullition affecting him? Where was he, what doing and what planning? Let us see.

If you could have looked into his laboratory, on Twenty-sixth Street, after he had launched his fifteen-

minute coup, you might have seen him sitting perfectly at ease in a big chair, pipe in mouth, observing a complex piece of apparatus.

The curtains of the room were close-drawn, and gloom filled it. All you could distinguish clearly—for it stood out with striking contrast against the half-seen jumble of models, machinery, retorts and tools that covered work-benches, tables and even the floor—was a diagonal of ground-glass, set into a kind of box or cabinet, and rather brilliantly illuminated from within.

Wires led from this to Storm's telephone, thus putting it in direct connection with the whole city system. A switchboard stood beside the apparatus; and as Storm plugged in on this board with various wires, images appeared on the ground-glass screen.

First came a confused street-scene, a miniature and silent mob in wild confusion. Then, as Storm consulted his telephone-directory, chose another location and changed the plugs, the picture changed to a dense press crowding about the bulletins in Herald Square.

Again Storm shifted the connections, and again; and every time fresh and vivid scenes leaped into being on the glass—scenes that all convinced him even so slight a trial as this had shaken civilization to its base.

“If,” reflected he, grimly, “if this little touch, this mere nibble at the edge of things, throws a million or two of people into spasms, what will a *real*, a prolonged demonstration do? Gad! There's no escape from me now! The Plutocracy—the world of finance and robbery, and war and exploitation—the reign of gold—I hold it all, all, in the hollow of my hand!”

Still the scientist changed his connections, seeking in vain for what he wanted.

"Where can *he* be?" muttered Storm, drawing hard at his pipe. "Odd, but I can't find him. I'd give a good deal to get a line on *him*, just now, but—! Damn this visualizer, it's far from perfect, yet! The best it can do for me is follow the telephone-system!"

He smoked and watched the varying play of the great panic for an hour or more, nodding with satisfaction from time to time; then, wearied at last, suddenly snapped a switch.

The vision died. Storm arose, let the shades up and flooded the room with winter sunshine, revealing clearly now the vast and complex multiplicity of the apparatus that filled his den.

For a moment he stood looking out into the street, pondering his campaign.

"Every day, regularly," thought he, "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 and the lives of the rest of their class won't be worth a sheet of my blotting-paper."

Suddenly his telephone bell rang.

"Hello, hello!" he answered the call.

"You, Storm?" came a voice over the wire.

"Yes! Mr. Murchison? No use trying to inter-

view me now. Nothing doing! You know my hours. Good-by!"

"Hold on, hold on there, idiot! See here—you know that Vuelta Abajo field of mine, in Mindanao? Well, say, Storm, it's yours, all yours, and I give you a free, clear, guaranteed title to it, if—"

Storm hung up. But his face had gone a trifle pale.

"Gad!" said he to himself. "It's a good thing I cut him off. That field—those smokes—the old fox! He certainly knows where to hit me. But it's no go. Nothing doing. It's a fight, now, to a finish!"

Considerably agitated, Storm put on his coat and hat, and went out.

"Enough of this by-proxy observation," said he. "I'll get a bite to eat, and mix with the crowd. I want to see it at first-hand. After all, I've got to hear what they're saying, before I can get an exact line on the situation."

Slipping on his coat he reached for his hat, which lay where he had tossed it among the vials and carboys.

"Too bad," he reflected, as he left his den and carefully locked the door, "too bad about all this violence and injury and these various fatalities. But the innocent bystander always gets it in the neck. In the righting of a great wrong, some few individuals must get hurt and even die. I can't free the world from war and hate, from greed and misery and woe, without doing a *little* damage—as much, perhaps, as would be done in a single skirmish of a single battle!"

Thus thinking, he sought the streets of the city.

He found the scene already familiar, from his observation of the ground-glass screen. But the ebb and

flow of the crowds, and the noisy turmoil that still showed no signs of abating as he pushed along Broadway, nevertheless interested him keenly.

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 Detwiler-Hawks divorce suit, the Hammett murder case, the Vanderpoel turquoise robbery, all had dropped out of public interest.

Everything was Blight, Blight, Blight!

The man across the table from Storm, flushed and excited, tried to engage him in an argument concerning it, while the diners to right and left—clerks, stenographers and miscellaneous New Yorkers—hung eagerly on every word. This man claimed to have witnessed, personally, the first attack, in Wall Street.

“I was there, I tell you,” he cried dramatically, waving his arms. “I lost a gold stick-pin right in front of the City Bank! Look—see that?”

He displayed a pinch of white ash, carefully done up in a leaf of a note-book.

“That’s all I got left, now, of my pin—that, and one o’ the rubies! I was there, I tell you—right on the spot—my God!—what’s happening here in New York, I’d like to know?”

Such a dense and pushing crowd immediately gathered round the table that the manager had to beat

his way through and order the man to keep still or leave. The excited one refused to be silenced.

Storm, seeing a fight in the making, got up, leaving his meal half-eaten, and shoved his way out into Fourteenth Street again.

As he shouldered his way into the brawling mass of humanity, 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 homeward, 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 *détour* to get south of it again.

Thankful that his precious radiojector was safely hidden in his secret den on Fifteenth Street, he returned to his laboratory on Twenty-sixth, for another

session with his visualizer. Again he sought Murchison in it, first at his offices, then at the Englewood mansion; but though he got good pictures of the offices, he found no trace of him there. The Englewood connections were poor; he could obtain only blurred and imperfect results. Murchison was not to be discovered.

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 A. M., 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, wrinkled by thought and harsh with many battles.

“So?” mused the man 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? *Donnerwetter!* Still it

may be 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 Grace's orders and interrupting Your Grace, 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!"

"But, Your Grace—"

"Silence," roared the count. "Not a word! Now, listen. Here are three telegrams. One to Glanzer, at Bucharest; one to Heinzmann, at my Düsseldorf laboratories; one to Captain Kurz, on board the *Sieger*, at Amsterdam. Have these sent at once!"

"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!"

"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, a cube 2.54 centimeters on each edge, 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 said he:

“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.

“Krämer?” 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 laid the telephone back on its two horizontal supports.

“Now!” he exclaimed. “To work.”

Vigorously he began to arrange despatches, papers, data, and all the material already in hand.

This man, Maximilian Braunschweig, 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 this colossus of Jewish race and faith, this ardent

Zionist and utterly fearless juggler with the finances of more than a dozen nations.

First of all the financiers of the Old World, he had perceived something of the truth. His keen Semitic brain and 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 completely 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 Bahnhof.

The 4.15 Holland Limited delayed thirty-five seconds to couple on his private car—seconds that had to be made up, unfailingly, on the run to Amsterdam.

Already, in obedience to many code-telegrams, banks in Brussels, Ghent, Antwerp and The Hague, as well as in Amsterdam, had shipped silver, by special trains, to Captain Kurzmann of the Graf's quadruple-turbine, 32-knot yacht *Sieger*. This silver, as fast as it arrived, was stowed as ballast; and in the yacht's boilers already a tremendous head of steam was pent.

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.

CHAPTER XX

TRAPPED

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 on 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.

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 re-wound 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.

Storm relaxed, and tried to understand.

"Gad!" thought he, "I'm up against it for sure! What's doing? How can I tell? All I know is I'm caught. Force won't get me out of this. Whatever's in the wind for me, my only show is diplomacy and sharper wits than the other fellow!"

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.

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-dis-

covered facts about the bandages and the gag, the door, the windows, and the dimly lighted gas-jet.

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.

“For Heaven’s sake, what can be the meaning of that?” thought he. 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 definite satisfaction.

“To dope and rob a man like me, who hasn’t got anything at all to steal,” he reflected, “certainly 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, to make millions with. 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 fast-bound in some devious, far-reaching tentacle of Murchison's octopus power.

"And if so, what then? *Death?*" he pondered.

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.

Without him to control it, the Blight would spread at random. Like a runaway locomotive on a down-grade toward a crowded terminal, it must inevitably hurl catastrophe upon mankind.

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.

The world needed him. His death would mean its utter ruin.

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 his 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.

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 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 flared suddenly 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?”

Storm lay low. The voice, though muffled, was indisputably Irish. 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.

“Now,” thought Storm, “here's where I get it! It's coming, now!”

CHAPTER XXI

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, reflected from the other room, was small and spare; the other a tall, square-built man with red hair—a powerful, ominous-looking fellow.

Storm knew they were peering down at him. He smelled the smoke of one of his very best cigars; 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. For a moment, prisoner and invaders stared at each other, mentally taking stock.

"What does all this mean? What do you want with me? What do you think you're going to do?" Storm tried to ask; but the only sound that got past the gag was a stifled: "Wawawa dada wawawawawa!"

The big fellow laughed. His teeth showed in a canine rictus. Storm saw that half of one eyebrow was white.

"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.

"*Wawawawawaaaa!*" 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, eyeing him now with a mild interest, sat down by the bedside and tilted his chair against the wall.

"Come, come, mister," remarked he. "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 furious contortions. He felt sick and dizzy and faint. Cruelly the gag hurt his lacerated mouth. The blood hummed loudly in his ears. Gagged and helpless, he stared at the little beast.

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!

At the mocking, wizened face he glared with fevered eyes, bloodshot and wild and savage. But to speak again he did not try.

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 dawn once more should break, red and sullen, over the eastern sky-line, he, John Storm, would be past hearing, seeing, thinking, struggling any more—forever.

A moment the two men looked at each other by the unsteady light of the gas-flame, which burned low.

Then spoke the intruder—while from the other room

faintly sounded the scratch of pen on paper. Said he:

“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 A1 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, shipshape 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,” remarked he 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," admitted he. "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.

"Pipe that, will you? Some pretty job, eh?"

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 o' time framing that.

"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,” remarked he 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 yen,” 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 bedside, 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, pain-racked 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.

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. Back he stood, 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 contemplatively. "Then off with the bandages, open everything wide, and dust out! We got goods on the old man, now, that'll bring us a million if we work it right. Huh! Only five thousand for a job like this? Nix on that! Guess *not!*"

"Leave Murchison to me, Bo," the other answered, as they sauntered into the study. "Blight or no Blight, he'll come across, *now*, or—!"

"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, both men sauntered leisurely out into the study.

Storm, drugged and bound, heard in his anguish the click of the telephone-receiver being taken down. A pause, then:

"Englewood, 660-Q."

Another pause.

"Hello? How's the weather?"

". . . ."

"Snow is right. It's a cold day when anyone gets away with anything or *us*."

". . . ."

"All fixed, right an' proper. A good job, at that. So, any time we get the rest of the stuff—"

". . . ."

“Sure of it! Everything’s settled. You’ll see it in the papers, to-morrow night, sure. . . . Yes, sure! . . . All right, any time. . . . Give you the whole story. . . . Good-bye!”

Storm made one last, furious struggle, all in vain. Bound and drugged, he heard the striking of matches and the creak of chairs. He knew the murderers, calm and collected, were taking their ease while he—*he* was dying.

“Don’t suppose he’s got a drop o’ good stuff to lap up, here, do you?” he heard the little man’s voice. And then, cautiously, drawers and cupboards were opened, and there came slight sounds of bottles chinking as divers vials and flasks were moved on the shelves where the scientist kept his chemicals and reagents.

“God! If they’d only get hold of my wood-alcohol!” thought Storm. “Or the brandy I had that Haytien *fer-de-lance* pickled in!”

But now, already, his thoughts were beginning to grow vague, uncertain, wild. Over him a strange and numbing change was beginning to creep.

The drug, he realized, had already begun its soporific, deadly work.

CHAPTER XXII

IS THIS DEATH?

BITTER his fight was against it; but in its very nature the battle was a losing one. Will-power, determination, grit, 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 gouted 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 demons who, phantomlike, 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.

"If I could only trace those curves and draw them!" he vaguely thought.

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.

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 enwrapped him in the mantle of Nirvana.

"Straighten up everything, Danny," came a voice. "That's right—now, the sheets over him, so. All O. K.? Fine job, I call it.

"Now the keister! 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, let's beat it!"

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.

CHAPTER XXIII

TO WORK AGAIN

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, sensing only pain and utter exhaustion—an exhaustion so acute that even to breathe, slowly and at long intervals, was anguish. 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.

He was alone, once more. No sign, no sound of the two criminals. Both had fled.

“God! I still live?” thought he 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. He remembered a procedure he often used when he had sick-headache, and with tremendous effort got his hand to his throat. Trembling, he pressed thumb and index on his jugulars. The reduced blood-pressure in his brain presently afforded some slight re-

lief, and he again opened his dull eyes. 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 remembered. “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 there.

“What the devil?” wondered he, with swimming senses.

A moment later he again reassembled his strength.

“Fresh air!” he thought. “I must have oxygen, at once!”

With a huge effort he 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.

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 an explosion, turned on the gas again.

Then, with a shaking hand, he applied the flame to the jet.

Nothing! No result—no flame!

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 strength revived.

And, still pale and sick and trembling, a strange and haggard figure in his gaily striped pajamas, he 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! *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.

To his aching head he pressed his hand and tried to think; but, dazed as he still was, he could not possibly remember just what condition he had left the radio-jector 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.”

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 strongly 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.”

He was strong enough by now to get 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 blamed 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!”

He laughed weakly.

“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.

“Some escape, all right,” said he to himself. “Ingenious attack, only parried by chance.”

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.

Storm listened eagerly for some cry of “Hextry! Hextry, here!” but heard none. Provided anything *had* happened regarding the Blight, no newsboy was deserting Broadway for the comparative quiet of Danton Place.

“I’ll see later; I’ll see soon enough,” mused Storm. “What I must do first of all is try to figure this thing out from A to Z, and see where I’m at. One false step now would wreck everything. And, moreover, I’ve got a few people to get square with.”

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 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 son-of-a-gun 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 it from my own writing! And, being done on my own stationery, with my own pen and ink, right here, it would certainly have got by any and all investigation. It would have passed at face value, all right enough. I’d have been a bona fide suicide, sure as guns!

“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,’ ” thought he, 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. Up he 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, dream-like incidents of his drug-intoxication, just before consciousness had 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, dope 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!"

"Ingenious, 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.

Looking about the room, again, he sought some clue of the invaders. He examined door and windows, to discover if possible how Murchison's thugs had gained access to his rooms, but learned nothing.

“Evidently no violence has been done here,” thought he. “They must have used a skeleton key, and an uncommonly good one, at that, to have picked that patent lock of mine. Traces, *nil*—except a couple of cigar-stubs which offer no clue. I suppose Sherlock Holmes could tell me those crooks' names by looking at the ashes they've dropped on the floor; but that's only in books, and this is real life—quite a different proposition. Well, no matter about them, anyhow. Murchison was the principal in this skulduggery. And he's the man I'm going to settle with, in full!”

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 triumphantly. “I've got it. When *this* strikes Murchison—”

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DEN

STORM'S first move was practical in the extreme. He went quickly out into the hall, and—making sure nobody saw him—dropped a quarter into the slot of the gas 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,” thought he. “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 its 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 of Gold has already worked incalculable devastation. The wealth of the country is melting like snow under a July sun. Unless some immediate remedy is found . . .

“Hm!” grunted Storm, “they’ll find a remedy all right—oh, yes! It’s working, all right; working to a T! Couldn’t be finer. Another day or two of this, and the pirates will be howling for peace at any price. I’ve got ’em on the run, already—not a doubt of it!”

He felt vastly 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 M. For fifteen minutes only it operated, but in that brief time the loss is estimated—

“Hang the loss! Hang the banks! What do I care how many fail? All these details about the panics in the different cities don’t interest me. They’re all alike—same thing, everywhere.

“Main thing is, what’s the System doing? Any con-

erted action on the part of Murchison and his associates in the profit-skinning game? Any scientific commissions of mossbacks appointed to try and solve a riddle that's the same to them as integral calculus would be to an idiot?

"Any governmental action? Any official recognition of what's sweeping the land? Anything really worth knowing, except that my work is going on just as I planned and left it to do? Bah, these fools—like a drove of pigs caught under a gate!

"All this, yellow journalistic bunk and 'human interest' and word-painting at a time like this, is sickening—appalling! What I want and what the world wants—and must have—is facts!"

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. Well—I'll be letting the light in on him and his pack of war-loving polecats before very long!"

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. Gold is not a necessity of life. It is neither food, drink nor shelter. Storm was destroying nothing of actual human need—no loaf of bread, no beef,

no milk, no clothing—nothing but a dull, insensate metal. Yet the world, stupid and unreasoning, had flung itself into the clutches of a perfectly irrational panic.

Far beyond the present limits of the Blight, vast waves and circles of terror, of unreasoning, insensate fear, were spreading.

The mass, stampeded, was clearly out of hand.

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 gold could be hidden ingeniously enough, no loss could result.

Small banks and big alike were bowling over like so many candle-pins struck by a hurtling box-wood ball. The paper teemed with cases of personal injury, and even death, attending the bank runs.

“‘Police and Militia Out in Two-Score Cities,’ ” read Storm. “‘Mob Fights, Tigerlike, at Gates of—’ Pshaw! No use in wasting time on this rubbish. Always the same story—the big bugs sit tight, while the little wigglers wiggle, and fight, and die.

“No matter if a few *do* get killed now. Serves ’em right for having let a fool system like this last so long; a system based on a single metal! Nobody can eat gold, or burn gold, or do anything with gold except use it for decoration and dentistry, or make it into round things called coins, with a fictitious value. And yet, when gold fails—madness! Death! The boneheads!

“They aren’t working-class people, at any rate. The workers have no gold or bank-deposits to worry about. No, these mobs of madmen are mostly the middle-class reactionaries, the small tradesmen, petty merchants and exploiters, cockroach capitalists and all the money-grabbing bourgeoisie I have nothing but scorn and contempt for. Let ’em mob it, if they want to, and get their thick heads smashed. Mighty good thing for the world, at that! The radical press has been trying to educate ’em about economic truths, for decades, and have they been willing to listen? I guess not! But one swift wallop from me, where they live—in their pocket-books—and they wake up quick enough, never fear. Oh, they’re alive *now*, all right enough, if they never were before!

“Better a few should perish now, getting rid of the whole infernal rubbish, sweeping out the dust and cobwebs and making a fresh start all clean and new, than to keep on this way with panics and wars and all the rest, and periodic slaughter!”

Once more he glanced at the paper.

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.

Canards of a thousand varieties were run as facts, all obviously gendered in the brains of panic-stricken or sensation-loving editors and writers.

All these accounts varied and contradicted each other. One paper declared the Secretary of the Treas-

ury was rushing bullion and coin to the blighted cities; another stated that he was recalling all the gold possible to the National Treasury, and there sealing the canvas bags in lead-foil.

One reported a calling of a hasty joint commission of metallurgists, scientists, and bankers, at Washington; another denied this, but claimed the President had issued a special proclamation for a day of prayer.

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 Japan—one paper even named the Japanese scientist responsible—with a view to wrecking the United States and then invading and overthrowing it, were double-leaded. The *American News* had a story, under two-column heads, telling of 200,000 armed Japanese in Mexico, already mustering to the attack; and it supplemented this information by stating that eighteen Japanese cruisers and dreadnaughts had already sailed from Kagoshima, accompanied by colliers, and carrying an air-fleet of one thousand monoplanes capable of dropping fifty cordite bombs apiece, to ravage the Pacific coast. In short, national dementia threatened.

“*We must fight! Fight!*” already rose the cry.

Fight—yes, but what? Whom? Nobody knew, or cared, least of all the yellow press, so long as the spilling of human blood was in prospect, and the boosting of circulation. 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!*”

Above them 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 nagaika-lash, 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.

“Are they discussing economics, urging sanity and calmness, pointing out that the industries, the mines and mills, the factories and railroads and ships, the

land, the farms and forests, the fisheries and all the natural resources are still intact and just as productive and useful as ever? Hardly! Gold is crumbling—and they've all gone mad, stark, staring, raving mad!

“And the people—blind, groping idiots—are bewailing the loss of a ring or pin or a few coins. A city is ‘stupefied’ by the destruction of a few hundred 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 twenty-four hours. He realized that the first thing to do was to “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 paste-board 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 smiled. “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."

He put the room in order, spread up his bed, and removed all traces that anything untoward had happened there.

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—he neither knew nor cared what it might be; but this side street was almost abandoned.

Storm felt certain no one was heeding him as he made his way toward his 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 what-not. Nobody would bother about him.

"Mighty fine thing I've got a place 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-sixth 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. Thank heaven my radiojector is safe here!"

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 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 already pleased her well. Then Storm, with no further parley, climbed to the topmost floor, up to his stronghold under the eaves.

As he switched on the incandescent he glanced with satisfaction at his emergency accommodations. A cot, bureau, wash-stand and book-loaded 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," queried he, "when they don't know even where *I* am? Oh, a cinch! Too easy, eh? Robbing a cripple is herculean beside it!"

He sat down in his single wooden chair, tilted back on its 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, swarthy, quick-eyed and eminently polite, had already made at least the preliminary step of getting acquainted with Angelica.

But of all this John Storm—happily for his peace of mind—suspected nothing.

CHAPTER XXV

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 habit 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 styles which the copper czar 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. So's everybody! The whole damned business goes to smash, and we with it!

"Now see here, Baker. This is 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.

"Not at his office, is he?" asked the Secretary of War.

"Office, nothing! Think he'd dare go down to Wall Street, *now*?"

"This Murchison? 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. Six sharp! Good-by!"

At six-fifteen the three men were in conclave in the billionaire's library—the same great room where, so short a time before, John Storm had first demonstrated his stupendous power. But this time the door was carefully shut, with Jinyo on guard, outside, lest any ear should listen.

Murchison had altered greatly. He was already worn down fine; his eyes, as they wandered round the vast apartment or fixed themselves on his associates' faces, glowered hollow and anxious from behind the silver-bowed spectacles that bestrode the hawk-bill nose; his hue was sallow and sodden, his mustache bristled raggedly, with much pulling, and his hand shook as it held the Mindanao whereof now the savor

and bouquet had all departed. ' 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, who nervously sought to return his look. Baker was agitated and blinking.

"You," said Wainwright, *sans ceremonie*, glaring at the billionaire who could not meet the look, "you are a Hell of a success as an executioner, aren't you? Oh, yes, a bull's-eye on the target of go-get-it! Some pippin, I don't think, when it comes to carrying out a job, what? This thing was left in your hands, and—"

"Now, now, see here! I—"

"Can that! Cut it, and listen! It was left for you to do. *You* could take care of it, all right! *You* could put this lunatic beneath the daisies! Oh, yes! As a result—"

"Well, how d'you know I haven't made good?" blurted the financier, flushing.

"How do I know? What? You ask me how I know, when this very day—?"

"Didn't he tell us himself, no matter what happened to him, the Blight would go on working just the same? Didn't I advise 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!"

Quivering with rage and excitement, he appealed to the Secretary of War.

"That's certainly true, Wainwright," admitted the Secretary of War, while the copper czar fairly boiled.

Murchison nodding vigorously, thumped his fist on the green-stone table.

“You wouldn’t have it so!” cried he.

Wainwright thought a second.

“*Is* he dead?” blurted he. “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 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 tremulous fingers, but found no answer.

“Have you seen the carcass, the remains, the stiff, the cadaver?” demanded Wainwright.

“Why—er—no.”

“Why not?”

“Now see here, Andy, I couldn’t mix up with this thing, personally. I put it into the hands of two of the most expert private detectives in New York. Old, experienced—hm—”

“Murderers! Say it, can’t you?”

“This was to be no slugging job, Andy,” continued the billionaire, lowering his voice and glancing uneasily about him. “No crude, sanguinary piece of work, leaving obvious traces of assassination. Instead, it was planned as a suicide.”

“What?”

“A suicide, I tell you. These men were to enter

Storm's room, chloroform him and bind him, then write a note purporting to be by him—one of them is a most expert forger, most expert indeed—”

“The guy you used in that K & B bond matter?”

Murchison nodded.

“Well, what next?” demanded Wainwright.

“Then they were to drug him, remove the bandages, leave everything in a normal state in his room, turn on all the gas-jets, and decamp.”

Wainwright grunted with satisfaction, squinting the while from fat-lidded eyes. Then he nodded.

“Damned good!” he ejaculated, thumping the table. “I congratulate you, Henry. Didn't think you had it in you to frame such a deal. All right, so far. But what then? Did it go through?”

“It did. They telephoned me, from Storm's room, that the—er—the job was completed, and—”

“You trust them?”

“Absolutely! Faithful fellows, both. Once their word's given—”

“I know. But, the body? Have you had any proofs in that way? Has anyone seen it? Have the papers mentioned it? I've read 'em all, and not a line—”

“I know; but naturally you couldn't expect me to risk too much, by starting any inquiry. It can be done, though, very easily. Quite so. This very night we can assure ourselves—”

A sudden sharp ringing of the telephone-bell interrupted him.

“Hello, hello!” replied Murchison, pulling the instrument toward him on the table. “Telegraph-office call-

ing, 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 table-top, transcribed the message:

Intent level omicron velum energy loam unequal cam indirect
lunar leave empire white intent tram health abbott large lien
mental yea hour effect art respite travail. BRAUNSCHWEIG.

At sound of the name, Murchison started and grew pale.

"What?" cried he. "*He?*"

"Who?" exclaimed Baker. "You mean Storm?"

"No, no! Braunschweig!"

"Graf—?"

"Of course!"

"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 Jewish financier. And for a moment no word was spoken.

Then Murchison flung the receiver on to the hook with a bang.

"What in Hell does he want?" snarled Wainwright.
"What the devil?"

Murchison made no answer, but very grimly seized the consular report and stared at it.

Then he adjusted his glasses on his thin nose-bridge.

"It's in the L. G. code," said he.

"Go on, read it!" blurted the secretary eagerly.

For the moment, John Storm had been completely swept from the thoughts of the Triumvirate.

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.!" said he in a shaken voice he tried in vain to render steady.

The others watched him in grim silence.

"What is it?" ejaculated the secretary. "Quick! What's up?"

"Freely rendered, here's the idea." He paused a little as though marshaling 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 coöperate 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 devil 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!

"He's coming, is he? Going to help us, is he? Some nerve! But—nothing doing, Dutch! Outside, for his! Say—!"

Murchison looked up quickly. He was calmer now.

Some new and big idea had suddenly taken possession of him. A certain crafty glitter in his brightening eye boded no good to whomso would oppose him. But he spoke in even, natural tones.

"This is certainly a new complication," said he. "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?"

Wainwright growled, deep in that gross throat of his. The billionaire continued:

"All this about coöperation with me is so much rubbish. I know Braunschweig! He coöperates with nobody! If he does, the other party's rake-off is always minus zero. We've got to think this thing over. I've had dealings with the Graf. So have you, Andy. You, Baker, remember that matter of the 1904 issue of 3's? *That* was coöperation for you, with a vengeance. Coöperation—yes indeed! 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," said he, "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 public at large isn't going to put up with this very much longer. You know what's going on already—mobs, militia, bank-wrecks, and all. Baker, here, has been summoned back to Washington. That means army's got to be overhauled and put in shape for possible contingencies, doesn't it, Baker?"

"State secret, Murchison, but I don't mind saying it does."

And Baker rubbed his hands together like a merchant touting wares.

"If it comes to the lead cure for the gold panic—we're on the job, that's all."

Murchison smiled faintly.

"Yes, yes, of course," assented he. "But you can't always count on the army, either. We all remember several historic crises where, somehow or other, things didn't work as expected and the guns turned round the other way.

"Now I, for one, don't hanker to stand at the busi-

ness end of a gun, or at either end, for that matter. Storm was right, so far—we fellows don't love the firing-line. No, nor the lamp-post and the hemp, either; nor yet the guillotine. You know the public temper the last few years; things have been drifting a bit. *This*, on top of everything, might just possibly touch off the bonfire. The fools lay everything that happens to *us*. And if this goes too far—”

“The qualified Dutchman had better keep out of our private preserves, that's all I've got to say!” interrupted Wainwright angrily. “Our crowd has managed this country long enough to know the ropes. I guess if it comes to that little ‘whiff of grape’ to clear the atmosphere. Baker, here, can deliver the goods all right!”

“We mustn't act hastily, in any event,” urged Murchison. “We've got to think this out, and think straight. There's lots of time. He can't get here, at the inside, sooner than Monday afternoon. We've got leeway to plan for his reception. If we work it right, we can not only head off the Graf, but possibly also get hold of his scheme and turn his own guns on him.”

Wainwright nodded vigorous approval, as he exclaimed:

“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! Even if Storm isn't dead—and I'd give a million, this minute, to see his head lying right there on that table!—we can handle both him and the Dutchman. This message is nothing but a stall—a clear case of bluff. The Graf would like nothing better than to

have you keep hands off this lunatic and let him wreck America, so he could gulp the pieces. What! You stand for any such a steer as that?"

He slapped his knee with a big, well-groomed hand, and set his jaw at an ugly angle. Murchison considered before he answered.

"Yes," said he 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?"

"Any temporizing, now, is sheer insanity, Murchison. If Braunschweig butts in, that means war to the knife. Don't be an ass, on top of being a confounded hypocrite, and—"

Murchison, stung to the quick, at last, was about to retort hotly when a sharp rapping at the door interrupted him.

"Who is it?" called he.

"Jinyo, sar," answered a voice. "Message for you."

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.

"Go on, open it!" exclaimed Wainwright, brutally.

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),
To-day.**

**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 to-morrow at 11:45, I shall execute a coup of tremendously more importance and vastly larger scope. It will involve not only America, but part of Europe as well. On your own head be the consequences!

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 and to the capitalist class.

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 heeded 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 for the world at large.

Your move!

THE BLIGHT.

CHAPTER XXVI

STORM'S RADIOJECTOR

NOT ten minutes after the reading of this amazing letter, and while the three men in the library, in their own ways, were still reacting from the shock of it, the telephone rang again.

Over the wire came a voice demanding speech with Murchison. When the billionaire inquired this stranger's business, warning him that no reporter could pass the guarded gates of Edgecliff, the unseen one whispered a few words that brought Murchison up all standing, as the phrase is.

"You mean that?" questioned the billionaire, with terrible eagerness? *You know?*"

"I do, and can prove it. Will you give me a few minutes of your time?" came the question.

"Where are you?"

"Never mind. Say the word, and I'll be with you in fifteen minutes."

"Then come, at once! Say 'urgent' to the lodge-keeper."

"I'm on! Good-bye!"

Murchison called the lodge-keeper, on the private line that covered the house and grounds, and bade him let a man pass, soon to arrive, with "urgent" for a countersign. And then followed anxious moments, in

the library; and conversation lagged. But Storm's letter passed from hand to hand for many a re-reading; and if a hundredth of the curses heaped on its author could have taken effect, the scientist would have gone to the Bottomless Pit with no delay.

"Urgent" arrived in the library exactly twelve and one-quarter minutes after his call over the wire. He proved to be a swarthy, short, active man, with some kind of foreign accent and penetrant eyes. Well at ease, he sat down without being invited, and reached for a cigar, which he lighted with aplomb.

"Who are you, and what do you know?" demanded Murchison, abruptly.

"My name don't matter," the new-comer answered. "I'm an independent operator, a free-lance in the detective world. I know you're after John Storm—"

"How did you find out?"

"It's my business to find out things."

"And you know where he is, now?"

"I do. After your two men failed—"

"You know about that, too?" exclaimed the billionaire.

"I followed Storm," the other continued, taking no notice of the interruption. "I know where he is, at this moment. I have a room in the same house. His apparatus is there. He's working in that place. Nobody but me knows anything about it. I can turn the trick for you. How much?"

Wainwright, smiling with satisfaction, met the new-comer more than half way.

"Listen," said he. "I don't care where he is, and won't ask you, because you wouldn't tell, anyhow."

That's your rake-off, that knowledge is. You nail him, and do it right, kill him and break up his machinery, and present proofs to me, personally, and I'll give you five thousand in cash—no checks, the real stuff."

The other laughed drily.

"A hundred thousand is my bottom figure," he answered. "Not that the job's hard. But it's worth ten times that to you—yes, a thousand times. Nobody can do it but me. A hundred thousand! Get me?"

Silence, a moment.

"God! You're gouging deep!" muttered the copper czar.

"Yes, and you're going to come across, too," retorted the other, inhaling a lungful of heavy smoke. "One hundred thousand. That, or nothing!"

"But—" Murchison began.

"Can it!" exclaimed Wainwright. "I accept."

"Then have the stuff on tap, to-morrow noon, at your office," said the other. "Storm and his apparatus will both be dead ones, by morning."

"And then? You trust me to pay?" asked Wainwright. "You have confidence in me, with no writing to show?"

The stranger laughed disagreeably.

"Not a damn bit of it!" he retorted. "But after the job's done, you'll come across, all right. You won't snitch, and you'll pay. Why? I know too much, every way. So I take your word. Now that it's given, I don't need to stick around any longer. I've got a job to do. You'll see me at noon, to-morrow."

He picked up his hat, nodded easily to the three, turned on his heel and left the library.

At eleven o'clock of that same night—while in the library at Edgecliff excited controversy was still going on between Murchison and the copper czar, after Baker had left to catch the "Owl" to Washington—John Storm in his well-hidden little attic den was preparing for the next step in his war against war.

The scientist was fresh and fit again, by now, having wholly recovered from the effects of the murderous attempt upon him.

Having thrown consternation into Murchison's camp, via the telephone, he was now calmly making ready to overhaul his radiojector for to-morrow's work. Although it would have functioned even without him, yet the billionaire's attack had greatly changed his plans. 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 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.

“Even old Max Shinburn himself, king of cracksmen, would have an interesting hour or two trying to ‘crush’ *this!*” smiled Storm 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 and the cover raised.

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 were six hundred and eighty-one.

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.

Suddenly he paused. Outside his door, it seemed to him a foot had creaked a board. He had a peculiar feeling someone was standing there, listening or trying to peek through the keyhole.

Silently he got up and tiptoed to the door. He listened a moment, then quickly unlocked it, jerked it open and looked out into the dark upper hall.

Nobody there.

It seemed to him a door closed softly, somewhere; but in the gloom he could see nothing.

He waited a moment, to make sure no one was spying, then went back into the den and once more locked his door.

"Getting an attack of nerves, myself, am I?" he grumbled. "Forget it!"

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! The combination of effect diminishing as the cube of the distance, *and* the chronological difference between here and Europe, introduces some pretty problems!"

Then, having solved the matter, 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!" judged he at last. "Now I'll add just a little extra power and then she'll do."

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 1,500, he switched off the current, disconnected and stowed the wires away.

Then he threw a handle and turned out the remaining light.

"Got to be sure everything's O. K.," said he, 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 aurora-like 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, was 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.

Stock-still he stood, listening. In the dark, his fist clenched with the eagerness of his attention. 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 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 for shelter.

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.

All at once, an idea recurred to him—a memory of the suspicious sound he had thought to hear at his door, some time ago. He recalled the feeling of suspicion he had felt, and swiftly pieced his evidence together.

“Damn 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 on to 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, and make a paralyzing example of him! It's got to be done quietly, too. No noise, no blood—quietly and with science, or I may find myself in Dutch."

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 at length concluded. "I don't know as there is any law at all when it's a case of ordinary people *vs.* plutocracy. If not, I'll make my own.

"Let's see now. I reckon it this way: That skunk, up there, won't go far. He's after me, to put me in my wooden ulster; and he's after the machine, to bust the devil out of it, the way those rough-necks smashed my lab. This affair is going to be pulled off at once. He'll probably skulk, up there, till he figures I'm asleep, and then drop in for a call.

"If he gets away with it, I suppose he'll win a mighty fine bundle from the Mammonites. 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 alleyway. There's no back yard; just a narrow court. I'm sure of that much, from what observations I've already made. 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 radiojector. 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.

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 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, then hide for Storm’s return. When Storm comes back, one crack with a sandbag or a lead pipe—then a quick getaway over the roof. Cinch! 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 down-stairs.

“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, who had asked a question or two about the lodgers, and had then hired a room, himself, he, too,

had praised the macaroni. Now Signor Benton had come down-stairs again, expressly to try a plate of it. This was flattering.

Yes, indeed, there was plenty left, *con formaggio, signor—ah, molto buono, si!* And he could 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,” thought he, 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 mortal 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!”

He rigged a kind of curtain over the skylight, to prevent any further observation.

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 snow-storm had obliterated any traces that might have led to determining the spot whence he had dropped, or the cause of that accident.

He might have been a burglar, who had fallen from some roof or window, though the excellence of his clothing and his general appearance rather negatived this diagnosis.

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.

There were but four men living who could have explained it—the Triumvirate and John Storm. The Triumvirate culled the news from their papers. Storm, though he did not view the body, got all the essentials from the excited Capotosto family. But he said nothing. The Capotostos privately mourned the sudden loss of their new lodger, but kept close mouths, lest the police put them through dreaded third degrees.

Wainwright, when he came across the news item, identified the man with that keen intuition which had made him so formidable on the Exchange, and once more gave way to a fit of passion. Passion of rage and hate, wherein but one grain of consolation was to

be found, that, at all events, Storm's whereabouts had been approximately located.

Murchison, reading his paper in the library, likewise caught the news, read it twice over, sensed its import and suddenly felt very ill.

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. We have him trailed, with a view to smashing his machine—and our 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 yellowish, 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 cackled:

"I'll get you yet! Damn you! I'll get you—*get you yet!*"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FINAL DAYS OF RESPITE

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.

Even as mobs were rioting in front of such places all over the country, trying to hire boxes at any figure, for the storage of coin and family heirlooms, their treasures turned to dust in their hands and pocket. Numbers of men and women went insane, in such vaults,

as, in the very act of locking up their valuables, these crumbled beneath their touch. Some few suicides followed hard upon the heels of these maddening losses.

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 service and by wireless, found their parallels in Mexico City, all over the northern half of South America, and throughout the United States and Canada.

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.

All other 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 government, the same under empires, monarchies or

republics, always and forever holding the people in subjection for the benefit of the capitalist class, he was reserving as the object of 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-foil-lined 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 gold 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 murder-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 of the capitalist and middle classes drove them insane.

Before the sudden, smashing impact of the Blight, all privately owned gold, inside the huge zone, faded and blanched, crumbled, disappeared.

Speculators of all kinds began running mad, in myriad crooked, intricate and unheard-of forms of gambling. The insurance companies were suddenly swamped with applicants for insurance on gold.

A score of strange reflex actions began to flare up.

By swarms, prophets and fanatics began ranting in every tongue, all over Europe and America. New sects commenced to form with wonderful swiftness; and many of the old ones, principally the least rationalistic, began growing with incredible rapidity. Huge camp-meetings took spontaneous form, in the south, with monster mass-baptisms in rivers and lakes.

As at all times of social turmoil, the churches—chronically dwindling and many of them practically moribund—began to reap great harvests. Fear now as always engendered superstition. In many temples, all-day and all-night services of prayer and supplication were held, and enormous crushes swarmed to gain admission. The Adventists and Millerites sprang into renewed activity, and many a strange, grotesque hegira to mountain-tops, undertaken by devotees in white robes, bore witness to the still-persisting credulity of the human race.

Everywhere, the social, economic and financial effect of the Blight was instant and crushing.

“Gold! Gold is perishing!” This cry had sufficed to set the whole world raving mad.

As in New York, so also in London, incredible scenes resulted.

So accurately adjusted had been the various zones of activity of the radiojector, that for the first two days of the general attack, not the whole city of London was swept. The entire northeastern sections 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, through Southwark, Camberwell and Dulwich.

Up to the actual moment when the Blight struck London, the Briton had pooh-poohed it.

“All very well for America!” the verdict had been. “Most extraordinary 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 English aplomb.

Never had Zeppelin raids, submarine outrages or the naval bombardments of undefended watering-places so agitated the British public as now did this devastating attack on British gold.

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, all among those narrow and crooked streets along the Thames as far as Dock Street and Wapping Basin, stark panic reigned.

Singular scenes occurred among the stodgy old “beef-eaters” or guardians of that venerable pile wherein the crown jewels and much of the royal treasure had been kept since time immemorial.

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 were 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.

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. Both Petrograd and Moscow, quickly laid under martial law, became vast military camps; but no Cossack horde, no Preobejanski 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 Tuilleries, Louvre, Champ de Mars—all contained uncounted hundreds of thousands clamoring, yelling, fighting, even bleeding in the frightful violence of that terrorized struggle for news.

In the Place de l'Opéra, the mounted *gendarmérie* had a pitched battle with the mob.

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.

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 den Linden and throughout the city, yet the national depression caused by the disastrous outcome of the Pan-European war, as well as the scarcity of gold in Germany, due to that Hohenzollern fiasco, made for better order.

Pale-faced, spectacled German scientists made continuous tests on such funds as still remained, working like huge rats in the dim, groined recesses of the vaults.

Everywhere throughout the stricken area in Europe, savants were doing the same. For even though the Great War had profoundly shaken the capitalist system, gold still remained the basis of civilization.

Not yet had come any understanding of the great change that impended over the world. Still one dominant idea persisted—the hope of gain, from the calamity; the burning eagerness to save something, at least, from the seeming wreck. To get rid of gold, men bought everything, anything—land, houses, silver, diamonds, even infinitudes of trivial, useless, foolish trifles. But, as the fear of the Blight increased, the value of gold fell, until its purchasing power fell to almost zero.

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 speculations in gold began all over the world. A three-day period of immunity, granted by Storm, had now set in. During this time confidence revived again, and 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.

In the midst of cataclysmic business failures and a perfect débâcle of ruin and suicide, other businesses of a speculative nature burst out, leaped to gigantic proportions almost in an hour and for a space swam on the turgid, rushing tides of world-disaster.

Spontaneous markets established themselves. "Curbs" were formed and dissolved as by magic. Gold changed hands—what little private gold was left—at irrational figures.

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. Had there been writers in any frame of mind to record these events or dramatize them, wondrous books and plays could have been built around even the smallest of these amazing events. Some of the most surprising developments took place where East and West meet, where the twentieth century grazes the fifteenth, in North Africa, in Algeria and Tunis.

From the French colonies along the southern shores of the Mediterranean, and from the Sahara, weird tales drifted into Europe. The Arabs, Berbers and Algeri-

ans, when their gold melted like the fabled snow they had long heard of but never seen—when all this vanished, especially the age-long-hoarded and infinitely precious golden ornaments, nose-rings, anklets and coin-necklaces of their women (especially of the Ouled-Nails, whose dowries hung about their necks), these strange brown people screamed in vain to Allah Il Allah, for vengeance on the Frank, the infidel dog whose magic had wrought not only this outrage, but had committed the terrible sacrilege of stripping all the golden domes and inscriptions of the Ineffable Name from a thousand mosques.

And a 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. From Biskra and the Desert of Igidi they came, from Hammada-el-Homra and far Abu-Gossi, beyond the Oasis of Selimah; 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 of all nationalities singularly enough put up no fight at all.

Scared bloodless by the Blight, soaked in superstition, these wastrels, 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.

The beakers and chalices, the rings and jewels, the

golden images and gauds looted from innumerable raids, swiftly crumbled to dust.

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 their stallions or their own fright-weakened legs could travel, they fled before the rising swarms of brown-skinned Mohammedan tribesmen.

Fled with parched tongues and bent backs, sweating beneath their *cache-nuques*, over the mirage-beckoning, sandstorm-swept deserts.

Nameless battles, routs and massacres by the Berbers and fierce hill-men freed the world of uncounted numbers of these unchanged thugs and *chevaliers d'industrie*. But many thousands, spent and sun-baked, won through to the coast towns, to the reassurances of the plaza, the galvanized iron table, the green-eyed milky curse of the snow-cooled absinthe in the tall glass. And there, dazed and uncomprehending, they told wild tales, the least of which would have furnished forth a fiction-writer with material for great gain.

Thus the white invader of the Prophet's lands fled the Blight and the pursuing hordes of the Faithful. Thus retreated those who, with the power of Gold behind them, gladly would have faced the Mahdi, had he possessed a hundred times as many tribesmen. And desert Africa for a time, throughout its whole northern reaches, once more swept clean of the invader, the infidel dog, became all brown, all black.

CHAPTER XXVIII

NIGHT IN THE STRICKEN CITY

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.

Laws failed to operate. Courts and judges fell, crashing, from their pedestals of power. Police and militia broke like reeds, before this tempest. Even the armies of the world, hastily called upon for service, to shoot and bayonet the people into dumb submission once again, now snarled with bared teeth at their former masters.

Mutiny reigned. The leaven of new intelligence was at work. Forever past was the day of blind, unthinking obedience to the masters' will. Already the men in blue, the men in khaki, had begun to use their brains; and the supposedly impregnable mass of trained butchers had now got wholly out of hand. Plutocracy realized, too late, that the watch-dog might at any moment turn on them and rend their throats, instead of throttling the dumb, driven cattle of the proletaire.

And white-faced fear reigned at Washington, in Wall Street, at Edgecliff and in every chancellory, every throne-room, every plutocratic stronghold in the whole World of Gold.

The golden binding-cords, once loosened, showed what the true component elements of society really were. Now men and women, for the most part, revealed themselves as mere puppets, bound with golden wires, moved by golden strings. In the whirling jinnee-breath of the hell-storm that scorched the world, only the Social Revolutionists remained calm.

They only, understanding the true philosophy of values, the real worthlessness of gold, labored like Titans, through their press, with innumerable meetings and with hosts of "soap-boxers," to spread oil on these stormy waters. Yet, though thousands listened and were made wise, the vast majority of mankind heeded not; and even though these social prophets "spake with tongues of wisdom's eternal flame," yet chaos swept the world.

Chaos, in which the dreaded "Iron Heel" of militarism itself was swept away like chaff. Chaos, insensate and incomprehensible. Chaos, hurling the mad world whither?

John Storm, throughout it all—calm, collected, accurate in his daily scourgings of the earth, his pitiless and relentless destruction of gold in ever-widening areas—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 day followed day, yet still no banner flung itself

abroad upon the winds of heaven, hundreds of feet above the tortured city.

“Ha!” smiled he, bitterly, to himself. “So, then, still stiff-necked? The idiots in their insensate blindness must have their final lesson. And Ridpath, the historian, was right when he said: ‘The iron teeth of monopoly, once fastened on the marrow-bone of privilege, never relax until the jaw itself is broken.’

“Broken? Wait! I’m ready for that job, too, if *they* are!”

Thus came the final days.

John Storm mingled once more with the howling, roaring, mafficking mobs that now for a considerable time—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—like the Arabian Nights fisherman who liberated the spirit from the brass bottle;—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. Little or no vehicular traffic was to be seen. Much of the tramway service and of the “L” and subway system was paralyzed. Shops were boarded up; special guards, heavily armed, swarmed everywhere; business was at a standstill, save along speculative lines, where it flared and blazed in thousands of fantastic shapes.

In the cosmic discord every relation of life seemed awry, inverted, unreal. The stupid, unthinking, slavish world, suddenly deprived of its age-long fetish, gold, was drifting rapidly toward Bedlam.

The wolf-instinct of mankind for a time seemed getting the upper hand. Atavism leaped up. Every individual now grabbed, fought, struck for his own, tore away what he could grasp, and showed his teeth to defend his booty. "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 hoarsely telling a mate:

"Thirteen years' savin's, that's wot. In gold! All in gold! Ye see, I wasn't goin' to take no chances. No paper, fer mine, no, nor silver. Just gold! But when this here strikes, an' I goes to git my stuff—Gawd!"

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 here 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 pushed his way along Thirty-fourth, to the Waldorf. Here he entered, minded to investigate something of the psychology of the master-class.

The hotel offices and corridors were packed with a shouting, gesticulating mob. Not the great financiers here, but the lesser lights of the golden 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 though the heavens fell, wine would still flow, and at last came back to sit down in the long, main, brilliantly lighted 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.

“Wiped out!” he stammered.

“All gone?”

“Last night I had one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in gold in the strongest safe-deposit vault in Brooklyn,” he stammered. “To-night, d’you know what I’ve got? Sixteen and a half pounds of *ashes!* Oh, merciful God!”

Up he sprang. He staggered blindly through the crowd. He vanished. Storm shook his head.

“If he’d spent that intelligently, now!” thought he. “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.

“Huh?” he fired at Storm. “You don’t know?”

“Know what? Everybody’s crazy, here, or how?”

“Say! Ha! ha! 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!*”

They went up in the elevator, which was packed full, to the ninth floor.

“Know th’ gold room?”

Storm shook his head.

“I’m a stranger, I tell you. Coffee-planter, from just outside Rio. What’s up? The whole town gone insane?”

“And you ain’t read the papers? Ain’t heard, on the trip?”

“Seasick, all the way. Just docked; took a taxi up here. City looks like it had been through a revolution. 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—this here gold room!”

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!”

“It’s certainly a mess,” said Storm. “All lead-colored—and the carpet, all ashes!”

“Ashes! You’re damned right, mister. Some ashes, believe me! The Blight done that.”

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 t’ Hell out o’ here!” he cried with passion. “You’re bugs! Beat it, you, or I’ll have you pulled. Don’t know about the Blight, huh? Nutty! Plumb nutty! Go on, now, go on! Skate!”

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 the aorta of New York—Broadway—pondering on the intellectual chaos of the self-boasting “masters of society,” the propertied class, as mirrored in the wild, inconclusive, anarchistic scenes and arguments he had just heard and witnessed.

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 and hard-eyed painted women

elbowed each other; dope-fiends—of whom the number had now largely increased—shuffled along with those crazed by their losses; 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 during these last nights of the Blight.

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 black man, sweating with fear and zeal—hurling denunciations at the gibing 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 eyeballs rolled as ecstatic frenzy seized the howling fanatic.

Through the tumult, Storm caught a phrase or two:

“An’ de Beast was wid seven horns—wheels within wheels—de days ob Armageddon, my breddren—flee de Wrath to come! Oh, sinners, for de Son ob Man cometh—!”

All at once, the black man vanished.

A louder roar burst upward, echoing against the barricaded shops and through the shattered windows. Somebody had 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!” thought he, 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?”

A vision of his body, jerked and shredded into tiny, red-dripping strings and fragments, bits of quivering rawness tossed on high along the bellowing flood-tide of the street, flashed before his eyes.

He put the vision away with a grim set of the jaw.

“Soon, now!” 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.

“Soon, now, the final blow! And then—?”

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, untiring trajectory to New York.

On her gale-swept foredeck stood the massive, long-bearded figure of the Jewish financier. Though night and mist enshrouded the Atlantic, still his eyes were turned toward America.

High up the mast against which he leaned, the faint, incessant, crepitant 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 XXIX

THE COMING OF BRAUNSCHEWIG

AT half past ten of the culminant 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 financial and governmental supermen.

Wainwright was there, and Baker, and—of course—the lean, gray, nervous figure of Murchison himself. There was Campbell, with Stanley M. Whitney, secretary of the United States Treasury; and there, too, were other men, for the most part tight-lipped and hard-browed—men known and feared and cringed to from world's end to world's end.

Yet 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, dour and ugly and harassed. 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. Futhermore, I think we all agree that a real danger may possibly threaten the national treasure to-day. 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:

“Everybody knows everybody 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 his 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 counter-charges, by personalities and the lie direct.

All parliamentary convention thrown aside, two, three, five men were on their feet at once, shouting and gesticulating. Campbell's pounding with the ruler had about as much effect, now, as a single drop of oil on the whole North Atlantic. These men, cooped there together like wolves in a diminishing circle of flame, snarled at each other with bared fangs, each fighting for what each thought his own personal 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!"

Through all, over all, bellowed Wainwright's dominant threat:

"Gold or no gold, we're masters! We hold the jobs—if we say so, the world starves! Let 'em starve or submit, whatever happens!"

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 rabbinical beard of gray; 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.

But the calm lasted hardly a moment.

Then Murchison, white with passion, leaped up.

“*Sir!*” cried he.

Wainwright cursed and stared. The others turned angry faces at the interloper.

The stranger bowed. He smiled, and with an indefinitely suave gesture that seemed to epitomize ages of European culture, indicated that he waited 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—”

“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 Hell are you, anyhow, to offer anything?”

burst out Wainwright, 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—"

"*Who are you?*" roared the billionaire, smiting the secretary's desk so hard that ink splattered 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!"

CHAPTER XXX

THE GREAT JEW'S OFFER

AGAIN 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 Jewish world-financier's hand in even some of his most intimate, most jealously-cherished monetary ventures.

When, in 1907, he had opened up the South Bechuanaland Railway, with a view to exploiting the Kuruman diamond-fields, he had only too late discovered that Braunschweig had already acquired a controlling op-

tion on every blue-clay region from Barkley northwest to Molanuan. The Graf had, next year, fought him in the Baku oil-region and driven him ignominiously thence; and at other times had jockeyed him out of some millions in connection with the Balkan-Turkish war, the Pan-European catastrophe and the Hui-nan Railway. The Jew's ever-gaping coffers had, in a score of cases, swallowed profits and dividends that Murchison looked upon as his own just perquisites; and though he had still remained the richest man in the world, yet he had been forced to feel the menace of this European power and to take cognizance of this ever-expanding rivalry.

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.

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 fine to the breaking-point.

Murchison snapped it.

“I protest!” ejaculated he, 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."

Braunschweig merely smiled, but said no word. Campbell, the chairman, gaped in amazement. His should have been the place to speak, in the name of this gathering; but the billionaire, at last analysis the master of them all, preëmpted this right, and the others only listened.

"We have not solicited your advice," continued Murchison, his voice rising as anger swamped caution. "We have not requested your presence here. My house is open to you, sir, as a guest, but not my business affairs. I positively must ask you to withdraw!"

"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?"

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.

Turmoil reigned.

The Secretary of the Treasury even tried to clamber

on to his desk, whence to address them; but strong hands pulled him back.

Alone unmoved, courteous, patient—yet still with that formidable light in his 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, exhausted by the poignancy of his emotions, had now sat down again and was staring with intense antipathy at the Graf. Much as he hated the man, he 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 howl, vociferate and debate, eventually Braunschweig would get a hearing.

“The quicker, the better,” thought Murchison. “Whatever he offers, I’ll checkmate 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 affects 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 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, 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?”

“My idea exactly, sir!” exclaimed somebody at the back of the room.

“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 what he wish to gold. Silver remains. If we get enough silver out in circulation in the whole world to replace the gold, nothing much can result.”

“Nothing *much?*” cried the billionaire. “My God, man! Do you know what’s happened already?”

“Oh, yes, yes, of course, it will make some disturbances, but no world-panic or overturning of civilization. Believe me, gentlemen, there is no other way. Silver—that is all!”

“Yes, but,” interposed Murchison, perplexed, “what about it? What do you offer?”

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,” murmured he, “but, after all, it is the practical application that has value.

“Gentlemen,” and now his voice went a tone deeper, his words fell more slowly, and his smile had vanished quite, “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, small and yellow, resembled gold. The other, larger far, shone with a silver hue.

"My friends," said the Jew, as though lecturing them on some indifferent topic, "this smaller cube is brass. I would have shown you gold, except for the unfortunate fact that, outside the national treasuries, none now exists in Europe, America or on the high seas. I started from Amsterdam with a cube of gold, of this size, but in latitude $48^{\circ} 27'$ North, longitude $31^{\circ}, 12', 18''$ West, it crumbled to ashes. So I had my chief engineer make me this cube of brass to represent it, and help me in my explanation.

"Imagine this, now, as pure gold. It would weigh one ounce, and under normal conditions be worth \$20.673. The silver cube has the same value. Though so greatly different in size, they are equal in purchasing power—or were, before the Blight struck the world.

"Well, gentlemen, now that so much of the gold is only 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 round and faced the silent gathering.

"He—he—the Blight—!"

"What?" snarled Wainwright, with a curse. "He's on the wire? Here! Don't let him go, damn him! Don't—!"

Already Murchison had sprung toward the desk, his hand quivering with eagerness, his face the color of old wax.

"He's gone!" cried Campbell. "No use!"

"Gone?" shrilled Murchison. "What did he say?"

"He said that—in two minutes, if you don't yield—he'll strike the government gold!"

Tumult burst forth; but the great Jew, pushing his way to the desk, banged on it with his cube of silver.

"Silence, I beg of you, my friends!" pleaded he. "Only hear me, now! Why yourselves alarm, needlessly? Why be excited?"

"*Why?*" bellowed the copper czar. "This maniac is going to blight the national reserve of the United States, in a couple of minutes, and you—you ask—?"

Words failed him. His face grew purple and his

bull-neck swelled with rage as he glared at the impassive Braunschweig.

“It makes nothing,” declared the Jewish financier, calmly. “Let him do as he pleases. That does not invalidate my offer, my cash offer! See, now, I continue as before. I still save the situation!”

He paused. Silence now held the assembly, silence broken only by the heavy breathing of Wainwright and the billionaire, and by the fateful ticking of the clock, each second bringing catastrophe nearer, nearer still.

“You save it, eh?” suddenly sneered Murchison. “Well, how? See here, Graf, if you’ve got anything up your sleeve, trot it out, almighty sudden. For I reckon we are standing on the edge of a volcano, this very minute!”

“No, no, not so bad as you think it,” Braunschweig reassured him. He destroys the national gold, as he has destroyed the private? Very well. I buy the ashes, *ja!* I, Maximilian Braunschweig—I purchase all you bring me, from everywhere, paying silver!”

“Eh? What?” cried Murchison, gripping the back of a chair, to steady himself.

“My yacht, *Der Sieger*, on which I have just arrived, now lies at a pier in the East River. Do you know what it is ballasted with? Silver! A six-thousand-ton ship, gentlemen—and not one pound of rock or water ballast.”

Dead silence muted every breath. Every eye stared at this amazing man, who only smiled benignly as in simple words, as though passing the time of day, he told them the news incredible.

“Silver coin, my friends, *kroner, thäler, francs, lire,*

all kinds, from Germany, Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg. And silver bars, also. Bullion! *Ach, ja!* Tons of silver bars!"

He paused a moment and looked slowly round at the dumb-stricken money-ghouls.

The clock already pointed at 11:45.

Then said he:

"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, and the supremacy of capital! I buy! If I have not silver enough here, I bring more. I buy! Do you hear me, gentlemen?"

Again a disturbance interrupted the Jewish financier's harangue.

At the door a violent pounding was heard.

"Open! Open!" cried 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 trembling 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 gripped his arm, while Wainwright shouted some hoarse, unintelligible thing and the others all came crowding.

“What—what *now?*” demanded the billionaire, shaking the employee with frenzy.

“Look!” gasped the man.

He twitched the binding string of the canvas bag.

“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.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE GREAT SPECULATION

THUS began that incredible, wild epoch of gold-ash speculation. That period of a new, never till then dreamed of, commerce, which for a brief time revived the dying System, as a guttering lamp-flame will flare and flicker high just before the final black.

Thus was exhaled that expiring, febrile gasp of capitalism, which, like a moribund treated with oxygen or galvanism, seems to take on new life—but only seems!

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. No surrender! The Graf's 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. We still live!"

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. Storm had not yet succeeded in reducing it to dust. Not yet had he mastered the combination which would pierce these massive, mysterious shields.

Nor had the government been able, yet, to lay hands on its tormentor. Acting on Murchison's information, Secret Service men had drawn their drag-net all across the locality where the electrocuted man had been found in the alley; but Storm had not been found. Once more he had flitted; and so skilful, so secret had been his going and his re-establishment in some other nook or cranny of the great metropolis, that every clue had failed and every trail led only to a *cul de sac*.

Thus, from some darkly hidden den, he still was flinging out his rays of gold-destruction. But a check, at last, had been put upon his activities. Even though all the outworks of Capitalism had at last been successively taken and destroyed, a few nuclei of gold still defied him.

Beside the ultimate 1,200 tons in the National Treasury, some of the European war-hoards and a few in Asia still existed—such as the hidden and fabled Manchu loot of 100,000,000 taels, the Sublime Porte's 2,500,000,000 piasters, the Ameer of Gond's 4,000 lakhs of rupees and some others.

But, so far as could be discovered, every other 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.

The United States government sold to him. Murchison sold, and Wainwright, and Baker, and all the capitalists, big, little or medium. Foreign governments began selling. Russia and Japan vied with each other in unloading ash. France and Germany for once were in accord, in accepting his world-wide offer, which had been cabled everywhere and in divers languages had been posted in every bank, bourse, exchange and government-finance office in the world. As with a universal besom, the Jew swept the world's gold-ash into his coffers.

Banks everywhere tumbled over each other in their eagerness to unload; trust companies forwarded their wreckage by special armed messengers—and fights took place in the public streets of the cities for ash.

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 another tremendous wave of disturbance, greater even than 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, from Tokyo to Petrograd. All round

the world and back again, up and down the map, radiating from every city to all towns and villages, to every hamlet, to every house and farm and mining-camp and ranch—everywhere, without exception, over the whole surface of the civilized and even much of the barbarous world—it thrilled and quivered: “*Silver for your ash!*”

The Jewish 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 huge suite of offices in the Woolworth Building. At the same moment, a vast series of similar offices opened in every city in the world with more than 100,000 population.

These offices, already arranged for in America through his agents, König & Breitenbach, and in Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia through his correlated banking-houses, all threw open their doors simultaneously, for the sole, exclusive purpose of buying gold-ash. The Dai Nippon Ginko handled the business in Japan and China. India, Arabia, the west coast of Africa, Siam and the Straits Settlements were covered by the Jhejeeboy’s Banking System. The Russian Empire sold through Kadnikof Brothers, while Australia dealt with the firm of McDowell & Hargison.

A map of the world, showing each of these singular financial nuclei, was hung in the Graf’s private office on the thirty-sixth story of the Woolworth Building. Every branch-office was marked by a red dot. The

world seemed to have suddenly developed an exaggerated case of small-pox, on a cosmic scale.

Estimates place their number in the entire world (though the Graf refused to affirm or deny this number) at some 30,000. There may have been more—perhaps as many as 35,000, all told, inasmuch as a good many branches were in a few days opened in towns even smaller than the 100,000 limit. In North America alone, not including Mexico, which had 654, Braunschweig established 7,328.

At each of these branches, whether located on the Russian tundra, in Chile or Bolivia, in Texas or Newfoundland, the Jewish 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. At any second, Storm in his hiding-place might readjust his mechanism, find the proper wavelength or combination of lengths, and smash the final treasure. And what then?

Braunschweig had become, to the capitalist class 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.

Such was the will of the capitalist class; and that will, now as always, twitched the puppet-strings of state and church, newspaper and college.

Murchison raged secretly, immured at Edgecliff with his shrunken but still enormous fortune in silver and in industrial holdings. Yet he held his peace—and waited.

Revenge, he felt, might still come to his hand. Not more savage were his thoughts against John Storm than against the Graf, his rival, now dominating all. Even the fact that Braunschweig had kept him from being utterly wiped out in a universal bankruptcy where mines and railways, oil-wells and trust bonds alike would have collapsed, could not soften the billionaire's heart against "that damned pig of a Jew," as he still thought of him.

Never could he forgive the fact that Braunschweig had dictated to him, had displaced him in the world's eye, had played the game better and harder than he himself. Murchison forgot to hate John Storm in hating Braunschweig. An overpowering fear of the Jew, also, grew upon him.

"For Heaven's sake, what's his motive?" wondered he, pacing the library floor. "The man may be mad, but he's not a driveling idiot. And he's parting with silver, solid silver or its equivalent in certificates! What for? For worthless ash! My God, *why?*"

Why, indeed?

Murchison thirsted for the answer, as never in his whole long life of loot and ravagement had he desired anything. Had he but been able to solve this riddle, he felt he might still outplay the Graf, might still take

vengeance on him and overthrow him. But, lacking the key, the problem presented to him only a blank, insoluble face. And so he frayed his nerves, in vain, clutching at hypothesis after hypothesis, but finding none more stable than ropes of sand.

The question drove Murchison right to the doors of insanity. It haunted, lashed and tortured him till his brain reeled; but answer came there none. Yet, all this time—as the papers told Murchison and as his brokers kept him well-informed—Braunschweig kept silently, methodically, persistently buying ash.

Presently—whereat Murchison's hate and rage were supplemented by a consuming fear—the Graf began 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 Jewish banker foresaw something, this *something* must be of tremendous importance.

So rose the strangest speculative tide ever known in the history of the world, bar none—the Gold-Ash Speculation.

Murchison was not drawn into this huge maelstrom. 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.

Everywhere business died. Unemployed millions began to swarm, to starve, to riot everywhere. They could not strike, for now there were no jobs. Vast forays began—lootings for actual food, reminding one of Hanseatic days, Crusading times, the earlier incursions of the Goths and Vandals into Roman civilization, or even the ravishment of the territories occupied by the Germans in the Pan-European War. And in the resultant disorders throughout the world, the military forces more often than not turned against their masters.

Strange tales drifted in from here, from there; tales that reduced the French revolution *jacqueries* to child's-play; that brought the Russian revolution of 1905 down to the proportions of a mere riot.

History does not record that epoch clearly; those days have all but escaped it. Only its larger outlines are plain—here a dynasty crumbling, there a republic founded on the blazing pyre of an age-long monarchy, yonder an aristocracy wiped out in blood. The record was all blurred, distorted and unreal. Every news-service was totally disorganized. Battles were fought, barricades defended and taken by storm, aerial attacks delivered against rebellious provinces and cities, massacres perpetrated—and History hardly wrote even the dates, on her mutilated tablets. The world was deaf and blind, now, to everything but Ash, Ash, Ash!

Headlines, editorials, market-quotations, all hung on Ash. Governments stood or fell, by the power of Ash. The world revolved for Ash, alone.

Madness reigned, indeed.

Everywhere, now—forgetting politics, social life, family, friends, organization of all kinds—men were frantically speculating in Ash. Everywhere they were buying and selling it, outright, short, or on margin; dealing in gold-ash as they one time had dealt in the fictitious, watered values of oil, or coal, or railways—only now with a fierce abandon that cast utterly into the shade all previous speculative movements in the world's history.

A whole special sheaf of technical papers, devoted to Ash, sprouted up like mushrooms. Ash-assay offices burgeoned everywhere; and fortunes were made (in silver) by scientific men—charlatans, some—who could analyze and pass judgment on the fineness of the material; or who could make pretense of doing so.

Inside of a few days an enormous Ash Conspiracy developed, for the production and sale of spurious dust. Many financiers and not a few formerly expert counterfeiters, chemists and scientists were involved in this. More than thirty-five were arrested, in America and Europe; and in the height of public passion, nearly all were railroaded for long sentences.

A man named Warren F. Hazelton was lynched, in Pittsburgh, merely on suspicion of having manufactured imitation Ash. Judicial, social, economic and financial anarchy reared its snarling head.

The holiday season passed unnoticed, for the first time in the history of civilization. As well try to ob-

serve Christmas, at such a time, as to make merry on a water-logged raft in mid-Atlantic gales.

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.

No village, no hamlet was too insignificant to be overlooked, whether by these agents or by the Graf's. Alike the whiskered farmer on the shores of Lake Champlain; the lumber-jack in his mackinaw among the spruce and fir of Mount Katahdin; the high-booted moujik in his Siberian *mir*; the Bengali *ryot* among his rice-paddies; the Zuñi patriarch; the Bolivian muleteer; the priest, the bar-keep, the bishop, the prostitute—all were approached by these ubiquitous agents, eager to buy even a pinch of dust that represented perhaps the sole family bit of jewelry, the wedding-ring, the anklet, the nose-pendant, the cross of military honor or the sacred amulet or scapulary—no matter what.

And thus, swept in by uncounted thousands of eager searchers, the Ash accumulated. Thus the world, seemingly gone mad, scrabbled on the ash-heap of the vanished gold that once had been master of all.

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, ruled supreme. Save for the Social-Philosophers, who then numbered hardly more than 50,000,000 in the world, few men were wholly sane, those days.

Yet the great Jew, calmly smiling, patriarchal still,—unheeding the torrents of praise and adulation as also the floods of violent and abusive letters that poured in on him and the many fanatics who sought to take his life—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 confusedly to some vast, vague issue, 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 water through the penstocks at Niagara. He only smiled, and waited.

With the astute skill of a master, he swept 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. In the Federal District, at least, some semblance of rule still persisted.

Since the Jew 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 this 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.”

Yet all these days of madness John Storm remained both calm and full of sober, contemplative foresight.

Safely and undiscoverably hidden in an obscure nook far over on Avenue A, on the East Side, master of the world yet dwelling in a noisome slum, unnoticed and unknown, he waited.

Forgotten now was he—almost forgotten even by the Triumvirate and those who shared their knowledge, in that huge, indrawing, vortical madness which constituted the last days.

If Murchison and Wainwright and the others now thought of him at all, it was but as an *arrière-pensée*, a somewhat blurred memory, no longer to be reckoned with. He seemed to have done his worst. True, he had wrecked the former status of the world; yet they had not capitulated. No surrender had been given. Tumult and chaos reigned; all standards save that of Ash had gone by the board; yet the System might still emerge triumphant. And those who knew, at times even sneered in their hearts at this mad dreamer and wild visionary. Sore-wounded themselves, they still triumphed—when they recalled the man, at all—in the belief that his last bolt was sped, his last trump played, and lost!

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.

On one of the last nights before he hoped to loosen

the supreme blow, he came upon a few brief paragraphs in "The Coming Nation."

These he reread minutely, then clipped and pasted them on manila paper, ready for filing.

"Sometime," mused he, "the world as a whole will realize their truth. Sometime these ideas, which are my own, too, will dominate. Sometime—after I shall have swept away the final remnants of the curse of gold!"

A moment he gazed at them.

"Here, at last, is truth!" said he, and slowly read aloud as though to sense the full import of the words:

All this war-madness because some gentlemen who make guns and ships happen to need the money? No, not quite all. Back of them, and of the rest of the bloodthirsty nonsense is another and greater fact, compelling all and directing all.

Back of the whole mad story is the tremendous fact of an unconsumed surplus of goods, under capitalism; a surplus that, recognized or unrecognized, pushes the nations along steadily to war.

What shall the capitalists do with their mass of products that yearly mounts upon them? Something, of course, is achieved when we build a battle-ship, because that is worthless in ten years, and therefore deteriorates at the rate of \$1,000,000 every twelve months. Something is gained when we compel China to take a loan she does not want and cannot use, for that provides additional bonds for our banking system and helps out the imperiled balance of trade. But these are no more than palliatives. Still the surplus of goods mounts. Nothing but war will really keep it down.

Therefore, being civilized people and highly intelligent, us for the battle-field!

Storm paused a little, to think. Then he nodded.

"H-m!" remarked he. "Civilized! Highly intelligent!—*not!* But there's hope still, lots of hope. I can save man from murder, even in spite of his own

brutishness. Yes, even though I now make thousands suffer or even die, in the end I shall save millions uncounted and regenerate the world. I can—I *will!*”

He read again:

If we kill enough of one another, we can dodge that surplus problem for a time, anyway. In a world where the majority of the inhabitants live in destitution, want, and misery, there exists such a surplus of the unconsumed products of industry that it is necessary to go to war to get the surplus out of the way, or to find markets for it.

How is that for an example of sanity?

Most of the nations producing more than, under the existing system, their people are able to purchase; all of the nations filled with vast populations that need these things and cannot get them; and then war, to force new markets and break in new dumping-grounds!

There are more than 5,000 lunatics on Ward's Island, New York, and the maddest fantasy ever entertained by the maddest of them, seems by comparison the essence of mental health.

A huge unconsumed surplus in the face of the destitution, want, and misery of the majority of the inhabitants—see if you can match that for preposterous absurdity.

The things we need, piled in a mass on one side; and the people who need them, gathered on the other; and between these the men who profit by this condition, planning war, so that the evil may be continued and may not break down.

This is the basis and mainspring and life of the existing system. How much longer shall we be fooled by it?

With a glad laugh, Storm threw down the clipping and reached for his tobacco.

“How much longer?” repeated he. “Not long, now—not long! Man shall at last be free; intellect shall rule; gold perish—and my work be done!

“Not long, now, not long—thank God!”

CHAPTER XXXII

THE ATTACK ON WASHINGTON

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 the 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 some abyss, certainly, whence I see no issue,” he reflected. “None, unless I succeed at once, now, and utterly destroy the idea of gold in the minds of men. Superficially considered, I seem to have done nothing but botch matters in an extraordinary fashion. Suicides and disorders, violence and crime can certainly be laid at my door. On the surface, it’s disheartening, very!

“But, viewed with a deeper insight, all is different. The surgeon’s knife makes a terrifying wound. Blood flows. The patient seems infinitely worse off than before the operation began. But in reality, he’s saved.

The cancerous growth is gone. And when all is over, he faces life, not death!

“Thus I’m justified. Thus all the blood and tears and anguish of this time are made parts of the general upward trend toward health. Thus, by one incisive cut, I can yet end the long phlebotomy of war. And when the tally is cast up, all the woe and death that I have brought into the world won’t equal those of a single battle of a single capitalist war.

“The last blow must fall,” said he. “I will hit, *hard*, this time! Let the world rave. Let Braunschweig buy and buy and buy, if he will. Nothing will avail, to stand against me, once the final hoards are gone.

“It must come now, at once! The final, smashing blow must be delivered!”

His final adjustments were made with a skill and care which, he felt positive, must bring success.

That night, John Storm went to Washington. Disguised as a laborer in worn, patched clothing, he took the midnight express from the Pennsylvania Depot where now so little traffic trickled through the once-crowded sluiceways of travel. In a corner of the smoking car he ensconced himself with an old pipe, for the long, weary vigil. None noticed him. None knew or suspected that the man whose picture and description had long been printed in every paper, with a Blackerton reward-offer of \$250,000 for his apprehension—charge not stated—now sat there with his hat pulled down over his disguised face, in the swift steel car.

Thus Storm, master of the world’s gold, traveled to the nation’s heart, bent on an errand, which should either free the world or end his own hard strivings.

Well-informed observers state that the first outward sign of the attack on Washington, the morning of Wednesday, January first, was given by the dulling of the golden cap of the Liberty statue, on top of the great Capitol dome.

The news of this portent, running like flame through magnesium-powder, swiftly brought together a tremendous concourse, that soon filled the open areas about the huge building, packed the streets and parks, and crammed every roof and window that commanded a view of the structure.

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, grimy-handed steeple-jack, Barker Fimerson 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 on to 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 Bucknam.

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.

Bucknam 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.”

Bucknam 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’s all off! Liberty has lost her gold cap. Nothing up here, now, but gray scale. The finish is coming!”

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—it swelled to heaven as 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 on to 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!”

Murchison, who for eight and forty hours had been in Washington, striving in vain to check the power of Braunschweig, heard it in his temporary offices in the Monadnock Building. Heard it, and peered out in sudden apprehension, out over the massed thousands, all stricken with keen terror and confusion.

He ordered his motor and hastened to the Treasury Building, his mind a welter of fear and rage, with the sweat of anguish pearling his wrinkled forehead.

Five minutes later, while the multitude still stood rooted there, groaning, weeping, praying, many with suppliant hands raised to what they knew not, the President received a telegram:

This he immediately made public, as being in the nature of an emergency measure. At once the wires of the now thoroughly sensationalized International Press Combine grew hot with the message:

At noon, sharp, unless a white flag rises over the War Department Building, the final blow will fall. This flag must fly

as the symbol of submission on the part of the universal *Weltverein* government. I am now in Washington. At the proper moment I shall appear. Meanwhile, I warn you to take immediate action. Time is short. To save themselves now, the powers must cede at once!

JOHN STORM.

This was the news that Baker thrust into Murchison's hands, the minute they met. This was the news that, hastily 'phoned, now brought together a swift, half-defiant, half panic-stricken gathering of the world-financiers, the government chiefs, foreign bankers, diplomatists and representatives and accredited *Weltverein* officials in the Treasury Building.

Never before in the history of the world had so many eminent men of such diversity of race and tongue, so hastily met together. With gold at stake, they stood not for ceremony, precedence or diplomatic poppycock.

Braunschweig was there, still serene and (if anything) more confident than ever. The apoplectic face of Wainwright contrasted with the old-ivory features of Baron Iwami, now again decorated with the Order of the Rising Sun, this time done in silver. The antithesis seemed to typify the cosmopolitan character of this, the strangest gathering of the System's 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. The city, as capital of the *Weltverein*, naturally had attracted the flow.

Now, in the great assembly-hall, plutocrats from East, from West, from distant lands and near, were coming together with that instinctive *rassemblement* which draws the threatened wolf-pack close, or herds a fear-stricken bunch of steers, with lowered horns, upon the midnight prairie.

Strange faces were those on which the morning light, dulled by the long curtains of yellow silk, cast its softened glow. Strange faces, oddly variant complexions, divers tongues and a weird *mélange* of uniforms, frock coats, decorations (none, however, of gold) and military tunics.

Few words were uttered. Those spoken were brief.

Men whispered. Gentile, Jew, white-skinned Danish financier and swart Levantine banker, trust magnate and Rand nabob, now despoiled of his still undug wealth, Chinese bond-holder and Argentine speculator, Russian grand-duke and British lord—all these and scores of others, unlike in everything save the one all-compelling lust for gold, the worship of the power of gold, the blighting terror of the loss of gold, stood about uneasily; trod the thick rugs with catlike, noiseless steps; grouped and regathered and fell away from one another, with hard, bitter, suspicious glances and curt sneers.

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.

Dully, with muffled cadences, they heard the awed

and yet continuous movements of the massed throngs outside. It seemed as though the world-pulse now was centered there in Washington, there in that Treasury Building, that very chamber; and on its next throb hung the destinies of nations.

Sounded, all at once, the sharp *tap-tap-tap* of a gavel.

“Gentlemen!” exclaimed, from the rostrum, Stanley M. Whitney, presiding officer and Secretary of the Treasury.

At sound of his deep, grave voice, papers rustled; chairs moved, men sat down.

Silence fell. The tension grew acute.

This, on a larger scale, recalled that other scene in the Sub-treasury in Wall Street. Braunschweig, remembering it, smiled darkly to himself.

He alone remained unmoved.

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 XXXIII

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.

It opened, closed again and once more opened, vigorously.

“Order!” shouted Whitney, in vain.

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?” exclaimed the Secretary. “There’s a—but—no, no! He can’t come in here, I tell you! *Impossible!*”

He stared, as though the mere thought of what the page had told him reversed all precedents and outraged every principle.

Again the page spoke, eagerly. But Whitney only shook his head once more.

“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!"

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!"

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.

Murchison sprang up, pointing a tremulous finger, his face bone-white.

"There—there he is! There—Storm! Look—that's the man—there! My God! Catch him! *Arrest that man!*"

The billionaire, overwrought, staggered and sank gasping into his chair.

"*Order!*"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand reward for him—and he walks in here like—like—"

"Like a free man, at your service!" said John Storm, facing them all.

Wainwright leaped up, with a blasphemy. Bull-like, in purple rage, he surged forward. Toward Storm he ploughed his way, elbowing diplomatists and financiers right and left. With raised fist he menaced.

Murchison screamed, quite overwrought:

“Look! That’s the man, there! My God! *Somebody grab him, quick!*”

Angry men of half a dozen races, not yet understanding, but furious at disturbance in this crucial moment, pulled Wainwright back.

“How the devil could *he* get—get here, without being pinched?” roared the copper czar. Strong hands forced him to a chair.

Bubbling oaths and passion, as a stirred-up lobster bubbles foam, the copper czar was forcibly suppressed. The gavel, broken in Whitney’s hand, still flailed the desk.

A babel rose, a tumult of many tongues, rendering all speech valueless. Storm gestured eloquently at his rough, patched clothes—the clothes of a laborer—and from his pocket drew a workman’s cap.

With a contemptuous smile, he held this aloft.

Some degree of silence fell.

“*Ach!*” exclaimed Braunschweig, laughing. “So you have deceived them all? They were looking for a good coat and for linen, eh? I felicitate you, Storm!”

The scientist 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.

“I thank you, Braunschweig!” Storm finally answered. “By heaven, I’m glad to see you!”

“The compliment is returned, with interest,” said the Graf, with real sincerity. “I truly felicitate you, John Storm, for what you have done. Not because of its motive, but because of your infernal intelligence!”

“Not second to your own,” Storm returned. “*You are a man!* Gad, what a brain! Braunschweig, you

have seen a million miles farther than all the rest of the world put together. Beside 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, dead, rotten wrong, you’re a man after my own heart.”

He thrust out his hand. The great Jew clasped it, warmly. For a minute the grasp held tight. Then it loosened and fell apart.

The hearers gasped. Yet Braunschweig only smiled still more broadly.

“I thank you,” he answered. “The tribute is worth having, and I shall cherish it. You are right. I do understand, even as you understand. I foresee, even as you foresee—though perhaps in a different way and with different ambitions. Still, you and I—we know. We alone. These others, here—*pfui!—!*”

With a glance, he swept them all in good-humored contempt. Then his eyes once more fell on John Storm.

You might have thought, by Braunschweig’s expression, that this man before him, the most feared, denounced and hated human being in the capitalist black book, had done him some stupendous kindness, some incalculable benefit. For in his look lay genuine respect and admiration.

Suddenly Wainwright erupted again.

“Secretary! Hey, Whitney!” he shouted. “Get an officer! That, there, is John Storm! Arrest him! What’s the matter, here? You all crazy, or what?”

“Shhh, you!” boomed the Graf, shaking a finger at

the copper czar, as at a naughty child. "Be quiet, will you? This is now no time for arrests and such foolish play. John Storm is above arrest and beyond it! He is a world-figure, man, and you would put him in a jail, like a sneak-thief or a—"

"But, damn you—!"

Braunschweig's face darkened. An intense silence fell, there in the crowded chamber. All eyes were on the Jew.

"Pardon me, what did you say?" he queried, slowly, his accent now a trifle more marked. "Did you address a remark to me?"

Wainwright measured him, with an eye to combat; but the Graf's shoulders discouraged him. Scarlet, he sank back in his chair.

"You apologize, of course?"

A moment's pause, in which the copper czar paled again, with excess of rage. Then his arrogant eyes fell.

"Yes," he grunted.

"Thank you," said Braunschweig. "Now, let us hear from Mr. Storm."

The scientist confronted them all smiling.

Then, with another look about him, he once more advanced toward the rostrum.

"Mr. Secretary!" exclaimed he.

Whitney was dumb. Astonishment and fear had 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. On his face, new lines had

been graven by the soul-searching experiences of the past weeks.

But, still strong and keen, his eyes alert and slightly squinted as though peering at some complex chemical reaction, he faced this crowd of angry vampires; and for a moment looked them over, calmly.

Strangely they contrasted with him. Strangely all the tawdry, murder-connoting fripperies of these uniforms, all these respectable frock-coats, all these be-ribboned orders and decorations clashed with him. On the one hand, the essence of bondholding wealth, of scheming, plotting, blood-spilling capitalism. On the other, a single, rough-clad man.

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.

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 and butchers of men.

Wainwright subsided.

Murchison, crumpled forward in a heap, head hidden in both palms, remained motionless.

Baker stared, as though hypnotized.

Each in his own way, that great and polyglottic throng awaited, listening.

Of them all, only the great Jew was at ease.

“Men of all nations,” began Storm very slowly, very gravely, “you rulers and financiers, bankers, dividend-eaters, gold-worshipers and makers of war, now listen; for I am going to put some bitter truths to you.

“You have all known my demands, for some time, now. You have suffered, and you have made the world suffer terribly, as a result of your own folly and obstinacy, of your blind passion for gold and power. At this last moment will you 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. You have differed and bickered and quarreled about everything else, but never about the sanctity of these two institutions—these, and profits. When I rose up to threaten them, three of your number, here, knew my plan. Their first thought was to kill me. They would have murdered me in cold blood, had I not outwitted them. And then you put a price on my head! A price that not all of you, together, now dare try to collect! But murder has been in your hearts. Individual murder, for profit and power, just as you have long committed mass-murder, otherwise known as War, for the very selfsame objects—for gold, and profits, and surplus!”

He paused and spurned them with a look of loathing. But no one stirred or spoke. Only on the lips of the great Jew the smile broadened a trifle.

“Surplus!” cried Storm with sudden vehemence.

“Surplus! It’s always been the same old story, for centuries past. Serfdom was a surplus-squeezing game. So was slavery. Capitalism is no different—save that it’s worse, and bigger. Your Reign of Gold depends on surplus, wrung out of the lives and bodies of the working-class, out of mine own people.

“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!

“But”—and now Storm took a different tone—“but, 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 the 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 perfectly inconceivable debt crushes every nation on earth.

“Debts—national debts—and you draw dividends on those, too! Debts, piled in mountains on the backs of the long-suffering people. This is another burden you and your infernal system have laid on the world. Debts! The *New York Call* gives the monetary loss of the Pan-European war alone as \$118,444,000,000! Almost ten times the total amount of cash in the whole world, before I blighted your damned gold!

“Think of that, you money-mongers, you gold-harpies! All for the sake of gain! Ridpath, the historian, *he* understood you!” Storm raised a fist on high. “*He* laid the scourge of hatred and of scorn upon your callous backs!

“Hear his words! Said he:

Reflect for an hour upon the appalling aggregate; consider the pressure of this intolerable incubus; try to estimate the horror of this hell; weigh the woe and anguish of them who rest under it!

All these thousands of millions of dollars—statesmen, philosophers, preachers, journalists, mouthpieces of civilization, one and all of you, how do you like the exhibit? Does it not suffice? Who is going to pay the account? The people! Who, without lifting a hand, or turning in their downy beds, will gather this infamous harvest? Plutocracy!

He paused a moment, as though to let the arraignment strike home.

Whitney, frowning blackly, began thumbing a ponderous volume of statistics, as though some fatuous idea had entered his brain of overthrowing this damning accusation with official figures; but all at once recollecting that the total war-debt of the world had recently passed even beyond Storm’s figures, abandoned the attempt and tried to look as if no such an idea as disputing Storm had ever possessed him.

“Very interesting figures,” commented Braunschweig, cheerfully. “Quite correct, too, though these data are impossible of accurate statement. A little underestimated, perhaps; but that makes nothing. *Ach!* We hear the truth, to-day! Proceed!”

“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!

“Knaves, pirates, guiding the state galleon—whither? To the rocks! Like derelicts 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!

“And you plan ‘greater armies, greater navies, then still greater armies and still greater navies, then still more powerful armies and navies; then impossible taxation, intolerable burdens; then bankruptcy! And now come wrath, rebellion, revolution. And this constitutes the program for practically every “civilized” nation in the world!’

“War! Militarism—‘the international political whirlpool. But now the maelstrom opens, the chasm yawns; it spreads wide its huge jaws for the capitalist ship of state!’ ”

“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 a 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.”

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, *Weltverein* officials, captains of industry! You editors of kept papers; you pulpit-thumpers howling to the ‘God of Battles’ and preaching war! 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 monoplane, dropping bombs and getting shot, all for the sake of gold.

“Hardly! There’s plenty of common flesh and

cheap, ordinary blood to be bought in wholesale lots, at rock-bottom prices. *You're safe enough!* The working class, as Shakespeare said, will spare you, personally, the risk of damage.

“Tut, tut; good enough to toss; food for powder, food for powder; they'll fill a pit as well as better!”

“How many of you, personally, took part in the Big War, that cost Europe \$4,000,000 every hour, night and day; that laid waste 125,000 square miles of territory; that starved to death tens of thousands and rendered homeless 6,000,000 women and children? How many of you went into the trenches? You sneaks! *Not one!*”

He turned to another page of his note-book, and scornfully continued:

“No, you people never risk getting into anything like the fight at Dixmude where

“There were 2500 German bodies in the Yser Canal. Many of them were drowned and others were bayoneted. The very water itself was bloody, while Dixmude's streets were strewn thick with the dead. These ghoulish facts alone give some idea of the savageness of the fighting, the desperation of the German attacks and the stubbornness of the Allies' resistance. The night was a hell from dark to dawn. Face to face men even wrestled and died by drowning each other in the canal's waters.

The Germans were mowed down with rifle shot, torn into human fragments by shells and bayoneted back, yard by yard, over their own dead into the waters of the canal.

There were frantic scenes, and the bodies seen in the water on the next day gave grim testimony of this.

About 3000 German infantrymen got into Dixmude. They held it for a time, but with shell fire and rifle fire the place was riddled through and through. The Germans dashed out of the crumbling houses, only to be wiped out by a sirocco of shrapnel and shot in the streets.’

“Not one of *you* in all that, was there?” Storm flung at them, with bitter scorn. “No inducement would get *you* into a battle where you might be smashed to atoms by artillery fire, impaled in bayonet charges or hacked to pieces with sabers on bastions composed of a hideous mish-mash of corpses, their dead features fixed in all the contortions of unutterable agony.

“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!”

CHAPTER XXXIV

BRAUNSCHWEIG'S COUNTERPLAY

AT the rear of the room a sudden disturbance arose. Some one — an old, hoary-headed plutocrat — had fainted. Around him others pressed. But Storm paused not.

“Ha!” shouted he, 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 have been in some of those battles of the last war, when the dead were so thick they kept each other standing in the trenches? How would you, Baker,” and Storm’s long finger jabbed viciously at the dumb-staring magnate,

“how would you have enjoyed being a wounded man in one of those ghastly field-hospitals where the surgeons busily cut off fingers, hands, arms, feet, legs, as butchers trim meat, and threw them into pails and baskets? Where they plugged gaping wounds that welled up instantly, crimson, through the plugs? Where straining bandages ceased, in a moment, to become white? Where the smell of fresh, warm blood was thick on the air?

“Imagine Baron Iwami, here, lying wounded in some remote war-swept village, amid human corpses and the bodies of cows, horses and pigs, while—as happened in the last war—some starving swine devours a dead soldier, once some maiden’s lover!

“Imagine Campbell, there, up to his knees in blood, in a trench, as many soldiers have reported being. Or fighting and marching for five days without food or water, charging bayonets by day, and shivering in bloody trenches by night, as one Essex regiment did, till their cheeks were like sunken leather and they were black with blood and choked with mud! Splendid War, indeed; glorious, sublime—and profitable!

“Imagine Whitman lying wounded on a road, among so many dead and wounded that the wheels of passing military auto-trucks skidded in the blood, as happened more than once in the Big War. Just fancy Graf Braunschweig fighting in a wood where ‘strips of flesh, legs, arms and even heads were lodged in the branches of trees, while heaps of mutilated bodies lay on the ground,’ or in a field covered with fragments of flesh and bone, and oozy with blood!

“No, the Graf would certainly never risk being in any

such situation. Neither would any of you jackals. At the time all that was happening, you were speculating in munitions, war-ships and bonds, or cleaning up fortunes supplying knock-down coffins, which followed the German army in trainload lots—coffins that came back so full of mutilated corpses that, as also from the hospital trains, blood dripped through the floorboards of the cars and reddened the tracks for many miles.

“I remember a letter written to Thomas H. Ince, the great photo-play producer, by a man who signed himself ‘A Plain British Soldier’—a letter commending Ince’s vast anti-war picture, ‘Civilization.’ In that letter the man who had known war at first-hand said:

“‘Picture the stench of your comrades rotting in death by your side, as you are bespattered by the hot blood of others freshly butchered in all the blistering heat and volcanic thunder of shrieking shells and belching guns! Then, in the black and deadlier silence of night, while you lie half buried in muddy, bloody slime, hour after hour, waiting for Hell’s fire to burst out from earth and sky again, you feel the maggots that are devouring in their millions the men you have lived and fought by, crawling over your own living carcass as your brain reels in delirium—oh God! you can’t think of it!’

“Fine, isn’t it? Ah, glorious!

“Modern war! Infinite murder, bereavement, destruction, rape, torment, horror—that *you* may wax more sleek and fat, or that your monarchs may wear another ribbon on their coats or count another province in their dominions! Soldiers in trenches eating bread soaked crimson with the blood of their comrades. Wrecked homes, burned cities, ruined arts and sciences, numbed education, brutality glorified and every evil

thing nurtured to ferocious triumph! The whole world one great, bleeding, groaning pit of woe! Made so by whom? By you, and you, and you!

“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 class 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?”

“No, impossible. You never can. You have always hypocritically ‘deplored’ war, even while making war, with crocodile tears. Before the Big War, you claimed war was impossible, for a score of reasons—but you made war, just the same. For profits beckoned, beckoned as never before.

“You people never reform. The only way to handle you is to wipe you out. If you were free from my grip, to-day, and some imminent war offered you another penny or another foot of land, you would still

howl for war, let the other man fight and suffer and die, and play the same old sickening game!"

Storm paused for breath, and looked about him with contempt and anger. All eyes were fixed on him, all lips silent. None now tried to speak, to interrupt, to gibe. Armed only with the lash of his invective, like a lion-tamer with a scourge, he stood before them all, and kept them mute. And for a moment, silence held the room.

"Civilization has been crushed by gold. Civilization? What do you know or care for that?" he queried, bitterly. "Its true test—the state in which each man most fully realizes his social duty and most adequately performs it—has been smeared away, blurred, destroyed by gold.

"Reason has abdicated. Intelligence is enslaved. No longer does truth rule the affairs of men, or right prevail, or even common decency get so much as a hearing. The world lies stewing, festering, rotting in misery and vice and crime—because of gold!

"Gold! I symbolize capitalism thus, because your minds are too narrow, bigoted, stupid, and atrophied to understand a larger term.

"Just as by war I have meant *all* the abuses of the System—just as I have called the system 'war,' so that your minds, incapable of generalization, could grasp the concrete fact, so by gold I mean the power of exploitation, the rule of class over class, the heartless, bitter, grinding wage system, the making of profits out of human flesh and blood.

"By gold I mean capitalism, the beast that herds millions of children to the mine, the mill, the coal-breaker,

the foul and noisome factory. I mean the profit-lust that pants for war; that poisons food and drink for an extra penny of foul gain. I mean the chronic crime of unemployment, of starvation in a land of plenty. I mean government by injunction and by gunmen; the slugging, shooting and burning of strikers—yes, even of their women and children; the labor-sweating that drives each year a hundred thousand girls forth—out of the smugly-owned department-stores—such as you own, or *you*, out on to the street, to sell themselves for bread!

“I mean the greed that dries the milk in the working class mother’s breast; that each year crushes and mangles half a million workmen in this land alone; that owns and operates rotten railroads and hurls thousands of victims to death, year by year—because there’s dividends to win!

“I mean capitalism! All that is wrong, criminal, ugly, base, hateful, vile, low! All that breeds disease and death, all that is antithetical to truth, strength, beauty, light, purity, intelligence!

“Oh, generation of vipers! Your day is come! Your System crumbles, even now; and reason shall yet rule!

“Reason—intelligence—these shall be the watchwords, the touchstones of the future state.

“Soon the truth shall be seen and known by all men, that at the bottom of all evil, of all crime and sorrow, all pain and wrong and woe, lie ignorance and greed.

“That only as the light of reason shines, so can the world forge ahead to newer, better things. That only as false standards crumble to ‘the immutable dust,’ can humanity stand erect and face the east and smile.

“Then, instead of men like you and you and *you*, sitting here as the representatives of power, full-fed and fat and stupid, gorged and bloated with your own dull inanity; instead of flunkeys and incompetents to represent this land abroad; instead of genius huddled starving in the attic, crass dullness in the palace plethoric with unearned luxury—the product of others’ toil—all shall be otherwise.

“No more shall the painted, pampered mistress of the millionaire—brainless, smirking and vicious—loll in her touring-car and fondle her costly Pomeranian on Fifth Avenue; while some beautiful, brave, keen-witted, pure-hearted and intelligent girl works her white fingers to the bone all day, then sits poring over books till early morning, trying to learn, to grow—striving to conquer poverty and amass wisdom at the same time.

“But all shall be different. A kinder and a saner world shall come to birth, a world wherein shall be no misery, no war, no poverty, woe, strife, creeds, oppression, tears.

“Even as I have crumbled the golden cap of the figure of Liberty to dross and ashes, so shall I forever destroy the golden oppression which until now has weighed on Liberty itself.

“All shall be changed; all shall be ‘better than well.’ Labor shall yet reap its full reward. Man shall at last be free. The world-chains shall be shattered, and the human race acknowledge its fraternity, know its deathless right to truth, and by the flame of the unquenchable sun of inspiration look up, clear-eyed, to the vast arch of life set free!”

He ceased, and with a long, deep breath gazed at the

assembly there before him. Then he continued in another tone:

“All this shall be done, and soon. For a brief moment yet, gold still rules men’s minds. Gold!

“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 worshiped 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.

No man stretched out a hand to stop him; no man spoke.

Slowly and with a kind of impersonal abstraction he walked 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, in those worn and patched clothes, gone with

that shabby cap clutched tight in his big hand. Out from their presence passed this scorching breath of the world's toilers; and for a little while, was silence.

Then suddenly, Braunschweig laughed.

"*Ach, ja!*" quoth he. "It hurts, eh? The truth is painful? For it *is* the truth, gentlemen, and nothing else. An intelligent young man—very. And I like him, even though you do not. Perhaps for that very reason, I like him better. We might be friends, he and I, yet. A big man, that, of great insight and power.

"So intelligent a young man—so entertaining, is he not? But I regret that he is 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."

A wondering murmur rose, in the great room.

The financiers, officials, scientists and eminent men of arms, recovering now a little from their shame and stultified abashment, shifted to see the great Jew and to draw a little nearer. Silent, yet, was Stanley Whitney on the rostrum; silent was Murchison; silent all save Braunschweig, who stood there smiling at them, still, as though perhaps he, bitterly as many hated him, might yet lead the way for their salvation.

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.

"Let him dissolve even these war-hoards, the last gold

in the world, if he will. It makes nothing. One thing he has not known, understood or taken into account—a thing that I, almost from the beginning, have known and acted on. A thing you, too, have been as ignorant of as he.

“My confrères, 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!”

CHAPTER XXXV

THE GOLD RETURNS

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 off my knowledge, every ounce off gold and off gold-ash 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 at these men, as though he held them all by the throat. 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 Jew!” 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 devil 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 for him!"

"Wring it?" replied Baker. "Why not? Wait! This game's not through yet!"

"All—all der gold!" again cried Braunschweig. "Und mit dis gold, I haf you all, efery one, in my power, ab-so-lutely!"

Groans, murmurs, curses and fervid execrations, now scantily veiled by the exigencies of polite society, droned through the hall.

That they, all these financiers and mighty ones of the gold rule now instinctively felt themselves forestalled, tricked, outwitted, done—this maddened these dollar patriots as blood a tiger.

But Braunschweig paid no heed. He was struggling with his own excitement, striving to dominate himself and calm the outburst that had robbed him of his prided English accent. 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 a little reverting to the dialect. But I am calm now. I am myself.

"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.

“The last government to sell out was this one, the United States. *Ach!* you are hard men to negotiate with, you Americans—but prudent, too, when you see ruin in the face staring you! Yes, at last I succeeded to buy even the Treasury surplus. And I alone reserved the right to announce that fact.

“An interesting process the gold collection was, with some picturesque features, yes! For example, the last private individual to sell out to me, in any considerable quantity, was a Malay pirate named Palembang. Only four days ago he sailed in to Singapore, down the Straits of Malacca, mad with panic, insane with it, gentlemen—terrified out of his brown skin.

“Devils, he said, had attacked his junk and had turned all his Siamese gold, looted from the coast villages, into a kind of whitish dust—devil-dust, which he would have thrown overboard, at once, only neither he nor any man of his crew dared lay a finger to the stuff.

“My Singapore agent immediately confirmed his terror, convinced him the ashes were poisonous, and kindly took them off his hands, for a cash consideration of some \$12,000, silver, to be paid him by the pirate. Informed of this by cable, I allowed my agent to keep the silver, and directed him to forward the ash to Bombay, where I have a large repository. A unique case, gentlemen—to have ash given away, with a handsome bonus

beside! Incidentally, the government of Siam has already condemned Palembang to death—by being trodden on by the royal white elephants, in the usual manner—but this is a mere detail, unworthy of notice.

“All I wish to point out is the fact that, by one means or another, I have already bought in the total and complete gold supply and ash supply of the entire world; that the remaining governmental war-hoards are *not* now where our friend Storm—ach Himmel! so very intelligent, is he not?—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 out Murchison. “You’re going to euchre him, yet? You’re going to trim that devil? Let me in on that game, Braunschweig, and by heaven! all I have is at your disposal! Where, in God’s name, *where’s that ash?*”

“Here! Right below us, gentlemen,” answered the great Jew, pointing downward. “In the vaults immediately under our feet!”

Silence greeted his announcement; the silence of utter, stunned amazement.

Only Whitney, Secretary of the Treasury, seemed unmoved, for only he had known the secret.

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 cosmically 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, slow-moving multitude which now blocked alley, street and square, filled park and terrace, blackened wall and roof, and jammed each window whence by any possibility the Treasury building could be seen.

“The white flag—will it go up? Will they surrender? This question was in every mouth, this thought filled every soul. Tense, but with a kind of apathetic calm, the people waited. And over the wires, cleared to bear the news, the nation listened too, and the whole world.

Save for the sprinkling of red banners here and there, and the exhortations of “soap-boxes” striving even at the last moment to spread the truth and show the way to peace and a new order of things, 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.

“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 positive 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 a satisfactory manner. And he should have such an answer! Such an intelligent young man, so well-informed and energetic!”

He gestured toward the door.

“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.

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 Jew, 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.

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 final hoards have not yet arrived, but at all event, 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 have 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 carloads, shiploads, mountains of silver, for what seems mere dross, eh?”

“Well, let me tell you; now that my master-coup is a *fait accompli*; now that practically all is over, save reaping the harvest. Let me explain!”

He crossed his huge arms, sank his Mosaic beard a moment on his breast, and from beneath leonine brows peered at this Gentile and 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 is so astonishingly simple—when you understand. At once, at the very first news of the Blight, I had my idea. Immediately 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 Düsseldorf.

“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 learn—*ach!* no indeed! But by correlating their answers, gentlemen, I discovered the truth.”

“What truth, for heaven’s sake? What truth?” rasped Murchison, haggard and wan.

“I learned that gold is truly indestructible. 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," shouted he, "that you've beaten us all to it? Done us all? Left us all holding the sack, while you, *you* have grabbed the bait?"

"Pray do not interrupt," said the great Jew, frowning. "This is now a scientific matter, and also, hard words can change nothing. I learned, in short, 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—"

Another disturbance in the group huddled there under the groined arches dim and dusty, broke his discourse. Sounds of a scuffle, of angry words, of oaths verberated through the dim, vaulted space.

Then shouted the professor:

"It's the same old sneaking game, in a new dress—the

same! When the first of your family waited at Waterloo, saw Wellington victorious, and knew in London that the country was mad with fear because of his reported defeat——”

Braunschweig smiled indulgently.

“Why rake up ancient history, my friend?” exclaimed he. “Have you not enough this day to occupy your mind?”

“Then killed a dozen of the fastest horses to get to Calais—hired a swift vessel and crossed the Channel before the news could——” continued the professor, panting with rage, “and raced to London—bought, bought, bought wagon-loads of tumbling British securities—and in a few hours found himself rich beyond the dreams of avarice——”

“Yes, he was playing the capitalist game, and playing it hard,” concluded Braunschweig with a laugh. “And I am playing it—*harder!* And you are losing! Worse, you are whining in defeat. You cannot feel the lash in silence, cowards that you are!

“Cowards, I say!” Braunschweig’s great voice echoed through the hollow passageways. “John Storm spoke the truth. You love the game, so long as you win. But when you lose, *ach Himmel!* you split the very heavens with your howls!

“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.

Hard-clenched fists rose in the close, stifling air. Canes brandished.

In a score of tongues, many maledictions rained on the world-master.

Even Baron Iwami, his Japanese aplomb now forgotten, hissed “*Baka!*” 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!” gibed he, 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, you call me ‘Jew’! Not now ‘eminent Hebrew financier,’ and ‘savior of society,’ but ‘*Schurke—pendard!—baka!—Shylock!*’ *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 loomed 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.

And out toward the snarling, wrath-stung press before him he stretched his corded hand.

“Behold!” cried he in a loud voice, the hidden fanaticism of his soul suddenly bursting forth, “Behold, this shall be the true Zionism! A Jew shall enslave you all, you pagans and you Gentiles! Behold, my race comes to its own, again! ‘Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord; I will repay!’ Now the earth and the fulness thereof is about to pass into mine hand and to my people, oh you foolish and empty generation!

“Thus Israel smites the Philistine, hip and thigh! Two thousand years and more you and yours have robbed, tortured, slain my people. But now, now comes another story. Now *I* enter the game; and like clay in my fingers, I squeeze you all, every one—all governments, all great men, pagan or *goy*, no matter. You are all alike as chaff to my flame!

“*Rache!* Revenge! Praised be Jehovah, *Gott* in Israel!”

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 cut-throat game, a startled, tremulous, gasping cry thrilled all the darkened vagueness of the treasure-vaults.

“Look! See! My God—look *there!*”

“Aye, look there, and look again, and still once more!” 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 incredible, unimaginable 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 the great Jew had foreknown 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, dry, 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 only dust had been, now were beginning to shine, in yellow sparkles, scattered and ever-growing signs of gold once more!

Dumb-stricken, the watchers stared, peering in awe and terror down the long and dusty passageways.

They knew not—in that deep, heavily vaulted treasure-house, with steel doors closing them in, how could they know?—that out in the broad, sunshiny 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 Jew'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 that 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 noon-day 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 result of that strong, together-drawing, reintegratory force now set free by the exhaustion of Storm's Zeta-ray, 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 Treasury vaults, was rushing back like a tide, rising, filling, overflowing with resistless force.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE MOLTEN FLOOD

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 plutocrats, knowing not which way to turn, saw wonders on all sides. Here a passage was already choked with the swift rush of the returning treasure, there a whole tier of sacks came rolling, tumbling down, breaking open as they fell.

A confused uproar, made of a thousand noises, crashed booming through the vaults.

And through the huge and rapidly growing confusion, the saturnine, deep laugh of Braunschweig re-echoed 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 of "*Dios Mio!*" 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 Grand Duke Fedor Ivanoff, a broken, dissipated man who was reported to own twelve million roubles’ worth of Russo-Japanese war bonds, and to have sold 184,000 rifles to the Mikado. *Bózhe moy!* The pressure—it melts the gold!”

Here and there, other like cries were rising, now. The truth was beginning already to drive home to these astounded, dazed and wondering plutocrats, there in the far recesses of the vaults. They were beginning to understand, though vaguely, the fact of this sudden, violent, molecular change.

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 the intense molecular activity of the radioactive 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 scientific wonder and all thoughts of gold-lust or of revenge swept quite away—with only startled cries to voice their sudden panic, 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 million deaths that they might fatten. Life, life alone!

But now all was confusion.

Already the golden flood had poured across the exit.

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.

The crashing-down of shelves, the sliding of great heaps of ash and gold, the crackling of flames as the molten gold fired the broken woodwork of the compartments, blent in horrible turmoil.

As the scared plutocrats, 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°.

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.

Bankers who with the utmost complacency had sent thousands of their fellowmen out on to 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, the blow-flies of a putrescent civilization,” 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 in the smoke.

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 with fist and cane and pocket-knife, red-bladed now; 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, nor cared. Once he appeared, vast in the cyanid smoke and swirl; then was gone.

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!

No longer did they lust for the rich yellow metal, so plentifully poured out before them, there. 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, with mouths that twitched and yelled and sobbed even like the mouths of wounded and dying men, mangled and forsaken on the battle-field.

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 over Iwami's body and went down, strangling, writhing, never to rise again.

Fervent as a pit-fire in a West Virginia or a Colorado coal-mine, the conflagration charred their very bones and marrow.

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, shrill as those of soldiers burned alive by the *feuerwerfer* of the Prussians, 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.

"Water! For God's sake, water!"

It was Baker's voice, now weak and hoarse, a terrible, wailing scream.

Baker fell, trying to clamber up on to a smoldering shelf—fell, and was trampled by Wainwright, and died with imprecations on his blackened lips.

Wainwright, stone-blind and seared till the flesh peeled from face and hands, seized Murchison and thrust him, like a shield, against the oncoming lava tide of gold.

The two men clawed at each other, howling dismally,

like wildcats in a trap. Wainwright's brute strength still served him, for a moment, though already he had breathed fire and his lungs were cooked. A few seconds he still made a screen of the writhing, screeching billionaire, even as, aforesaid, Murchison himself had held a clerk before him, to ward off a bomb-explosion, terribly mangling the clerk, who had never been able to collect a penny of damages.

But Wainwright's respite was brief. For now the gold was on them both.

Breath failed. They reeled and sank, together; and the coruscating metal took them. Death was welcome.

The sickening smell of burnt flesh and hair, of baking bones and blood, spread through the smoke-filled air. The scene almost paralleled, in a small way, a glorious victory over the 'red rampart's slippery edge' of battle.

A frightful, screaming laugh howled through the ruddy, flaming smoke and fumes.

Braunschweig, at bay, staggered to his feet for a brief instant.

Gone, now, his prophet-beard—scorched clean from his blackened, roasted face. Gone his leonine 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 Jew 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!" roared he,

hoarse and terrible as the Minotaur in the fabled Cretan labyrinth.

"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, still unchecked, swifter and ever swifter still, expanded, burst upward through the solid roof of the crypt in a vast deluge of bright, blinding glory.

Silence!

Death!

Death for the Mammonites.

Yet as they died, life for the people was coming to its birth. Life for the nation. Life for the waiting, eager, mazed and trembling world.

CHAPTER XXXVII

SUNSHINE UPON THE HEIGHTS

DRIVEN back by the swiftly accelerating heat and smoke about the now deserted Treasury building, the stupendous multitudes watched the outbursting of this cataclysmic flood with silent wonder.

Where, at the beginning of the Blight, all had been noise, panic, tumult and uproar inconceivable, now a calm, watchful, patient dignity possessed the people.

What was happening?

Nobody knew exactly.

The general opinion—as you will find it reflected in the press of that day, if you refer back to the files of the old papers—seems to have been that this subterranean disturbance was one symptom of Storm's final coup, the destruction of the last national reserve of 1,200 tons of gold.

But, for a while, nothing was done. The city, black with people, simply stood still and watched, even as the nation and the world, by wire and by wireless, were watching too.

So disorganized every department of life seemed to have been, so wholly disjointed all the local and Federal governmental machinery, that even so trivial a detail as the ringing in of a fire-alarm was neglected.

Even had an alarm been pulled, no engines could have

penetrated the close-packed masses of people which for many blocks in all directions—even from Potomac Park and the river, around by the Capitol and the Union Station, as far to westward as Rock Creek—rendered the streets wholly impassable.

Even those who now began to feel the heat and fear the up-bursting smoke as it coiled from the basement windows, as it writhed up between the sidewalk flaggings and cracks in the asphalt pavement, burst up volcano-like through coal-holes and drifted from the very earth itself below their feet—even these, nearest the scene of the gold integration, succeeded in fighting their way back only by tremendous effort.

But there was no rioting. Such disturbance as occurred was merely the effort of the inner masses of people to retreat before the growing cataclysm.

A strange, unnatural calm held them in thrall.

And, slowly yielding, the vast ring of watchers widened as the heat and smoke grew more and more oppressive.

The first gush of molten gold, however, produced a violent outcry, and some disorders in which a number of spectators were injured.

At sight of that vivid, spurting, sparkling flow, a long and quickly swelling thunder of massed voices rose; it spread and echoed like concentric waves on a vast lake.

The whole city seemed to acclaim it with passionate fervor.

The very spot where the metal first broke through, just a little south of the southwest corner of the building, is—as you know—to-day marked by that rugged,

symbolic "Liberation Monument," without a cut of which no school history is nowadays complete.

The first jet was followed by many others, almost simultaneously; and now the earth cracked and ripped apart as fumes and metal alike began to fulminate.

All accounts—though differing somewhat in detail—agree that the north wing was the first to fall. Faster, thicker the smoke came now. Up-welling, the golden flood bubbled and gushed from a thousand apertures; it spread out, twisting, writhing in fantasies of voluted golden lava-flows.

And as these hardened, fresh jets from still other *fumaroles* gushed over them. The whole earth vibrated, groaning with the intense travail of the vaults beneath—the laboring strain of the expanding hoard that, pent by steel and concrete and by towering walls, fought to be free.

Thus Vulcan toils beneath Patmos; thus the Earth Giants and the Midgard Serpent of the Eddas toil.

Now great splintering cracks ran, booming all through the north wall of the building. They splayed out like lightning chains.

And, suddenly, with a titanic heave and thrust, a long section of the foundation lifted.

It dropped again, amid a rain of falling chimney-stacks, cornices, shattered window-ledges and facing-stones.

And as it sank, a stupendous dragon-burst of flame, of smoke and spurting gold belched heavenward.

Then the whole north wing, crumpled like a card-house struck by a cyclone, roared down to ruin.

Before the thunder of the shock and of the million-

throated cry had died, the central façade caved backward, crushing the undermined body of the structure. Half a minute later the south wing, rent apart, swayed, tottered and suddenly collapsed.

Where the Treasury had stood, a symbol of capitalist might and hoarding power, now lay a tremendous, roughly conical pile of steel and stone and gold.

High in air, a stupendous pillar of smoke and dust shot up.

At the top it broadened, mushroomlike. Slowly this huge, monstrous signal-column drifted away on the southeast wind up the valley of the Potomac.

Swirling flames, vapors, leaping and roaring masses of metal, stifled reports and booming verberations, with everywhere the bright and crawling founts of gold, gold, gold—all made a picture such as never yet was seen on earth and never any more shall be.

In the smoke of that vast funeral pyre of the men of gold, the capitalist system lifted from off the weary shoulders of the world.

And like the wraith of a forgotten, evil dream—a dream of horror, blood, lust, war—it drifted on, on, away; it faded, vanished utterly upon the wings of the pure, cold December wind.

For, though the actual gold remained, the world had fundamentally altered, vitally transmuted during the long stress and terror of the Blight. And that which men had seemed to love, now they hated with a bitterness wherein fear played a vital part.

Such was the first step out into freedom, the first long step toward reason and the dominance of pure intelligence.

When Storm had struck even his first blow, the world had for many a long and toil-worn year been "ripe and rotten-ripe for change."

Millions of men already had accepted, with the passionate fervor of a new and vital faith, the knowledge of social evolution; millions were hoping, waiting, working for the Great Change.

Storm's campaign had done more than temporarily destroy gold. It had killed an idea, throttled a superstition. It had forever shattered to the uttermost foundation mankind's submission to the idea that plutocracy—the gold power—possessed any right whatsoever to rule and rack and ruin.

It had been the fecundating germ of an incalculable mutation, the electric spark firing the train of universal, resistless mass-revolt.

In the weeks of Storm's progressive victory over gold (a concrete object lesson of the helplessness of matter, the dominance of intellect), so much water had run under the world's economic, social and political bridges, that—now with the dominant masters seared and sealed under tons of rigid gold—nothing could ever any more bring the people's neck again *sub jugum*, under the yoke.

King Gold was dead!

A rejoicing world, uprising millions upon uncounted millions, acclaimed his death; and, to the farthest isles, kings, emperors, czars found their thrones a-crumble, their crowns falling, their ermine transformed to the sackcloth of fear and flight.

But the people, glad in triumph, knew the day of longed-for freedom was at the dawn. Up fluttered the

crimson banners of fraternity; the "International," sung in all tongues, ushered the better day.

Hardly had the gold stiffened into its fantastic grotesquerie, binding and gripping the ruins of the Treasury in a thousand weird embraces, when popular pressure on Congress caused to be drawn and enacted the famous national monument bill, and called for an International Values Commission, to sit at Washington.

The bill provided, as you know, that the Treasury ruins be appropriately fenced and surrounded by a park, adjoining the Administration grounds and embracing the territory between H Street, Fourteenth and Pennsylvania Avenues; and that the granite pile, gold and all, should forever remain inviolate—softened only by time and by the fingering tendrils of woodbine and ivy—as a huge memorial of past human folly and of the crimes of capital, in other days.

The values commission, representing every civilized nation in the world, demonetized gold, after a two-days' session.

Certain reactionaries proposed mining the gold from the ruins, and trying to reestablish the System; but their suggestion was not even made public. For in the existing state of popular enthusiasm, grave consequences might have resulted.

Gold thus lost its fictitious, imaginary, dream-spun value, and became simply an ordinary metal, like any other. Save in the arts and sciences, it now possessed no more importance than lead—even less, for many uses.

No longer an exchange medium, its power for ill vanished forever.

The news flamed from a hundred thousand bulletin-boards, to shouting, cheering millions; and the vast series of fêtes that resulted, could not find adequate description in a library of quarto volumes.

Still further, the radical elements of society all the world over, had in the weeks of stress so enormously strengthened their power that now they at once began demonetizing silver also and introducing a system of labor-certificates, personal and non-transferable, as the only legal tender.

With their rise to control, all exploitation, involuntary poverty, war and the whole misbegotten brood of capitalism, soon passed beyond the bounds of any possible resuscitation.

Far more than this, the coöperative commonwealth, whereof unnumbered sages and philosophers had dreamed, for which uncounted multitudes had labored and died, now shone—clearly at hand—upon the heights ahead.

EPILOGUE

COMFORTABLY leaning back in his big chair at the very window of the Planters' and Traders' Hotel, from which he had watched the destruction of the Treasury, John Storm drew for a moment at his cigar before concluding his long letter of refusal.

The sun-soaked radiance of that southern winter morning beat warmly on the table before him. He pondered a moment with wrinkled brows, then shook his fountain pen, and wrote these final paragraphs:

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!" sighed he, much relieved. "What a dog's life a writer's must be!"

For a little while he smoked in silence.

"Dreams," said he to himself at length. "Yes, I, too, have had my dreams, even I. And now they're coming true!

"Dreams of an infinitely better world than any mankind has ever known—a world free from the oppressions of kings, priests and capitalists, liberated from the nightmare-rule of gold, forever done with slavery and exploitation and the ghastly, blood-stained madness of war.

"Dreams of a world of joy, peace, knowledge, in which mankind shall come into its rightful heritage and own the earth as one great family, each giving according to his ability, each taking according to his need. A world without bitterness and strife; a world of aspiration and of love.

"Now, for the first time, ideals can come to full fruition. The human race, its chains unbound, can now for the first time live its visions, and prove the innate nobility of the human soul. In place of misery, poverty, anguish, woe and death, shall be light and joy, knowledge, art, music, development, plenty, peace and life!

"Life was meant to be free, joyous, self-expressive. The few, with cynic power, have chained it in hard bonds of woe and travail. But now, already 'the old order changeth, giving place to new!'"

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 winter

morning. Away and away the Potomac stretched a crinkled ribbon of blue watered silk. Over all, through all, brooded quiet and calm and joy.

“H-m!” said he to himself at length, “before long I shan’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.

The sunlight on his face showed it a trifle thinner, a bit paler than before the Blight; but it was still the same strong, half-humorous, half-stern face, kindly, determined and very human.

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.

Storm leaned on crossed arms to listen.

Pipe gripped in teeth, he harkened the New Year’s 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!” mused Storm. “How good it is—how good the world is now, and the people, and everything—now that the chance exists!”

He paused and looked abroad.

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 New Year’s 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 raised his head and listened, his heart athrill; and to his soul the brazen bells cried, in a pean 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!