

# The Black Cat

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## September 1901

**Gentlemen Unafraid.**

Florence Guertin Tuttle.

**Born Tired.**

James D. Ellsworth.

**The Invisible City.**

Frank Lillie Pollock.

**The Strayed Finger.**

John Walcott.

**The Man Who Found Zero.**

Ion Arnold.



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## The Invisible City.\*

BY FRANK LILLIE POLLOCK.



HE bare possibility of the thing, and that it should have culminated in its amazing tragedy in the midst of the enthusiastic throng as the returning regiment marched up Fifth Avenue, staggers the imagination. The soldiers had just reached Twenty-ninth Street when a man who had been standing in the crowd at the south-west corner dropped suddenly into a huddling heap upon the sidewalk. At the same moment, as was afterward remarked, those standing near experienced a peculiar sensation of physical distress, attributed by some to fatigue, but quickly forgotten in the excitement of the spectacle.

A policeman rescued the man, who was supposed to be intoxicated, and extricated him from the crowd. But a single glance into his face was enough to refute the theory of intoxication; he was ghastly pale, with open eyes; his limbs hung like limp strings, and his head waggled helplessly upon his shoulders. An ambulance was called, and the man was removed to the hospital.

He was a short, slight man, of middle age, with black moustache and black, slightly grizzled hair. He was well dressed, and had all the appearance of an American professional man. The most cursory examination showed that the case was one of paralysis of the most complete sort. Not a muscle of the system appeared to be under control, though it was believed that the man was conscious. It was of course useless to interrogate him, and he was removed to a ward and undressed.

The first surprise came with the discovery that he was wearing next his skin a garment of something resembling woven glass, flexible as silk. It recalled the famous World's Fair glass dress, but was much finer in workmanship. This strange coat of mail

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was in one piece and covered the entire body, limbs and feet, but down the back it was split in a zigzag tear.

This remarkable revelation aroused much curiosity, and the man's clothing was searched for some clue to his identity. There was not so much as a visiting card or a notebook — not even a watch or a pencil, but in an inner pocket was found a rather thick packet, wrapped in paper, like a bundle of letters. It was opened, and to the amazement of the attendants revealed a packed pile of thousand-dollar bank-notes — one hundred and seventy-five in all.

The staff immediately concluded that they had a bank robber or defaulter, and communicated at once with police headquarters. But there was no report of any such sum having disappeared. Advertisements were placed in various newspapers without success, except in the assembling of a horde of bogus claimants. Meanwhile the only man who could throw any light on the matter lay dumb and as good as dead upon his cot.

This state of things lasted for two months and a half. Early in April, 1899, the attendants observed a slight but unmistakable return of power to the paralyzed limbs. The improvement continued, but was confined to the left side alone. In a few weeks more, the patient was able to use his left arm feebly, and those around eagerly awaited the day when he should speak.

That day never came; the disease held the larynx fast. In a short time, however, he begged by signs for writing materials, and scrawled painfully with his left hand a series of characters that were wholly undecipherable by the attendants and doctors. Inspection by a linguist proved it to be very crabbed Russian, the translation being simply: "Where is my money?"

It was shown him, to his satisfaction, and a Russian interpreter was engaged. Strange revelations were expected, as a mystery of no common nature seemed involved, but no revelations were forthcoming. The patient made only the most ordinary requests. No language but Russian seemed intelligible to him, and, in view of his decidedly American appearance, it was supposed that this had been his mother tongue, to which the stroke had thrown him back.

But in a few days he took to writing, slowly and with difficulty, for several hours every day, guarding his manuscripts with the

most anxious care. They were kept under his pillow at night, and he was not willing that any one should so much as touch them. But his solicitude was not to be prolonged. His partial recovery had been attended by a dangerous lowering of vitality; his right side was dead already, while the left still lingered. In less than a week, as the house-surgeon was making his rounds, he was startled by a strange, guttural sound from the bed of the paralytic. He hastened toward it with the attendants, but the man had raised himself to a sitting posture, as if completely recovered. His mouth opened, and in a voice of no human sound he exclaimed loudly, "Vive l'Anarchie!" and fell back again — lifeless. The papers crackled under his pillow.

The mysterious patient was buried — a mystery — and the funeral expenses were paid out of his money. The superintendent, who had possessed himself of the dead man's manuscript, sent it at once to a professor of languages for translation. When the English version was returned, he read it; he read it and kept his counsel. Then, the time of his annual vacation approaching, he left New York and told no one where he was going.

First of all he went to Santa Fé, New Mexico. Thence, by horseback, he traversed the mountain trails of the north-western corner of the territory until he arrived at the "Lago de los Demonios" — the Lake of Demons. The water bearing this uncanny name lies in a round, cup-shaped valley, which twenty years ago was green and empty. Few persons ever passed, but one day a band of trappers found the valley two-thirds filled with blue water, and bordered with dangerous-looking blue mud. Their ponies snorted and held back from entering this mud, which was thereupon deemed bottomless. It was not surprising that a cloud-burst or a deflected river should have filled the valley, but it was observed that, however the wind might blow, no wave ever ruffled the surface of the lake. It remained smooth and placid as if it had been a block of solid glass. Game deserted the neighboring hills and horses manifested the utmost reluctance to approach the strange water, so that it is not remarkable that the superstitious Mexicans should have come to believe in the evil influences of the place.

But about the middle of January, 1899, a passing traveller

found the waters of the lake much lowered, with no quicksands in sight. More than that, a fresh breeze drove the blue water breaking upon the shore, and his horse manifested no reluctance to drink freely. Grouse drummed in the thickets, deer fed in the chaparral, and it was as if an evil spell had suddenly been lifted from the place. The traveller told of these things in Taos, and his report was speedily corroborated, but the lake continued to be known by its ill-omened name.

The superintendent rode around this mysterious sheet of water, explored the hills near by and meditated deeply for some hours. Then he returned to Santa Fé and to New York, with the air of a man who has accomplished his mission. His first act after returning was to re-read the dead man's statement:

“My real name is Paul Zphanoff,” it ran, “and I am of Polish birth. My father was killed in the Polish insurrection of 1846; one of my brothers was accused of the distribution of Socialistic literature, and died in the mercury mines; my other brother disappeared in the fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul on a similar charge, and his fate was never known. My mother died soon after this. It is not wonderful, then, that I should have grown up with the fever of revolution in my veins.

“In 1872 I fled from Russia to France, where I began my scientific studies at the University of Paris. Very soon I ran short of money, and continued so for many years, living among the poor, for all my funds were expended in apparatus and experiments. But I shall never cease to be thankful for those years, for I grew to know the poor. I saw the hideous industrial despotism as the slaves see it, only one degree less than that of the Tsar, and that which had made me a Nihilist in Russia made me a Socialist in Paris.

“Four years later came my arrest, on an absurd charge, but leading to a year's imprisonment. I shall not dwell upon this outrage, for it has been amply avenged. It was the one thing needed to precipitate my resolution, and when I was released I joined hands with the Committee of the Red Terror.

“Then, in 1876, I made my grand discovery — the discovery which has resulted in making me the most powerful and irresponsible ruler that the century has seen. The police will remember, if no one else does, the sudden disappearance from half a dozen

capitals of a hundred of the most dangerous and most suspected labor agitators and socialists of Europe. They had departed with me, and we had gone to realize the ideal of centuries of dreamers — an industrial and ungoverned community. But for its success we had conditions of isolation impossible heretofore.

“That was due entirely to my invention. Briefly speaking, it was based on an extension of the wave theory of force. Every one knows that matter in a comparatively low rate of molecular vibration produces sound, running up the gamut, till, after an interval of silence, heat and light rays are produced. Beyond the violet of the spectrum lie the Röntgen rays, and beyond this nothing has been known, chiefly on account of the impossibility of producing a sufficiently rapid rate of vibration. This difficulty I overcame by the use of my multiplying electric motors, and beyond the violet of the prism, further than the Röntgen discoveries, I found what I have termed the ‘Hypnotic Ray.’

“To these currents are due, I believe, all the phenomena of telepathy, hypnotism and mesmerism. Hitherto all these forces have been quite uncontrollable, generated no one knew how, but for the first time I was able to produce them mechanically at will, and even to transmit them by means of suitably contrived conductors as easily as an ordinary voltage of electricity. To this the Invisible City owed its being.

“In an almost unknown valley in the mountains of New Mexico we chose our site, at the bottom of a deep, green, circular valley. Round about it we led the Hypnotic wires, with revolving discs at intervals, so that neither man nor beast was able to come within sight of them without falling under their influence, and being made by the operation of my will to believe that they saw the valley filled with water, while our colony was establishing itself within. There were but a few score of us at first, but we obtained accessions from all quarters, till, at the end of a year, the valley contained more than five hundred inhabitants.

“We had taken a vow of individual poverty as austere as that of the Capuchins — but to me was the power, to me was the glory. I alone knew the secret of the Hypnotic motors, and every soul in the place was blindly and unconsciously under my influence. Not one was able to pass outside the lines while the wires were

charged, and the machines were never stopped. Meanwhile we increased in numbers and in collective wealth, for we had set about extensive mining operations and daily took out an average of five thousand dollars' worth of gold dust. A scientifically cultivated zone of land supplied all our own needs, and the proceeds of our mine were devoted to the cause of Socialism and Anarchy. I alone went into the outer world from time to time to sell the gold and apply the money where it was the most needed.

“Frequently emissaries were dispatched outside on special service, but not one of these ever returned. They were invariably caused to lose all memory of the city on departing, remembering only the blind purpose with which I had inspired them. Ravachol was one of these — Lucchini, the slayer of the Austrian Empress, was among the latest. Whenever a king has been shot at or a millionaire assassinated during the last ten years it has been at my order, and as surely by my hand as if I myself had held the weapon.

“The city continued to grow, even beyond my expectations, and in 1889 was already densely populated. Ten years later, indeed, it contained upwards of ninety thousand toilers — nearly a hundred thousand automata. Frequently I made journeys to recruit new settlers, as well as to spy upon the machinations of our enemy, the World. I became well known in the business and social circles of four capitals, and it was upon one of these expeditions that I was so ill-starred as to meet Marie Lorrime.

“She was the daughter of a multifold millionaire, a man against whom all our hostility was directed, but I found myself loving her from the first. I struggled hard, I went back to the Invisible City, I worked, I plotted, I cursed, but I could not tear the love out of my soul. I had never known the like before; here was something absolutely beyond my control. To love meant desertion to the enemy, and treachery of the most dastardly kind to the cause of liberty. For a year I did not go within five hundred miles of her, and I devoted myself fiercely to the grim business of dynamite and stiletto, as half a dozen nations know to their cost.

“All was in vain. I was as completely enchanted as were the deluded victims of my powers. Strangely enough, to exercise these powers upon her I felt to be impossible. Yet I did not even

know whether she had so much as dreamed of loving me, nor did I much care. Such love as mine, I knew well, was not to be balked by a mere woman's will. It was with my own will that the battle lay.

“There is no need to detail my struggles — they lasted for three years, and at last I gave up the unequal conflict. It was in the Invisible City, late at night, I remember, that I at last admitted defeat, and, once conquered, I made immediate preparations to open my new career and completely close the old. Human life, I am glad to say, has never weighed much with me. Our immense water reservoir was situated on the hillside just above the city, and by night I employed myself secretly in weakening the gates. I also labored to turn the half dry course of a river that a cloud-burst always changed to a roaring torrent, and to deflect it toward the reservoir. The valley would fill like a cup with the next cloud-burst, and not a man could pass the lines, even under fear of death. For myself, the only danger was that which always menaced me in leaving the city, — that the grounded Hypnotic wires should make the earth circuit to my body — for the constant neighborhood of the strange psycho-physical currents had produced an effect somewhat akin to polarization — to avoid a technical explanation. As a safeguard I wore a complete garment of woven glass, manufactured by our own processes and flexible as cloth.

“On the third of January, 1899, I secured what gold happened to be in the treasury, and left the Invisible City for the last time. I went straight to New York, where I exchanged the dust for thousand dollar bills.”

At this point the narrative broke off abruptly, ended by the death of the mysterious writer. What was the true cause of his strange paralytic seizure? Had the wonderful “Hypnotic Ray” found him out, and avenged upon him the murder of a hundred thousand people?

No one will ever know. And meanwhile the Invisible City rests at peace beneath the blue water of the Lake of Demons — invisible forever.

