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The Toys of Fate

BY TOD ROBBINS

Illustrated by W. K. Starrett

THERE was a raucous screaming of brakes, and the train, which had been gliding along smoothly through the night, came to an abrupt, shivering halt. I was violently precipitated against the man who sat opposite me, and he was thrown to the floor.

"I beg your pardon," I said, as soon as I regained my breath and my equilibrium. "I hope you're not hurt."

He was a stout, middle-aged man in a light woolly overcoat. Lying on the floor of the smoking-compartment, his large and melancholy brown eyes staring up at me from his unexpressive face, he closely resembled a sheep awaiting the attentions of the butcher. There was an irritating passivity about his inert figure which was galling in the extreme. My right toe tingled to stir him into a more upright and dignified position.

"I hope you're not hurt," I repeated, but this time there was no sympathy in my tone.

His hands fluttered uncertainly about his plump person.

"No, I'm not hurt," he said at last, rising slowly to his feet. "For a moment I thought that he'd finally taken me out of his pocket; but—"

He broke off and regarded me mournfully with his head on one side.

"I beg your pardon," said I, making no sense out of his words. "You were saying—"

But at this point I was interrupted by the conductor, who bustled in with an air of importance. The somber pride of the tragedian was mirrored on the official's face as he picked up a lantern and lighted it.

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

"A man's been run over," he answered tersely. "Got his foot caught in the switch, and couldn't get away in time."

"Poor devil! Is he dead?"

"I should say so! They tell me he's torn to rags. I'm going up there now. Want to go along?"

"No," I answered hastily. "That kind of thing makes me sick."

The conductor smiled rather contemptuously and strode out into the passageway. A moment later I could see his lantern, one among a dozen or more, gliding past the window like a large, luminous bubble. We had come to a standstill in a deserted tract of swamp-land. The black, brooding night seemed to hang heavily over the earth, like a threatening hand. Not a light glimmered anywhere, except those gay bobbing lanterns which flowed on merrily to the feet of tragedy; not a sound broke the silence, except the far-away murmur of voices and the dismal croaking of frogs.

"He would have chosen such a night!"

I started involuntarily. For the moment I had forgotten the existence of the man in the woolly overcoat. He now sat facing me in his old seat near the window, looking particularly docile, stupid, and altogether aggravating.

"I'm sure I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," I said rather irritably. "Will you kindly explain?"

"Naturally you wouldn't," he murmured sadly. "And you won't believe me if I tell you the story. You'll think me mad."

"Oh, no, I won't," I hastened to assure him.

I had realized at the first glance that this fellow with the muddy brown eyes was too stupid to be threatened with insanity. Madness, after all, is a mental fungus dependent on rich soil for its growth—the disease of a vivid imagination. Looking at my traveling companion with the trained eyes of a physiognomist, I said with conviction:

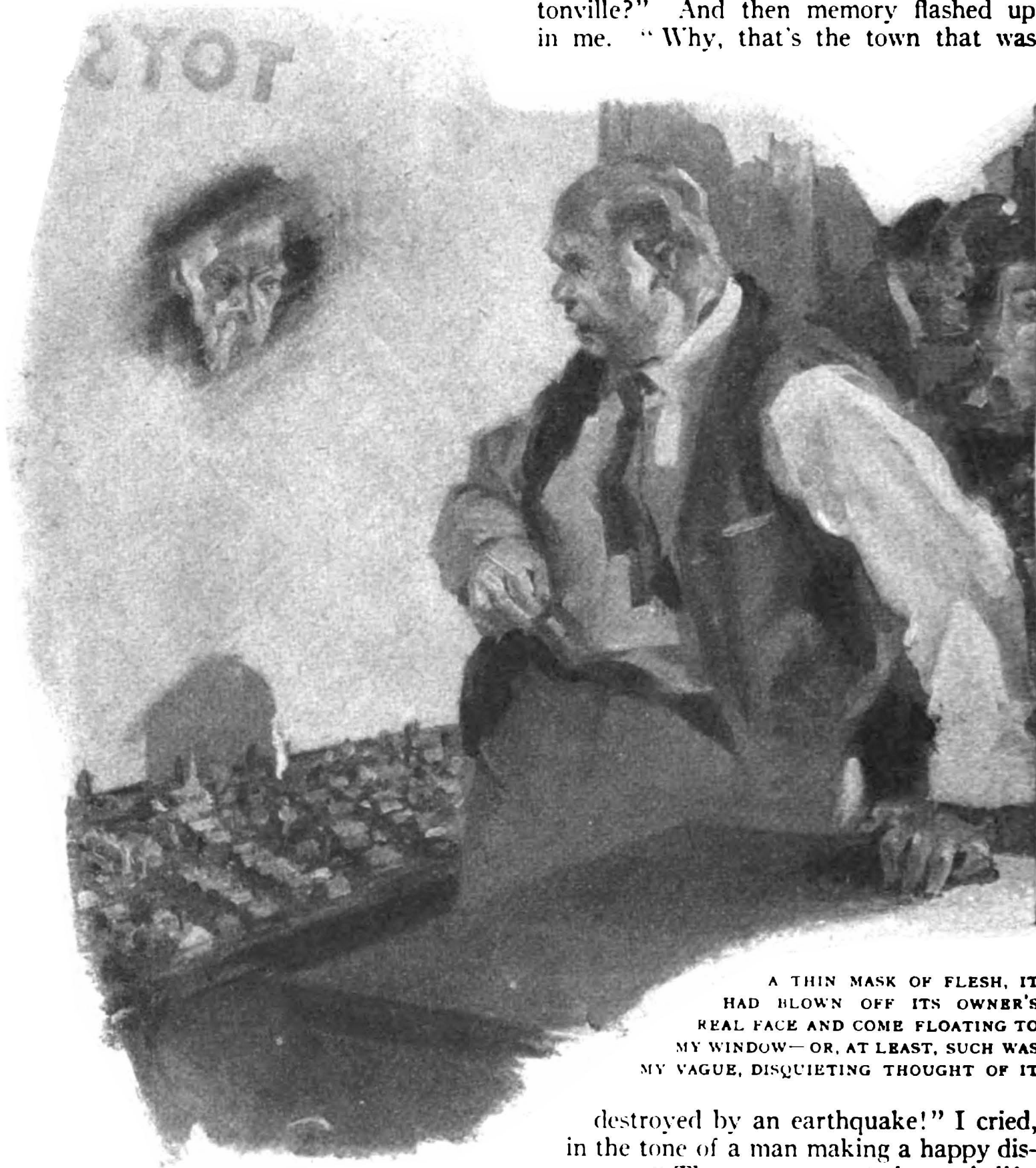
"I would never consider *you* insane!"

At this he brightened visibly, as if I had paid him a compliment.

"That's a satisfaction," said he, crossing his plump legs. "To be quite candid with you, Mr.—"

"So I was, sir," said he, with a mournful shake of the head. "It all happened a long time ago, when I was living in Prestonville. Perhaps you've heard of Prestonville, Mr. Burton?"

"Prestonville?" I murmured. "Prestonville?" And then memory flashed up in me. "Why, that's the town that was



A THIN MASK OF FLESH, IT HAD BLOWN OFF ITS OWNER'S REAL FACE AND COME FLOATING TO MY WINDOW—OR, AT LEAST, SUCH WAS MY VAGUE, DISQUIETING THOUGHT OF IT

"Burton's my name," said I.

"To be quite candid, Mr. Burton," he continued, "I've been called mad more times than once. And when I haven't been called mad, I've been called a good liar, which is just as insulting."

"Neither is insulting," I replied; "but let that pass. You were about to tell me your story."

destroyed by an earthquake!" I cried, in the tone of a man making a happy discovery. "There was great loss of life, wasn't there?"

"A frightful loss of life, Mr. Burton! It came after midnight, when people were in their beds, and the houses were bowled over as if they were made of cardboard. There was no warning. All at once the earth began to shake, and then—"

He made a sweeping gesture with his hand.

"It was a thriving town, I understand?"

"Yes, indeed, sir—a progressive town. By this time it would have been a large city. There were enterprising business men who had made their homes there—clean-living, ambitious men, who would have been the pride of the country if they had survived; but most of them were buried under their own roofs. They died with the town." He broke off and rubbed the bald spot just above his right temple, which was glistening with perspiration. "And there was no reason for it all!" he finished, almost fiercely. "If it had been a vicious growth, like some towns in this State, one could call it a visitation of Providence, and explain it that way."

"Can one *ever* satisfactorily explain what happens?" I broke in. "Fate is a blindfolded baby attempting to play chess for the first time."

"No, he isn't!" the man in the woolly overcoat cried excitedly. "I'll tell you what he is. He's an old fellow—a little mad, you understand, but not so mad as not to be vicious."

"You seem positive that you're right," I said with a smile. "Why?"

Before he answered, he drew out a cigar and lighted it with a hand that shook oddly.

"I'll tell you why," he answered very calmly between puffs. "I have met Fate."

"You have met fate?" I said slowly, trying to figure out his meaning.

"Exactly," he replied with a half-hearted chuckle. "He's a dirty old man with a face white and wrinkled as a paper bag—an untidy old man who drops crumbs in his beard and soup on his vest—an old man who neighs when he laughs, like a frightened horse."

"In spite of his stupid look this man is quite mad," was my thought. But aloud I said: "How did you know that the old fellow was Fate? Tell me about it."

"Willingly," said he. "It unburdens my mind to tell what I know, even though people think me mad. Living and remaining silent is unendurable. I feel that I am hidden away from the world in some black recess—a recess from which I cannot escape, and in which I must wait patiently. Some day his hand will grope about in that recess, touch me, and then—" He broke off and passed his handkerchief across his perspiring forehead. "And when I am finally plucked out into the light of day,

what will happen to me? I do not know, nor can I guess. Perhaps he has forgotten me; perhaps I may be overlooked for years. He has so many playthings, that mad old man!"

"You were about to tell me your story," I ventured.

II

"To be sure," the man said in a somewhat calmer tone. "It all happened ten years ago in Prestonville. I was in the toy business then, and had a large shop on Main Street. My show-windows were the delight of every child in town. They would stop on their way to school and stare in, with their noses pressed tight against the glass. And often grown people would stop. You see I had an artistic temperament, and it found expression in my show-windows."

"How?" I asked.

"Well, I arranged scenes like a stage-director. For instance, there was my tobogganing scene. Through the show-window one caught a glimpse of a hill covered with snow and children sliding down it on gaily painted sleds. And then there was my hunting scene in the forest. One saw a miniature bear at bay, surrounded by miniature sportsmen with leveled rifles. The bear growled, opened its cavernous mouth, and struck at the hunters with its heavy forepaws. It was all quite realistic, I assure you."

"No wonder your windows drew a crowd!"

"Yes, one can perform miracles with mechanical toys," he said. "But perhaps my greatest success was my replica in miniature of Prestonville itself. That, indeed, was a work of art. Every street, every house, every tree, was an exact counterpart of one in the town. When I finally put it on exhibition, it interested not only the children but the grown people as well. It was a drawing card which helped my business and quite eclipsed the efforts of my rival across the street.

"Every day hundreds of people would stop to see what was happening in this tiny town of Prestonville; for with great skill I arranged scenes for them—scenes which parodied the happenings of yesterday. It was a clever joke on the town—a harmless joke at which all could laugh, and at which none could take offense. And I was extremely happy in my ability to amuse,

when one dark, rainy evening in October *he* came and peered solemnly through my show-window."

"He?" I asked.

"Yes, that untidy old man I told you of—the old man who dropped crumbs in his beard and soup on his vest—the mad old man whom later I grew to fear worse than death.

"On account of the weather the streets were deserted; and, as there seemed to be little or no prospect of business on such an evening, I had allowed my two assistants to leave before their usual time. I was standing by the counter, staring absently at the rain-splashed windows, when I suddenly saw a dingy coat-sleeve rubbing against the plate glass. A moment later a white, wrinkled face appeared through the space which had been wiped dry, and a pair of small gray eyes stared solemnly down on my miniature of Prestonville.

"On first seeing it thus, Mr. Burton, I experienced an involuntary tremor of fear. I had an odd fancy that there was a face out there in the night and nothing more—a face drifting about quite independent of a body—a thin mask with a tangle of wild, disreputable beard hanging from it, and shark's eyes staring coldly through the slits above the cheek-bones. But it wasn't what this face held that troubled me, Mr. Burton. No, it was what it lacked—the thinness of it—the feeling that behind its flat, wrinkled surface there was nothing but vacancy. A thin mask of flesh, it had blown off its owner's real face and come floating to my window—or, at least, such was my vague, disquieting thought of it.

"For some time I stared stupidly at the face; and it, in turn, stared down on the toy town. From where I stood the scene suggested a picture. The town no longer seemed a group of miniature houses at my elbow, but the real Prestonville at a great distance; and the face, surrounded as it was by the gray mist which had formed on the window-pane, resembled the face of a cruel divinity looking down from the clouds on what it might presently destroy. It suggested one of those religious pictures of old times when man believed God to be capable of an implacable hatred and desire for vengeance. As I stood there, motionless and staring, I actually trembled for my toy town, which by some mysterious flight of the imagination had also become Prestonville."

The shopkeeper paused and blew a ring of smoke thoughtfully ceilingward.

"All this must sound absurd to you," he resumed after a moment. "In fact, on looking back on it later that night, it seemed absurd to me that an old man's face should have filled me with such wild notions. You see, Mr. Burton, I'm not ordinarily an imaginative man. I've always prided myself on my practicality."

"How long did he stare through the window?" I asked with growing interest.

"I don't know exactly. It might have been only a minute, but it seemed an age. I remember that my eyes, which have always been weak, winked shut for an instant. When I opened them again, the face had gone. I might have thought I had dreamed the whole thing if it hadn't been for the clean patch on the window-pane."

"Did you see the face again?"

"Yes, many times; but always when I was alone in the store, or at night. Sometimes I saw it surrounded by other faces, but it was usually by itself. It seemed to pick stormy nights to stare in at the toy town."

"Were you always affected in the same way?" I asked.

"Yes, always. I could not rid myself of the unhealthy feeling that this face was only a mask, like those I sold to children on Hallowe'en. If it had mirrored any human emotion or thought, it would not have affected me so. There was a sickening thinness about it, if you can understand me. It hung over my toy town like an evil moon. Soon I began to dream about it. It was a great relief when the old man finally came into my shop."

"So he came in!" I cried. "That's rather unusual, isn't it? Faces such as you describe seldom trust themselves under the glare of electric lights."

"I knew you wouldn't believe me," the shopkeeper said wistfully. "Nobody does."

"So far I believe you," I answered truthfully enough. "Go ahead."

"Well, as I was saying, he finally came in. It was a great relief to see that the face had a body to it; but what a body it was! Here were old bones, Mr. Burton—the oldest bones I've ever seen outside a graveyard. I give you my word, the man was a walking mummy. I felt the great age of those bones as they moved slowly beneath the parchment-like skin, and they

filled me with a kind of awe; but there was nothing to command respect in his shuffling gait, or in his tangle of beard, where bread-crumbs were sticking like currants in a bush, or in his clothes, which were dingy beyond belief, or in his silly senile smile, which set the wrinkles on his face all aquiver, like ripples on a bowl of milk when you stir it with a spoon. All in all, he was as disreputable-looking an old man as the town could boast of—and half-witted as well, if his wagging lower lip did not belie him. But, as I was saying, there was something awe-inspiring in his slow-moving bones—something which filled me with an unaccountable reverence.

“Well, he shuffled up to the counter and leaned on it for a space, mumbling to himself, like a man rehearsing a speech. His pale gray eyes were fixed on me, but they didn't seem to see me. He ran his fingers through his beard in a nervous fashion, so that several stray crumbs rolled down his soup-stained vest and fell on the floor.

“‘Well, sir,’ I finally said, speaking pleasantly and even respectfully, for I couldn't forget the age of his bones, ‘what can I do for you?’

III

“At that he winked one eye at me and snickered. It wasn't a laugh at all, rightly speaking, but more like the neigh of a frightened horse.

“‘Tut, tut!’ says he with a reproving roll of his head. ‘Don't ask silly questions, young man. You know what I want. Why, I've come for your town!’

“‘My town?’ I cried in astonishment. ‘You mean you want to buy it?’

“‘Isn't it for sale?’ he asked, cocking his beard at me. ‘I'll tell you what it is, sir. I've found everything for sale in this world but myself—myself!’ He smirked and bowed like a dancing-master in his dotage. ‘The prices that have been offered me just for a nod or a smile! Ha, they would turn your head, young man! You'd sell your soul for a hundredth part of them; but I? Ah, no! I may not be intelligent, but I'm essentially honest—yes, essentially honest. What do you want for your town?’

“‘I hadn't intended to sell it,’ I replied rather weakly, for his torrent of wild words had played havoc with my wits. ‘You see it's a good advertisement for the shop.’

“‘Come, come, young man!’ says he,

tapping his nose slyly with a shriveled forefinger. ‘None of your tradesman's tricks with me! Everything has a price, you know. Out with it!’

“At that, Mr. Burton, I took a careful survey of this old man from top to toe, from the dingy felt hat set awry on his head to his mud-splashed boots rich with the red clay of the countryside. I had no intention of selling my toy town, and I meant to ask a price far beyond his ability to pay.

“‘Well, young man?’ he cried impatiently. ‘Well?’

“‘Five thousand dollars is the price of that town,’ I answered, thinking that now I would be rid of him.

“You may well imagine my surprise, Mr. Burton, when he pulled out an old leather wallet fairly bursting with bills, and counted five thousand-dollar notes into my palm. One would as soon expect to find a scarecrow stuffed with bank-notes. Here he was, a very beggar of a man in appearance, with a purse whose contents would have done credit to any millionaire! It made my head swim.

“‘There you have it,’ said he with one of his snickers. ‘A very moderate price, I'd say, for such a thriving town. I'm afraid you've cheated yourself, young man.’ He turned his back on me and stepped over to the show-window. ‘You shouldn't have kept it so long!’ he cried sharply. ‘You're hopelessly old-fashioned!’

“‘Old-fashioned?’ I muttered.

“‘Yes, old-fashioned,’ he said sourly. ‘You show nothing here except what happened yesterday. What sort of business is that? Now I'm abreast of the times, and sometimes a step or so in advance of them. I may look antiquated, but I'm not. See here!’

“As quick as thought, Mr. Burton, this strange old man put his hand in his pocket and drew out a match. Striking it on the heel of his boot, he bent forward and applied the flame carefully to one of the tiny cardboard houses in the town.

“‘Look out!’ I cried. ‘You'll set it on fire! It's only made of paper!’

“‘It is on fire,’ he answered with evident satisfaction, slowly straightening his aged back. ‘It gives quite a blaze for such a small house.’ He broke off and regarded me with a strange look of childish innocence on his wrinkled old face. ‘I love fires!’ said he. ‘Don't you?’

"I made him no answer. My eyes were on the toy town and on the tiny cardboard house which was going up in flames and smoke. Instantly I knew which one this mad old man had picked out to destroy—it was the miniature of my own house on Sanford Avenue. There it blazed merrily; and I was moved by the sight of it. Hot anger surged through me against this old fool at my elbow—an anger which was tinged with fear. I felt regret, too, that I had sold my toy town to this destroyer of miniature homes.

"At last the toy house crumbled into red-hot ashes, Mr. Burton; and the old man, who all this time had been stretching his hands over the blaze, once more turned to me with an air of triumph.

"'You see I'm not old-fashioned!' he cried with a high, neighing laugh. 'No—I keep abreast of the times, although I'm so dingy. Who cares about yesterday's doings? We want a peep into the minute ahead, not the minute behind. Do the little figures of wood go with the town?'

"'Yes,' I answered sourly. 'As perhaps you know, each is supposed to represent some one in Prestonville.'

"'And are *you* included?' he asked, half closing his dull, fishy eyes. 'Did you sell yourself as well as the others?'

"'I suppose you'll find the wooden man-iken of me in the collection,' I muttered, 'unless it was burned up in that little house.'

"'How could that happen?' he said pleasantly. 'You've been in this shop all the time. No, not a soul was burned but your mother-in-law.' He leaned forward and prodded in the little heap of ashes with his finger. 'Here she is, sir,' he continued with a grin, holding up for my inspection a tiny charred figure of wood. 'Burned to a cinder, you see! Well, you won't miss her much.'

"And then I smiled weakly, Mr. Burton. I was very much attached to Sally's mother, but I smiled, as almost any man smiles when his mother-in-law's name is coupled with tragedy.

"'Of course, I won't miss her much,' I answered, with quite the conventional air of gay unconcern.

"'Well, that's lucky,' he went on, stroking some more crumbs out of his beard; 'for, as you can see for yourself, she's well toasted. Not that it makes one iota of difference to me whether you miss her or

not,' he added fiercely. 'To be quite candid, young man, I'm neither very intelligent nor very kind-hearted, and I don't pretend to be, although there are optimistic fools in this world who call me both.'

"'Indeed?' I said politely.

"'Yes,' he continued, 'they think I sit up at night trying to better the human race—I, who have so many amusing things to do. There are people who imagine I'm a cousin of Santa Claus.'

"'Once removed or far removed?' said I.

"At that he began to snicker, Mr. Burton, in a most unpleasant way.

"'I wish I could think up bright things like that,' he said after a time. '*Far* removed, I'd call it. But seriously, young man, I often kick those fools in the face just to see what they'll do; and, bless me, if they don't come crawling back on all fours to lick my boots!'

"'You're a stranger to me,' I broke in. 'I thought I knew by sight every soul in town. Where are you staying?'

"For answer he bent over the toy town and touched with his finger a house which stood a little apart from the others.

"'Preston Mansion!' I cried in surprise. 'Why, that hasn't been lived in for twenty years—not since old Colonel Preston cut his throat.'

"'I live in it,' he said simply.

"'But it's in a deplorable state of disrepair,' I ventured.

"'So am I,' he rejoined. 'We're good company for each other.'

"'But the roof's never been shingled since it got hit by lightning two summers back. It can't keep out the rain.'

"'I'm living under that roof, not you!' he replied sharply. 'It suits me.'

"'I'm sure I didn't mean any offense,' I said. 'Shall I have the toy town sent there to-morrow morning?'

"'No, no!' he cried irritably. 'I'll call for it when I want it. None of your impudence, young man!'

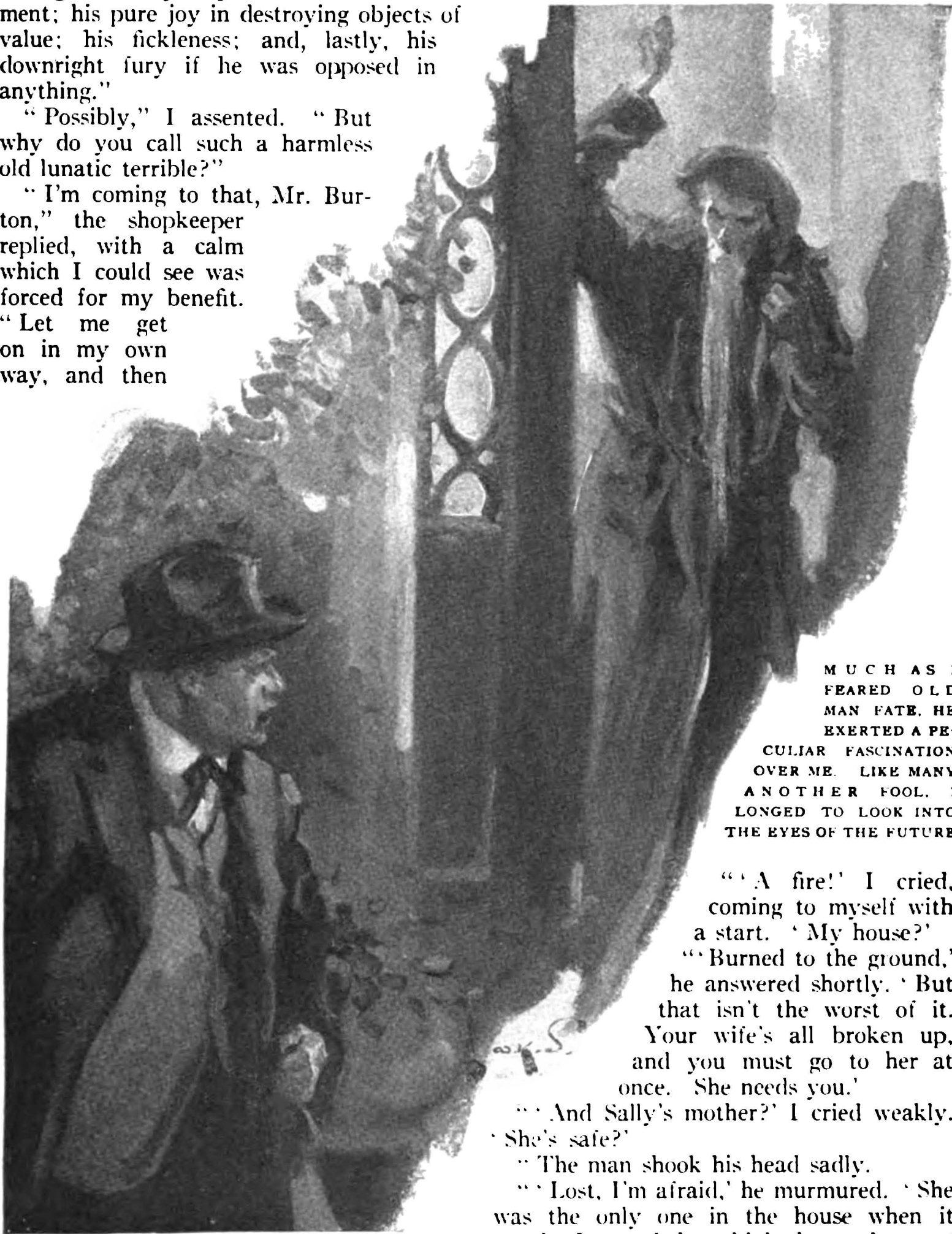
"And at that he shuffled out of my shop, Mr. Burton, without so much as a good night, leaving me fairly dumfounded. Nothing that I had said could possibly have given offense to the most sensitive person; yet he had left me in high dudgeon. Later I came to learn that he was always like that toward the end of our talks. It wasn't anything that had passed between us, but just a natural weariness of my society—the same irritability that a

child shows when he is forced to stay indoors with his nurse. Indeed, that terrible old man was very much like a spoiled child in a great many ways—his love of excitement; his pure joy in destroying objects of value; his fickleness; and, lastly, his downright fury if he was opposed in anything."

"Possibly," I assented. "But why do you call such a harmless old lunatic terrible?"

"I'm coming to that, Mr. Burton," the shopkeeper replied, with a calm which I could see was forced for my benefit. "Let me get on in my own way, and then

"Come, come!" he cried, shaking me by the arm. "There's been a fire up at your place. Your wife wants you."



MUCH AS I FEARED OLD MAN FATE, HE EXERTED A PECULIAR FASCINATION OVER ME. LIKE MANY ANOTHER FOOL, I LONGED TO LOOK INTO THE EYES OF THE FUTURE

"A fire!" I cried, coming to myself with a start. "My house?"

"Burned to the ground," he answered shortly. "But that isn't the worst of it. Your wife's all broken up, and you must go to her at once. She needs you."

"And Sally's mother?" I cried weakly. "She's safe?"

"The man shook his head sadly.

"Lost, I'm afraid," he murmured. "She was the only one in the house when it caught fire, and they think the smoke must have suffocated her, for she hasn't been seen since. Your place was insured, I hope?"

"I made him no answer. Stepping to the show-window, I bent down and looked

you can judge for yourself. As I have said, he left me with my wits all astray, gaping behind the counter; and it was there one of the neighbors found me a few minutes later.

long and curiously at the ashes where once had stood my miniature house.

" 'It all happened here,' I muttered dully. 'It happened here before my eyes!'

" 'Come, come!' my neighbor said brusquely. 'Don't break down. Play the manly part. Your wife's the real sufferer, you know. After all, a mother-in-law is only a mother-in-law.'

" 'It all happened here,' I repeated stupidly, pointing down at the toy town. 'Everything!'

" But he did not even so much as glance at the show-window. His eyes were on my right hand, which still grasped what the old man had given me.

" 'You're drunk!' he cried after a moment. 'Perhaps you'd better not go back to your wife in this condition.'

" All that I had gone through that evening, added to this final affront, made me see red.

" 'Drunk!' I cried, stepping forward. 'Why, you fool, I—'

" Unconsciously my right hand opened. From it dropped—not crisp thousand-dollar bills, but half a dozen chocolate creams wrapped up in a piece of tissue paper. The money that the old man gave me had all disappeared!"

IV

THE shopkeeper regarded me wistfully. Evidently he still hoped that I might believe his improbable story. The train was once more slipping through the night, only now at a faster pace, to make up for the enforced delay. I could see nothing through the window but a curtain of moving blackness, could hear nothing but the monotonous lullaby of the revolving wheels; but I was vaguely conscious of the sky which overhung us, somber and threatening, like an immense, hovering hand.

" Well, what do you think?" he said at last, a trifle timidly.

" I think that you were badly frightened by a coincidence," I answered. " Of course, it was strange that the old man should have burned your house in miniature; but those things happen. I remember once—"

" But how about my mother-in-law?" he broke in.

" Another strange coincidence—startling enough, I grant you."

" But can you explain how the money turned to chocolate creams?" he demanded.

" Well, as for that," I answered, " probably it was a sleight-of-hand trick. No doubt your mad old man was a practical joker with some knowledge of parlor leg-erdemain. Those fellows can fool even the brightest eyes, and you acknowledge that yours are weak."

" You have common sense," he said bitterly, " and all that I told you is an affront to it. You argue very much as I used to argue before I met that terrible old man for the second time and learned the truth."

" He came into your shop again?"

" Yes, a week after my mother-in-law's funeral. He came in just as my nephew went out. They must have met each other at the door. I can still remember the old man's first words as he hobbled up to the counter.

" 'I don't like that boy,' he said peevishly, his cold gray eyes fixed on my face. 'He aggravates me.'

" 'That's a pity,' I answered ironically.

" You must know that I was very fond of my sister's son, Mr. Burton. There wasn't a cheerier, better-natured boy in Prestonville than Charlie, though I say it myself. He was a bit mischievous, perhaps, but there was no malice in it. He was a real boy who showed that he was glad to be alive.

" 'No, I don't like him,' the old man continued, plucking irritably at his tangled beard. 'He's happy—entirely too happy. Why, the little fool goes hopping about this town like a canary! When he isn't whistling, he's grinning like an idiot. The way he acts, you wouldn't think that I existed. He ignores me, and that's the truth of the matter—*me*, whom nobody should ignore.' He paused and twitched a gray hair savagely out of his beard. 'Besides,' he finished, 'I can't abide round-eyed, apple-cheeked boys! Can you?'

" 'I'm very fond of Charlie,' I answered warmly. 'Of course, he's happy. Why shouldn't he be? He's strong and healthy.'

" 'Strong and healthy, eh?' the old man cried, with one of his unpleasant snickers. 'Well, that can be mended. Have you any toy trolley-cars in your shop—the kind that you wind up and run?'

" 'Yes, I have several,' I answered; 'but what do you want with one?'

" 'Never you mind,' he said with a sly wink. 'Never you mind, sir. Perhaps I'm buying it for Charlie. When I don't like

children, I buy them toys—not at all like Santa Claus, you see!’

“Now, Mr. Burton, he was grinning at me so slyly, with his beard ruffled out like the tail of a turkey-cock, and his eyes shifting from side to side, that, in spite of the strange fear I had of him, it was all I could do to keep from bursting out into a laugh. Here was this mummy of a man puttering about my shop like a child of ten. A toy trolley-car, indeed!

“And yet there was a childish sincerity about him, an eager curiosity to see the stock of toys, which stroked my business pride the right way. There he stood as I brought out my supply of cars, bending forward in wonder, and actually sucking his thumb.

“‘Here they are,’ said I from between twitching lips.

“‘A nice assortment,’ he said gravely; ‘a very pretty lot of trolley-cars. Now I wonder which would be best suited for Charlie. Let’s see!’ He bent lower still, so that his gray beard brushed the counter. ‘I rather fancy this one without a fender,’ he muttered. ‘It looks more businesslike than the others. Do you wind it up with a key?’

“‘Yes, here’s the key,’ I answered, holding it out to him. ‘And there’s where it winds up, right behind the rear seat. Do you want to see it run?’

“‘Indeed I do,’ he said eagerly. As he spoke, he picked up the toy and began to wind it. His beard twitched with excitement, and he hopped about as nimbly as a goat. ‘This is what I call fun!’ he cried.

“‘Put it on the counter,’ I suggested. ‘It’ll run along there all right.’

“He shook his head.

“‘No, no,’ said he. ‘That’s silly. Who ever heard of a trolley-car running on a counter? There’s just one place for it. Look here!’

“And as quick as thought, Mr. Burton, he skipped over to the window and placed the trolley-car on one of the streets of my toy town.

“‘Here’s the place for it—right on Main Street!’ he cried joyously. ‘Now I’ll let her go. Ding dong! All aboard!’

“‘It will do damage there,’ I told him, stepping forward. ‘There are people on that street. It will break all my manikins. Stop it!’

“But I was too late. Before I reached the window, the toy trolley-car had bowled

over one of the little wooden figures and had smashed both its tiny legs.

“‘Now see what you’ve done!’ I cried angrily, as the old man picked up the manikin in the palm of his hand. ‘I must ask you to leave my show-window alone in the future. That’s no way to treat toys!’

“‘They’re mine, aren’t they?’ he demanded innocently. ‘Didn’t I buy your town, with everything in it?’

“‘No, you didn’t,’ I retorted. ‘If you think a handful of chocolate creams paid for this artistic miniature of Prestonville, you’ve got another guess coming.’

“‘Chocolate creams?’ said he, with a puckered brow. ‘Chocolate creams? Did I pay you with chocolate creams?’

“‘You did!’ I answered hotly. ‘What good are they?’

“‘Why, chocolate creams are good to eat,’ he answered solemnly, staring at me like an owl. ‘You should consider yourself lucky, young man. There are people who would pay more than five thousand dollars for a handful of chocolate creams.’

“‘Nonsense!’ I cried, quite out of temper. ‘If you think—’

“But he cut me short with a wave of his hand.

“‘Now you speak about it,’ he said blandly, ‘I *do* remember about the chocolate creams. You must know that it was one of my little jokes. I’m not very intelligent, but I’ve a keen sense of humor. It happened that there was a young man who got lost in the Maine woods last week. He had five thousand dollars and six chocolate creams in his pocket. For days he wandered about in a circle, till his provisions were all gone. He grew very hungry. The five thousand dollars were no good to him; but the chocolate creams!’ The old man broke off to snicker, while his cold, shifty eyes wandered here, there, and everywhere. ‘Those chocolate creams would have kept life in his bones till his friends found him,’ he finished with a grin.

“‘Well?’ I demanded.

“‘Well, sir,’ he replied, ‘I took those chocolate creams out of his pocket while he slept, and gave them to you in place of the five thousand dollars. You see, they were very precious chocolate creams—to him. That poor young man died of starvation four days ago. Now doesn’t that prove that I have a keen sense of humor, sir?’

“It was an extremely warm day; and

yet, in spite of the heat, I felt cold. For the first time, Mr. Burton, a real tangible terror of that old man took possession of me. As I have told you, he was not so mad as not to be vicious; and now his white, wrinkled face was convulsed with a malicious merriment. Once more, in my imagination, it had become the mask of flesh which had stared through my show-window—that thin mask without human substance behind it, which might be worn in turn by all evil emotions.

“‘If you really did such a thing,’ I said at last, ‘it shows a strange kind of humor!’”

“‘Strange it may be,’ he answered sourly, ‘but it’s mine.’ He drew out his bulging wallet and put five thousand dollars on the counter. ‘It seems that you were not satisfied with chocolate creams,’ he added. ‘Well, there’s no suiting everybody. Here’s the money. You’d better count it carefully this time, for I’ve come to carry the toy town away with me.’”

“It is needless to tell you, Mr. Burton, that I acted on his suggestion. I counted the bills three times, and then locked them in my safe. Next, at his bidding, I packed up the toy town in a large leather case and helped him carry it to the door; but here I paused.

“‘How about the trolley-car?’ I asked. ‘Don’t you want that, too?’”

“‘No, young man,’ he answered, with a solemn shake of his head. ‘I have no further use for trolley-cars at present. Perhaps some other day. We’ll see, we’ll see. Meanwhile you can give this one to Charlie, with my compliments. It will make him remember me in the future. A souvenir of our meeting in your shop, eh? Good evening, sir.’”

“Frail as he looked, he picked up the leather case as easily as if it were filled with feathers. Indeed, he was surprisingly strong for a man of his age.

“‘I find you rather amusing company, young man,’ were his final words to me. ‘Drop in some evening at Preston Mansion. You’ll always find me at home.’”

“‘Whom shall I ask for?’ I inquired.

“‘Mr. Fate,’ said he, grinning up at me from beneath his ragged hat-brim. ‘Mr. L. P. D. Fate, at your service.’”

“For some time after he had left me I stood on the door-sill, following his bent, crooked figure with my eyes. Finally it vanished in a crowd that had gathered on the corner of Main Street and Sanford

Avenue. Then I heard the clatter of horses’ feet and the brazen clanging of a bell. A moment later the Prestonville ambulance swept past my shop, the horses’ shoes striking sparks on the pavement.

“‘An accident,’ I thought, not without a sensation of personal fear.

“Snatching my hat from the rack, I hurried up the street and was soon in the midst of a horrified group. Not a dozen yards farther on a trolley-car had been deserted by both motorman and conductor, and stood motionless on the tracks. Contrary to the law, the car had no fender.

“‘Who’s been hurt?’ I asked an acquaintance who stood on the outskirts of the crowd.

“For a moment, Mr. Burton, this man didn’t recognize me. When he did, his face took on a frightened look.

“‘Push your way through, Jim,’ he told me. ‘You’ve got a right to see. It’s your nephew, Charlie Carey. He was hit by that trolley. The poor kid! Both his legs are smashed to a pulp.’”

“I waited to hear no more. Pushing my way through the crowd, quite overmastered by horror and grief, I would have been by Charlie’s side in another moment, had not a long, thin hand reached out and plucked me by the sleeve.

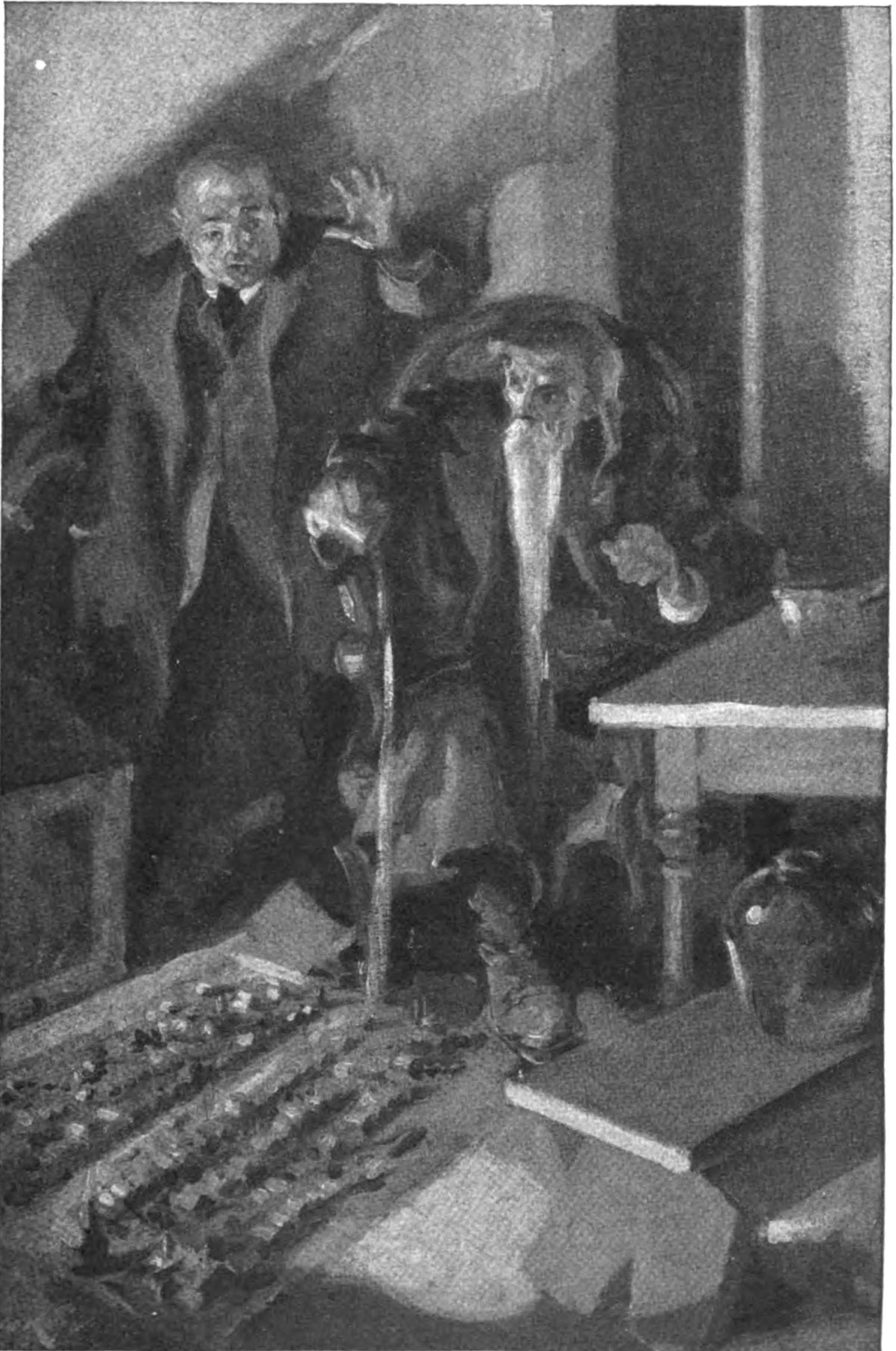
“‘It’s Mr. Fate,’ a low, insinuating voice whispered in my ear. ‘Mr. L. P. D. Fate, at your service. Don’t you forget him, young man. It doesn’t pay to forget Mr. Fate!’”

“And then I saw that terrible old man at my elbow. There he stood, grinning up at me, his cold gray eyes fixed on my face, his left hand outstretched and holding in its palm a little broken figure of wood.

“Suddenly he pocketed his toy and turned away.

“‘Don’t you forget Mr. Fate, young man,’ he called back over his shoulder. ‘Home every evening—Preston Mansion—Mr. L. P. D. Fate!’”

“His voice died away; he was gone. And I? Why, a new horror had overmastered me—a horror of the old man’s tangled beard; a horror of his cold, fishy eyes; and, worst of all, a horror of his shriveled, claw-like hands. Yes, I feared his hands the most. What were they not capable of, those hands? Guided by a brain—a little mad, you understand, but not so mad as not to be vicious—surely they gripped the world and spun it at their pleasure. This



FORTUNATELY THE GLASS WAS ONLY HALF-FULL, OTHERWISE THE INHABITANTS MIGHT VERY WELL HAVE BEEN DROWNED IN THEIR BEDS

old man's talons held the throat of strangling humanity in their grasp. Only twice had I seen them at their work, but I wanted no more proof. I was convinced of their power, Mr. Burton!"

V

THE shopkeeper paused to light his cigar, which had gone out. Once again I noticed the uncertainty of his every movement. I had seen drunken men, or men heavy with sleep, fumble with a match before striking it in just such a fashion.

Indeed, there was something of the somnambulist about my traveling companion. His acts did not seem to spring from the promptings of his own brain; it was as if he obeyed another's orders. He reminded me forcibly of a famous murderer whom I had interviewed a month before for my paper. Yes, that condemned poisoner had had exactly the same manner—the irresolute gestures, the trick of yawning unexpectedly, the terror and weariness of the eyes.

"I suppose you think me mad?" he said at last.

"Not yet," I answered. "Of course, what you've told me seems unbelievable; but there may be some simple solution to the affair which we've both overlooked."

"No, no!" he cried impatiently. "There isn't any solution. Hear me out, and you'll see that for yourself."

"I'm all attention," I assured him.

"You can well imagine," he resumed, "that this second tragedy, coming hard on the heels of the first, shattered my peace of mind. From that time on I lived in constant fear of the old man; and yet, much as I feared him, much as I dreaded to see his face or hear his name, he exerted a peculiar fascination over me. Like many another fool, I longed to look into the eyes of the future. Preston Mansion beckoned my imagination.

"At first downright fear held this unhealthy curiosity in check; but gradually, as the days went by, the first horror of what I had seen wore off slightly, giving place to a burning desire to probe the mystery. Soon I began to haunt the streets at night."

"You visited Preston Mansion?" I broke in.

"Yes, frequently. I couldn't stay away, Mr. Burton. Night after night I stole out to the outskirts of town, where that old

brick building stood somber and solitary. At first it would seem dark and deserted as I took my stand in the garden among the nodding weeds; but always, after I had been there a short time, one of the windows on the topmost floor would light up on a sudden, and a thin black shadow would pass back and forth across its glowing surface. Often this shadow would pause for an instant and bend down eagerly; and then I knew that something of moment was about to happen in Prestonville. It was terrible to stand there, Mr. Burton, and not know for certain what was happening behind that fire-flecked pane of glass."

"Didn't you ever go inside the house?" I inquired.

"Not until the old man called me. You see, I was afraid; but one night, as I stood in the garden, the front door swung open on its rusty hinges, and I saw him waiting for me in the hall. He held an old-fashioned taper above his head. Its light showed me that he wore a yellow nightcap and a disreputable velvet robe with rents in it.

"Don't be afraid, young man," he called softly. "Come in!"

"I'm not afraid," I replied, stepping forward bravely, although my knees were fairly knocking together from fright. "I'm cold from standing so long in your garden."

"You've been patient, young man," said he. "There's no gainsaying that; but one has to be patient with L. P. D. Fate."

"By this time, Mr. Burton, I was standing beside him in the hallway. The mansion was in a pitiable state of neglect. Cobwebs hung in long festoons from the rafters overhead; dust covered the floors and powdered the broad, winding staircase, lying nearly an inch deep on the carved mahogany balustrades; and behind the walls an army of rats scampered back and forth. A dismal odor of damp and decay filled my nostrils.

"The house seems a little old-fashioned, like me," the old man said, giving me a suspicious, sidelong look; "but we're not old-fashioned—neither of us. Ah, no—we keep abreast of the times! Come up to my room, young man."

"He led the way up the staircase, while I followed close at his heels. Up and up we went, three flights or more, till we came to the attic. Here he ushered me into a large, bare room, lit dimly by two wax tapers and by the rays of the moon, which

peeped in timidly through a hole in the roof; but I had eyes for nothing but the toy town.

"There it stood, Mr. Burton, on a large straw mat in the center of the room. Many changes had taken place since I had seen it last—changes, of course, which corresponded with the actual changes in Prestonville. For instance, there was the foundation of my new house standing where there had been but a heap of ashes. Then there was the new public library, which had been built in record time; and, lastly, standing outside my sister's home, was the miniature of the wheel-chair in which poor Charlie managed to get about after his legs had been amputated. These were the details that caught my immediate attention.

"I haven't played very much with this town,' the old man said, sitting down on the dusty floor. 'Other matters have taken up nearly all my time. There was a steamer to be sunk in the Baltic Sea, an uprising to be arranged in China, some emperor to be assassinated—I can't think of his name now—and a thousand other amusing things to do. They kept me hopping about, I can tell you! But I mustn't grow lazy. I must amuse you.'

"Don't bother about *me*,' I said quickly. 'I don't need to be amused.'

"You are my guest,' he said rather sternly, 'and I always try to amuse my guests. Now how would a flood suit you, young man? The river seemed very high to-night. Floods are rather commonplace, of course; but still—he rose and picked up a glass of water which stood on a table within arm's reach—'they're amusing. Don't you think so?' he finished, seating himself in front of the toy town and regarding me with childish solemnity.

"Don't!' I cried in horror, stretching out a detaining hand. 'Don't!' And then, seeing that he was tipping the glass in spite of my protests, I shouted: 'Floods are old-fashioned! Why, they date back to Noah's ark! Surely you wouldn't be as old-fashioned as that?'

"One grows tired of the new things,' he replied, with a sad shake of the head. 'I've had enough of trolley-cars and trains and steamers. Come, a flood isn't so bad, young man!'

"And then, without another word to say on the matter, he tipped the tumbler more and more till the water spilled out of it in a thin stream and flowed straight toward

the miniature town of Prestonville. In a moment more it was dashing down Main Street, sweeping one or two of the cardboard stores with it, and threatening all. Fortunately the glass was only half-full, otherwise the inhabitants might very well have been drowned in their beds.

"Not enough water!' the old man cried peevishly. 'Well, that's a disappointment! Better luck next time. I'd go down and fill this tumbler at the pump, if the steps weren't so confoundedly steep. I'm not so spry as I was, young man.'

"I'm afraid I've got to be going,' I said, glancing up at the moon, which had grown gray and ghostly. 'It's morning.'

"So it is!' he cried angrily, as if I had insulted him. 'It's time you went home. Some guests fairly have to be turned out of doors! Get along now, you humbug, or I'll set my dogs on you!'

"You have dogs?' I cried in surprise, snatching up my hat.

"Hell-hounds,' he told me, 'that eat sulfur. Get along with you! Come later next time, and don't stay so early. I can't abide guests who think me old-fashioned!'

"Well, I hurried out of that house as fast as I could, keeping a wary lookout for any such beasts as he described; but I didn't see any. After a time I came to Main Street, which was a good two feet under water. Here it was that I found Charlie's wheel-chair floating peacefully along on its back; so I pushed it home ahead of me, to show my wife that I hadn't wasted the whole night. For the rest of that week, we citizens of Prestonville wore rubber boots."

VI

THE shopkeeper broke off and yawned prodigiously. I could see that he would be fast asleep in another moment if I didn't prod him out of it. As you may well guess, I was anxious to hear the rest of his strange story, and I lost no time in keeping him at it.

"Did you go back to Preston Mansion again?" I asked.

"What's that?" said he, coming out of his doze with a start. "I was almost asleep, sir. I've been like that lately. I simply can't keep awake. What were you saying, sir? Oh, yes, I visited Preston Mansion many times. Indeed, I couldn't seem to keep away from it. That large room on the top floor—that bare, dusty

room where the moon peeped in through a hole in the roof—drew me as a magnet draws steel. Night after night I sat on the floor beside the mad old man, and, sitting thus, watched him play with his toys.

"It was here that I saw the murder of Molly Adams in miniature—a crime which horrified the entire State. It was in this room that I witnessed the robbing of the Prestonville Bank, when one of the clerks was killed, the burning of the schoolhouse, the explosion at the gas-works, and several other ghastly puppet-shows which froze me with horror. But what could I do, Mr. Burton? I was powerless to turn him from his grim jests. Any word from me only drove him to a more brutal mishandling of his toys.

"And yet, in spite of Fate's cruelty, in spite of his wanton destruction of people and objects I held dear, there were times when I pitied him. Boredom sat heavy on his shoulders. You see, Mr. Burton, there was no game under the sun which he hadn't played a million times before. For centuries, no doubt, he had been playing the same savage tricks on his toys. To them, his vagaries were always new; but to him, they were as old as the stars. I knew that he felt the age and mustiness of all he did, and that it filled him with a kind of blind fury against the world. The savor of his brutal jests was gone; nothing remained but the dregs of laughter, which are even more bitter than the dregs of tears. And it was because he knew himself to be a decrepit, toothless tiger, unable to masticate with enjoyment the stale titbits beneath his claws, that he rent so cruelly whatever crossed his path.

"'I am *not* old-fashioned!' he was wont to say over and over again, as if to convince himself rather than me.

"Yes, relentless as he was, I often pitied Fate."

"But did he pity you?" I asked.

"No, pity was denied him. He lacked the imagination from which pity springs. I remember that last terrible night we spent together—that night when I knelt on the floor with tears gushing from my eyes.

"'Pretty, pretty!' he gurgled like a baby, touching my cheek with an inquiring forefinger. 'Pretty—like diamonds!'

"You see, he simply didn't know the meaning of tears."

"Tell me about that last night," I said eagerly.

"Well, sir, it was a beautiful summer evening when I reached Preston Mansion. A full moon rode the heavens, casting its pale, silvery light on the dilapidated old house and the weed-choked garden. Not a breath of wind stirred the languid leaves of the maples. From the broad veranda I could see the roofs of Prestonville, faintly luminous in the distance. Never did the earth feel firmer underfoot; never did the well-being of the town seem so assured.

"On this last night, Mr. Burton, I hadn't long to wait. Hardly had I rapped gently on the door before it swung open and my host confronted me.

"At the first glance I saw that trouble was brewing. For days he had been sulky and out of sorts, taking no interest in his toys, and sitting silently in a dark corner; but now this sullen brooding had given place to a forced gaiety, which was a sure sign of coming danger. Evidently he was contemplating some new atrocity.

"'Come in, young man!' he cried, capering about in his ragged velvet robe like some kind of mad marionette. 'I've got a surprise for you. Come in!'

"'What is it?' I asked, with the gloomiest apprehensions.

"But he gave me no answer—just skipped nimbly up the winding stairway, waving the taper gaily above his head. Soon he had ushered me into that bare attic room where, as I have told you, he kept the toy town spread out in perfect order on a straw mat. The moonlight streamed down upon it through the broken roof.

"'I am tired of all these playthings,' the old man cried, pointing at the miniature of Prestonville with a wrathful forefinger. 'For days they have bored me to distraction. Never have I been so bored since I looked down on Pompeii. Those old Italians! Ah, I served them out for tiring me with their stupid arts and pompous pageantry! It seems only yesterday that I destroyed them and their city, yet it was many centuries ago.'

"'What are you going to do to Prestonville?' I cried; and all the blood seemed to flow away from my heart, leaving it cold and dead.

"For answer he stooped painfully, so that his crooked back curved like a bent bow and his long, tangled beard brushed the floor. Following his every movement with dread and horror, I saw him pick up

the corner of the straw mat between finger and thumb.

"What are you going to do to Prestonville?" I repeated dully.

"This, young man," he murmured, shaking the mat very gently. "This!"

"You can imagine what happened then, Mr. Burton. No sooner had he taken the corner of that mat between his fingers than I felt the solid floor shake beneath my feet. The whole room swayed dizzily from side to side, and the moon swung back and forth across the opening in the roof like the pendulum of a clock.

"Don't!" I cried, sinking on the floor and covering my eyes. "Don't!"

"When I looked again, Mr. Burton, the room was once more stationary; but the toy town of Prestonville? Ah, that had changed in those few brief moments beyond belief! Half the tiny houses were in ruins, and the rest were tottering on their foundations. My new home was still standing, but it was heavily listed to one side.

"Don't!" I cried, holding my clasped hands toward him in entreaty. "Everything that I love is in that town!"

"An earthquake is both unusual and amusing," he murmured, still holding one corner of the mat between finger and thumb. "Don't be selfish, young man. I simply must be amused!"

"I pray you be merciful, Fate!" I cried in a breaking voice.

"Ah, yes!" he broke in hurriedly. "Pray to me! I love to have people pray to me. Some of them have done it so well—Mark Antony, for instance. Let me hear *you* pray to Mr. Fate, young man!"

"And then a strange eloquence was vouchsafed me, Mr. Burton. Words, melodious and rich with feeling, flowed from my lips. It was as if the floodgates of restraint that bottle up a man's emotional outbursts had suddenly opened in my breast. To this day, I don't know what I said, or with what fine poetic imagery I clothed it all; but I do know that it pleased that terrible old man and made him wag his beard at me and smile.

"Very well put!" he cried when I had done. "Mark Antony himself could hardly have improved upon it. You have gifts, young man!"

"I pray you be merciful, Fate!" I repeated.

"Merciful?" he cried irritably, with a

sudden change of mood. "Tut, tut, young man! How should I know what mercy is? No one has ever shown me any. Certainly my playthings haven't had mercy on me. No, they have bored me to distraction by their sameness. I can't die, remember, and I've got to live on endlessly in an immense shop through which millions of toys pass daily. Do you wonder that I destroy them when I find time? Mercy? Tut, young man!"

"And then, Mr. Burton, he gave the mat such a savage shake that the walls seemed to change places with one another and the moon spun round and round like a top. When the room finally righted itself again, I saw that my worst fears had been realized. The miniature of Prestonville had been destroyed. Not a house was left standing, with the single exception of Preston Mansion, which was lurching drunkenly to one side. It was as I looked at this desolate waste of ruin which so shortly before had been a thriving town, at my own home toppled over on the sidewalk, that tears rose up into my eyes and fairly blinded me—weak, womanly tears at my own impotency.

"Pretty, pretty!" muttered Fate, touching my wet cheeks with his callous forefinger. "Pretty—like diamonds!"

"It was not until many days later that I came to realize that this terrible old man did not know the meaning of tears; that he took delight in them, like a baby, because they were bright and shining. At the time I thought he was mocking me, and I cursed him from my heart. I cursed him, Mr. Burton, as I don't believe any other man has ever cursed Fate. My tongue fairly flamed with invectives. I cursed his cold, fishy eyes, his beard all gritty with bread-crumbs, his vibrating, claw-like hands. I cursed his youth in the days when the world was young, and his old age when the world would be dying. I cursed him by all his names together—Luck, Providence, Destiny, Fate—and by each one singly. And when I had done, Mr. Burton, when my throat had gone dry of words, I found him grinning.

"Well done, young man!" he said, with his head on one side. "You curse even better than you pray. I can't think of anybody who has so spoken up to me since Judas Iscariot on the day when he hanged himself. He had a scorpion for a tongue, did Judas! You did very creditably,

young man. You actually succeeded in amusing me. I feel that I should reward you. What would you have of me, young man?"

"'Nothing!' I cried, half out of my mind from grief. 'Treat me as you do the rest of mankind—carry me around in your pocket.'

"'Not a bad idea!' said he, once more bending his



I FELT A SUDDEN FLICKER OF FEAR AS THE MAD OLD MAN PLACED THE TOY TRAIN ON THE TRACKS. "IT'S GOING TO SMASH!" I HEARD HIM MUTTER

crooked back over the ruins of the town. 'So that's what you want, is it?'

"'I want nothing from you,' I told him coldly.

"He paid me no heed—just began to grope about with his long, thin fingers in the only toy house that still was standing. At last, with a shrill, neighing laugh, he

pulled through one of the open windows a tiny wooden figure and held it toward me in the palm of his hand.

"'Here you are!' said he.

'You came out of this business without a scratch. So you want to go into old Fate's pocket, do you? Well, I must warn you that it's dark in there. Your ambition may fall asleep.'

"'Ambition?' I cried in despair. 'My ambition is buried under this town!'

"'Very well,' said he, cocking his beard at me whimsically. 'You're safe in my pocket—at least, for a time.' He paused and regarded me steadily with his cold gray eyes. 'I'm essentially honest,' he continued, 'and so I'm going to warn you again. What goes into my pocket must

sooner or later come out. Good-by until then, young man!"

The shopkeeper again yawned, and his chin sank down on his breast. Evidently he was on the very brink of sleep; but I had no intention of letting him doze off until he had told me the rest of his story. I bent forward and touched him on the arm.

"And then what happened?" I asked.

"Why, then he slipped the little wooden figure into his pocket and went out through the open door. I've never seen him again since that night, Mr. Burton."

"But what did *you* do?"

"I knelt on the dusty floor of that attic for a long, long time, quite alone with the ruins of my toy town. Nothing seemed to matter very much any more, Mr. Burton. It was as if I had been suddenly plucked out of life, as if its happiness and suffering were as remote as the stars. Later, even the real town of Prestonville failed to move me—that tragic heap of shattered masonry beneath the paling moon. Everything had died in my breast but fear—fear of the mental darkness which now enshrouded me, fear of that terrible old man whom I could no longer see, fear of that future time when Fate would drag me out of his pocket into the light of a relentless day. And so I have lived ever since—without love or ambition or hope. Only fear has remained, Mr. Burton!"

VII

ONCE more the shopkeeper's chin sank on his breast and his brown eyes closed.

"I'm so tired!" I heard him mutter fretfully.

A moment later he was fast asleep; and this time I did not disturb him. Instead, I stared through the window at the level swamp-land through which the train was speeding to make up for lost time.

"A strange story to come from even a madman!" I told myself.

Far ahead, around a distant bend, I saw a glow in the murky sky which informed me that I should soon reach my destination. A few minutes more and the train would pull into Fairview. The light came from a factory on the brow of the hill above the town.

Turning from the window, I started picking up my belongings. Suddenly I saw something which caused a cold thrill to run up my spine. While I had been staring

out at the landscape, an old man had noiselessly entered the smoking-compartment. He now sat beside the sleeping shopkeeper, peering into a large cardboard box that rested on his bony knees. I noticed, with an involuntary shudder, that this old man's long, tangled beard was sprinkled with bread-crumbs, which dangled from it like berries in a bush.

"What have you got there?" I asked, for I felt the need of speech.

"Toys," he said with a snicker. "Do you want to see them?"

Not waiting for my response, he put his hand into the box and pulled out a toy train. Next he drew forth a coil of tin tracks, and placed them on the floor.

"Do you want to see it work?" he asked, winding the engine as he spoke. "I love toy trains! Don't you?"

"Yes, of course," I answered, glancing hastily at the shopkeeper, who was still sleeping peacefully; "but I'm leaving at the next station, and I'm afraid I won't have time to see it work."

"Yes, you will, young man!" he cried excitedly. "Oh, yes, you will! I'm going to start it now!"

In spite of my common sense, I felt a sudden flicker of fear as he got painfully down on his hands and knees and placed the toy train on the tracks. A moment later it started off. Faster and faster it went, while the old man's tangled beard waved joyously above it.

"It's going to smash!" I heard him mutter in a strange, singsong voice. "It's going to smash!"

But it didn't—not that time, at least. Slowing down at the last vicious curve, even as the train which carried us was doing now, it came to a shivering halt.

Before it had fairly stopped, the old man seized the engine and began winding it savagely. Then, glancing slyly at the sleeping shopkeeper, he felt in his pocket and pulled out a little wooden figure. This he carefully inserted through a window of the first toy car, and replaced the engine on the tracks.

By now we had reached Fairview. Pushing past the old man, I was hurrying out of the smoking-compartment, when something prompted me to glance back over my shoulder.

There the shopkeeper sat, sleeping sonorously, and quite unaware of the old man who crouched beside him on the floor—

that mad old man who, even as I watched, took a match out of his pocket and laid it carefully across the toy tracks.

"It's going to smash!" I heard him mutter gleefully through his beard. "It's going to smash!"

VIII

I HAVE little more to add. All of you, no doubt, still remember the glaring headlines in the morning papers, telling of the most disastrous railroad wreck that this country had ever known—how that ill-fated train, while making up time between Fairview and Forest Point, was derailed by a tree-trunk which had fallen across the tracks, and pitched over a hundred-foot embankment; and how every man, woman, and child aboard met an almost instantaneous death. All that is ancient history now.

But the mad old man—what of him? He was not among the charred bodies taken from the burning train; nor was he among the few men who leaped for their lives and perished on the cruel rocks that lined the gully. No, he and his toys had vanished together.

Of late I have been thinking that perhaps that unfortunate shopkeeper was not so mad; that Fate may indeed wear a human guise while he stalks among us. If this is so, surely it was he whom I met that

night as the train drew into Fairview! Fate, an old man playing with toys like a child of ten—a mad old man who is not so mad as not to be vicious! Truly a terrible thought!

But there is another thought, more terrible still, which of late has plagued me sorely. How was it that I came to escape that night? Yet did I actually escape? Perhaps, after all, I have not slipped through those eager, groping fingers—perhaps that merciless old man has merely dropped me into a ragged pocket, to play with me at his leisure. Yes, I feel that he can still hold me at will in the hollow of his hand.

Long ago, like the shopkeeper, I lost love and hope and ambition. Now, of all human emotions, only fear remains—the fear of a rat in a trap when it hears its jailer's footsteps approaching—the fear of a fly in the threatening shadow of a descending hand.

And yet, as I draw back with a shudder, as I look about hopelessly for some means of escape, a merciful drowsiness descends upon me, calming the wild, tumultuous beating of my heart. Yes, all my senses are engulfed in a sea of tranquil dreams. Yawning, I stretch my arms above my head and yawn again. Surely this must mean the beginning of the end. I, too, am in Fate's pocket!