

it and returned to the basket on the counter. He looked at Minerva, and Minerva looked back at him. He turned and gazed at Dr. Faust, and the Doctor returned his glance with an interest which can only be described as intense.

Mr. Hopper drew a long breath. "Well," he said to himself, "what are you going to do?"

On a shelf in the corner was a round bottle. Mr. Hopper looked up at this bottle. Part of the label was hidden, but enough was visible to display the following letters, "Chloro—".

"Only the strongest survive," muttered Mr. Hopper. "Only the strongest survive."

He started for the bottle, but ended by taking a walk around the shop, his hands in his pockets.

"What would Machiavelli have done?" he demanded of himself as he walked away from the bottle. He stopped.

"But I'd feel so plagued mean whenever I thought of it," he replied, walking back to the bottle.

"But you wouldn't have to keep thinking about it, would you?" he demanded as he walked away again.

"I would think of it," he answered, walking back, "every time I saw a cat."

"Well, you wouldn't have to keep looking at cats, would you?" he demanded, walking toward the door.

"No," he said, returning to the corner. "But I'd think of it every time I saw Mrs. Stebbins."

"You're a fool!" he fiercely told himself.

"I know it," said he. "That's always been my trouble."

He sat down in his chair behind the counter and groaned. Minerva was watching him with all the wisdom of the ages in her big, round eyes, and Dr. Faust was ironically biting the bars of his cage and chuckling to himself.

"Now let us reason it out like Marcus Aurelius would have done," said Mr. Hopper, taking a new grasp on things. "If I make this cat well, Mrs. Stebbins will forgive him, especially when she finds out how hard she hit the dog with the poker. But if the cat dies, she will never forgive him."

He blinked his eyes like another Euclid working out an intricate mathematical proposition.

"And that," announced Mr. Hopper—"and that would leave me. I could give her another cat, with my compliments, just as good as this one. And this one I could stuff. Somehow I wouldn't feel so bad about chloroforming it, either, if I knew I was going to stuff it."

Mr. Hopper looked quickly from Minerva to Dr. Faust.

"And here I was just complaining about having no opportunities like Machiavelli had," he said.

Dr. Faust chuckled. "And it isn't as if it would hurt the cat," he said, turning to Minerva.

Very solemnly Minerva looked at him, and very solemnly she blinked her eyes.

"It would put the poor thing out of its misery, too," said Mr. Hopper, deserting Talleyrand in favor of Mr. Pecksniff. With this last reflection he arose and walked toward the bottle. "What is the life of a cat," he asked himself—



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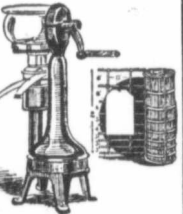
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