

"Is this final, Mr. Podmore?" Young Archer's face revealed his disappointment as he rose from the chair beside the desk and put the question.

"There is nothing final in this world, my boy," answered Abner Podmore. "All I can tell you is that, just as this moment, I have other plans for Lucy. You are both very young, and your ideas may change—or I may alter my plans. I guess you understand that to-night Romance hasn't much of an appeal to me. How does the Independent Ticket look to the voters of the Second Ward?"

Podmore's eyes were on the grinning little imp hooded by the evening newspaper. He had shrouded it quickly when Archer was announced. The plaster image smirked approval from its shadowy hiding-place, and Podmore was filled with a great complacency.

"I am not interested in politics, sir," replied Tom Archer. "Lucy and I will never be happy without each other, and there is something here—he touched his breast—"that fights against your judgment. Won't you—"

The imp frowned. The frown on that plaster face was no doubt a trick of Podmore's mind, but he had become so thoroughly Bilikinized that he trimmed his sails to the imp's fancied moods.

"We'll talk of that some other time, Archer," he broke in, curtly. Strains of music from a distance had reached his ears. A torchlight procession, headed by the Belleville band, was moving through the town. In that procession there were transparencies showing Podmore's picture and bearing the legend, "Podmore for Mayor." As this enlivening spectacle came more clearly before Podmore's mental eye, Romance paled into utter insignificance before the glamour of Politics.

The candidate's heart stirred blissfully in his bosom, and the growing melody of the horns, the cymbals and the drums cast a delicious spell over his soul. The daughter of the Mayor of Belleville should look higher than the superintendent of the electric lighting system! Eh, Bilikin?

Young Archer's broad shoulders drooped a little as he left the study, but Podmore was not perturbed. He caught the flash of a white dress as Archer opened and closed the study door, however, and breaking through the strains of distant music came a convulsive sob. Podmore started guiltily at that, but looked to his mentor for consolation—and received it. Picking up his meerschaum pipe, he reached for the plaster lion's head wherein he kept his tobacco. The lion's head was as empty as his own, and he laid down the pipe with a sigh.

Presently the blare of horns came almost from beneath the study windows. Was it "The Conquering Hero" they tooted so vigorously? Podmore did not know "The Conquering Hero" from "Annie Laurie," but on the eve of election a campaign band has to be consistent. Podmore was paying for the band and the torchlight procession, and even hiring enthusiasm must toe the mark.

"Podmore! Podmore!" rang out the clamor in the street.

Should he appear? The luck-god told him that he should. Floundering to his feet he crossed the room, lifted a window and pushed head and shoulders into the yells and the torch-flare and the music. Silence fell, and he told the band and the rest of the procession what he would do for Belleville when he was in the Mayor's chair. Following this the cheering was renewed, the band blustered loudly, and the row of smoking lights lost itself around a corner.

Flushed with a vague delight, Podmore turned from the window. The pleasure of the moment was somewhat dampened by the sight of Mrs. Podmore, sitting beside the desk in the chair recently occupied by young Archer. She had either by accident or design, removed the newspaper from the luck-god, and was staring at the imp with an expression of horrified wonder.



"For mercy sake, Abner," she gasped, "what's that?"

"That?" Podmore's spirits were going down, down. "Oh—er—why, Minerva, that's a little fancy of mine."

He laughed mechanically. Should he confess all to the partner of his joys? Should he tempt fate by revealing to her the source of his good fortune? His troubled gaze rested on the imp, but for once the imp was non-committal.

"Well," said Mrs. Podmore, with a long breath, "all I can say, Abner, if that's the way your fancy runs you ought to see a doctor. What a horrible thing that is! I declare, it gives me the creeps just to look at it."

"It's really artistic, Minerva," he parried, weakly.

"Artistic! Abner Podmore, that's the poorest excuse for a statue I ever saw in my life! I was brought up on Rogers' groups, and I ought to know. For goodness sake, where'd you get it?"

"I brought it back with me from New York, my dear."

"So that's been in this house for two months, and this is the first time I've seen it!" The wrath of a housekeeper, whose prerogative it is to pass personal approval upon everything under her roof, flamed in Mrs. Podmore's eyes. "Where have you been keeping it?" she demanded.

His manner was apologetic, and his appearance was that of a man who had been caught red-handed.

"Er—a-hem—why, my dear, I've been keeping it in a drawer of my desk."

He quailed under her sharp glance.

"Tell me about it, Abner." Her tone was keen and compelling. "You haven't deceived me very many times, but you're trying to do it now."

"It's like this, Minerva," he faltered. "I went to a good many business places in New York, and there was one of those on the desk of every successful man I called on. Naturally, my dear," he wheedled, "you don't understand these things like a captain of industry, but it's a fact that that little imp is a luck-bringer."

"Luck-bringer?"

The tone she used in repeating the term brought a flush to Abner's face. Moisture had gathered on his brow, and he covertly removed it with a handkerchief, laughing feebly.

"Of course," he proceeded, "when I was told that the image was a luck-bringer, I scoffed at it. Yes, my dear, deliberately scoffed. But so many level-headed business men had the thing that I—well, I was forced to give the idea some consideration. Just to try it, I bought one and brought it home in my grip."

"How much did you pay for it?" Mrs. Podmore's nature was by no means niggardly, but she had firm convictions on the subject of useless extravagance.

"Just a dollar, my dear, only a dollar. It comes in two or three sizes, but I took the dollar size."

"Wouldn't you have got more luck with a larger size?" The sarcasm in that escaped Podmore.

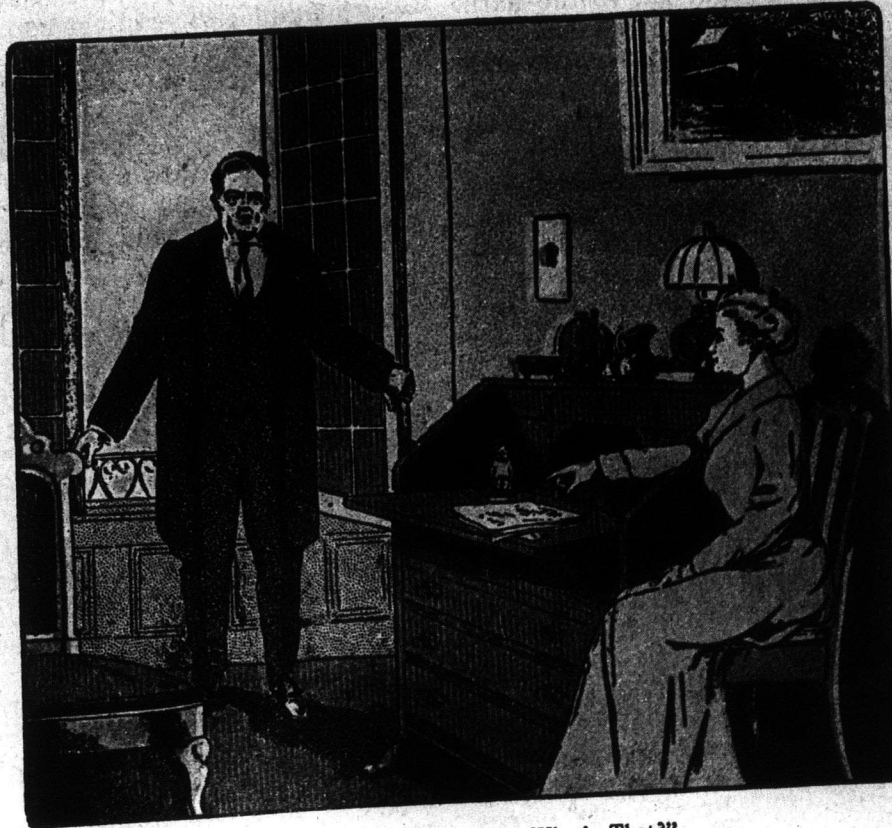
Looking upon the remark as complaisant, and showing interest, Podmore gathered courage.

"Minerva," he declared solemnly, "I had no sooner put that luck-god in my grip than everything began coming my way. By cracky, I was surprised! I wound up my business ten times more fortunately than I thought I should when I left home, and on my way back to Belleville the trains weren't late a minute, and I made every connection without a particle of trouble."

"Just because you had that in your grip!" Mrs. Podmore was luring her husband alone, exploring the length, breadth and depth of his self-deception. But he could not see it.

"Well, I didn't think so then," he answered, happily. "I just looked upon everything that happened as a coincidence. But when I got home the good luck kept up. I bought some mining shares to help out a friend, three weeks ago—"

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For Mercy's Sake, Abner, What's That?"