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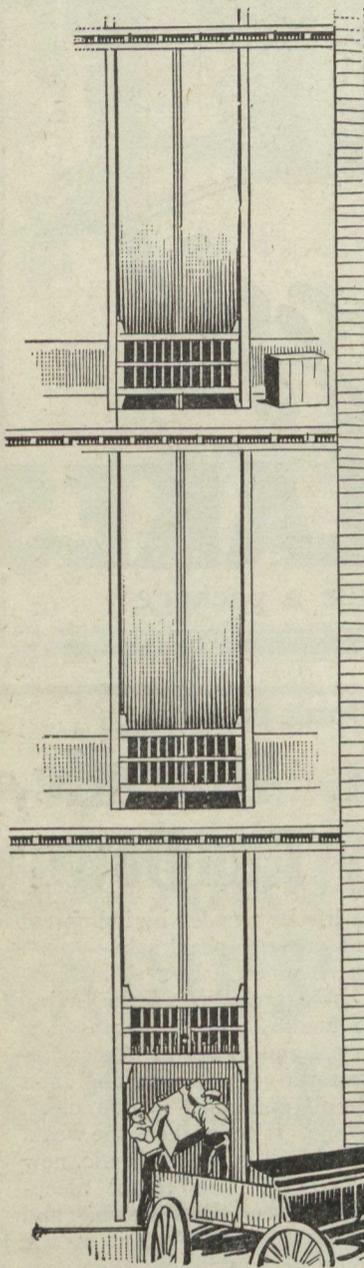
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"That's what I call a real friend to take me at my word."

CHAPTER XIII.

A THREE and a one are odd numbers, and if you put them together you make an even; but luck goes with the odd. The best is to make thirteen a negligible quantity, as a baker does when he throws it in with the dozen and get rid of it that way.

The club, known to a select and safe minority of the smart elect as the "South Western," was a demure and most respectable-looking dwelling-house in a quiet square of Knights-bridge, and passed as the domicile of an intellectual couple with a literary circle who met for mutual discussion and instruction.

As a matter of fact it was the favorite secret haunt of the most reckless and devout gamblers in London who, unable to get away to France and play their roulette and tente-et-quarante, their baccarat and chemin-de-fer legally, enjoyed them under the rose and also under the nose of English law and lawgivers with impunity.

So discreet were the members and so heavily bribed were all the employes as well as the outside officials who might have spotted it, that the South Western had never once been raided and had come to think itself specially favored by the God of Happy Chance.

One o'clock had just chimed from a neighbouring church and the clocks in the club-rooms were echoing it softly, in silvery tones, when Tubby Mauleverer strolled into an ante-room called the bar, and ordered a large whiskey and a small soda.

The man on the next divan was one of those over well-dressed middle-aged loungers whom you meet at places of amusement, and who, in spite of good clothes and a show of ready money, are living on their own wits, at the expense of other people's witlessness.

He made some remark as Mauleverer sat down and Tubby, murmuring a civil answer, recognized him as the successful backer of the Number Seven, which had been enjoying continuous short runs for some time.

"Odd how often my number has come up," the man said, after a moment or two of desultory conversation. "Yes," said Tubby, "but it's still odder that whenever I have backed it, it has stopped coming up."

"Is that so?" the other queried. "That's rather singular. Another chap said the same thing to me just now. It looks as if—" He broke off, then, with lowered voice, added confidentially, "the fact is, there's a history attached to this seven business to-night. I'm not playing for myself—you won't mention this, of course—and I shall only get a percentage on my winnings. But the old chap for whom I'm doing it will have a tidy little sum if the luck holds out a bit longer. He lives in the country and he's a real pukka gambler—thinks everything is a tip or the reverse. He wrote up to me and asked me to come here and play to-night for him—we used to meet and chat last season—and he told me that if there was anything in sequences, seven would win. It appears"—his voice became lower still—"that a murder has just been committed in his neighbourhood, on the seventh—and this is the seventh month, you see—and the person's names had seven letters in each of them, and—"

The abrupt setting-down of Mauleverer's glass, with an unsteady hand that sent it rolling over the table till it fell with a crash and splintered on the floor, interrupted the flashy-looking man's narrative and brought it to an untimely end. Tubby, his phlegmatic manner restored, rose, however, and strolled away back to the roulette room where two tables, exactly like those of Monte Carlo, were surrounded by players three deep.

As he approached one of them, he heard the croupier call out, "Sept! noir impair et manque," and the flashy man, who was following him, nudged his arm. "There you are again! seven!"

Tubby made no answer. The man's familiarity would have been annoying in any case, but, coupled with the

revelation he had just unconsciously made of the commission he was acting on, it revolted Tubby beyond endurance.

He hated himself for being there and for having yielded to the temptation of backing this horrible fatal number, which he would fain have resisted. He hated to think that his father should have stooped to employ this "bounder," as he labelled him, in order to gratify vicariously his ruling passion.

Yet there was so much of the inherited tendency to gamble in Mauleverer's disposition that, ashamed as he was of the sacrilege that it seemed, he found himself carried away by the gruesome fascination of following the luck of this strange sequence.

He went on to the next table and backed the seven. Instead the thirteen came up, yet he heard, at the table he had quitted, the same announcement from the croupier again—"Sept—noir impair et manque"—and through the intervening people, under the glare of the electric lights, he could see the flashy man's face redden under the excitement of another winning coup.

Mauleverer was coming to an end of his ready money, and several I O U's of his had already found their way into the cashier's hands; yet he could not stop himself from trying to get back what he had lost—the gambler's lure!—and he went from table to table, trying to catch the instant when the elusive seven came up.

The flashy man—whom he heard addressed as "Carbine" or "Captain" alternately—seemed to know exactly when to back it, and when to hold his hand, and had he been playing high stakes would have won largely. But part of his "commission"—as he insisted on explaining confidentially to Mauleverer later—was to strictly limit his venture, and he dared not exceed, for fear luck should turn.

It was a curious coincidence, this competition between the father (through his representative, Captain Carbine) and the son, and punters round the tables noticed at last with what strange regularity Carbine won on seven and Mauleverer lost; it seemed as if a lurking devil was impelling the one to stake when the other refrained, and more than once when Mauleverer threw a sovereign on the seven (where Carbine's stake already rested) at the last moment, in defiance of the croupiers "Plus rien!" the ball which had hopped briskly into seven, flashed out again and fell into another number, or poised itself between two and was returned at "Nul."

At last, vexed by the general attention and remarks, Mauleverer stopped backing seven and returned to thirteen, which had been rivalling the other in its frequency.

Yet directly he backed it, thirteen also failed him. Persistently, coup after coup, he followed it, getting dogged as it refused to come up. It seemed as though, if he hung on long enough, it must again appear, and recoup him for his losses.

Women—many of the gamblers were of the fair sex—stopped playing and watched the comely, bored-looking young man, who showed so much persistence, with murmurs of admiration at his pluck.

CARBINE himself desisted, for the run of the seven seemed to have ended and the ball was capriciously flying to all the numbers in turn—with the marked exception of both seven and thirteen.

Mauleverer's expression remained unchanged and to the strangers round him he seemed merely a bored though reckless young plunger, but anyone who knew him really well would have noticed the signs of excitement and desperation betrayed by the fixed stare of his eyes under their drooping lids, the twitch of his hand, the dryness of his lips.

As a matter of fact he had completely lost control of himself, and, though he knew that already he had pledged himself to sums that he could not possibly pay, he cashed one I O U