

At the Sign of the Wooden Leg

Your
Humble
Servt:
Silas
Wegg

Solitaire At Home and Abroad

I had lighted my pipe and seated myself at a table, and had begun to distribute the cards for a game of solitaire, when Mrs. Wegg spoke up.

"Why don't you go out with the boys and play a real game?" said she.

I went, and parted with the twenty dollars I had in my pocket for the coal dealer, and returned a better man.

All this demands explanation, because it is not wise, hardly honest, to waste on red diamonds the roll that is needed for black diamonds. That is, as a rule. There are exceptions, however. No one should think too deeply about the necessities of a coal dealer when he is gaining experience and, incidentally, getting copy for *The Civilian*. An ounce of wisdom is worth a ton of coal any day, and you don't have to carry out the ashes.

What I learned was that Mrs Wegg was right. It is better to play a real game, even though a dealer of one sort comes into possession of what belongs to another kind of dealer, rather than spend one's precious hours over the sham battles of solitaire. This is my pennyweight of wisdom, my mustard seed of truth, which I hope may grow into a tree of knowledge ample to cover a page or two of print.

Solitaire has its attractions, but its dangers also. It is not necessary to waste an hour at the telephone seeking someone to complete a quorum for Auction when all one has to do is to challenge the ever-available Chinaman to a contest. Who that loves a good rubber has not fretted and groaned over the problem of finding a "fourth"? There are no limits to which an Auction fiend will not go in his efforts to corral players for a game. He will thumb his way from Aarons to Zvengali in hope that some acquaintance, be he the parson himself, may have the evening at his disposal. Ah, it is pitiful, here a whole cityful, fourths there are none.

But I do not aim at writing now about the perils of Auction. We will

not cross that bridge until we come to it. I wish merely to point out how easy it is to drop into a game of solitaire as compared to other games. Therein lies its first danger.

Even our pleasures should demand some effort of us, some sacrifice to make them of worth. You know how easily easy money goes. The first dollar of a legacy is spent with delight. After that one longs for the joy he had in jingling in his pocket the coins he obtained by hard work. That is the money that yields gladness in the spending, each coin bearing the image and superscription of one's own personality. Thus it is with playing solitaire. The enjoy-



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ment can be only second-rate. There has been no preparation for the feast, none of the thrills of the night before a holiday without which the holiday itself is a mere incident and not an event.

It is too easy to drift into solitaire playing, and too easy to maintain the game. We have no foeman worthy of our steel, except the hypothetical Chinaman who has been invented by us to spare our pride, because no one feels elated over winning out against nobody. We call our opponent the

Chink, or Colonel Bogey, rather than surrender all our self-respect.

Of course it is safe. There is no chance of the house being pinched and of you being haled before the magistrate to answer for your misdeeds. Some games may not be worth the scandal, but it is better to be jailed for playing stud poker than coop yourself within the prison of a lonely pleasure.

You know by this time that this is all by way of figure of speech. Silas Wegg, senior clerk and church warden, is not advising you to devote your nights to gambling. All he is trying to get across is the idea that it is necessary for the development of a civil servant's character, for he dares not preach outside his parish, to avoid the easy job, to seek problems that will try his mettle, and to take some chances with fate. When Mrs. Wegg advised me to get into a real game, I think she had Silas Wegg, the civil servant, and not Silas Wegg, the solitaire player, in mind.

The routine task is the tempting solitaire of the service. All we ask for is a table and a pack of cards — we say a desk and a file of papers — no one to bother us, and our happiness is complete. What we need, though, is an occasional demand for poker wits, a sharp summons to heed what someone else is about, and a show down now and again when we will have to stake our future on our ability to make good.

How many in the service are looking for a real game? True we all like the salary appertaining thereto, but do we not come to prefer to play against the Chinaman rather than against flesh-and-blood folks? For instance, here are two jobs — one to put some definite piece of work through along lines never before attempted in one's department, the other to report on that work when it is done or to audit the accounts when the expenditures have been made. The former is the real game; the latter