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glanced nervously at the mirror to see that his cravat was properly tied and that his collar did not ride up in the back.

The only calm person in the house was the ex-widow. With the eyes of a major-general sweeping the field on the eve of an important battle, she had taken in the disposition of the furniture, the hang of the curtains and the placing of the cushions and lesser comforts. She had also arranged with her own hands the masses of narcissus and jonquils on the mantels, and had selected the exact shade of yellow tulips which centred the dining-room table. It was to be a "Gold-Mine Dinner," so Arthur had told her, "and everything must be in harmony."

Then seeing Parkins, who had entered unexpectedly and caught her in the act (it is bad form for a hostess to arrange flowers in some houses—the butler does that), she asked in an indifferent tone: "And how many are we to have for dinner, Parkins?" she knew, of course, having spent an hour over a diagram placing the guests.

"Fourteen, my lady."

"Fourteen!—really, quite a small affair." And with the air of one accustomed all her life to banquets in palaces of state, she swept out of the room.

The only time she betrayed herself was just before the arrival of the guests, when her mind reverted to her daughter.

"The Portmans are giving a ball next week, Arthur, and I want Corinne to go. Are you sure he is coming?"

"Don't worry, Kitty, Portman's coming; and so are the Colonel, and Crossbin, and Hodges, and the two Chicago directors, and Mason, and a lot more. Everybody's coming, I tell you. If Mukton Lode doesn't sit up and take notice with a new lease of life after to-night, I'm a Dutchman. Run, there's the bell."

The merciful Scribe will spare the reader the details incident upon the arrival of the several guests. These dinners are all alike: the announcements by the butler; the passing of the cocktails on a wine-tray; the standing around until the last man has entered the drawing-room; the perfunctory talk—the men who have met before hobnobbing, instantly with each other, the host bearing the brunt of the strangers; the saunter into the dining-room, the reading of cards, and the "Here you are, Mr. Portman, right alongside Mr. Hodges. And Crossbin, you are down there somewhere"; the spreading of napkins and squaring of everybody's elbow as each man drops into his seat.

Neither will the reader be told of the various dishes or their garnishings. These pages have so far been filled with little else beside eating and drinking, and with reason, too, for have not all the great things in life been begun over some tea-table, carried on at a luncheon, and completed between the soup and the cordials? Kings, diplomats and statesmen have long since agreed that for baiting a trap there is nothing like a soup, an entree and a roast, the whole moistened by a flagon of honest wine. The bait varies when the financier or promoter sets out to catch a capitalist, just as it does when one sets out to catch a mouse, and yet the two mammals are much alike—timid, one foot at a time, nosing about to find out if any of his friends have had a nibble; scared at the least disturbing echo—then the fat, toothsome cheese looms up (Breen's Madeira this time), and in they go.

But if fuller description of this special bait be omitted, there is no reason why that of the baiters and the baited should be left out of the narrative.

Old Colonel Purviance, of the Chesapeake Club, for one—a big-paunched man who always wore, summer and winter, a reasonably white waistcoat and a sleazy necktie; swore in a loud voice and dropped his g's when he talked. "Bit 'em off," his friends said, as he did the ends of his cigars. He had in honor of the occasion, so contrived that his black coat and trousers matched this time, while his shoestring tie had been replaced by a white cravat. But the waistcoat was of the old pattern and the top button loose, as usual. The Colonel earned his living and a very comfortable one it was—by promoting

various enterprises—some of them rather shady. He had also a gift for both starting and maintaining a boom. Most of the Mukton stock owned by the Southern contingent had been floated by him. Another of his accomplishments was his ability to label correctly, with his eyes shut, any bottle of Madeira from anybody's cellar, and to his credit, be it said, he never lied about the quality, be it good, bad or abominable.

Next to him sat Mason, from Chicago—a Westerner who had made his money in a sudden rise in real estate, and who had moved to New York to spend it; an out-spoken, common-sense, plain man, with yellow eyebrows, yellow head partly bald, and his red face blue-speckled with powder marks due to a premature blast in his mining days. Mason couldn't tell the best Tiernan Madeira from corner-grocery sherry, and preferred whiskey at any and all hours—and what was more, never assumed for one instant that he could.

Then came Hodges, the immaculately dressed epicure—a pale, clean-shaven, eye-glassed, sterilized kind of a man with a long neck and skinny fingers, who boasted of having twenty-one different clarets stored away under his sidewalk which were served to ordinary guests, and five special vintages which he kept under lock and key, and which were only uncorked for the elect, and who invariably munched an olive before sampling the next wine. Then followed such lesser lights, as Nixon, Leslie and the other guests.

These, then, were the palates to which Breen catered. Back of them lay their good-will and good feeling; still back of them, again, their bank accounts and—another scoop in Mukton! Most of the guests had had a hand in the last deal and they were ready to share in the next. Although this particular dinner was supposed to be a celebration of the late victory, two others, equally elaborate, had preceded it; both Crossbin and Hodges having entertained nearly this same group of men at their own tables. That Breen, with his reputation for old Madeira and his supposed acquaintance with the intricacies of a Maryland kitchen, would outclass them both, had been whispered a dozen times since the receipt of his invitation, and he knew it. Hence the alert boy, the chef in the white cap, and hence the seesawing on the hearth-rug.

"Like it, Crossbin?" asked Breen.

Parkins had just passed down the table with a dust-covered bottle which he handled with the care of a collector fingering a peachblow vase. The precious fluid had been poured into that gentleman's glass and its contents were now within an inch of his nose.

The moment was too grave for instant reply; Mr. Crossbin was allowing the aroma to mount to the innermost recesses of his nostrils. It had only been a few years since he had performed this same trick with a gourd suspended from a nail in his father's back kitchen, overlooking a field of growing corn; but that fact was not public property—not here in New York.

"Yes—smooth, and with something of the hills in it. Chateau Lamont, is it not, of '61?"

It was Chateau of something-or-other, and of some year, but Breen was too wise to correct him. He supposed it was Chateau Lafitte—that is, he had instructed Parkins to serve that particular fine and vintage.

"Either '61 or '63," replied Breen with the air of positive certainty. (How that boy in the white apron, who had watched the boss paste on the labels, would have laughed had he been under the table.)

Further down the cloth Hodges, the epicure, was giving his views as to the proper way of serving truffles. A dish had just passed, with an underpinning of crust. Hodges' early life had qualified him as an expert in cooking, as well as in wines: Ten years in a country store swapping sugar for sausages and tea for butter and eggs; five more clerk in a Broadway cloth house, with varied boarding-house experiences (boiled mutton twice a week, with pudding on Sundays); three years junior partner, with a room over Delmonico's; then a rich wife and a directorship in a bank (his father-in-law was the heaviest depositor); next, one year in Europe and home as vice-president, and at the

present writing president of one of the certify-as-early-as-ten-o'clock-in-the-morning kind of banks, at which Peter would so often laugh. With these experiences there came the usual blooming and expanding—all the earlier life forgotten, really ignored. Soon the food of the country became unbearable. Even the canvasbacks must feed on a certain kind of wild celery; the oysters be dredged from a particular cove, and the terrapin drawn from their beds with the Hodges' coat of arms cut in their backs before they would be allowed a place on the ex-clerk's table.

It is no wonder, then, that everybody listened when the distinguished epicure launched out on the proper way to both acquire and serve so rare and toothsome a morsel as a truffle.

"Mine come by every steamer," Hodges asserted in a positive tone, not to anybody in particular, but with a sweep of the table to attract enough listeners to make it worth while for him to proceed. "My man is aboard before the gang-plank is secure—gets my package from the chief steward and is at my house with the truffles within an hour. Then I at once take proper care of them. That is why my truffles have that peculiar flavor you spoke of, Mr. Portman, when you last dined at my house. You remember, don't you?"

Portman nodded. He did not remember—not the truffles. He recalled some white port—but that was because he had bought the balance of the lot himself.

"Where do they come from?" inquired Mason, the man from Chicago. He wanted to know and wasn't afraid to ask.

"All through France. Mine are rooted near a little village in the Province of Perigord."

"What roots 'em?"

"Hogs—trained hogs. You are familiar, of course, with the way they are secured?"

Mason—plain man as he was—wasn't familiar with anything remotely connected with the coralling of truffles, and said so. Hodges talked on, his eye resting first on one and then another of the guests, his voice increasing in volume whenever a fresh listener craned his neck, as if the information was directed to him alone—a trick of Hodges' when he wanted an audience.

"And now a word of caution," he continued; "something that most of you may not know—always root on a rainy day—sunshine spoils their flavor—makes them tough and leathery."

"Kind of hog got anything to do with the taste?" asked Mason in all sincerity. He was learning New York ways—a new lesson each day, and intended to keep on, but not by keeping his mouth shut.

"Nothing whatever," replied Hodges.

"They must never be allowed to bite them, of course. You can wound a truffle as you can everything else."

Mason looked into space and the Colonel bent his ear. Purviance's diet had been largely drawn from his beloved Chesapeake, and "dug-up dead things"—as he called the subject under discussion—didn't interest him. He wanted to laugh—came near it—then he suddenly remembered how important a man Hodges might be and how necessary it was to give him air space in which to float his pet balloons and so keep him well satisfied with himself.

Mason, the Chicago man, had no such scruples. He had twice as much money as Hodges, four times his digestion and ten times his common-sense.

"Send that dish back here, Breen," Mason cried out in a clear voice—so loud that Parkins, winged by the shot, retraced his steps. "I want to see what Mr. Hodges is talking about. Never saw a truffle that I know of." Here he turned the bits of raw rubber over with his fork. "No. Take it away. Guess I'll pass. Hog saw it first; he can have it."

Hodges' face flushed, then he joined in the laugh. The Chicago man was too valuable a would-be subscriber to quarrel with. And, then, how impossible to expect a person brought up as Mason had been to understand the ordinary refinements of civilization.

"Rough diamond, Mason—Good fellow. Backbone of our country," Hodges whispered to the Colonel, who was sore from the strain of repressed hilarity.