

delayed. From the card he glanced at the stranger, beholding a man of medium height, broad-shouldered, with peculiarly bright eyes, deep-set in a clean-shaven, healthy, rather humorous countenance. He looked at the card a second time. It was like this:—

THE P. J. SYNDICATE.

No. 3

The visitor helped himself to a chair on Mr. Vasper's left, remarking that the weather was somewhat chilly for May.

"Had my clerk been in the office," said Vasper stiffly, "he would have told you that I was engaged at this hour. As a matter of fact, I am particularly engaged now; but if you care to call later, Mr.—er—" He eyed the card once more, then glanced enquiringly at the visitor.

"Number Three," said the visitor, with a smile. "There are seven of us in the Syndicate, and as we are all of equal importance and of one mind in all our transactions, we employ numbers only on such occasions as this. Our Number One, I may say, would be the last to infer that his number gave him any precedence whatsoever."

"Very interesting, I'm sure," said Vasper, wondering whether he had a practical joker or a lunatic to deal with. In either case he was anxious to be alone. He took out his watch.

"If you will kindly mention your business now, and return to discuss it later—if necessary—I should be infinitely obliged. By the way, what is the P. J. Syndicate? Gold, copper, lead—eh?"

"Oh, dear no, Mr. Vasper! P. J., I have the honour to explain stands for Poetic Justice."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Poetic Justice, my dear sir, Poetic Justice."

Vasper stared. The man was certainly mad.

"I do not wonder at your never having heard of our Syndicate the other proceeded. "It was formed but recently. Its operations so far have been small, yet not, we trust, without some profit to the public. We have not, however, until now dealt with anyone who might be called a financier. In addition to the designation of accountant you Mr. Vasper, are fairly entitled to that of financier. Is it not so?"

"No doubt, no doubt—but in a small way, of course," said Vasper. To most of us the word financier has a pleasing sound. But Mr. Vasper was not quite comfortable just then. Several people were awaiting instructions from him through the telephone, and he was very impatient to give these instructions. The lunatic seemed harmless enough, but there was a danger of his visit proving costly.

"Because I am only a financier in a very small way," added Vasper, with an effort at good humour, "I cannot afford to lose money. And at present time is money."

"So it is," Number Three mildly admitted. "So it is. Doubtless one hour would mean some money to you, while a whole day—but I wander."

"Pardon me if I agree with you there." The financier "in a very small way," smiled grimly.

"I wonder," continued the other, as though he had not heard, "I wonder if you have ever studied the beauties of Poetic Justice."

"I've never had time to study poetic anything. And now—"

"What a pity, what an immense pity! The Syndicate has studied its beauties most carefully. On several occasions it has executed little pieces of Poetic Justice, quite fascinating in their way. It is desirous, very desirous, Mr. Vasper, of showing you an example that will, we feel sure, appeal to yourself—"

"I must really request you to allow me to attend to my morning's business. I assure you it is urgent."

"I am sure it is, otherwise I should not have called this morning."

Vasper looked quickly and keenly at the speaker. "What do you mean?"

Number Three smiled gently, and said:

"Wouldn't you like to use the telephone now?"

The financier stiffened.

"See here, my man!" he said roughly, "what are you playing at? What do you want?"

"Poetic Justice." The voice was so mild that Vasper was more wrathful than alarmed. But precious minutes were slipping away.

"Yes, I wish to use the telephone. And first of all I'll ring up the police station."

"Why?"

"To give you in charge, if you don't clear out at once."

"In charge for what? For cutting your telephone wire as I came along the passage? Didn't you hear the snip-snap? Here's the little instrument that did the trick." A pair of shining pliers was briefly exhibited.

"What!" Vasper fell back in his chair. "You cut the wire!" He jumped up, furious, but far more anxious. "You'll pay for this later, but now—"

"Please sit down. I took the liberty of locking the outer door as I came in. The key is in my pocket. Further, on the outside of the door is a notice to the effect that the office is closed for the day. Perhaps I ought to mention, also, that I wired your clerks early this morning that they could take a holiday. There is no fear of our being disturbed, Mr. Vasper, while I expound, or rather exemplify, the Syndicate's methods. Put down that ruler!"

The heavy ruler fell with a crash, and the financier, white and shaking, sank into a chair, gaping at the muzzle of a revolver.

"What is it you want?" he asked hoarsely.

"Poetic Justice. That is all."

"Are you going to rob me I—I've nothing here in the office."

"No; we don't do that sort of thing. Still, if you like, we are going to rob you; or, rather, we are going to make you rob yourself. But first of all I am going to tie you up."

Ere the huddled creature realised the words, Number Three was behind him with coils of whipcord. In three minutes he was trussed securely in his chair. Then there was a longish silence, broken only by heavy breathing.

"For God's sake," said Vasper at last, "do one thing for me. Keep me here as long as you like, but send word—send it any way that suits you—to my brokers—I'll give you the addresses—to cover Honeydew Deeps. Will you do it? I can't make out what you want—but I suppose it's money. If you do this for me, I'll give you plenty of money. Oh, name your price!"

"I regret to say, you have asked the very thing that cannot be granted."

Vasper gave a great groan.

"Mr. Vasper," said the visitor quietly, "have you still no glimmerings of what the Syndicate means by Poetic Justice."

"Curse your Poetic Justice! What's your game? What's your price?"

"What price would you suggest from a man who has made himself wealthy as you have done?"

"Don't preach! How have I made myself wealthy? Speculation? Gambling?—call it that, if you like! But—"

"We call it gambling with marked cards; loaded dice, if you will. Why don't you play fair, Mr. Vasper? Why have you never played fair in your bigger operations? Those who know you, or think they know you, call you a fearless speculator—whereas you are merely a fearful swindler."

"You lie! It's all very well to sit there and abuse me while I'm helpless. I tell you, you and your gang shall suffer for this assault. I am engaged in a perfectly legitimate business, and—"

"Pardon me, you are no longer engaged in any business, legitimate or otherwise. As you say, you are helpless, and helpless you must remain till five o'clock, at which hour I shall leave the door open and send some one to release you."

"FIVE o'clock!" Vasper's body went rigid; he turned grey. "That'll ruin me," he whimpered.

"Of that we are aware. The cable from your Johannesburg agent should be in by then."

"Cable! What do you know about a cable?" The question was a terrified whisper.

"The Syndicate works fairly hard and pretty thoroughly," was the unemotional reply. "The cable referred to should have reached here weeks ago, with the information that the flooding of the Honeydew Deep was a comparatively trifling affair. You and your clique paid for its suppression and wrecked the market. Incidentally you ruined hundreds of people. You have played the same sort of game so often before that the Syndicate determined to make an example of you. It's all very simple."

"You—you dirty spies."

"It is rather dirty work dealing with swindlers, Mr. Vasper. We had to follow your example and bribe your Johannesburg agent. But once bribed, always bribable, you know."

A minute passed.

"I'm not the only one," whined Vasper.

"No; there are four of you. The Syndicate is taking care of you all this morning. None of you will be able to communicate with the Stock Exchange to-day. I should inform you that their wives and children will not be allowed to starve. For yourself, the Syndicate understands you are a bachelor. You shall have one hundred pounds to start afresh."

The captive made a choking sound. "Your gang has been buying the shares," he croaked.

"Only a few, the profit on which may cover the expenses of this operation. Over our previous operations we have been out of pocket."

"And you call this playing fair?"

"We call it Poetic Justice. Ruin for ruin, my friend."

"Did I ever injure you or your friends?"

"No; but the police can't look after everything."

Another silence, longer than any previous, fell between them. It was painfully still in the office. Suddenly hurried steps came to the outer door, halted, and went away. Vasper quivered. A message from a broker perhaps. He determined to shout for help should steps come again.

"PRAY don't make it necessary for me to gag you now, Mr. Vasper," said his visitor quietly. "I shall, of course, have to do so ere I leave you. It won't hurt beyond a slight stiffness afterwards."

"You devil!" cried Vasper. He did not remember Witherow's use of the identical epithet towards himself an hour previously.

"The cable ought to be posted in the Exchange some time this afternoon," said the other absently. "It will cause a bit of a flurry, I expect. I wonder what you'll be able to buy back at. How many are you oversold?"

Vasper, writhing in impotent agony, made no reply. He was about eighty thousand shares short. To buy that number in a market crazy with relief, booming from an unmerited collapse, would bulge the price, not by shillings, but by pounds. And he was not alone in his plight. Scores had followed his lead in selling short. The result would be a bear panic that would, in all probability, become historic. He who at that moment was half a millionaire would be beggared. He had entrusted his brokers with no instructions. They would be paralysed when Honeydew Deeps began to rush up.

"Why don't you shoot me?" he exclaimed of a sudden.

"Why not?" Number Three lifted the revolver from the table and pointed it.

"No, no! spare my life."

"Certainly. You may yet make something of it. You don't know what life really is so far."

Another long silence.

"Look here," said Vasper weakly; "let's come to terms. What'll you take to set me free?"

"The Syndicate sometimes finds it expedient to offer bribes, but it does not accept them."

"Oh, curse you! Will nothing move you?"

"Nothing."

"Let me close some of the shares."

"No."

Once more footsteps approached the outer door. Vasper opened his mouth. A peculiar tap fell on the door, followed by the flap of the letter-box.

"No use calling out," said the visitor. "It's only a message for me. Excuse me for a moment." He left the private room and returned almost immediately with a note in his hand. He opened it.

"Honeydew Deeps have opened at 8s. 6d. to 9s.," he said. "Think of the poor wretches who have given up hope selling at that price, when the mine is as good as ever it was. Think of all the poor wretches who have been giving up hope and selling ever since you started your trickery. I don't mean the speculators, though they needn't be grudging sympathy in such a case as this. But I refer particularly to the small investors. It's extraordinary what varieties of people put money in gold mines. Yet why should they not, if the mine is good? There was the case of a young man who gave his wife twenty shares for which he had paid over five pounds apiece. They would have yielded him ten per cent. on his hard-earned money. Doubtless he ought to have put his money in the bank, but he and his wife were as proud as lord and lady over their twenty shares, and the dividends were going to pay for no end of things. Then the shares went down and they took fright and sold, losing seventy pounds. There was an elderly teacher of music who bought ten. She admitted she hoped to sell them at a profit some day. Her life was dull. Ten pounds profit would give her a long-dreamed-of trip to Switzerland. Instead of gaining ten she lost thirty. There was an old man in the country—well, never mind him. And there was a young man who—blew his brains out when the Honeydews fell to a pound. The Syndicate knows of others. Possibly these people were unwise, but their misfortune was not due to the Stock Exchange nor to their natural desire for gain. It was due to your marked cards, Mr. Vasper, to that long-suppressed cable. Think of the feelings of these people when they read the cable of quotations of Honeydew Deeps to-night or to-morrow morning. And

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