

THE DIVINE FIRE

This evening, however, they had hit on a topic almost virgin from the mint.

"S. K. R. ? *Who* is he ? *What* is he ? " said Mackinnon.

" I can't tell you what he *is* ; but I can pretty soon tell you what he's not," said Stables. He was a very young man with a white face and red eyelids, who looked as if he sat up all night and went to bed in the day-time, as indeed he generally did.

" *Omnis negatio est determinatio*," murmured Jewdwine, without looking up from the letter he was trying to write.

" What has he done ? " persisted Mackinnon.

" He's done a great many remarkable things," said Rankin ; " things almost as remarkable as himself."

" Who unearthed him ? "

" I did," said Rankin, so complacently that the deep lines relaxed round the five copper-coloured bosses that were his chin and cheeks and brow. (The rest of Rankin's face was spectacles and moustache.)

" Oh, did you ? " said Maddox. Maddox was a short man with large shoulders ; heavy browed, heavy jowled, heavy moustached. Maddox's appearance belied him ; he looked British when he was half Celt ; he struck you as overbearing when he was only top-heavy ; he spoke as if he was angry when he was only in fun, as you could see by his eyes. Little babyish blue eyes they were with curly corners, a gay light in the sombre truculence of his face. They looked cautiously round.

" I can tell you a little tale about S. K. R. You know the last time Smythe was ill——? "

" You mean drunk."

" Well—temporarily extinguished. S. K. R., who knows his music-halls, was offered Smythe's berth. We delicately intimated to him that if he liked at any time to devote a little paragraph to Miss Poppy Grace, he was at perfect liberty to do so."

" A liberty he interpreted as poetic licence."

" Nothing of the sort. He absolutely declined the job."

" Why ? "

" Well—the marvellous boy informed me that he was too