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X.

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I.

How often we find a set of people, thrown together by the emergency of a common pursuit, yet to whom that pursuit is the only bond of unity. It is a great pity when this is so, when each, apart from the common object of business, lives isolated, a prey to envy, or jealousy, or dislike of his fellows, the ground for which exists probably alone in his imagination, whenever so little rubbing off of the angles, ever so little forbearance on the part of the units, might make the whole harmonize in a common friendship.

This was the case with the staff of employes at the Head Office of the Holstadt and Kleinborgen Eisenbahn.

They were all picked men, men who had given a promise of future capability, whose energy and talent at home had won for them the promotion in circumstances and prospects which a transplantation to a new and more expanded field of labour gave; men endowed with more or less brains, more or less excellency of physical and social qualities, who only needed to know each other intimately to break through the ice of their native reserve, to form, apart from business, as glorious a fraternity in private life as they were zealous collaborators in their profession. And yet, with the exception of two or three here and there who clung together, each went to his home at the close of the day shut up within himself, in a miserable and solitary exclusion.

This state of things had existed for nearly two years when Arthur Merryweather came among them. Then there was a change. Young, stalwart, possessed of exuberant health and spirits, with a clear brain and broad views, he found some kindred chord in the breast of each of his new associates, and became the common centre in which the sympathies of all united. He was the keystone of the arch. He founded a boating club, a cricket club, a "novel society" of which the members related their experiences and drew on their imagination in a dramatic form; a whist club, a boxing, fencing, and athletic club, and was, himself, *facile princeps* in each.

And he soon became popular, not alone in the little nucleus of fellow countrymen which formed his more immediate surrounding, but among the natives both of high and low degree. At every public gathering he made fresh acquaintances, at the Schutzenfest, on the Regiebahn, in the theatre. He was the idol of the public balls, the observed of all observers on the Linden Allée. The ladies called him "der schöner Engländer," the photographers besought him to sit to them gratis.

Thus feted and courted on every side in his leisure hours, and with onerous and responsible duties during the day, had he possessed a brain less keen, a frame less Herculean, a temperament less elastic, he must have succumbed for lack of the necessary repose. But his vigour of mind and body was such that he seemed actually to need no rest. No matter how great the fatigue, how exhausting the excitement, how convivial the banquet of the nocturnal hours Arthur was always at his post, fresh, cool, calm, keen, and punctual to the minute next morning. The knottiest points resolved themselves into the simplest questions before his wise judgment, the abstrusest calculations were to him but a pleasing pastime. And then he possessed the rare attribute of sleeping at will. While waiting for the execution of some detail by a subordinate he would rest his brow upon the desk and snatch a few moments of repose, awakening at a word with fresh energy and unclouded brain.

Yet perhaps there was a tinge of bravado in all this, and his physical powers owed their exhaustless energy to a pitiless and iron will. Be this as it may one day having sought the store room—a huge lumber room which was the repository of a bountiful stock of office stationery—with the view of hunting up a particular form of material account of which he best knew the probable whereabouts, the temptation to fling himself upon one of the mattresses, part of the household goods of a colleague who had not as yet found a suitable domicile for the establishment of the domestic menage, because irresistible and in a moment his muscles relaxed by the sweet balsam of the gods, he sank into a peaceful slumber.

Naturally graceful in every movement, his pose might have satisfied the exacting taste of a classic sculptor for a model Endymion. And as even Diana lingered a moment, hovering in chaste admiration over that fortunate stripling, so we would defy any merely human woman to pass our sleeping hero without a moment's pause or an admiring glance. So, in effect, pretty little Linda Laurberg, tripping with light foot-step to her studio under the tiles, lingered for a moment and confessed within herself she had never before beheld so perfect a type of manly beauty. But as even her light tread was sufficient to rouse Arthur from his slight slumber she was not able to make her escape before our hero's eye had rested on her fresh young beauty and he, in his turn, became conscious that he had for the first time witnessed his ideal of perfection in womanly grace.

As his eyes opened, Linda timid as the young fawn, and covered with confusion, fled, leaving Arthur in doubt as to whether the beautiful apparition were a dream or no; however, a little knot of blue ribbon on the threshold established the reality of the vision. He picked it up and with this talisman in his hand and the bundle of forms under his arm, proceeded to lock up the store room and return to the more prosaic regions of the offices below.

A door, opening into the corridor, near the stairhead stood wide, thus giving a draught of pure air through the room from the little window in the sloping roof a precaution not unnecessary if its inmate would escape suffocation, for the sun poured down with an almost tropical heat on the blazing tiles.

Within, seated at a desk, sat Linda scribbling for dear life. "Fraulein," said Arthur attracting her attention by a little tap, "permit me to restore to you, what I conceive to be your property."

She rose with a startled blush, came forward and thanked him.

She looked extremely pretty standing there in her confusion with her lightened colour. Arthur sought an excuse to prolong the conversation. The papers scattered about the room gave him one.

"Forgive my curiosity. Am I on the threshold of the study of an authoress?"

"Yes. At least it is to my pen I owe my livelihood," said Linda.

"A very pleasant pursuit, doubtless," remarked Arthur.

She told him it was rather a laborious one, which she followed rather from necessity than choice. They had quite a little chat standing there in the doorway. Arthur had such kindly frank eyes and was so courteous she could not send him away, and then Linda was so lonely and yearned so for sympathy, and had so few to take any interest in her, poor child.

I think Arthur's correspondence must have been enormous during the succeeding weeks or he must have had a great many statements to make or have worked very carelessly and spoiled reams of paper, for his voyages to the upper regions became very frequent.

II.

"La, is that you Zaur Meergervitter?" exclaimed Linda, as Arthur came in through the street door just as she had closed it. "How you startled me. Pray, what brings you back at this unusual hour?"

"Dire necessity, little Fraulein, nothing less. Linda I am getting awfully pious."

"How so?" said Linda making great eyes. You see, it was a proclivity she had never attributed to Arthur.

"Why, if to labour be to pray, I am at my worship day and night."

"Oh, fie, it is only the worship of Mammon. It is always business, business, business with you men. Do you know I have been longing to ask you to spare me five minutes. I want to consult you on some knotty points in my novelette."

"Then I will add another prayer and beseech you to bring down your work and honor me with your presence, while I sacrifice to Mammon."

"But I shall disturb the rites—or the writing," rejoined Linda.

"Not at all. I have a lot of district pay sheets to expropriate, which is Greek to you, but is about equivalent to dividing them into chapters, and this involves a great deal of copying and while I copy I can talk."

So Linda suffered herself to be persuaded and presently came tripping down stairs, fancy work in hand, and established herself, as cool, and comfortable, and completely at home as if she had occupied the same seat nightly for years. Rail not, ye prudes and maiden aunts. No, there was nothing "extremely improper" in all this. There was that pride of purity about Linda which would have prevented any man in his senses from addressing her a disrespectful word and which invested her most unconventional acts with an atmosphere of perfect rectitude. She and Arthur had understood each other from the first and knew that their intimacy was not going to be dangerous.

The subjects which had vexed the spirit of the young authoress, the problems which were beyond her ingenuity to solve, were partly of a legal, partly of a medical nature, and though Arthur had never looked between the covers of Coke or Littleton and had but a vague acquaintance with the rules which govern the compilation of the testimonial literature of Doctors Commons, though he knew but little of poisons and their antidotes, or whether a person, "shot through the heart" would fall upon his face or his back,—yet he evolved from his inner consciousness such shrewd methods of evading technical difficulties without detracting from the truthful delineation of the 'sensations' or 'spasms' of the story that Linda's novelette, when in due season it appeared in print, was censured by the critics neither for faulty jurisprudence or erroneous medical theories.

This way of putting the case was so droll—the dry humour with which he piled up the agony in an imaginary address to a jury to illustrate his idea of the way out of the difficulty, his ingenious method of getting rid of a troublesome personage that had to be killed for the exigencies of poetic justice, the whole uttered in little sentences, divided by pauses, during which he calculated and compared—was so entertaining that Linda felt she had never enjoyed herself so much, never met with a friend whom she could so thoroughly admire for all the long months of her orphanage.

But as they sat there—Arthur talking and working, Linda animated, happy and beautiful, her face all aglow with excitement as she watched and listened—they heard the hall door bang, a heavy step across the vestibule, and a hand upon the latch of the outer office.

Linda rose, white and terrified, there was no other means of egress, only the huge fire-proof safe gaped a black and hideous cavern from the wall. Arthur, who had risen too, made a sign towards it; she fluttered in, scared and trembling like a frightened bird. He turned the lock upon her and faced the door of the room as it opened.

"Ah, Mr. Merryweather, you are here. I am fortunate to find you; you are the very man I wished to see." It was the chief who spoke.

"Funds are needed to pay the men in the carriage shops at Kleinberg. The enemy has destroyed the telegraph and interrupted the postal communication. It is imperative that, notwithstanding the war, the building of the rolling stock should be proceeded with. A trusty messenger, provided with a pass securing him from molestation as an English subject, must be despatched at once. I want a man with a head on his shoulders for this service. I know you have friends in Kleinberg. In a word, I have selected you."

"All right, sir. I am ready."

"I will write a letter of instruction for your guidance; also a letter to the manager of the works at Kleinberg. If you have any preparations or private arrangements to make, you can go, returning for your credentials in the course of an hour."

"I have indeed some friends I would wish to bid adieu to."

"Very well, then, be off with you. Only tell the messenger as you go out to order an extra post to be at your door tomorrow morning at five. Don't hurry your leave-taking on my account. If you have not returned when I have finished, you will find everything necessary on the table here."

"Then, in view of that possibility," said Arthur, turning back and holding out his hand, "I will bid you good-bye."

"Good-bye, my boy," said the chief, with a hearty hand-grasp, "you will have an adventurous and, I trust, an interesting journey."

"Thanks. I hope I shall prove worthy of your confidence in this matter."

And he was away through the door, had given his instruc-

tions to Carl, and the street door had closed behind him five seconds afterwards.

And the key was in his pocket and Linda in the safe! "She must have patience for an hour. I couldn't let her out before, anyway," he said to himself.

But the hour passed, and the chief engineer had finished his letters and his cigar, and lighted another, and there was no Arthur.

"Up at Jacobi's I suppose, taking a tender leave of the fair Flora. Ah! these boys," said the chief, as he rose and prepared to go homewards—

"All their thought is woman to win,
Sighing and singing of midnight strains,
Under bonny belles' window panes,
This is the way that boys begin."

Wait till they come to forty years!"

And the chief, who was a grizzled, but by no means crabbed, old bachelor, smiled grimly to himself as he paced homeward in the beautiful moonlight.

III.

The clock in the outer office ticked away the seconds of the night, pointed the quarters, struck the hours, and still no other sound disturbed the silence, no quick step hurried through the vestibule, no hand moved the closed doors. Arthur returned not. The papers lay awaiting him upon the desk, the pale moon looked in and illumed them, and hovered over them curiously as though wondering what they contained and who placed them there. The dawn came and the first sunbeam stole into the still desolate office, and Arthur came not.

Then the housemaid came to dust and sweep and garnish, and presently the clerks came sauntering in one by one, and wondered why the packages lay there and why Arthur, punctual Arthur, was not at his post.

The books were all locked up in the safe, and Arthur kept the key, consequently the business of the day was at a standstill.

What could have happened? The surmises were numerous and ingenious. Presently one volunteered to go round to his rooms to see if he were ill. He soon came back with the intelligence that Arthur had not been home all night.

"Well, if we are to have a holiday, so be it." Pipes and cigars were lighted, and Carl was ordered to fetch in a dozen of "Bairsk" which were stowed in the convenient cavities of Merryweather's desk.

"The governor won't be here till eleven, and we may as well enjoy ourselves," they said. One or two strolled round to the club for billiards; the rest remained to conjecture and discuss.

A little after eleven the chief came in. "Merryweather not been here and not been home all night? Extraordinary! Nevertheless, gentleman, you need not be idle on that account."

Carl was despatched in a cab for the duplicate key. When brought it was useless. The safe, which was not constructed for us, but was built up with the house, was fitted with one of those absurdly elaborate locks that are secured by an arrangement of letters. Arthur had set it, and we didn't know the combination.

The chief drew from the bank the requisite funds, despatched Paul Elliott on the mission to Kleinberg, and then, though evidently considerably annoyed at Merryweather's non appearance, started as usual for the works.

As the sound of his wheels died away, the surmises were resumed, and all sorts of expedients suggested for opening the safe. That the open sesame was a word of six letters, so much we knew; what those six letters were we might spend a lifetime in discovering.

"Of how many combinations are the letters of the alphabet capable, does any fellow know?" asked Jack Hinton.

"Couldn't we arrive at the solution by algebra? That is the best way of resolving impossible enigmas," cried Charley, sprightly. "Let X equal the unknown, you know, and X plus some other letters, and minus a lot more, will give you the combination, eh? Isn't that an excellent idea?"

There was a general snigger, but the jest set me thinking. The words with X in them which most readily occurred to me were Latin words—mox, nox, vox, etc. Vox Dei, there were six letters; I tried them, without effect. A quantity of other combinations followed. Then I bethought me of the other end of the epigram, vox pop—click went the spring, the key went in up to the hilt, and I flung the door open with a shout of victory.

Willie Singleton, a pink and white youngster of seventeen, who, being junior, and eager to get on, had been chafing all the morning at this enforced idleness, rushed forward to get at his beloved ledgers. With eyes unprepared for the darkness within, he stumbled over something on the ground and half fell. In a second he was back in the room with a terrible blank terror in his face. "My God!" he shrieked, "there is a corpse in there! I touched it," he gasped, "it was cold as ice." He sank on the floor in convulsions. Poor boy, he had never, as he afterwards said, "seen anything dead in his life."

IV.

The discovery of poor Linda's senseless body in the great safe and Arthur Merryweather's strange absence caused an intense sensation in the office. What was worse for poor little Linda, it would find its way into the newspapers, and cause a sensation with the public.

Meanwhile let us go back to Arthur and see what had happened to account for his strange disappearance.

His first thought, as the governor had surmised, had been of Flora Jacobi. His attachment for her, though it had taken as yet no tangible form, was yet such as to give her a kind of an acknowledged proprietorship in him, and she would have felt slighted had he left her uninformed of any important event in his proceedings. He could not leave the city on a mission, possibly involving some personal danger, without taking a kindly farewell of the girl whom he prized above all the blonde beauties of Hofstadt. The Jacobis lived in a pretty little square white house, beyond Nordenbruck which lay at the further extremity of the Linden Allée. There was not a cab on the road near the red and white, pinnacled, stone-corned bank-building when Arthur passed. It was too dark for him to see this for the moon had not yet risen above the hill with the mill on it behind the city walls, but he knew it when no voice replied to his stentorian hail.

"No matter," said our hero to himself, "I can run up Reichentrassé and catch a cab at the corner;" so settling down to a long stride he sped up the street as if in training for a mile heat.