The Prophet of Berkeley Square

Robert Smythe Hichens

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CHAPTER I. MRS. MERILLIA IS CARRIED TO BED

The great telescope of the Prophet was carefully adjusted upon its lofty, brass−bound stand in the bow window of Number One Thousand Berkeley Square. It pointed towards the remarkably bright stars which twinkled in the December sky over frosty London, those guardian stars which always seemed to the Prophet to watch with peculiar solicitude over the most respectable neighbourhood in which he resided. The polestar had its eye even now upon the mansion of an adjacent ex− premier, the belt of Orion was not oblivious of a belted earl's cosy red−brick home just opposite, and the house of a certain famous actor and actress close by had been taken by the Great Bear under its special protection.

The Prophet's butler, Mr. Ferdinand−−that bulky and veracious gentleman −−threw open the latticed windows of the drawing−room and let the cold air rush blithely in. Then he made up the fire carefully, placed a copy of Mr. Malkiel's /Almanac/, bound in dull pink and silver brocade by Miss Clorinda Dolbrett of the Cromwell Road, upon a small tulip−wood table near the telescope, patted a sofa cushion affectionately on the head, glanced around with the meditative eye of the butler born not made, and quitted the comfortable apartment with a salaried, but soft, footstep.

It was a pleasant chamber, this drawing−room of Number One Thousand. It spoke respectfully of the generations that were past and seemed serenely certain of a comfortable future. There was no too modern uneasiness about it, no trifling, gim−crack furniture constructed to catch the eye and the angles of any one venturing to seek repose upon it, no unmeaning rubbish of ornaments or hectic flummery of second−rate pictures. Above the high oaken mantel−piece was a little pure bust in marble of the Prophet when a small boy. To right and left were pretty miniatures in golden frames of the Prophet's delightfully numerous grandmothers. Here might be seen Mrs. Prothero, the great ship− builder's faithful wife, in blue brocade, and Lady Camptown, who reigned at Bath, in grey tabinet and diamond buckles, when Miss Jane Austen was writing her first romance; Mrs. Susan Burlington, who knew Lord Byron−−a remarkable fact−−and Lady Sophia Green, who knew her own mind, a fact still more remarkable. The last−named lady wore black with a Roman nose, and the combination was admirably convincing. Here might also be observed Mrs. Stuefitt, Mistress of the Mazurka, and the Lady Jane Follington, of whom George the Second had spoken openly in terms of approbation. She affected plum colour and had eyes like sloes−−the fashionable hue in the neat−foot−and−pretty−ankle period. The flames of the fire twinkled brightly over this battalion of deuced fine women, who were all, without one exception, the grandmothers−−in various degrees−−of the Prophet. When speaking of them, in the highest terms, he never differentiated them by the adjectives great, or great−great. They were all kind and condescending enough to be his grandmothers. For a man of his sensitive, delicate and grateful disposition this was enough. He thought them all quite perfect, and took them all under the protection of his soft and beaming eyes.

Of Mrs. Merillia, the live grandmother with whom he had the great felicity to dwell in Berkeley Square, he seldom said anything in public praise. The incense he offered at her shrine rose, most sweetly perfumed, from his daily life. The hearth of this agreeable and grandmotherly chamber was attractive with dogs, the silver cage beside it with green love−birds. Upon the floor was a heavy, dull−blue carpet over which−−as has been intimated−−even a butler so heavy as Mr. Ferdinand could go softly. The walls were dressed with a dull blue paper that looked like velvet.

Here and there upon them hung a picture: a landscape of George Morland, lustily English, a Cotman, a Cuyp−−cows in twilight−−a Reynolds, faded but exquisitely genteel. A lovely little harpsichord−−meditating on Scarlatti−−stood in one angle, a harp, tied with most delicate ribands of ivory satin powdered with pimpernels, in another. Many waxen candles shed a tender and unostentatious radiance above their careful grease− catchers. Upon pretty tables lay neat books by Fanny Burney, Beatrice Harraden, Mary Wilkins, and Max Beerbohm, also the poems of Lord Byron and of Lord de Tabley. Near the hearth was a sofa on which an emperor might have laid an easy head that wore a crown, and before every low and seductive chair was set a low and seductive footstool.

A grandmother's clock pronounced the hour of ten in a frail and elegant voice as the finely−carved oak door was opened, and the Prophet seriously entered this peaceful room, carrying a copy of the /Meditations of Marcus Aurelius/ in his hand.

He was a neatly−made little man of fashionable, even of modish, cut, spare, smart and whimsical, with a clean−shaved, small−featured face, large, shining brown eyes, abundant and slightly−waving brown hair, that could only be parted, with the sweetest sorrow, in the centre of his well−shaped, almost philosophical head, and movements light and temperate as those of a meditative squirrel. Having just dined he was naturally in evening dress, with a butterfly tie, gleaming pumps, and a buttonhole of violets. He shut the door gently, glanced at his nice− looking grandmothers, and, walking forward very quietly and demurely, applied his eye to the telescope, lowering himself slightly by a Sandow exercise, which he had practised before he became a prophet. Having remained in this position of astronomical observation for some minutes, he deviated into the upright, closed the window, and tinkled a small silver bell that stood on the tulip−wood table beside Malkiel's /Almanac/.

Mr. Ferdinand appeared, looking respectfully buoyant.

"Has Mr. Malkiel sent any reply to my inquiry, Mr. Ferdinand?" asked the Prophet.

"He has not, sir," replied Mr. Ferdinand, sympathetically.

"Did the boy messenger say he delivered my note?"

"He said so, sir, on his Bible oath, sir."

"And do you believe him?"

"Oh, sir!" responded Mr. Ferdinand, in a shocked voice, "surely a London lad would not be found to tell a lie!"

"I hope not, Mr. Ferdinand. Still−−did he look a nervous sort of lad?"

"He was a trifle pale, sir, about the gills−−but a heart of gold, sir, I feel sure. He wore four medals, sir."

"Four medals! Nevertheless, he may have been frightened to go to Mr. Malkiel's door. That will do, Mr. Ferdinand."

Mr. Ferdinand was about to bow and retire when the Prophet, after a moment of hesitation, added,−−

"Stay, Mr. Ferdinand. Mrs. Merillia has gone to the Gaiety Theatre to−night. I expect her back at half−past eleven. She may need assistance on her return."

"Assistance, sir! Mrs. Merillia, sir!"

Mr. Ferdinand's luminous eyes shone with amazement.

"She may−−I say she /may/−−have to be carried to bed."

Mr. Ferdinand's jaw dropped. He gave at the knees and was obliged to cling to a Chippendale cabinet for support.

"Have an armchair ready in the hall in case of necessity and tell Gustavus to sit up. Mrs. Merillia must not be dropped. You understand. That will do, Mr. Ferdinand."

Mr. Ferdinand endeavoured to bow, and ultimately succeeded in retiring. When his tremulous shoulders were no longer visible, the Prophet opened Marcus Aurelius, and, seating himself in a corner of the big couch by the fire, crossed his legs one over the other and began to read that timid Ancient's consolatory, but unconvincing, remarks. Occasionally he paused, however, murmured doubtfully, "Will she have to be carried to bed?" shook his head mournfully and then resumed his reading.

While he thus employs his time, we must say a word or two about him.

Mr. Hennessey Vivian was now a man of thirty−eight, of excellent fortune, of fine connections, and of admirable disposition. He had become an orphan as soon as it was in his power to do so, having lost his father−−Captain Vivian of Her Majesty's Tenth Lancers−−some months before, and his mother−−who had been a Merillia of Chipping Sudbury−−a few minutes after his birth. In these unfortunate circumstances, over which he, poor infant, had absolutely no control−−whatever unkind people might say!−−he devolved upon his mother's mother, the handsome and popular Mrs. Merillia, who assumed his charge with the rosy alacrity characteristic of her in all her undertakings. With her the little Hennessey had passed his infantine years, blowing happy bubbles, presiding over the voyages of his own private Noah−−from the Army and Navy Stores, with two hundred animals of both sexes!−−eating pap prepared by Mrs. Merillia's own /chef/, and sleeping in a cot hung with sunny silk that might have curtained Venus or have shaken about Aurora as she rose in the first morning of the world. From her he had acquired the alphabet and many a ginger−nut and decorative bonbon. And from her, too, he had set forth, with tears, in his new Eton jacket and broad white collar, to go to Mr. Chapman's preparatory school for little boys at Slough. Here he remained for several years, acquiring a respect for the poet Gray and a love of Slough peppermint that could only cease with life. Here too he made friends with Robert Green, son of Lord Churchmore,

who was afterwards to be a certain influence in his life. His existence at Slough was happy. Indeed, so great was his affection for the place that his removal to Eton cost him suffering scarcely less acute than that which presently attended his departure from Eton to Christchurch. Over his sensations on leaving Oxford we prefer to draw a veil, only saying that his last outlook−−as an undergraduate−−over her immemorial towers was as hazy as the average Cabinet Minister's outlook over the events of the day and the desires of the community.

But if the moisture of the Prophet did him credit at that painful period of his life, it must be allowed that his behaviour on being formally introduced into London Society showed no puling regret, no backward longings after echoing colleges, lost dons and the scouts that are no more. He was quite at his ease, and displayed none of the high− pitched contempt of Piccadilly that is often so amusingly characteristic of the young gentlemen accustomed to "the High."

Mrs. Merillia, who had been a widow ever since she could remember, possessed the lease of the house in Berkeley Square in which the Prophet was now sitting. It was an excellent mansion, with everything comfortable about it, a duke on one side, a Chancellor of the Exchequer on the other, electric light, several bathrooms and the gramophone. There was never any question of the Prophet setting up house by himself. On leaving Oxford he joined his ample fortune to Mrs. Merillia's as a matter of course, and they settled down together with the greatest alacrity and hopefulness. Nor were their pleasant relations once disturbed during the fifteen years that elapsed before the Prophet applied his eye to the telescope in the bow window and gave Mr. Ferdinand the instructions which have just been recorded.

These fifteen years had not gone by without leaving their mark upon our hero. He had done several things during their passage. For instance, he had written a play, very nearly proposed to the third daughter of a London clergyman and twice been to the Derby. Such events had, not unnaturally, had their effect upon the formation of his character and even upon the expression of his intelligent face. The writing of the play−−and, perhaps, its refusal by all the actor−managers of the town−− had traced a tiny line at each corner of his mobile mouth. The third daughter of the London clergyman−−his sentiment for her−−had taught his hand the slightly episcopal gesture which was so admired at the Lambeth Palace Garden Party in the summer of 1892. And the great race meeting was responsible for the rather tight trousers and the gentleman−jockey smile which he was wont to assume when he set out for a canter in the Row. From all this it will be guessed that our Prophet was exceedingly amenable to the influences that throng at the heels of the human destiny. Indeed, he was. And some few months before this story opens it came about that he encountered a gentleman who was, in fact, the primary cause of this story being true. Who was this gentleman? you will say. Sir Tiglath Butt, the great astronomer, Correspondent of the Institute of France, Member of the Royal College of Science, Demonstrator of Astronomical Physics, author of the pamphlet, "Star− Gazers," and the brochure, "An investigation into the psychical condition of those who see stars," C.B.F.R.S. and popular member of the Colley Cibber Club in Long Acre.

The Prophet was introduced to Sir Tiglath at the Colley Cibber Club, and though Sir Tiglath, who was of a freakish disposition and much addicted to his joke declined to speak to him, on the ground that he (Sir Tiglath) had lost his voice and was unlikely to find it in conversation, the Prophet was greatly impressed by the astronomer's enormous brick−red face, round body, turned legs, eyes like marbles, and capacity for drinking port−wine−−so much so, in fact that, on leaving the club, he hastened to buy a science primer on astronomy, and devoted himself for several days to a minute investigation of the Milky Way.

As there is a fascination of the earth, so is there a fascination of the heavens. Along the dim, empurpled highways that lead from star to star, from meteorite to comet, the imagination travels wakefully by night, and the heart leaps as it draws near to the silver bosses of the moon. Mrs. Merillia was soon obliged to permit the intrusion of a gigantic telescope into her pretty drawing−room, and found herself expected to converse at the dinner−table on the eight moons of Saturn, the belts of Jupiter, the asteroids of Mars and the phases of Venus. These last she at first declined to discuss with a man, even though he were her grandson. But she was won over by the Prophet's innocent persuasiveness, and drawn on until she spoke almost as readily of the movements of the stars as formerly she had spoken of the movements of the Court from Windsor to London, and from London to Balmoral. In truth, she expected that Hennessey's passion for the comets would cease as had ceased his passion for the clergyman's daughter; that his ardour for astronomy would die as had died his ardour for play−writing; that he would give up going to /Corona Borealis/ and to the Southern Fish as he had given up going to the Derby. Time proved her wrong. As the days flew Hennessey became increasingly impassioned. He was more often at the

telescope than at the Bachelors', and seemed on the way to become almost as gibbous as the planet Mars. Even he slightly neglected his social duties; and on one terrible occasion forgot that he was engaged to dine at Cambridge House because he was assisting at a transit of Mercury.

Now all this began to weigh upon the mind of Mrs. Merillia, despite the amazing cheerfulness of disposition which she had inherited from two long lines of confirmed optimists−−her ancestors on the paternal and maternal sides. She did not know how to brood, but, if she had, she might well have been led to do so. And even as it was she had been reduced to so unusual a condition of dejection that, a week before the evening we are describing, she had been obliged to order a box at the Gaiety Theatre, she, who, like all optimists, habitually frequented those playhouses where she could behold gloomy tragedies, awful melodramas, or those ironic pieces called farces, in which the ultimate misery of which human nature is capable is drawn to its farthest point.

In the beginning of this new dejection of hers, Mrs. Merillia was now seated in a stage box at the "Gaiety," with an elderly General of Life Guards, a Mistress of the Robes, and the grandfather of the Central American Ambassador at the Court of St. James, and all four of them were smiling at a neat little low comedian, who was singing, without any voice and with the utmost precision, a pathetic romance entitled, "De Coon Wot Got de Chuck."

Meanwhile the Prophet was engaged for the twentieth time in considering whether Mrs. Merillia, on her return from this festival, would have to be carried to bed by hired menials.

Why?

This brings us to the great turning point in our hero's life, to the point when first he began to respect the strange powers stirring within him.

Until he encountered Sir Tiglath Butt in the dining−room of the Colley Cibber Club Hennessey had been but a dilettante fellow. He had written a play, but airily, and without the twenty years of arduous and persistent study declared by the dramatic critics to be absolutely necessary before any intelligent man can learn how to get a bishop on, or a chambermaid off, the stage. He had nearly proposed to a clergyman's daughter, but thoughtlessly, and without any previous examination into the clericalism of rectory females, any first−hand knowledge of mothers' meetings, devoid of which he must be a stout− hearted gentleman who would rush in where even curates often fear to tread. He had been to the Derby, but without wearing a bottle−green veil or carrying a betting−book. In fact, he had not taken life very seriously, or fully appreciated the solemn duties it brings to all who bear its yoke. Only when the plump red hand of Sir Tiglath−−holding a bumper of thirty−four port−−pointed the way to the heavens, did Hennessey begin−−through his telescope−−to see the great possibilities that foot it about the existence of even the meanest man who eats, drinks and suffers. For through his telescope he saw that he might be a prophet. Malkiel read the future in the stars. Why not he?

He endeavoured to do so. He sought an intimacy with the benefic /Jupiter/, and found it−−perhaps by a secret kow−towing to /Sagittarius/. He made up openly to /Canis Major/ and was shortly on what might almost be considered terms of affection with /Venus/. And he was, moreover, presently quite fearless in the presence of /Saturn/, quite unabashed beneath the glittering eye of /Mercury/. Then, as the neophyte growing bold by familiarity with the circle of the great ones, he ventured on his first prophecy, a discreet and even humble forecast of the weather. He predicted a heavy fall of snow for a certain evening, and so distrusted his own prediction that when the evening came, mild and benign, he sallied forth to the Empire Palace of Varieties, and stayed till near midnight, laughing at the sallies of French clowns, and applauding the frail antics of cockatoos on motor bicycles. When, on the stroke of twelve, he came airily forth wrapped in the lightest of dust coats, he was obliged to endure the greatest of man's amazements−−the knowledge that there was a well of truth within him. Leicester Square was swathed in an ivory fleece, and he was obliged to gain Berkeley Square on foot, treading gingerly in pumps, escorted by linkmen with flaring golden torches, and preceded by tipsy but assiduous ruffians armed with shovels, who, with many a lusty oath and horrid imprecation, cleared a thin thread of path between the towering walls of snow that sparkled faintly in the gaslight.

This experience fired him. He rose up early, lay down late, and, quite with her assent, cast the horoscope of Mrs. Merillia in the sweat of his brow. He cast, we say, her horoscope and, from a certain conjunction of the planets, he gathered, to his horror, that upon the fifteenth day of the month of January she would suffer an accident while on an evening jaunt. We find him now, on this fifteenth day of the first month, aware of his revered grandmother's intrepid expedition to the Gaiety Theatre, waiting her return to Berkeley Square with

mingled feelings which we might analyse for pages, but which we prefer baldly to state.

He longed to be proved indeed a prophet, and he longed also to see his beloved relative return from her sheaf of pleasures in the free and unconstrained use of all her graceful limbs. He was, therefore, torn by foes in a mental conflict, and was in no case to sip the philosophic honey of Marcus Aurelius as he sat between the telescope and the fire in the comfortable drawing−room awaiting his grandmother's return.

"Gustavus," said Mr. Ferdinand in the servants' hall to the flushed footman who lay upon a what−not, sipping a glass of ale and reading a new and unabridged farthing edition of Carlyle's /French Revolution/, "Gustavus, Mrs. Merillia has been and gone to the Gaiety Theatre to−night. We expect her back at eleven−thirty sharp. She may need assistance on her return, Gustavus."

The footman put down the tumbler which he was in the act of raising to his pouted lips.

"Assistance, Mr. Ferdinand!" he ejaculated. "Mrs. Merillia, Mr. Ferdinand!"

"She may−−we say she /may/−−have to be carried to bed, Gustavus."

Gustavus's jaw dropped, and the /French Revolution/ fluttered in his startled hands.

"Good lawks, Mr. Ferdinand!" he exclaimed (not quoting from Carlyle).

"Have an armchair ready in the hall, Gustavus. Mrs. Merillia must not be dropped. You understand? That will do, Gustavus."

And Mr. Ferdinand passed to the adjacent supper−table, to join the upper housemaid in a discussion of two subjects that were very near to their hearts, a round of beef and a tureen of pickled cabbage, while Gustavus got up from the what−not in a bemused manner, and proceeded to search dreamily for an armchair. He came upon one by chance in the dining−room, and wheeled it out into the hall just as the clocks in the house rang out the half−hour after eleven.

The Prophet above sprang up from the couch by the fire, Mr. Ferdinand below closed his discussion with the upper housemaid, and the former rapidly came down, the latter up, stairs as the roll of wheels broke through the silence of the square.

Gustavus, in an attitude of bridled curiosity, was posed beneath a polar bear that held an electric lamp. His hand was laid upon the back of the armchair, and his round hazel eyes were turned expectantly towards the hall as his two masters joined him.

"Is all ready, Mr. Ferdinand?" said the Prophet, anxiously.

"All is ready, sir," replied the butler.

"Wheel the chair forward, Gustavus, if you please," said the Prophet. "Mrs. Merillia must not be dropped. Remember that."

"Not be dropped, sir−−no."

The chair ran forward on its amicable castors as a carriage was heard to stop outside. Mr. Ferdinand flung open the portal, and the Prophet glided out excitedly upon the step.

"Well?" he cried, "well?"

A footman, in a long drab coat with red facings, was preparing to get off the box of a smart brougham, but before he could reach the pavement, a charming head, covered with a lace cap, was thrust out of the window, and a musical and almost girlish voice cried,−−

"All nonsense, Hennessey, all rubbish! Saturn don't know what he's talkin' about. Look!"

The carriage door was vivaciously opened from the inside and a delightful little old lady, dressed in brown silk, with a long, cheerful pointed nose, rosy cheeks, and chestnut hair−−that almost mightn't have been a wig in certain lights−−prepared to leap forth without waiting for the reverent assistance that the Prophet, flanked by Mr. Ferdinand and Gustavus, was in waiting to afford.

As she jumped, she began to cry, "Not much wrong with me, is there, Hennessey?" but before the sentence was completed she had caught her neat foot in her brown silk gown, had stumbled from the step of the carriage to the pavement, had twisted her pretty ankle, had reeled and almost fallen, had been caught by the Prophet and Mr. Ferdinand, borne tenderly into the hall, and placed in the armchair which the terrified Gustavus, with almost enraged ardour, drove forward to receive her. As she sank down in it, helpless, Mrs. Merillia exclaimed, with unabated vivacity,−−

"It's happened, Hennessey, it's happened! But it was my own doin' and yours. You shouldn't have prophesied at your age, and I shouldn't have jumped at mine.

"Dearest grannie!" cried the Prophet, on his knees beside her, "how grieved, how shocked I am! Is it−−is it−−"

"Sprained, Hennessey?"

He nodded. Mechanically Mr. Ferdinand nodded. Gustavus let his powdered head drop, too, in imitation of his superiors.

"I'll tell you in the drawin'−−room."

She placed her pretty, mittened hands upon the arms of the chair, and gave a little wriggle, trying to get up. Then she cried out musically,−−

"No, I must be carried up. Mr. Ferdinand!"

"Ma'am!"

"Is Gustavus to be trusted?"

"Trusted, ma'am!" cried Mr. Ferdinand, looking at Gustavus, who had assumed an expression of pale and pathetic dignity. "Trusted−−a London footman! Oh, ma'am!"

His voice failed. He choked and began to rummage in the pocket of his black tail coat for his perfumed handkerchief.

"T'st, t'st! I mean his arms," said Mrs. Merillia, patting her delicate hands quickly on the chair. "Can he carry me?"

The countenance of Mr. Ferdinand cleared, while Gustavus eagerly extended his right arm, bent it sharply, and allowed his magnificent biceps to rise up in sudden majesty. Mrs. Merillia was reassured.

"Hoist me to the drawin'−room, then," she said. "Hennessey, will you walk behind?"

The procession was formed, and the little old lady proceeded by a succession of jerks to the upper floor, her silk gown rustling against the balusters, and her tiny feet dangling loosely in mid−air, while her long and elegant head nodded each time Mr. Ferdinand and Gustavus pranced carefully sideways to a higher step. The Prophet followed solicitously behind, with hands outstretched to check any dangerous recoil. His face was very grave, but not entirely unhappy.

"Set me down by the fire," said Mrs. Merillia, when she found herself being smoothly propelled through the atmosphere of the drawing−room.

The menials obeyed with breathless assiduity.

"And now bring me a sandwich, a glass of toast and water and a fan, if you please. Yes, put the footstool well under me."

"Dearest grannie," said the Prophet, when the men had retired, "are you in great pain?"

"No, Hennessey. Are you?"

Mrs. Merillia's green eyes twinkled.

"I!"

"Yes, at my accident. For my ankle is sprained, I'm almost sure, and I shall have to lie up presently in wet bandages. Tell me, are you really pained that I have had the accident you prophesied?"

She glanced from her grandson to the telescope that pointed toward the stars and back again.

"I am, indeed, sincerely grieved," the Prophet answered with genuine emotion.

"Yes. But if I'd jumped out all right, and was sittin' here now in a perfect condition of health, you'd have been sincerely grieved, too."

"I hope not, grannie," said the Prophet. But he looked meditative.

Mr. Ferdinand brought the toast and water, the sandwich and the fan. When he had trodden across the carpet out of the room Mrs. Merillia continued,−−

"Hennessey, you see where this prophetic business is leadin' you. It has made you charmed at my accident. Yes, it has."

She spoke without any pathos, humorously indeed, in a bright tone full of common sense. And she nodded at him over her toast and water with a chaffing, demure smile. But the Prophet winced and put his hand to his thick brown hair.

"No, no," he cried quickly. "That's impossible. It can't be." But the statements sounded like perturbed questions.

"Think!" said his grandmother, looking down at her poor, helpless foot as it lay on the velvet stool. "If I hadn't had an accident to−night, you'd have been obliged to think ill of−−of−−which of them was it that had the

impertinence to talk my affairs over with you?"

"Mercury and Uranus, Jupiter, Saturn and Venus," said the Prophet with almost terrible gravity.

"Exactly. I always have thought ill of the last, but that's nothin' to do with it. Weigh me in the balance against five planets−−are they all planets?−−and how do the scales go? You see, Hennessey!"

The Prophet looked much distressed. He saw his beloved grandmother by the fire and the bright stars twinkling through the frosty window− panes. He thought of his telescope, of Sir Tiglath, of Mr. Malkiel, and of the future, and the velvety blue walls of the drawing−room seemed to spin round him.

"Prophecy," continued Mrs. Merillia, fanning herself till the lace lappets of her priceless cap fluttered above her orderly and clasping wig, "is dangerous, for often it can cause its own fulfilment. If you hadn't said that because of a certain conjunction of planets−−or whatever it was−−in my horoscope, I should have an accident to−night, I shouldn't have jumped out of the brougham. I should have waited for Mr. Ferdinand to assist me, as befits a gentlewoman."

"But, grannie, I assure you I was most anxious to save you. I hoped I had made a mistake in your horoscope. I did, really. I was so nervous that I sent to Mr. Malkiel while you were at the theatre and implored him to look into the matter as an expert."

"Mr. Malkiel! Who is he? Do we know him?"

"No. But we know his marvellous /Almanac/."

"The /Almanac/ person! Why, Malkiel is surely a myth, Hennessey, a number of people, a company, a syndicate, or something of that kind."

"So I thought, grannie. But I have made inquiries−−through a detective agency−−and I have discovered that he is one person; in fact, a man, just like you and me."

"Rather an odd man then! Is he in the Red Book?"

"No. He is, I understand, of a very retiring and secretive disposition. In fact, I have had great difficulty in learning anything about him. But at length I have discovered that he receives and answers letters at an address in London."

"Indeed. Where is it?"

"Jellybrand's Library, Eleven Hundred Z, Shaftesbury Avenue. I sent a boy messenger there to−day."

"Did you receive a reply?"

"No. I think the boy−−although Mr. Ferdinand tells me he wore four medals, I presume for courage−−must have become nervous on perceiving Mr. Malkiel's name on the envelope, have thrown the note down a grating, and bolted before he reached the place, though he said−−on his Bible oath, I understand from Mr. Ferdinand−−he delivered the note. In any case I got no answer. How are you feeling?"

"Twisted, but prophetic. I foretell that my ankle will be swelled beyond recognition to−morrow. Help me to bed, Hennessey."

The Prophet flew to his dear relative's assistance, and Mrs. Merillia endeavoured to rise and to lean upon his anxious arm. After a struggle, however, in which the Prophet took part and two chairs were overset, she was obliged to desist.

"You must ring the bell, Hennessey," she said. "Mr. Ferdinand and Gustavus must carry me to bed in the chair."

The Prophet sprang tragically to the bell. It was answered. The procession was re−formed, and Mrs. Merillia was carried to bed, still smiling, nodding at each stair and bearing herself with admirable courage.

As Mr. Ferdinand and Gustavus descended to the basement after the completion of their unusual task, the latter said solemnly,−−

"However should master have come to know as the missis wouldn't be able to put foot to floor this night, Mr. Ferdinand? However?"

"I cannot answer you, Gustavus," Mr. Ferdinand replied, shaking his broad and globe−like head, round whose bald cupola the jet−black hair was brushed in two half moons decorated with a renowned "butler's own special pomade."

"Well, Mr. Ferdinand," rejoined Gustavus, stretching out one hand for pale ale, the other for /French Revolution/, "I don't like it."

"Why, Gustavus?" inquired Mr. Ferdinand, preparing to resume his discussion with the accommodating upper

housemaid. "Why?"

"Because it seems strange like, Mr. Ferdinand," said Gustavus, lifting the glass to his lips, the /French Revolution/ to his eyes.

"It do seem strange, Gustavus," answered Mr. Ferdinand, leaving out the "like" in a cultivated manner. "It do."

In the drawing−room the Prophet stood, with clenched hands, gazing through the telescope at Mercury and Uranus, Jupiter, Saturn and Venus, while, on the second floor, Mrs. Fancy Quinglet, Mrs. Merillia's devoted, but occasionally disconcerting, maid, swathed her mistress's ankle in bandages previously steeped in cold water and in vinegar.

CHAPTER II. MALKIEL THE SECOND IS BETRAYED BY THE YOUNG LIBRARIAN

Mrs. Merillia's accident made a very deep impression upon the Prophet's mind. He thought it over carefully, and desired to discuss it in all its bearings with Mrs. Fancy Quinglet, who had been his confidante for full thirty years. Mrs. Fancy−−who had not been married−−was no longer a pretty girl. Indeed it was possible that she had never, even in her heyday, been otherwise than moderately plain. Now, at the age of fifty− one and a half, she was a faithful creature with a thin, pendulous nose, a pale, hysteric eye, a tendency to cold in the head and chilblains in the autumn of the year, and a somewhat incoherent and occasionally frenzied turn of mind. Argument could never at any time have had much effect upon her nature, and as she grew towards maturity its power over her most markedly decreased. This fact was recognised by everybody, last of all by Mrs. Merillia, who was at length fully convinced of the existence of certain depths in her maid's peculiar character by the following circumstance.

Mrs. Merillia had a bandy−legged dachshund called Beau, whose name was for many years often affectionately, and quite correctly, pronounced by Fancy Quinglet. One day, however, she chanced to see it written upon paper−−B.E.A.U.

"Whatever does that mean, ma'am?" she asked of Mrs. Merillia.

"Why, Beau, of course, Beau−−the dog. What should it mean?"

"Bow?" cried Fancy. "Is he writ so?"

"Of course, silly girl. It is written Beau, and you can pronounce it as you would pronounce a bow of ribbon."

Fancy said no more, though it was easy to see that she was much shaken by this circumstance. But she could never afterwards be induced to utter her favourite's name. She was physically unable to speak the word so strangely, so almost impiously, spelt. This she declared with tears. Persuasion and argument were unavailing. Henceforth Beau was always called by her "the dog," and it was obvious that, had she been led out to the stake, she must have burned rather than save herself by a pronouncing of the combination of letters by which she had been so long deceived.

Such an inflexible mind had Mrs. Fancy, to whom the Prophet now applied himself with gestures almost Sinaic.

She was dressed in mouse−coloured grenadine, and was seated in a small chamber opening out of Mrs. Merillia's bedroom, engaged in what she called "plain tatting."

"Fancy," said the Prophet, entering and closing the door carefully, "you know me well."

"From the bottle, sir," she answered, darting the bone implements in and out.

"Have you ever thought−−has it ever occurred to you−−"

"I can't say it has, sir," Fancy replied, with the weak decision peculiar to her.

She was ever prone thus to answer questions before they were fully asked, or could be properly understood by her, and from such premature decisions as she hastened to give she could never afterwards be persuaded to retreat. Knowing this the Prophet said rapidly,−−

"Fancy, if a man finds out that he is a prophet what ought he to do?"

The lady's−maid rattled her bones.

"Let it alone, sir," she answered. "Let it alone, Master Hennessey."

"Well, but what d'you mean by that?"

"What I say sir. I can't speak different, nor mean other."

"But can't you explain, Fancy?"

"Oh, Master Hennessey, the lives that have been wrecked, the homes that have been broke up by explainings!"

Her eye seemed suddenly lit from within by some fever of sad, worldly knowledge.

"Well, but−−" the Prophet began.

"I know it, Master Hennessey, and I can't know other."

She sighed, and her gaze became fixed like that of a typhoid patient in a dream.

"Them that knows other let them declare it," she ejaculated. "I say again, as I did afore−−the homes that have been broken up by explainings!"

She tatted. The Prophet bowed before her decision and left the apartment feeling rather hungry. Fancy Quinglet's crumbs were not always crumbs of comfort. He resolved to apply again to Mr. Malkiel, and this time to make the application in person. But before he did so he thought it right to tell Mrs. Merillia, who was still steeped in bandages, of his intention. He therefore went straight to her room from Fancy Quinglet's. Mrs. Merillia was lying upon a couch reading a Russian novel. A cup of tea stood beside her upon a table near a bowl of red and yellow tulips, a canary was singing in its cage amid a shower of bird−seed, and "the dog" lay stretched before the blazing fire upon a milk−white rug, over which a pale ray of winter sunshine fell. As the Prophet came in Mrs. Merillia glanced up.

"Hennessey," she said, "you are growin' to look like Lord Brandling, when he combined the Premiership with the Foreign Office and we had that dreadful complication with Iceland. My dear boy, you are corrugated with thought and care. What is the matter? My ankle is much better. You need not be anxious about me. Has Venus been playing you another jade's trick?"

The Prophet sat down and stroked Beau's sable back with his forefinger.

"I have scarcely looked at Venus since you were injured, grannie," he answered. "I have scarcely dared to."

"I'm glad to hear it. Since the days of Adonis she has always had a dangerous influence on young men. If you want to look at anybody, look at that pretty, sensible cousin of Robert Green's."

"Lady Enid. Yes, she is sensible. I believe she is in Hampshire staying with the Churchmores."

He looked calmer for a moment, but the corrugated expression quickly returned.

"Grannie," he said, "I think it my duty to make an effort to see Mr. Malkiel."

"The /Almanac/ man. What do you want with him?"

She tapped one of her small, mittened hands over the other and slightly twisted her long and pointed nose.

"I want to learn his views on this strange faculty of prophecy. Has it ever occurred to you that among all our immense acquaintance we don't number a single prophet?"

"One can't know everybody, Hennessey. And I believe that prophets always spring from the lower classes. The line must be drawn somewhere even in these days."

"Why not draw it at millionaires then?"

"I should like to. Somethin' will have to be done. If the nobodies continue to go everywhere the very few somebodies that are left will soon go nowhere.

"Perhaps they do go nowhere. Perhaps that is why we have never met a prophet."

Mrs. Merillia looked up sharply, with her wide, cheerful mouth set awry in a shrewd smile that seemed to say "So ho!" She recognised a strange, new note of profound, though not arrogant, self−respect in her grandson.

"Prophets," Hennessey added more gently, "have always been inclined to dwell in the wilderness."

"But where can you find a wilderness in these days?" asked Mrs. Merillia, still smiling. "Even Hammersmith is becomin' quite a fashionable neighbourhood. And you say that the /Almanac/ man lives in Shaftesbury Avenue, only half a minute from Piccadilly Circus."

"My dear grannie," he corrected her, "I said he received letters there. I don't know where he lives."

"How are you goin' to find him then?"

"I shall call this afternoon at eleven hundred Z."

"To see if he has run in for a postcard! And what sort of person do you expect him to be?"

"Something quite out of the common."

Mrs. Merillia screwed up her eyes doubtfully.

"I hope you won't be disappointed. How many editions have there been of the /Almanac/?"

"Seventy yearly editions."

"Then Malkiel must be a very old man."

"But this Mr. Malkiel is Malkiel the Second."

"One of a dynasty! That alters the case. Perhaps he's a young man about town. There are young men about town, I believe, who have addresses at clubs and libraries, and sleep on doorsteps, or in the Park. Well, Hennessey, I see you are getting fidgety. You had better be off. Buy me some roses for my room on your way home. I'm expectin' someone to have tea with the poor victim of prophecy this afternoon."

The Prophet kissed his grandmother, put on his overcoat and stepped into the square.

It was a bright, frosty, genial day, and he resolved to walk to Jellybrand's Library.

London was looking quite light−hearted in the dry, cold air, which set a bloom even upon the cheeks of the ambassadors who were about, and caused the butcher boys to appear like peonies. The crossing−sweepers swept nothing vigorously, and were rewarded with showers of pence from pedestrians delighting in the absence of mud. Crystal as some garden of an eternal city seemed the green Park, wrapped in its frosty mantle embroidered with sunbeams. Even the drivers of the "growlers" were moderately cheerful−−a very rare occurrence−−and the blind man of Piccadilly smiled as he roared along the highway, striking the feet of the charitable with the wand which was the emblem of his profession.

Only the Prophet was solemn on this delicious afternoon. People looked at him and thought that he must surely be the richest man of the town. His face was so sad.

He wound across the whirlpool, where the green image postures to the human streams that riot below it. He saw beneath their rooves of ostrich feathers the girls shake their long earrings above sweet violets and roses fainting with desire to be bought by country cousins.

"Where is eleven hundred Z, if you please?" he asked the Shaftesbury Avenue policeman.

"Jellybrand's sir? On the right between the cream shop and the engine warehouse, just opposite the place where they sell parrots, after that there patent medicine depot."

The Prophet bowed, thinking of the blessings of knowledge. In a moment he stood before the library and glanced at its dirty window. He saw several letters lying against the glass. One was addressed to "Miss Minerva Partridge." He stepped in, wondering what she was like.

Jellybrand's Library was a small, square room containing a letter rack, a newspaper stand, a bookcase and a counter. It was fitted up with letters, papers, books, and a big boy with a bulging head. The last− named stood behind the counter, stroking his irregular profile with one hand, and throwing a box of J nibs into the air and catching it with the other. Upon the Prophet's entrance this youth obligingly dropped the nibs accidentally upon the floor, and arranged his sharp and anemic face in an expression of consumptive inquiry. The Prophet approached the counter softly, and allowed the sable with which his coat was trimmed to rest against it.

"Did a boy messenger call here a few days ago with a note for Mr. Malkiel?" he asked.

The young librarian assumed an attitude of vital suspicion and the expression of a lynx.

"For Malkiel the Second, sir?" he replied in a piercing soprano voice.

"Yes," said the Prophet. "A boy messenger with four medals. There was a crest on the envelope−−an elephant rampant surrounded by a swarm of bees."

A dogged look of combined terror and resolution overspread the young librarian's countenance.

"There's been no elephant and no swarm of bees in here," he said with trembling curtness.

"You are sure you would have remembered the circumstance if there had been?"

"Rather! What do you think? We don't allow things of them sort in here, I can tell you."

The Prophet drew out half a sovereign, upon which a ray of sunshine immediately fell as if in benediction.

"Does Mr. Malkiel−−?

"Malkiel the Second," interrupted the young librarian, whose pinkish eyes winked at the illumination of the gold.

"Malkiel the Second ever call here−−in person?"

"In person?" said the young librarian, very suspiciously.

"Exactly."

"I don't know about in person. He calls here."

"Ah," said the Prophet, recognising in the youth a literary sense that instinctively rejected superfluity. "He does call. May I ask when?"

"When he chooses," said the young librarian, and he winked again.

"Does he choose often?"

"He's got his day, like Miss Partridge and lots of 'em."

"I see. Is his day−−by chance−−a Thursday?"

It was a Thursday afternoon.

"I don't know about by chance," rejoined the young librarian, his literary sense again coming into play. "But it's−−"

At this moment the library door opened, and a tall, thin, middle−aged man walked in sideways with his feet

very much turned out to right and left of him.

"Any letters, Frederick Smith?" he said in a hollow voice, on reaching the counter.

"Two, Mr. Sagittarius, I believe," replied the young librarian, moving with respectful celerity towards the letter rack.

The Prophet started and looked eagerly at the newcomer. His eyes rested upon an individual whose face was comic in outline with a serious expression, and whose form suggested tragic farce dressed to represent commonplace, as seen at Margate and elsewhere. A top hat, a spotted collar, a pink shirt, a white satin tie, a chocolate brown frock coat, brown trousers and boots, and a black overcoat thrown open from top to bottom−−these appurtenances, clerkly in their adherence to a certain convention, could not wholly disguise the emotional expression that seems sometimes to lurk in shape. The lines of Mr. Sagittarius defied their clothing. His shoulders gave the lie to the chocolate brown frock coat. His legs breathed defiance to the trousers that sheathed them. One could, in fancy, see the former shrugged in all the abandonment of third−act despair, behold the latter darting wildly for the cover afforded by a copper, a cupboard, or any other friendly refuge of those poor victims of ludicrous and terrific circumstance who are so sorely smitten and afflicted upon the funny stage.

Mr. Sagittarius, in fine, seemed a man dressed in a mask that was unable to deceive. His lean face was almost absurd in its irregularity, its high cheek−bones and deep depressions, its sharp nose, extensive mouth and nervous chin. But the pale blue eyes that were its soul shone plaintively beneath their shaggy, blonde eyebrows, and even an application of pomade almost hysterically lavish could not entirely conceal the curling gloom of the heavy, matted hair.

"Yes, two, Mr. Sagittarius," cried the young librarian, approaching from the rack.

The gentleman held out a hand covered with a yellow dogskin glove.

"Thank you, Frederick Smith," he said.

And he turned to leave the building. But the Prophet intercepted him.

"Excuse me," said the Prophet. "I beg your pardon, but−−but−−" he looked at the young librarian and accidentally let the half sovereign fall on the counter. It gave the true ring. "I believe I heard you mention−−let drop the name Mr. Sagittarius."

"I don't know about let drop," began the youth in his usual revising manner. "But I−−"

At this point the gentleman in question began to move rather hastily sideways towards the door. The Prophet followed him up and got before him near the letter rack, while the young librarian retrieved the half sovereign and bit it with his teeth.

"I really beg your pardon," said the Prophet, while Mr. Sagittarius stood still in the violent attitude of one determined to dodge so long as he has breath. "I am not at all in the habit of"−−Mr. Sagittarius dodged−−"of intruding upon strangers−−" Mr. Sagittarius dodged again with such extraordinary abruptness and determination that he nearly caused the young librarian to swallow the Prophet's golden bribe. "I see you don't believe me," the Prophet continued, flushing pink but still holding his ground, and indeed trying to turn Mr. Sagittarius's flank by a strategic movement of almost military precision. "I see that plainly, but−−" Mr. Sagittarius ducked to the left, endeavouring to cover the manoeuvre by an almost simultaneous and extremely passionate feint towards the Prophet's centre, which was immediately withdrawn in good order−−"but your remark−−arkable name, Saag−−itt−ittarius, suggested to me that you are rea−eally the man I seek."

He had now got Mr. Sagittarius into a very awkward bit of country between the letter P. in the rack, under which reposed Miss Partridge's correspondence, and the newspaper bureau, with the counter immediately on his rear, and taking advantage of this circumstance, he continued rapidly:

"May I ask whether you recently received a letter−−one moment!−− envelope−−crest−−I only want to know if you have received−−only−−an elephant rampant−−swarm of−−of bees−−"

"I have never received a rampant elephant and a swarm of bees," cried Mr. Sagittarius with every symptom of unbridled terror. "Help, Frederick Smith!"

"Right you are, Malkiel the Second!" cried the young librarian, hastily pocketing the half sovereign and making a feverish lunge at nothing in particular over the counter. "Right you are!"

"Malkiel the Second!" ejaculated the Prophet. "Then you are the man I seek."

Malkiel the Second−−for it was indeed he−−sank back against the counter in an attitude of abandoned prostration that would have made a fortune of a comic actor.

"I trusted to Jellybrand's," he said, drawing from his tail pocket a white handkerchief covered with a pattern of pink storks in flight. "I trusted to Jellybrand's and Jellybrand's has betrayed me. Oh, Frederick Smith!"

He put a stork to each eye. The young librarian assumed an injured air.

"It was the agitation did it, Mr. Sagittarius," he said. "If you hadn't a−kep' dodging I shouldn't have lost my memory."

And he looked avariciously at the Prophet, who smiled at him reassuringly and drew forth a card case.

"I feel sure, Mr. Sag−−Malkiel−−"

"Malkiel the Second, sir, is my name if it is betrayed by Jellybrand's," said that gentleman with sudden dignity. "There is no need of any mister."

"I beg your pardon," said the Prophet, handing his card. "That is my name and address. May I beg you to forgive my apparent anxiety to make your acquaintance, and implore you to grant me a few moments of private conversation on a matter of the utmost importance?"

Malkiel the Second read the card.

"Berkeley Square," he said. "/The/ Berkeley Square?"

"Exactly, the Berkeley Square," said the Prophet, modestly.

"Not the one at Brixton Rise behind the Kimmins's mews?" said Malkiel the Second, suspiciously.

"Certainly not. The one near Grosvenor Square."

"That's better," said Malkiel, upon whom the Prophet's address had evidently made a good impression. "Kimmins's is no class at all. Had you come from there, I−−but what may you want with me?"

The Prophet glanced significantly at the young librarian, who was leaning upon the counter in a tense, keyhole position, with his private ear turned somewhat ostentatiously towards the two speakers.

"I can tell you in an inner room," he murmured, in his most ingratiating manner.

"You're certain it's not Berkeley Square behind Kimmins's?" said Malkiel, with a last flicker of suspicion.

"Quite certain−−quite."

"Frederick Smith," said Malkiel the Second, "since Jellybrand's has betrayed me Jellybrand's must abide the consequences. Show this gentleman and me to the parlour."

"Right, Mr. Sagittarius," replied the young librarian whose memory had again become excellent. "But Miss Minerva is coming at three−thirty."

"Has she bespoke the parlour, Frederick Smith?"

"Yes, Mr. Sagittarius."

"Then she can't have it. That's all. Jellybrand's must abide the full consequences of my betrayal. Go forward, Frederick Smith."

The young librarian went forward towards a door of deal and ground glass which he threw open with some ceremony.

"The parlour, gents," he said.

"After you, sir, after you," said Malkiel the Second, making a side step and bringing his feet together in the first position.

"No, no," rejoined the Prophet, gently drawing the sage to the front, and inserting him into the parlour in such an ingenious manner that he did not perceive the journey of a second half sovereign from the person of the Prophet to that of the young librarian, who thereafter closed the deal and ground glass door, and returned to the counter, whistling in an absent−minded manner, "I'm a Happy Millionaire from Colorado."

CHAPTER III. THE TWO PROPHETS PARTAKE OF "CREAMING FOAM."

"And now, sir," said Malkiel the Second, pointing to a couple of cane chairs which, with the table, endeavoured, rather unsuccessfully, to furnish forth the parlour at Jellybrand's, "now sir, what do you want with me?"

As he spoke he threw his black overcoat wide open, seated himself on the edge of one of the chairs in a dignified attitude, and crossed his feet−−which were not innocent of spats−−one over the other.

The Prophet was resolved to dare all, and he, therefore, answered boldly,−−

"Malkiel the Second, I wish to speak to you as one prophet to another."

At this remark Malkiel started violently, and darted a searching glance from beneath his blonde eyebrows at Hennessey.

"Do you live in the Berkeley Square, sir," he said, "and claim to be a prophet?"

"I do," said Hennessey, with modest determination.

Malkiel smiled, a long and wreathed smile that was full of luscious melancholy and tragic sweetness.

"The assumption seems rather ridiculous−−forgive me," he exclaimed. "The Berkeley Square! Whatever would Madame say?"

"Madame?" said the Prophet, inquiringly.

"Madame Malkiel, or Madame Sagittarius, as she always passes."

"Your wife?"

"My honoured lady," said Malkiel, with pride. "More to me almost than any lunar guide or starry monitor. What, oh, what would she say to a prophet from the Berkeley Square?"

He burst into hollow laughter, shaking upon the cane chair till its very foundations seemed threatened as by an earthquake, and was obliged to apply the flight of storks to his eyes before he could in any degree recover his equanimity. At length he glanced up with tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Excuse me, sir," he said. "But what can you know of prophecy in such a fashionable neighbourhood, close to Grosvenor Square and within sight, as one may say, of Piccadilly? Oh, dear, oh, dear!"

"But really," said the Prophet, who had flushed red, but who still spoke with pleasant mildness, "what influence can neighbourhood have upon such a superterrestrial matter?"

"Did Isaiah reside in the Berkeley Square, sir?"

"I fancy not. Still−−"

"I fancy not, too," rejoined Malkiel. "Nor Bernard Wilkins either, or any prophet that ever I heard of. Why, even Jesse Jones lives off Perkin's Road, Wandsworth Common, though he does keep a sitting−room in Berners Street just to see his clients in, and he is a very low−class person, even for a prophet. No, no, sir, Madame is quite right. She married me despite the damning−−yes, I say, sir, the damning fact that I was a prophet−−" here Malkiel the Second brought down one of the dogskin gloves with violence upon the rickety parlour table−−"but before ever we went to the Registrar's she made me take a solemn oath. What was it, do you say?"

"Yes, I do," said Hennessey, leaning forward and gazing into Malkiel's long and excited face round which the heavy mat of pomaded hair vibrated.

"It was this, sir−−to mix with no prophets so long as we both should live. Prophets, she truly said, are low−class, even dirty, persons. Their parties, their 'at homes' are shoddy. They live in fourth−rate neighbourhoods. They burn gas and sit on horsehair. Only in rare cases do they have any bathroom in their houses. Their influence would be bad for the children when they begin to grow up. How could Corona make her /debut/"−−Malkiel pronounced it debbew−−"in prophetic circles? How could she come out in Drakeman's Villas, Tooting, or dance with such young fellers as frequent Hagglin's Buildings, Clapham Rise? How could she do it, sir?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," gasped the Prophet.

"Nor I, sir, nor I," continued Malkiel, with unabated fervour. "And it's the same with Capricornus. My boy shall not be thrown in with prophets. Did Malkiel the First start the /Almanac/ for that? Did he foster it till it went from the poor servant girl's attic into the gilded apartments of the aristocracy and lay even upon Royal tables for

that? Did he, I say?"

"I haven't an idea," said the Prophet.

"He did not, sir. And I−−I myself"−−he arranged the diamond pin in his white satin tie with an almost imperial gesture−−"have not followed upon the lines he laid down without imbibing, as I may truly say, the lofty spirit that guided him, the lofty social spirit, as Madame calls it. There have been other prophets, I know. There are other prophets. I do not attempt to deny it. But where else than here, sir"−−the dogskin glove lay upon the breast of the chocolate brown frock coat−−"where else than here will you find a prophet who hides his identity beneath an /alias/, who remains, as Madame always says, /perdew/, and who conducts his profession on honourable and business−like lines? Am I dressed like a prophet?" He suddenly brought his doubled fist down upon the Prophet's knee.

"No," cried Hennessey. "Certainly not!"

"Why, sir, how can I be when I tell you that Merriman &Saxster of Regent Street are my tailors, and have been since my first pair of trouserings? Do I bear myself prophetically? I think you will agree that I do not when you know that I am frequently mistaken for an outside broker−−yes, sir, and that this has even happened upon the pier at Margate. You have seen my demeanour at Jellybrand's. You saw me come into the library. You saw my manner with Frederick Smith. Was it assuming? Did I lord it over the lad?"

"Certainly not."

"No. I might have been anybody, any ordinary person living in Grosvenor Place, or, like yourself, in the Berkeley Square. And so it ever is. Other prophets there are−−possibly men of a certain ability even in that direction−−but there is only one Malkiel, only one who attends strictly to business, who draws a good income from the stars, sir, and satisfies the public month in, month out, without making a fuss about it. Wait a few years, sir, only wait!"

"Certainly," said the Prophet. "I will."

"Wait till the children are grown up. Wait till Capricornus has got his Latin by heart and gone to Oxford. Then, and only then, you will know whether Malkiel the Second is the exception to the rule of prophets. Yes, and Madame shall know it, too. She trusted me, sir, as only a woman can. She knew I was a prophet and had a prophet for a father before me. And yet she trusted me. It was a daring thing to do. Many would call it foolhardy. Wouldn't they, sir?"

The dogskin glove was raised. The Prophet hastened to reply,−−

"I daresay they would."

"But she was not afraid, and she shall have her reward. Corona shall never set foot in Drakeman's Villas, nor breathe the air of Hagglin's. I must have a glass of water, I must, sir, indeed."

He gasped heavily and was about to rise, when the Prophet said:

"Join me in a glass of wine."

"I should be delighted," Malkiel answered. "Delighted, I'm sure, but I doubt whether Jellybrand's−−"

"Could not Frederick Smith go out and fetch us a−−a pint bottle of champagne?" said the Prophet, playing a desperate card in the prophetic game.

An expression almost of joviality overspread the tragic farce of Malkiel's appearance.

"We'll see," he answered, opening the deal door. "Frederick Smith!"

"Here, Mr. Sagittarius," cried the soprano voice of the young librarian.

"Can you leave the library for a moment, Frederick Smith?"

The Prophet held up a sovereign over Malkiel the Second's narrow shoulder.

"Yes, Mr. Sagittarius, for half a mo!"

"Ah! Where is the nearest champagne, Frederick Smith?"

"The nearest−−"

"Champagne, I said, Frederick Smith."

"I daresay I could get a dozen at Gillow's next the rabbit shop," replied the young librarian, thoughtfully.

The Prophet shuddered to the depths of his being, but he was now embarked upon his enterprise and must crowd all sail.

"Go to Gillow's," he exclaimed, with an assumption of feverish geniality, "and bring back a couple of rabbits−−I mean bottles. They must be dry. You understand?"

The young librarian looked out of the window.

"Oh, I'll manage that, sir. It ain't raining," he replied carelessly.

The Prophet stifled a cry of horror as he pressed the sovereign into the young librarian's hand.

"You can keep the change," he whispered, adding in a tremulous voice, "Tell me−−tell me frankly−−do you think in your own mind that there will be any?"

"I don't know about in my own mind," rejoined the young librarian, drawing a tweed cap from some hidden recess beneath the counter. "But if you only want two bottles I expect there'll be ten bob over."

The Prophet turned as pale as ashes and had some difficulty in sustaining himself to the parlour, where he and Malkiel the Second sat down in silence to await the young librarian's return. Frederick Smith came back in about five minutes, with an ostentatious−looking bottle smothered in gold leaf under each arm.

"There was four shillings apiece to pay, sir," he remarked to the Prophet as he placed them upon the table. "I got the 'our own make' brand with the 'creaming foam' upon the corks."

The Prophet bent his head. He was quite unable to speak, but he signed to the young librarian to open one of the bottles and pour its contents into the two tumblers of thick and rather dusty glass that Jellybrand's kept for its moments of conviviality. Malkiel the Second lifted the goblet to the window and eyed the beaded nectar with an air of almost rakish anticipation.

"Ready, sir?" he said, turning to the Prophet, who, with a trembling hand, followed his example.

"Quite−−ready," said the Prophet, shutting his eyes.

"Then," rejoined Malkiel the Second in a formal voice, "here's luck!"

He held the tumbler to his lips, waiting for the Prophet's reply to give the signal for a unanimous swallowing of the priceless wine.

"Luck," echoed the Prophet in a faltering voice.

As he gradually recovered his faculties, he heard Malkiel the Second say, with an almost debauched accent,−−

"That puts heart into a man. I shall give Gillows an order. Leave us, Frederick Smith, and remember that Miss Minerva is on no account to be let in here till this gentleman and I have finished the second bottle."

The Prophet could not resist a wild movement of protest, which was apparently taken by the young librarian as a passionate gesture of dismissal. For he left the room rapidly and closed the door with decision behind him.

"And now, sir, I am at your service," said Malkiel the Second, courteously. "Let me pour you another glass of wine."

The Prophet assented mechanically. It seemed strange to have to die so young, and with so many plans unfulfilled, but he felt that it was useless to struggle against destiny and he drank again. Then he heard a voice say,−−

"And now, sir, I am all attention."

He looked up. He saw the parlour, the ground glass of the door, the tumblers and bottles on the table, the sharp features and strained, farcical eyes of Malkiel framed in the matted, curling hair. Then all was not over yet. There was something still in store for him. He sat up, pushed the creaming four−shilling foam out of his sight, turned to his interlocutor, and with a great effort collected himself.

"I want to consult you," he began, "about my strange powers."

Malkiel smiled with easy irony.

"Strange powers in Berkeley Square!" he ejaculated. "The Berkeley Square! But go on, sir. What are they?"

"Having been led to study the stars," continued the Prophet with more composure and growing earnestness, "I felt myself moved to make a prophecy."

"Weather forecast, I suppose," remarked Malkiel, laconically.

"How did you know that?"

"The easiest kind, sir, the number one beginner's prophecy. Capricornus used to tell Madame what the weather'd be as soon as he could talk. But go on, sir, go on, I beg."

The Prophet began to feel rather less like Isaiah, but he continued, with some determination,−−

"If that had been all, I daresay I should have thought very little of the matter."

"No, you wouldn't sir. Who thinks their first baby a little one? Can you tell me that?"

The Prophet considered the question for a moment. Then he answered,−−

"Perhaps you're right."

"Perhaps so," rejoined Malkiel, indulgently. "Well, sir, what was your next attempt−−in the Berkeley Square?"

The Prophet's sensitive nature winced under the obvious irony of the interrogation, but either the "creaming foam" had rendered him desperate, or he was to some extent steeled against the satire by the awful self−respect which had invaded him since Mrs. Merillia's accident. In any case he answered firmly,−−

"Malkiel the Second, in Berkeley Square I had a relation−−an honoured grandmother."

"You've the better of me there, sir. My parents and Madame's are all in Brompton Cemetery. Well, sir, you'd got an honoured grandmother in the Berkeley Square. What of it?"

"She was naturally elderly."

"And you predicted her death and she passed over. Very natural too, sir. The number two beginner's prophecy. Why, Corona−−"

But at this point the Prophet broke in.

"Excuse me," he said in a scandalised voice, "excuse me, Malkiel the Second, she did nothing of the kind. Whatever my faults may be−−and they are many, I am aware−−I−−I−−"

He was greatly moved.

"Take another sup of wine, sir. You need it," said Malkiel.

The Prophet mechanically drank once more, grasping the edge of the table for support in the endurance of the four−bob ecstasy.

"You prophesied it and she didn't pass over, sir," continued Malkiel, with unaffected sympathy. "I understand the blow. It's cruel hard when a prophecy goes wrong. Why, even Madame−−"

But at this point the Prophet broke in.

"You are mistaken," he cried. "Utterly mistaken."

Malkiel the Second drew himself up with dignity.

"In that case I will say no more," he remarked, pursing up his lengthy mouth and assuming a cast−iron attitude.

The Prophet perceived his mistake.

"Forgive me," he exclaimed. "It is my fault."

"Oh, no, sir. Not at all," rejoined Malkiel, with icy formality. "Pray let the fault be mine."

"I will not indeed. But let me explain. My beloved grandmother still lives, although I cast her horoscope and−−"

"Indeed! very remarkable!"

"I mean−−not although−−but I thought I would cast her horoscope. And I did so."

"In the square?" asked Malkiel, with quiet, but piercing, irony.

"Yes," said the Prophet, with sudden heat. "Why not?"

Malkiel smiled with an almost paternal pity, as of a thoughtful father gazing upon the quaint and inappropriate antics of his vacant child.

"Why not, sir−−if you prefer it?" he rejoined. "Pray proceed."

The Prophet's face was flushed, either by the "creaming foam," or by irritation, or by both.

"Surely," he began, in a choking voice, "surely the stars are the same whether they are looked at from Berkeley Square or from−−from−−or from"−−he sought passionately for a violent contrast−−"from Newington Butts," he concluded triumphantly.

"I have not the pleasure to have ever observed my guides from the neighbourhood of the Butts," said Malkiel, serenely. "But pray proceed, sir. I am all attention. You cast your honoured grandmother's horoscope−−in the Berkeley Square."

The Prophet seized his glass, but some remnants of his tattered self− control still clung to him, and he put it down without seeking further madness from its contents.

"I did," he said firmly, even obstinately. "And I discovered−−I say discovered that she was going to have an accident while on an evening expedition−−or jaunt as you might perhaps prefer to call it."

"I should certainly call it so−−in the case of a lady who was an honoured grandmother," said Malkiel the Second in assent.

"Well, Malkiel the Second," continued the Prophet, recovering his composure as he approached his /coup/,

"my grandmother did have an accident, as I foretold."

"Did she have it in the square, sir?" asked Malkiel.

"And what if she did?" cried the Prophet with considerable testiness.

He was beginning to conceive a perfect hatred of the admirable neighbourhood, which he had loved so well.

"I merely ask for information, sir."

"The accident did take place in the square certainly, and on the very night for which I predicted it."

Malkiel the Second looked very thoughtful, even morose. He poured out another glass of champagne, drank it slowly in sips, and when the glass was empty ran the forefinger of his right hand slowly round and round its edge.

"Can Madame be wrong?" he ejaculated at length, in a muffled voice of meditation. "Can Madame be wrong?"

The Prophet gazed at him with profound curiosity, fascinated by the circular movement of the yellow dogskin finger, and by the inward murmur−−so acutely mental−−that accompanied it.

"Madame?" whispered the Prophet, drawing his cane chair noiselessly forward.

"Ah!" rejoined Malkiel, gazing upon him with an eye whose pupil seemed suddenly dilated to a most preternatural size. "Can she have been wrong all these many years?"

"What−−what about?" murmured the Prophet.

Malkiel the Second leaned his matted head in his hands and replied, as if to himself,−−

"Can it be that a prophet should live in Berkeley Square−−not Kimmins's"−−here he raised his head, and raked his companion with a glance that was almost fierce in its fervour of inquiry−−"not Kimmins's but−−the Berkeley Square?"

CHAPTER IV. THE SECRET WATERS OF THE RIVER MOUSE

To this question the Prophet could offer no answer other than a bodily one. He silently presented himself to the gaze of Malkiel, instinctively squaring his shoulders, opening out his chest, and expanding his nostrils in an effort to fill as large a space in the atmosphere of the parlour as possible. And Malkiel continued to regard him with the staring eyes of one whose mind is seething with strange, upheaving thoughts and alarming apprehensions. Mutely the Prophet swelled and mutely Malkiel observed him swell, till a point was reached from which further progress−−at least on the Prophet's part−−was impossible. The Prophet was now as big as the structure of his frame permitted him to be, and apparently Malkiel realised the fact, for he suddenly dropped his eyes and exclaimed,−−

"This matter must be threshed out thoroughly, Madame herself would wish it so."

He paused, drew his chair nearer to the Prophet's, took off a glove and continued,−−

"Sir, you may be a prophet. You may have prophesied correctly in the Berkeley Square. But if you are, and if you have, remember this−−that you have proved the self−sacrifice, the privation, the denial, the subterfuge, the /mask/, and the position of Sagittarius Lodge in its own grounds beside the River Mouse at Crampton St. Peter, N.−−N., I said, sir−−totally and entirely unnecessary. I will go further, sir, and I will say more. You have not only done that. You have also proved the sacred instinct of a woman, a respectable married woman−−such as we must all reverence−−false and deceived. Remember this, sir, remember all this, then search yourself thoroughly and say whether what you have told me is strictly true."

"I assure you−−" began the Prophet, hastily.

But Malkiel sternly interrupted him.

"Search yourself, sir, I beg!" he cried.

"But upon my honour−−"

"Hush, sir, hush! I beg, nay, I insist, that you search yourself thoroughly before you answer this momentous question."

The Prophet felt rather disposed to ask whether Malkiel expected him to examine his pockets and turn out his boots. However, he sat still while Malkiel drew out a large gold watch, held it solemnly in his hand for a couple of minutes and then returned it to the waistcoat.

"Now, sir," he said.

"I assure you," said the Prophet, "on my honour that all I have said is strictly true."

"And took place in the Berkeley Square?"

"And took place in the Berkeley Square."

Malkiel nodded morosely.

"It may have been chance," he said. "A weather forecast and an honoured grandmother may have been mere luck. Still it looks bad−−very bad."

He sighed heavily, and seemed about to fall into a mournful reverie when the Prophet cried sharply,−−

"Explain yourself, Malkiel the Second. You owe it to me to explain yourself. Why should my strange gift−−"

"If you have it, sir," interrupted Malkiel, quickly.

"If I have it, very well−−affect you? Why should it render the self− sacrifice and−−and the position of−−of Sagittarius Lodge on the river−− the river−−what river did you say−−?"

"The River Mouse," rejoined Malkiel in a muffled voice, and shaking his head sadly.

"Exactly−−on the River Mouse at Crompton−−"

"Crampton."

"Crampton St. Peter total−−"

"N.!"

"What?"

"Crampton St. Peter. N. That is the point."

"Very well−−Crampton St. Peteren, totally and entirely unnecessary?"

"You desire my revelation, sir? You desire to enter into the bosom of a family that hitherto has dwelt apart,

has lain as I may say /perdew/ beside the secret waters of the River Mouse? Is it indeed so?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon," cried the Prophet, hastily. "I would not for the world intrude upon−−"

"Those hallowed precincts! Well, perhaps you have the right. Jellybrand's has betrayed me to you. You know my name, my profession. Why should you not know more? Perhaps it is better so."

With the sudden energy of a man who is reckless of fate he seized his goblet, poured into it at least a shilling's worth of "creaming foam," drained it to the dregs and, shaking back his matted hair with a leonine movement of the head, exclaimed,−−

"Malkiel the First, who founded the /Almanac/, lay /perdew/ all his life."

"Beside the secret waters of the River Mouse?" the Prophet could not help interposing.

"No, sir. He would never have gone so far as that. But he lived and died in Susan Road beside the gas−works. He was a great man."

"I'm sure he was," said the Prophet, heartily.

"He wished me to live and die there too," said Malkiel. "But there are limits, sir, even to the forbearance of women. Madame was affected, painfully affected, by the gas, sir. It stank in her nostrils−−to use a figure. And then there was another drawback that she could not get over."

"Indeed!"

"The sweeps, sir."

"I beg your pardon!" said the Prophet.

"I said−−the sweeps."

"I heard you−−well?"

"Being the only people that were not, in the whole road, made for loneliness, sir."

The Prophet was entirely /bouleverse/.

"I'm afraid I'm very stupid, but really I−−" he began.

"Is it possible that you live in London, sir, and are not aware that Susan Road lies in the most sought−after portion of the sweeps' quarter?" said Malkiel, with pitying amazement.

The Prophet blushed with shame.

"I beg your pardon. Of course−−I understand. Pray go on."

"It made for loneliness, sir."

"Naturally."

"Their hours were not our hours. And then the professional colour! Madame said it was like living among the Sandwich Islanders. And so, to an extent, it was. My father had left a very tidy bit of money−−a very tidy bit indeed, and we resolved to move. But where? That was the problem. For I was not as other men. I could not live like them−−in the Berkeley Square."

He smiled with mournful superiority and continued,−−

"At least I thought so then, and have done till to−day. Prophets−−so my father believed, and so Madame−−must be connected with the suburbs or with outlying districts. They must not, indeed they cannot, be properly prophetic within the radius. A central atmosphere would reduce them to the level of the conjuror or the muscular suggestionist. Malkiel the First, my father, was born himself in Peckham, and met my mother when coming through the rye."

He brushed aside a tear that flowed at this almost rustic recollection, and continued,−−

"Yet Madame was wishful, and I was wishful too, that the children−−if we had any−−should not grow up Eastern. It was a natural and a beautiful desire, sir, was it not?"

"Oh, very," replied the Prophet, considerably confused.

"The habits and manners of the East, you see, sir, are not always in strict accordance with propriety. Are they?"

Before the Prophet had time to realise that this question was merely rhetorical, he began,−−

"From what Professor Seligman says in his /The Inner History of Baghdad/, I feel sure−−"

"Nor are the customs of the East quite what many a clergyman would approve of," continued Malkiel. "Yet even this was not what weighed most with Madame."

"What was it then?" inquired the Prophet, deeply interested.

"Sir, it was the Eastern language."

"Ah!"

"Could we let our children learn to speak it? Could we bear to launch them in life, handicapped, weighed down by such a tongue? Could we do this?"

Again the Prophet mistook the nature of the question, and was led to reply,−−

"Certainly English children speaking only Arabic might well be at some loss in ordinary conver−−"

"We could not, sir. It was impossible. So we resolved to go to the north of London and to avoid Whitechapel at whatever cost."

"Whitechapel!" almost cried the Prophet.

"This determination it was, sir, that eventually led our steps to the borders of the River Mouse."

"Oh, really!"

"You know it, sir?"

"Not personally."

"But by repute, of course?"

"No doubt, no doubt," stammered the Prophet, who had in fact never before heard of this celebrated flood.

"That poor governess, sir, last August−−you recollect?"

"Ah, indeed!" murmured the Prophet, a trifle incoherently.

"And then the mad undertaker in the autumn," continued Malkiel, with conscious pride; "he floated past our very door."

"Did he really?"

"Singing his swan song, no doubt, poor feller, as Madame said after she read about it in the paper. There were the grocer's twins as well, just lately. But they will be fresh in your memory."

Before the Prophet had time to state whether this was so or not Malkiel proceeded,−−

"Well, sir, as soon as Madame and I had come to the Mouse we resolved that we could do no better than that. It was salubrious, it was retired, and it was N."

"You said−−?"

"N., sir."

"But what is en?"

"Sir?"

The Prophet had grown very red, but he was seized by the desperation that occasionally attacks ignorance, and renders it, for a moment, determinedly explicit.

"I ask you what does en mean? I am, I fear, a very ill−informed person, and I really don't know."

"Think of an envelope, sir," said Malkiel, with gentle commiseration. "Well, are you thinking?"

The Prophet grew purple.

"I am−−but it is no use. Besides, why on earth should I think of an envelope? I beg you to explain."

"North, sir, the northern postal district of the metropolis. Fairly simple that−−I think, sir."

"N.!" cried the illuminated Prophet. "I see. I was thinking of en all the time. I beg your pardon. Please go on. N.−−of course!"

Malkiel concealed a smile, just sufficiently to make its existence for an instant vitally prominent, and continued,−−

"By the Mouse we resolved to build a detached residence such as would influence suitably the minds of the children−−should we have any. For we had resolved, sir, by that time that with me the /Almanac/ should cease."

Here Malkiel leaned forward upon the deal table and lowered his voice to an impressive whisper.

"Yes, sir, it had come to that. We all have our ambitions and that was mine."

"Good Heavens!" said the Prophet. "Malkiel's /Almanac/ cease! But why? Such a very useful institution!"

"Useful! More than that, sir, sublime! There's nothing like it."

"Then why let it cease?"

"Because the social status of the prophet, sir, is not agreeable to myself or Madame. I've had enough of it, sir, already, and I'm barely turned of fifty. Besides, my father would have wished it, I feel sure, had he lived in these days. Had he seen Sagittarius Lodge, the children, and how Madame comports herself, he would have recognised that the family was destined to rise into a higher sphere than that occupied by any prophet, however efficient. Besides, I will not deceive you, I have made money. In another ten years' time, when I have laid by sufficient, I

tell you straight, sir, that I shall go out of prophecy, right out of it."

"Then your Capricor−−that is your son−−will not carry on the−−"

"Capricornus a prophet, sir!" cried Malkiel. "Not if Madame and I know it. No, sir, Capricornus is to be an architect."

As Malkiel pronounced the last words he flung his black overcoat wide open with an ample gesture, thrust one hand into his breast, and assumed the fixed and far−seeing gaze of a man in a cabinet photograph. He seemed lost to his surroundings, and rapt by some great vision of enchanted architects, busy in drawing plans of the magic buildings of the future ages. The Prophet felt that it would be impious to disturb him. Malkiel's reverie was long, and indeed the two prophets might well have been sitting in Jellybrand's parlour now, had not a violent sneeze called for the pink assistance of the flight of storks, and brought the sneezer down to the level of ordinary humanity.

"Yes, sir−−I give you my word Capricornus is to be an architect," repeated Malkiel. "What do you say to that?"

"Is it−−is it really a better profession than that of prophecy?" asked the Prophet, rather nervously.

Malkiel smiled mournfully.

"Sir, it may not be more lucrative, but it is more select. Madame will not mix with prophets, but she has a 'day,' sir, on the banks of the Mouse, and she has gathered around her a very pleasant and select little circle."

"Indeed."

"Yes, sir. Architects and their wives. You understand?"

"Quite," rejoined the Prophet, "quite."

Under the mesmeric influence of Malkiel he began to feel as if architects were some strange race of sacred beings set apart, denizens of some holy isle or blessed nook of mediaeval legend. Would he ever meet them? Would he ever encounter one ranging unfettered where flowed the waters of the River Mouse?

"They do not know who we are, sir," continued Malkiel, furtively. "To them and to the whole world−−excepting Jellybrand's and you−−we are the Sagittariuses of Sagittarius Lodge, people at ease, sir, living upon our competence beside the Mouse. They do not see the telescope, sir, in the locked studio at the top of the lodge. They do not know why sometimes, on Madame's 'Wednesdays,' I am pale−−with sitting up on behalf of the /Almanac/. For Capricornus's sake and for Corona's all this is hid from the world. Madame and I are the victims of a double life. Yes, sir, for the children's sake we have never dared to let it be known what I really am."

Suddenly he began to grow excited.

"And now," he cried, "after all these years of secrecy, after all these years of avoiding the central districts−−in which Madame longs to live −−after all these years of seclusion beyond the beat even of the buses, do you come here to me, and search yourself and say upon your oath that a prophet can live and be a prophet in the Berkeley Square, that he can read the stars with Gunter's just opposite, ay, and bring out an almanac if he likes within a shilling fare of the Circus? If this is so"−−he struck the deal table violently with his clenched fist−−"of what use are the sacrifices of myself and Madame? Of what use is it to live under a modest name such as Sagittarius, when I might be Malkiel the Second to the whole world? Of what use to flee from W. and dwell perpetually in N.? Why, if what you say is true, we might leave the Mouse to−morrow and Madame could pop in and out of the Stores just like any lady of pleasure."

At the thought of this so long foregone enchantment Malkiel's emotion completely overcame him, his voice died away, overborne by a violent fit of choking, and he sat back in his cane chair trembling in every limb. The Prophet was deeply moved by his emotion, and longed most sincerely to assuage it. But his deep and growing conviction of his own power rendered him useless as a comforter. He could not lie. He could not deny that he was a prophet. He could only say, in his firmest voice,−−

"Malkiel the Second, be brave. You must see this thing through."

On hearing these original and noble words Malkiel lifted up his marred countenance.

"I know it, sir, I know it," he answered. "One moment. The thought of Madame−−the Stores−−I−−of all that might perhaps have been−−"

He choked again. The Prophet looked away. A strong man's emotion is always very scared and very terrible. Three minutes swept by, then the Prophet heard a calm and hollow voice say,−−

"And now, sir, to business."

The Prophet looked up, and perceived that Malkiel's overcoat was tightly buttoned and that his mouth was tightly set in an expression of indomitable, though tragic, resolution.

"What business?" asked the Propet.

"Mine," replied Malkiel. "Mine, sir, and yours. You have chosen to enter my life. You cannot deny that. You cannot deny that I sought to avoid−−I might even say to dodge you."

With the remembrance of the recent circus performance in the library still strong upon him the Prophet could not. He bowed his head.

"Very well, sir. You have chosen to enter my life. That act has given me the right to enter yours. Am I correct?"

"I suppose−−I mean−−yes, you are," answered the Prophet, overwhelmed by the pitiless logic of his companion, and wondering what was coming next.

"I have been forced−−I think I may say that−−to reveal myself to you, sir. Nothing can ever alter that. Nothing can ever take from you the knowledge−−denied by Madame to the very architects−−of who I really am. You have told me, sir, that I must see this thing through. I tell you now, at this table, in this parlour, that I intend to see it through−− and through."

As Malkiel said the last words he gazed at the Prophet with eyes that seemed suddenly to have taken on the peculiar properties of the gimlet. The Prophet began to feel extremely uneasy. But he said nothing. He felt that there was more to come. And he was right.

"It is my duty," continued Malkiel, in a louder voice, "my sacred duty to Madame−−to say nothing of Corona and Capricornus−−to probe you to the core"−−here the Prophet could not resist a startled movement of protest−−"and to search you to the quick."

"Oh, really!" cried the Prophet.

"This duty I shall carry out unflinchingly," pursued Malkiel, "at whatever cost to myself. This will not be our last interview. Do not think it."

"I assure you," inserted the Prophet, endeavouring vainly to seem at ease, "I do not wish to think it."

"It matters little whether you wish to do so or not," continued Malkiel, with an increasingly Juggernaut air. "The son of Malkiel the First is not a man to be trifled with or dodged. Moreover, much more than the future of myself and family depends upon what you really are. From this day forth you will be bound up with the /Almanac/."

"Merciful Heavens!" ejaculated the Prophet, unable, intrepid as he was, to avoid recoiling when he found himself thus suddenly confronted with the fate of an appendix.

"For why should it ever cease?" proceeded Malkiel, with growing passion. "Why−−if a prophet can live, as you declare, freely and openly in the Berkeley Square? If this is so, why should I not remove, along with Madame and family, from the borders of the Mouse and reside henceforth in a central situation such as I should wish to reside in? Why should not Capricornus eventually succeed me in the /Almanac/ as I succeeded Malkiel the First? Already the boy shows the leanings of a prophet. Hitherto Madame and I have endeavoured to stifle them, to turn them in an architectural direction. You understand?"

"I am trying to," stammered the Prophet.

"Hitherto we have corrected the boy's table manners when they have become too like those of the average prophet−−as they often have−−for hitherto we have had reason to believe that all prophets−−with the exception of myself−−were dirty, deceitful and essentially suburban persons. But if you are a prophet we have been deceived. Trust me, sir, I shall find speedy means to pierce you to the very marrow."

The Prophet began mechanically to feel for his hat.

"Are you desirous of anything, sir?" said Malkiel, sharply.

"No," said the Prophet, wondering whether the moment had arrived to throw off all further pretence of bravery and to shout boldly for the assistance of the young librarian.

"Then why are you feeling about, sir? Why are you feeling about?"

"Was I?" faltered the Prophet.

"You are looking for another glass of wine, perhaps?"

"No, indeed," said the Prophet, desperately. "For anything but that."

But Malkiel, moved by some abruptly formed resolution, called suddenly in a powerful voice,−−

"Frederick Smith!"

"Here, Mr. Sagittarius!" cried the young librarian, appearing with suspicious celerity upon the parlour threshold.

"Draw the cork of the second bottle, Frederick Smith," said Malkiel, impressively. "This gentleman is about to take the pledge"−−on hearing this ironic paradox the Prophet stood up, very much in the attitude formerly assumed by Malkiel when about to dodge in the library−−"that I shall put to him," concluded Malkiel, also standing up, and assuming the library posture of the Prophet.

Indeed the situation of the library seemed about to be accurately reversed in the parlour of Jellybrand's.

The young librarian assisted the cork to emerge phlegmatically from the neck of the second bottle of champagne, mechanically smacking his lips the while.

"Now pour, and leave us, Frederick Smith."

The young librarian helped the fatigued−looking wine into the two glasses, where it lay as if thoroughly exhausted by the effort of getting there, and then languidly left the parlour, turning his bulging head over his shoulder to indulge in a pathetic /oeillade/ ere he vanished.

The Prophet watched him go.

"Close the door, Frederick Smith," cried Malkiel, in a meaning manner.

The Prophet blushed a guilty red, and the young librarian obeyed with a bang.

"And now, sir, I must request you to take a solemn pledge in this vintage," said Malkiel, placing one of the tumblers in the Prophet's trembling hand.

"Really," said the Prophet, "I am not at all thirsty."

"Why should you be, sir? What has that got to do with it?" retorted Malkiel. "Lift your glass, sir."

The Prophet obeyed.

"And now take this pledge−−that, till the last day−−"

"What day?"

"The last day, sir, you will reveal to no living person that there is such an individual as Malkiel, that you have ever met him, who he is, or who Madame and family are, unless I give the word. You have surprised my secret. You have forced yourself upon me. You owe me this. Drink!"

Mechanically the Prophet drank.

"Swear!"

Mechanically−−indeed almost like a British working man−−the Prophet swore.

Malkiel drained his tumbler, and drew on the dogskin glove which, in the agitation of a previous moment, he had thrown aside.

"I have your card, sir, here is mine. I shall now take the train to the River Mouse, on whose banks I shall confer at once with Madame. Till I have done this I cannot tell you what form the tests I shall have to apply to you will take. When I have done it you will hear from me. Your servant, sir."

He bowed majestically, and was turning towards the door when it was hastily opened and a lady appeared frantically in the aperture.

CHAPTER V. MALKIEL THE SECOND POISONS MISS MINERVA

"Miss Minerva!" exclaimed Malkiel the Second.

"Lady Enid!" cried the Prophet, at the same moment.

"You can't go in there, Miss Partridge!" ejaculated the young librarian, simultaneously, from the further room.

The lady, a tall girl of twenty−two, with grey eyes, dark smooth hair, and a very agreeable, though slightly Scottish, mouth, began to behave rather like a stag at bay. She panted, and looked wildly round as if meditating how, and in what direction, she could best bolt.

"What's the matter?" cried the Prophet, his voice becoming not a little piercing from surprise and his previous stress of agitation.

"You can't go in there, Miss Minerva," requested the young librarian, who had now gained the parlour threshold, and who seemed about to take up a very determined stand thereon.

"I must go in−−I must," said the lady, in a mellow, but again slightly Scottish, voice. "Don't tell anybody I'm here, or you'll be sorry."

And, with these words, she bounded into the parlour and banged the door on the young librarian. The Prophet opened his lips preparatory to a third wild exclamation.

"Hush!" the lady hissed aristocratically.

She shook her head vigourously at him, sank down on one of the cane chairs, held up her right hand, and leant towards the door. It was obvious that she was listening for something with strained attention, and so eloquent was her attitude that the two prophets were infected with her desire. They turned their eyes mechanically towards the deal door and listened too. For a moment there was silence. Then a heavy footstep resounded upon the library floor, accompanied by the sharp tap of a walking stick. The lady's attitude became more tense and the pupils of her handsome grey eyes dilated.

"Has a young female just entered this shop?" said a very heavy and rumbling voice.

"This ain't a shop, sir," replied the high soprano of the young librarian, indignantly.

"Bandy no words with me, thou infamous malapert!" returned the first voice. "But answer my question. Have you a young female concealed within these loathsome precincts?"

Under ordinary circumstances it is very possible that the young librarian might have betrayed the lady as he had already betrayed Malkiel the Second. But it happened that there existed upon the earth one object, and one object only, towards which he felt a sense of chivalry. This object was Jellybrand's Library. His reply to the voice was therefore as follows, and was delivered in his highest key and with extreme volubility and passion:−−

"Loathsome precincts yourself! You're a nice one, you are, chasing respectable ladies about at your age. There ain't no young females in the library, and if there was I shouldn't trot 'em out for you to clap your ugly old eyes on. Now then, out yer go. No more words about it. Out yer go!"

A prolonged sound of hard breathing and of feet scraping violently upon bare boards followed upon this deliverance, complicated by the sharp snap of a breaking walking stick, the thump of a falling chair, a bang as of a heavy body encountering firm resistance from some inflexible article of furniture−−probably a bookcase−−and finally a tremendous thundering, as of the hoofs of a squadron of cavalry charging over a parquet floor, the crash of a door, the grinding of a key swiftly turning in a lock, and−−silence.

The lady, Malkiel the Second and the Prophet looked at one another, and the lady opened her mouth.

"D'you think he's killed him?" she whispered with considerable curiosity.

There came a distant noise of a torrent of knocks upon a door.

"No, he hasn't," added the lady, arranging her dress. "That's a good thing."

The two prophets nodded. The torrent of knocks roared louder, slightly failed upon the ear, made a crescendo, emulated Niagara, surpassed that very American effort of nature, wavered, faltered to Lodore, died away to a feeble tittup like water dropping from a tap to flagstones, rose again in a final spurt that would have made Southey open his dictionary for adjectives, and drained away to death.

The lady leaned back. For the first time her composure seemed about to desert her entirely. That fatal sign in woman, a working throat, swallowing nothing with extreme rapidity and persistence, became apparent.

"A glass of wine, Miss Minerva?" cried Malkiel, gallantly.

He placed a tumbler to her lips. She feebly sipped, than sprang to her feet with a cry.

"I'm poisoned!"

"You never spoke a truer word," said the Prophet, solemnly.

"What is it?" continued the lady, frantically. "What has he given me?"

"Champagne at four shillings a bottle brought fresh from next door to a rabbit shop," answered the Prophet, looking at Malkiel with almost malignant satisfaction.

The lady, who had gone white as chalk, darted to the door and flung it open.

"A glass of water!" she cried. "Get me a glass of water."

The young librarian came forward with a black eye.

"It's all right, ma'am. The gentleman's gone," he piped.

"What gentleman? Give me a glass of water or I shall die!"

The young librarian, who had already an injured air, proceeded from a positive to a comparative condition of appearance.

"Well, I never! What gentleman!" he exclaimed. "And me blue and black all over, to say nothing of the bookcase and the new paint that'll be wanted for the door!"

"Can you chatter about trifles at such a moment?" cried the Prophet. "Don't you see the lady's been poisoned?"

"What−−by the old gent?" returned the young librarian. "Then what does she come to a library for? Why don't she go to a chemist?"

The lady turned her agonised eyes upon the Prophet.

"Take me to one," she whispered through pale lips.

She tottered towards him and leaned upon his arm.

"Trust me, trust me, I will," said the Prophet. "Direct me!" he added to the young librarian.

"There's one on the other side of the rabbit shop," said that worthy, who had suddenly become exceedingly glum in manner and morose in appearance.

"Thank you. Kindly unlock the door."

The young librarian did so, lethargically, and the lady and the Prophet began to move slowly into the street. Just as they were gaining it Malkiel the Second cried out,−−

"One moment, sir!"

"Not one," retorted the Prophet, firmly. "Not one till this lady has had an antidote."

He walked on with determination. Supporting the lady. But ere he got quite out of earshot he caught these fragments of a shattered speech, hurtling through the symphony of London noises:−−

"Banks of the Mouse−−Madame−−sake of Capricor−−be sure I−−probe−−quick −−search−−the very core−−hear from me−−architects−−marrow−−almanac−−the last day−−the Berkeley square−−"

The final ejaculation melted away into the somewhat powerful discord produced by the impact of a brewer's dray with a runaway omnibus at the corner of Greek Street, which was eventually resolved by the bursting of a motor car−−containing two bookmakers and an acting manager−−which mingled with them at the rate of perhaps forty miles an hour.

"Yes, please, a hansom," said Lady Enid Thistle, some five minutes later, as she and the Prophet stood together upon the kerb in front of the rabbit shop. "I feel much better now."

The Prophet hailed a hansom and handed her into it.

"Which way are you going?" he asked.

Lady Enid looked doubtful.

"I ought to be going back to Jellybrand's," she said. "I had an appointment. But really−−you see Mr. Sagittarius is there, and altogether−−I don't know."

She was obviously still upset by the "creaming foam," and the other incidents of the afternoon.

"Come to tea with grannie," said the Prophet.

"She's at home?"

"Yes. She's twisted her ankle."

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"Let me escort you."

"Thanks. I think I will."

"You won't mind stopping for a moment at Hollings's?" said the Prophet, in Piccadilly Circus. "I promised to buy some roses. Somebody is coming in to tea."

"On, no. But who is it?"

"I don't know. Only one person, I think. An old friend, no doubt. Probably the Central American Ambassador's grandfather."

"Oh, if that's all! I feel a little shaky still."

"Naturally."

The Prophet bought the roses and they drove on.

"It's very nice of you not to ask any questions," observed Lady Enid, presently.

The Prophet had been thinking it was, but he only said,−−

"Oh, not at all."

"I'm a woman," promised Lady Enid, "and I don't know whether I can be so nice."

The Prophet glanced at her and met her curious grey eyes.

"Try−−please," he replied very gently, thinking of the oath which he had just taken.

Lady Enid was silent for two minutes, then she remarked,−−

"I have tried, but I can't succeed. Why on earth were you closeted in the parlour−−at my time, too−−with Mr. Sagittarius this afternoon?"

"Then you really are Miss Minerva Partridge? And it was really you who had−−had−−well, 'bespoke' the parlour at half−past three?"

"Certainly. Now we are neither of us nice, but we're both of us human."

"There were some letters for you," said the Prophet.

Lady Enid wrinkled her smooth, young, healthy−looking forehead.

"How stupid of me! I'll fetch them to−morrow. Well?"

She looked at the Prophet with obvious expectation.

"I'm so sorry I can't tell you," he replied with gentle firmness.

"Oh, all right," she rejoined. "But now I'm at a disadvantage. You know I'm Miss Minerva."

"Yes. But I don't know why you are, or why you go to Jellybrand's, or why you rushed into the parlour, or who the old gentleman was that−−"

The cab stopped before Mrs. Merillia's house.

In the hall, upon an oaken bench, they perceived a very broad−brimmed top hat standing on its head. Beside it lay two pieces of a stout and knobbly walking stick which had been broken in half. Lady Enid started violently.

"Good Heavens!" she cried.

She picked up the walking stick, examined it, and laid it down.

"I don't think I want any tea," she murmured.

"I'm sure you do," said the Prophet, with some pressure.

She stood still for a moment. Then, catching the attentive round eye of Gustavus, who was waiting by the hall door, she shrugged her shoulders and walked towards the staircase.

"It's very hard lines," she murmured as she began to ascend: "all the questions you wanted to ask are being answered. You know I'm Miss Minerva already. In another minute you'll know who the old gentleman was that−−"

The Prophet could tell from the expression of her straight, slightly Scottish, back that she was pouting as she entered the drawing−room where Mrs. Merillia was having tea with−−somebody.

CHAPTER VI. THE OLD ASTRONOMER DISCOURSETH OF THE STARS

Never before had the Prophet felt so alive with curiosity as he did when he followed Lady Enid into Mrs. Merillia's presence, for he knew that he was about to see the venerable victim of the young librarian's indignant chivalry, the "old gent" who had come to intimate terms with Jellybrand's bookcase, and who had kicked and knocked at least a pint of paint off Jellybrand's door. His eyes were large and staring as he glanced swiftly from his grandmother's sofa to the huge telescope, under whose very shadow was seated no less a personage than Sir Tiglath Butt, holding a cup of tea on one hand and a large−sized muffin in the other.

No wonder the Prophet jumped. No wonder Mrs. Merillia cried out, in her pretty, clear voice,−−

"Take care of Beau, Hennessey! You're treading on him."

The dachshund's pathetic shriek of outrage made the rafters ring. Mrs. Merillia put her mittens to her ears, and Sir Tiglath dropped his muffin into a jar of pot−pourri.

"I beg your pardon," said the Prophet, earnestly. "Sir Tiglath−−this is indeed a sur−−a pleasure."

Lady Enid was being embraced by Mrs. Merillia. The Prophet extended his hand to the astronomer, who, however, turned his back to the company and, diving one of his enormous hands into the pot−pourri jar, began to rummage violently for his vanished meal.

"What is it?" said the Prophet, who had not seen the muffin go. "Can I help you?"

Still presenting his huge back and the purple nape of his fat neck to the assemblage, the astronomer, after trying in vain to extract the lost dainty in a legitimate manner, turned the jar upside down, and poured the rose−leaves and the muffin in a heterogeneous libation upon the Chippendale table. After a close examination of it he turned around, holding up the food to whose buttered surface several leaves adhered in a disordered, but determined, manner.

"Only a Persian could devour this muffin now," he said, in his rumbling, sing−song and strangely theatrical voice, which always suggested that he was about to deliver a couple of hundred or so lengths of blank verse. "Omar beneath his tree perchance, or Gurustu who to Baghdad came with steed a−foam and eyes a−flame. Wherefore do you trample upon hapless animals that are not dumb, young man, and cause the poor astronomer to cast his muffin upon the roses, where, mayhap, the housemaid might find it after many days? Oh−h−h−h!"

He uttered a tremulous bass cry of mingled reproach and despair, that sounded rather like the wail of some deplorable watchman upon a city wall, shaking his enormous head at the Prophet the while, and flapping his red hands slowly in the air.

"How d'you do, Sir Tiglath?" said Lady Enid, coming up to him with light carelessness.

Sir Tiglath bowed.

"Very ill, very ill," he rumbled, looking at her furtively with his glassy eyes. "One has had an afternoon of tragedy, an afternoon of brawling and of disturbance, in an avenue that shall henceforth be called accursed."

He sat down upon his armchair, with his short legs stuck straight out and resting upon his heels alone, his hands folded across his stomach, and his purple triple chin sunk in his elaborate, but very dusty, cravat. Wagging his head to and fro, he added, with the heavy, concluding tremolo that decorated most of his vocal efforts, "Thrice accursed. Oh−h−h−h!"

Lady Enid, who seemed to have quite recovered her self−possession, sat down by Mrs. Merillia, while the Prophet, in some confusion, offered to his grandmother the bunch of roses he had bought at Hollings's."

"They're a little late, grannie, I'm afraid," he said. "But I was unavoidably detained."

Mrs. Merillia glanced at him sharply.

"Detained, Hennessey! Then you found what you were seeking?"

The Prophet remembered his oath and turned scarlet.

"No, no, grannie," he murmured hastily, and looking like a criminal. "I met Lady Enid," he added.

"Where did you meet the lady, young man?" said Sir Tiglath. "Was it in the accursed avenue?"

Lady Enid shot a hasty glance of warning at the Prophet. Mrs. Merillia intercepted it, and began to form fresh ideas of that young person, whom she had formerly called sensible, but whom she now began to think of as crafty.

"Which avenue is that, Sir Tiglath?" asked the Prophet, with a rather inadequate assumption of innocence.

"The Avenue in which one beholds the perfidy darting into hidden places, young man, in which the defenders of foolish virgins are buffeted and browbeaten by counter−jumpers with craniums as big as the great nebula of Orion. The avenue named after a crumbled philanthropist, who could walk, sheeted, through the atrocious night could his sacred dust awake to the abominations that are perpetrated under the protection of his shadow. Let dragons lay it waste like the highways of Babylon."

He gathered up a crumpet, and blinked at Lady Enid, who was airily sipping her tea with a slightly detached air of calm and maidenly dignity.

"I think Sir Tiglath must be describing Shaftesbury Avenue," remarked Mrs. Merillia, rather mischievously.

"Oh, really," stammered the Prophet, "I had no idea that it was such an evil neighbourhood."

"Where is Shaftesbury Avenue?" asked Lady Enid, gently folding a fragment of thin bread and butter and nibbling it with her pretty mouth.

Sir Tiglath elevated his hands and rolled his eyes.

"Where partridges are to be found in January, oh−h−h−h!" was his very unexpected reply.

The Prophet started violently, and even Lady Enid looked disconcerted for a moment.

"What do you mean, Sir Tiglath?" she said, recovering herself.

She turned to Mrs. Merillia.

"I wonder what he means," she said. "He never talks sensibly unless he is in his observatory, or lecturing to the Royal Society on the 'Regularity of Heavenly Bodies,' or−−"

"The irregularities of earthly ones," interposed Sir Tiglath. "In the accursed avenue−−oh−h−h!"

"I fear, Sir Tiglath, you must be a member of the Vigilance Society," said Mrs. Merillia.

"Yes. He looks at the morals of the stars through his telescope, said Lady Enid. "By the way−−do you, too?" she added to the Prophet, for the first time observing the instrument in the bow window.

Mrs. Merillia and Sir Tiglath exchanged a glance. An earnest expression came into the Prophet's face.

"I confess," he said, with becoming modesty in the presence of the great master of modern astronomy, "that I do watch the heavens from that window."

"And for what purpose, young man?" rumbled Sir Tiglath, for the first time dropping his theatrical manner of an old barn−stormer, and speaking like any ordinary fogey, such as you may see at a meeting on behalf of the North Pole, or at a dinner of the Odde Volumes.

"For−−for purposes of research, Sir Tiglath," answered the Prophet, with some diplomacy.

"The young man trieth to put off the old astronomer with fair words," bellowed Sir Tiglath. "The thief inserteth his thumb into the tail pocket of the unobservant archbishop for purposes of research. The young man playeth merrily forsooth with the old astronomer."

Mrs. Merillia nodded her lace cap at him encouragingly. It was evident that there was an understanding between them. Lady Enid began to wonder what was its nature. The Prophet seemed rather disconcerted at the reception given to his not wholly artless ambiguity.

"Grannie," he said, turning to Mrs. Merillia, "you know how deeply the stars interest me."

"For their own sake, young man?" said Sir Tiglath. "Or as the accursed avenue interests the foolish virgins−−for the sake of frivolity, idle curiosity, or dark doings which could not support the light even of a star of the sixth magnitude? Can you tell your admirable and revered granddam that?"

This time, underneath his preposterous manner and fantastic speech, both Lady Enid and the Prophet fancied that they could detect an element of real gravity, even perhaps a hint of weighty censure which made them both feel very young−−rising two, or thereabouts.

"I was originally led to study stars, Sir Tiglath, because I had the honour to meet you and make your acquaintance," said the Prophet, valiantly.

The astronomer lapsed at once into his first manner.

"In what fair company did the old astronomer converse with the young man?" he cried. "His memory faileth him. He doteth and cannot recall the great occasion."

"It was at the Colley Cibber Club, Sir Tiglath," said the Prophet, firmly. "But we−−we did not converse. You had a−−a slight indisposition."

"Would you venture to imply−−in the presence of your notable granddam−− that one had looked upon the wine when it was red, young man?"

"You had a glass of port by you certainly, Sir Tiglath. But you also had a cold which, you gave me to understand−−by signs−−had affected your throat and prevented you from carrying on conversation.

"Then was it the vision of the old astronomer's personal and starry beauty that led you, hot foot, to Venus through yonder telescope? Oh−h−h−h!"

"I did not take observations of Venus first," answered the Prophet, with a certain proud reserve. "I began by an examination into 'The Milky Way.' "

Sir Tiglath impounded another crumpet.

"Go on, young man," he cried. "The old astronomer lendeth ear."

The Prophet, who felt very much like a nervous undergraduate undergoing a /viva−voce/ examination, continued,−−

"I became deeply interested, strongly attracted by the−−the heavenly bodies. They fascinated me. I could think of nothing else."

Lady Enid's Scottish lips tightened almost imperceptibly.

"I could talk of nothing else," proceeded the Prophet. "Could I, grannie?"

"No, indeed, Hennessey," assented Mrs. Merillia. "All other topics were banished from discussion."

"All," cried the Prophet, with increasing fervour and lack of self− consciousness. "I could not tear myself from the telescope. I longed for a perpetual night and found the day almost intolerably irksome."

Sir Tiglath's brick−red countenance was irradiated with a smile that did not lack geniality.

"The old astronomer lendeth attentive ear to the young man's epic," he roared, through the crumpet. "He approveth the young man's admiration for the heavenly bodies. Go on."

But at the last command the Prophet seemed suddenly to jib. The reserved expression returned to his face.

"That's all, Sir Tiglath," he said.

The astronomer and Mrs. Merillia again exchanged a glance which was not unobserved by Lady Enid. Then Sir Tiglath, with an abrupt and portentous gravity, exclaimed in thunderous tones,−−

"Sir, are you a man of science or have you the brain of a charlatan enclosed in the fleshy envelope of a conjurer and a sinner? Do you study the noble and beautiful stars for their own sakes to find out what they are, and what they are doing, what is their nature and what their place in the great scheme, or do you peek and pry at them through the keyhole of a contemptible curiosity in order to discover what you think they can do for you, to set you on high, to puff you out into a personage and cause you to be noticed of the foolish ones of this world? Which are you, sir, a young man of parts whose hand I can grasp fraternally, or an insulter of planets, sir, a Peeping Tom upon the glorious nudity of Venus, a Paul Pry squinting at the mysteries of Mercury for an unholy and, what is more, an idiotic purpose? What do you ask of the stars, sir? Tell the old astronomer that!"

The Prophet was considerably taken aback by this tirade, which caused the many ornaments in the pretty room to tremble. He gazed at his grandmother, and found her nodding approval of Sir Tiglath. He glanced at Lady Enid. She was leaning back in her chair and looking amused, like a person at an entertainment.

"What do I ask, Sir Tiglath?" he murmured in some confusion.

"Do you ask about your reverent granddam's hallowed ankles, sir? Do you afflict the stars with inquiries about the state of the ridiculous weather? Is that it?"

The Prophet understood that Mrs. Merillia had been frank with the astronomer. He cast upon her a glance of respectful reproach.

"Yes, Hennessey," she answered, "I have. My dear child, I thought it for the best. This prophetic business would soon have been turning the house upside down, and at my age I'm really not equal to living at close quarters with a determined young prophet. To do so would upset the habits of a lifetime. So Sir Tiglath knows all about it."

There was a moment of silence, which was broken by the agreeable voice of Lady Enid saying,−−

"All about what? Remember, please, that I'm a young woman and that all young women share one quality. All about what, please?"

Mrs. Merillia looked at the Prophet. The Prophet looked at Sir Tiglath, who wagged his great head and cried, with rolling pathos and rebuke,−−

"Oh−h−h−h!"

"Please−−Mr. Vivian!" repeated Lady Enid, with considerable determination.

"Grannie means that I−−that−−well, that I have been enabled by the stars to foretell certain future events," said the Prophet, glancing rather furtively at Sir Tiglath while he spoke, to note the effect of the desperate declaration."

"Oh−h−h−h!" bellowed the distressed astronomer, shaking like a jelly in his wrath.

"What?" cried Lady Enid, in an almost piercing voice, and with a manner that had suddenly become most animated. "What−−like Malkiel's /Almanac/ does?"

This remark had a very striking effect upon Sir Tiglath, an effect indeed so striking that it held Mrs. Merillia, Lady Enid and the Prophet in a condition of paralytic expectation for at least three minutes by the grandmother's clock in the corner of the drawing−room.

The venerable astronomer was already very stout in person and very inflamed in appearance. But at this point in the discourse he suddenly became so very much stouter and so very much more inflamed, that his audience of three gazed upon him rather as little children gaze upon dough which has been set by the cook to "rise" and which is fulfilling its mission with an unexpected, and indeed intemperate, vivacity. Their eyes grew round, their features rigid, their hands tense, their attitudes expectant. Leaning forward, they stared upon Sir Tiglath with an unwinking fixity and preternatural determination that was almost entirely infantine. And while they did so he continued slowly to expand in size and to deepen in colour until mortality seemed to drop from him. He ceased to be a man and became a phenomenon, a purple thing that journeyed towards some unutterable end, portentous as marching judgment, tragic as fate, searching as epidemic, and yet heavily painted and generally touched up by the brush of some humorous demon, such as lays about him in preparation for Christmas pantomime, sworn to provide the giants' faces and the ogres' heads for Drury Lane.

"Don't!" at last cried a young voice. "Don't, Sir Tiglath!"

A peal of laughter followed the remark, of that laughter which is loud and yet entirely without the saving grace of merriment, a mere sudden demonstration of hysteria.

"Oh, Sir Tiglath−−don't!"

A second laugh joined the first and rang up with it, older, but also hysterical−−Mrs. Merillia's.

"No, no−−please don't, Sir Tig−−Tig−−"

A third laugh burst into the ring, seeming to complete it fatally−−the Prophet's.

"Sir Tiglath−−for Heaven's sake−−don't!"

The adjuration came from a trio of choked voices, and might have given pause even to a descending lift or other inflexible and blind machine.

But still the astronomer grew steadily more gigantic in person and more like the god of wine in hue. The three voices failed, and the terrible, united laughter was just upon the point of breaking forth again when a diversion occurred. The door of the drawing−room was softly opened, and Mrs. Fancy Quinglet appeared upon the threshold, holding in her hands an ice−wool shawl for the comfort of her mistress. It chanced that as the phenomenon of the astronomer was based upon a large elbow chair exactly facing the door she was instantly and fully confronted by it. She did not drop the shawl, as any ordinary maid would most probably have done. Mrs. Fancy was not of that kidney. She did not even turn tail, or give a month's warning or a scream. She was of those women who, when they meet the inevitable, instinctively seem to recognise that it demands courage as a manner and truth as a greeting. She, therefore, stared straight at Sir Tiglath−−much as she stared at Mrs. Merillia when she was about to arrange that lady's wig for an assembly −−and remarked in a decisive, though very respectful, tone of voice,−−

"The gentleman's about to burst, ma'am. I can't speak different nor mean other."

Upon finding their thoughts thus deftly gathered up and woven into a moderately grammatical sentence, Mrs. Merillia, Lady Enid and the Prophet experienced a sense of extraordinary relief, and no longer felt the stern necessity of laughing. But this was not the miracle worked by Mrs. Fancy. Had she, even then, rested satisfied with her acumen, maintained silence and awaited the immediate fulfilment of her prediction, what must have happened can hardly be in doubt. But she was seized by that excess of bravery which is called foolhardiness, and driven by it to that peculiar and thoughtless vehemence of action which sometimes wins V.C.'s for men who, in later days, conceal amazement under the cherished decoration. She suddenly laid down the ice−wool shawl upon a neighbouring sociable, walked up to the phenomenon of the astronomer, and remarked to it with great distinctness,−−

"You're about to burst, sir. I know it, sir, and I can't know other."

At this point the miracle happened, for, instead of responding to the lady's−maid's appeal, and promptly disintegrating into his respective atoms, Sir Tiglath suddenly became comparatively small and comparatively pale, sat forward, wagged his head at Mrs. Fancy, and rumbled out in his ordinary voice,−−

"Have you never heard where liars go to, woman? Oh−h−h−h!"

On finding that nothing of supreme horror was about to happen, Mrs. Fancy's courage−−as is the way of woman's courage−−forsook her, she broke into tears, and had to be immediately led forth to the servant's hall by the Prophet, exclaiming persistently with every step they took,−−

"I can't help it, Master Hennessey. I say again as I said afore−−the gentleman's about to burst. Them that knows other let them declare it."

"Yes, yes. It's all right, Fancy, it's all right. We all agree with you. Now, now, you mustn't cry."

"I can't−−know−−other, Master Hennessey, nor−−mean different. I can't indeed, Master Hennessey, I can't−−know other−−nor−−"

"No, no. Of course not. There, sit down and compose yourself."

He gave the poor, afflicted liar tenderly into the care of the upper housemaid, and retraced his steps quickly to the drawing−room. As he entered it he heard Sir Tiglath saying,−−

"The stars in their courses tremble when the accursed name of Malkiel is mentioned, and the old astronomer is dissolved in wrath at sound of the pernicious word. Oh−h−h−h!"

"There, Hennessey!" cried Mrs. Merillia, turning swiftly to her grandson with all her cap ribands fluttering. "You hear what Sir Tiglath says?"

"If that accursed name belonged to an individual," continued the astronomer, waving his hands frantically over the last remaining crumpet, "instead of representing a syndicate of ruffianly underground criminals, the old astronomer, well stricken in years though he be, would hunt him out of his hiding−place and slay him with his own feeble and scientific hands."

So saying, he grasped the crumpet as if it had been an assegai, and assailed himself with it so violently that it entirely disappeared.

"But Malkiel is an−−" began Mrs. Merillia.

The Prophet stopped her with a glance, whose almost terror−stricken authority surprised her into silence.

"But I thought Malkiel was a man," cried Lady Enid, looking towards the Prophet.

"He−−for I will not foul my lips with the accursed name−−is not a man," roared Sir Tiglath. "He is a syndicate. He is a company. He meets together, doubtless, in some low den of the city. He reads reports to himself of the ill−gotten gains accruing from his repeated insults to the heavens round some abominable table covered with green cloth. He quotes the prices of the shares in him, and declares dividends, and carries balances forward, and some day will wind himself up or cast himself anew upon the mercy of the market. Part of him is probably Jew, part South African and part America. The whole of him is thrice accursed."

He began to expand once more, but Mrs. Merillia perceived the tendency and checked it in time.

"Pray, Sir Tiglath," she said almost severely, "don't. With my sprained ankle I am really not equal to it."

Sir Tiglath had enough chivalry to stop, and Lady Enid once again chipped in.

"But, really, I'm almost sure Malkiel is a−−"

She caught the Prophet's eye, as Mrs. Merillia had, and paused. He turned to the astronomer.

"But how can a company make itself into a prophet?" he asked.

"Young man, you talk idly! What are companies formed for if not to make profits?" retorted Sir Tiglath. "Every one is a company nowadays. Don't you know that? Murchison, the famous writer of novels, is a company. Jeremy, the actor−manager, is a company. So is Bynion the quack doctor, and the Rev. Mr. Kinnimer who supplies tracts to the upper classes, and Upton the artist, whose pictures make tours like Sarah Bernhardt, and Watkins, whose philosophy sells more than Tupper's, and Caroline Jingo, who writes war poems and patriotic odes. If you were to invite these supposed seven persons to dinner, and all of them came, you would have to lay covers for at least fifty scoundrels. Oh−h−h−h!"

"Well, but how are you sure that−−ahem−−the /Almanac/ person is also plural, Sir Tiglath?" inquired Mrs. Merillia.

"Because I sought him with the firm intention of assault and battery for five−and−forty years," returned the

astronomer. "And only gave up my Christian quest when I was assured, on excellent authority, that he was a company, and had originally been formed in the United States for the making of money and the defiance of the heavenly bodies. May bulls and bears destroy him!"

"Well, it's very odd," said Lady Enid. "Very odd indeed."

As she spoke she glanced at the Prophet and met his eyes. There are moments when the mere expression in another person's eyes seems to shout a request at one. The expression in the Prophet's eyes performed this feat at this moment, with such abrupt vehemence, that Lady Enid felt almost deafened. She leaned back in her chair, as if avoiding a missile, and exclaimed,−−

"Of course! And I never guessed it!"

"Guessed what, my dear?" inquired Mrs. Merillia.

"Why, that−−he−−it−−was a company," replied Lady Enid.

The Prophet blessed and thanked her with a piercing and saved look.

"Nor I," he assented, descending into the very mine of subterfuge for his recent oath's sake, "nor I, or I should never have taken the useless trouble that I have taken.

He managed to say this with such conviction that his grandmother, who, in the past, had always found him to be transparently honest and sincere, was carried away by the deception. She wrinkled her long nose, as was her habit when sincerely pleased, and cried gaily,−−

"Then, Hennessey, now you've heard Sir Tiglath's opinion of the practice of trying to turn the stars into money−makers, and the planets into old gipsy women who tell fortunes to silly servant girls, I'm sure you'll never study them again. Come, promise me!"

The Prophet made no answer.

"Hennessey," cried his grandmother, with tender pertinacity, "promise me! Sir Tiglath, join your voice to mine!"

Sir Tiglath had become really grave, not theatrically serious.

"Young man," he said, "your revered granddam asks of you a righteous thing. Who are you to trifle with those shining worlds that make a beauty of the night and that stir eternity in the soul of man? Who are you to glue your pinpoint of a human eye to yonder machine and play with the stupendous Jupiter and Saturn as a child plays with marbles or with peg−tops? Who are you that thinks those glittering monsters have nothing to do but to inform your pigmy brain of snowfalls, street accidents, and love−affairs prematurely, so that you may flaunt about your pocket−handkerchief of a square pluming your dwarfship that you are a prophet? Fie, young man, and again fie! Bow the knee, as I do, to the mysteries of the great universal scheme, instead of bothering them to turn informers and 'give away' the knowledge which is deliberately hidden from us. Show me a man that can understand the present and you'll have shown me a god. And yet you knock at the gates of the heavens through that telescope and clamour to be told the future! Fie upon you, young man, fie! Oh−h−h−h!"

Now the Prophet, as has been before observed, possessed a very sensitive nature. He was also very devoted to his grandmother, and had an extraordinary reverence for the world−famed attainments of Sir Tiglath Butt. Therefore, when he heard Mrs. Merillia's pleading, and the astronomer's weighty denunciation, he was deeply moved. Nevertheless, so strongly had recent events appealed to his curiosity, so ardently did he desire to search into the reality of his own peculiar powers, that it is very doubtful whether he might not have withstood both the behests of affection and of admiration had it not been that they took to themselves an ally, whose force is one of the moving spirits of the world. This ally was fear. Just as the Prophet was beginning to feel obstinate and to steel himself to resistance, he remembered the fierce and horrible threats of Malkiel the Second. If he should cease to concern himself with the stars, if he should cease to prophesy, not alone should he restore peace to his beloved grandmother, and pay the tribute of respect to Sir Tiglath, but he should do more. He should preserve his quick from being searched and his core from being probed. His marrow, too, would be rescued from the piercing it had been so devoutly promised. The dread, by which he was now companioned−−of Malkiel, of that portentous and unseen lady who dwelt beside the secret waters of the Mouse, of those imagined offshoots of the prophetic tree, Corona and Capricornus−−this would drop away. He would be free once more, light−hearted, a happy and mildly intellectual man of the town, emerged from the thrall of bogies, and from beneath the yoke which he already felt laid upon his shoulders by those august creatures who were the centre of the architectural circle.

All these things suddenly presented themselves to the Prophet's mind with extraordinary vividness and force.

His resolve was taken in a moment, and, turning to his eager grandmother and to the still slightly inflated astronomer, he exclaimed without further hesitation,−−

"Very well. I'll give it up. I promise you."

Mrs. Merillia clapped her mittens together almost like a girl.

"Thank you, Sir Tiglath," she cried. "I knew you would persuade the dear boy."

The astronomer beamed like the rising sun.

"Let the morning stars−−freed from insult−−sing together!" he roared.

The Prophet glanced towards Lady Enid. She was looking almost narrow and not at all pleased. She, and all her family, had a habit of suddenly appearing thinner than usual when they were put out. This habit had descended to them from a remote Highland ancestor, who had perished of starvation and been very vexed about it. The Prophet felt sure that she did not applaud his resolution, but he could not discuss the matter with her in public, and she now got up−−looking almost like a skeleton−−and said that she must go. Sir Tiglath immediately rolled up out of his chair and roared that he would accompany her.

"The old astronomer will protect the injudicious young female," he exclaimed, "lest she wander forth into accursed places."

"I'm only going to Hill Street," said Lady Enid, rather snappishly. "Come to see me to−morrow at three," she whispered to the Prophet as she took his hand. "We must have a talk. Don't tell anybody!"

The Prophet nodded surreptitiously. He felt that she was curious to her finger−tips as he gently pressed them.

When he and his grandmother were alone together he rang the drawing− room bell. Mr. Ferdinand appeared.

"Mr. Ferdinand," said the Prophet, "kindly call Gustavus to your aid and take away the telescope."

"Sir!" said Mr. Ferdinand in great astonishment.

"Take away the telescope."

"Certainly, sir. Where shall we place it, sir?"

"Anywhere," said the Prophet. "In the pantry−−the square−−in Piccadilly if you like−−it's all the same to me."

And, unable to trust himself to say more, he hurried almost tumultuously from the room.

"Here's a go, Gustavus," remarked Mr. Ferdinand a moment later as he entered the servants' hall.

"Where, Mr. Ferdinand?" replied Gustavus, glancing up from a dish of tea and a couple of Worthing shrimps with which he was solacing an idle moment.

"Here, in this mansion, Gustavus. Me and you've got to take the telescope out of the drawing−room, and Master Hennessey says if we wish we can chuck it in Piccadilly."

The round eyes of Gustavus brightened.

"That is my wish, Mr. Ferdinand," he exclaimed. "Here's a lark!"

He sprang up. But Mr. Ferdinand checked his very agreeable vivacity.

"I am your head, Gustavus," he remarked, with severe ambiguity, "and master having also said that, if we wish, we can set the instrument in the butler's pantry, I have decided that so it shall moreover be. It will be very useful to us there."

"Useful, Mr. Ferdinand! However−−?"

"Never mind, Gustavus, never mind," replied Mr. Ferdinand with some acrimony.

Being of a dignified nature he did not care to explain to a subordinate that there was a very pleasant−looking second−cook just arrived at the house of the Lord Chancellor on the opposite side of the square.

CHAPTER VII. THE DOUBLE LIFE OF MISS MINERVA

On the following day, just as the Prophet was drawing on a new pair of suede gloves preparatory to setting out to Hill Street, Gustavus entered with a silver salver.

"A telegram for you, sir," he said.

The Prophet took the blushing envelope, ripped it gently open, and read as follows:−−

"Madame and self must confer with you this afternoon without fail. Shall be with you five sharp; most important.

JUPITER SAGITTARIUS."

Gustavus nearly dropped at sight of the wrinkles that seamed the Prophet's usually smooth face as he grasped the full meaning of this portentous missive.

"Any answer, sir?"

The wrinkles increased and multiplied.

"Any reply, sir?"

"What−−no."

Gustavus glided in a well−trained manner towards the door. When he got there the Prophet cried, rather sharply,−−

"Stop a moment!"

Gustavus stopped.

"Sir?"

"The−−I−−er−−I am expecting a−−a−−couple this afternoon," began the Prophet, speaking with considerable hesitation, and still gazing, in a hypnotised manner, at the telegram.

"A couple, sir?"

"Exactly. A pair."

"A pair, sir? Of horses, sir?"

"Horses! No−−of people, that is, persons."

"A pair of persons, sir. Yes, sir."

"They should arrive towards five o'clock."

"Yes, sir."

"If I should not be home by that time you will show them very quietly into my library−−not the drawing−room. Mrs. Merillia is not at present equal to receiving ordinary guests."

The Prophet meant extraordinary, but he preferred to put it the other way.

"Yes, sir. What name, sir?"

"Mr. and Mrs.−−that is, Madame Sagittarius. That will do."

Gustavus hastened to the servants' hall to discuss the situation, while the Prophet stood re−reading the telegram with an expression of shattered dismay. Not for at least five minutes did he recover himself sufficiently to remember his appointment with Lady Enid, and, when at length he set forth to Hill Street, he was so painfully preoccupied that he walked three times completely round the square before he discovered the outlet into that fashionable thoroughfare.

When he reached the dark green mansion of Lady Enid's worthy father, the Marquis of Glome, and had applied the bronze demon that served as a knocker four separate times to the door, he was still so lost in thought that he started violently on the appearance of the Scotch retainer at the portal, and behaved for a moment as if he were considering which of two courses he should pursue: /i.e./, whether he should clamber frantically into the seclusion of the area, or take boldly to the open street. Before he could do either M'Allister, the retainer, had magnetised him into the hall, relieved him of his hat−− almost with the seductive adroitness of a Drury Lane thief−−and drawn him down a tartan passage into a very sensible−looking boudoir, in which Lady Enid was sitting by a wood fire with a very tall and lusty young man.

"Mr. Hennessey Vivian!"

"What, Bob−−you here!" said the Prophet to the lusty young man, after shaking hands a little distractedly with

Lady Enid.

"Yes, old chap. But I'm just off. I know you two want to have a confab," returned Mr. Robert Green, wringing his old school friend's hand. "Niddy's given me the chuck. And anyhow I'm bound to look in at the Bath Club at four to fence with Chicky Bostock."

Mr. Green spoke in a powerful baritone voice, rolling his r's, and showing his large and square white teeth in a perpetual cheery and even boisterous smile. He was what is called a thorough good fellow, springy in body and essentially gay in soul. That he was of a slightly belated temperament will be readily understood when we say that he was at this time just beginning to whistle, with fair correctness, "Ta−ra−ra−boom− de−ay," to discuss the character of Becky Sharp, to dwell upon the remarkable promise as a vocalist shown by Madame Adelina Patti, and to wonder at the marvellous results said to be accomplished by the telephone. He had also never heard of Christian Science, and was totally unaware that there exists in the metropolis a modest and retiring building called "The Imperial Institute." Nevertheless, he was repeatedly spoken of by substantial people as a young man of many parts, was a leading spirit in Yeomanry circles, and was greatly regarded by the Prophet as a trusty friend and stalwart upholder of the British Empire. He had rather the appearance of a bulwark, and something of the demeanour of a flourishing young oak tree.

"Yes, Bob, you've got to go," assented Lady Enid, examining the Prophet's slightly distorted countenance with frank, and even eager, curiosity. "Mr. Vivian and I are going to talk of modern things."

"I know, Thackeray and Patti, and three−volume novels, and skirt dancing, and all the rest of it," said Mr. Green, with unaffected reverence. "Well, I'm off. I say, Hen, pop in at the Bath on your way home and have a whiskey and soda. I shall just be out of the hot room and−−"

"I'm sorry, Bob," said the Prophet with almost terrible solemnity, that I can't, that−−in fact−−I am unable."

"What? Going to the dentist?"

"Exactly−−that is, not at all."

"Well, what's up? Some intellectual business, lecture on Walter Scott, or Dickens, or one of the other Johnnies that are so popular just now?"

"No. I have a−−a small gathering at home this afternoon.

"All right. Then I'll pop round on you−−say five o'clock."

"No, Bob, no, I can't say that. I'm very sorry, but I can't possibly say that."

"Right you are. Too clever for me, I s'pose. Look me up at the Tintack to−night then−−any time after ten."

"If I can, Bob, I will," replied the Prophet, with impressive uncertainty, "I say if I can I will do so."

"Done! If you can't, then I'm not to expect you. That it?"

"That is it−−precisely."

"Good−bye, Niddy, old girl. Keep your pecker up. By the way, if you want a real good tune for a Charity sing−song, a real rouser, try 'Nancy Lee.' "

He was gone, humming vigorously that new−fangled favourite.

"Sit down, Mr. Vivian," said Lady Enid, looking her right size. "We've got a lot to say to one another."

"I have to be home at five," replied the Prophet, abstractedly.

Lady Enid begin to appear a trifle thin.

"Why? How tiresome! I didn't think you really meant it."

"It is very, very tiresome."

He spoke with marked uneasiness, and remained standing with the air of one in readiness for the punctual call of the hangman.

"What is it?" continued Lady Enid, with her usual inquisitiveness.

"I have, as I said, a−−a small gathering at home at that hour," said the Prophet, repeating his formula morosely.

"A gathering−−what of?"

"People−−persons, that is."

"What−−a party?"

"Two parties," replied the Prophet, instinctively giving Mr. Sagittarius and Madame their undoubted due. "Two."

"Two parties at the same time−−and in the afternoon! How very odd!"

"They will look very odd, very−−in Berkeley Square," responded the Prophet, in a tone of considerable dejection. "I don't know, I'm sure, what Mr. Ferdinand and Gustavus will think. Still I've given strict orders that they are to be let in. What else could I do?"

He gazed at Lady Enid in a demanding manner.

"What else could I possibly do under the circumstances?" he repeated.

"Sit down, dear Mr. Vivian," she answered, with her peculiar Scotch lassie seductiveness, "and tell me, your sincere friend, what the circumstances are."

Unluckily her curiosity had led her to overdo persuasion. That cooing interpolation of "your sincere friend"−−too strongly honeyed−−suddenly recalled the Prophet to the fact that Lady Enid was not, and could never be, his confidante in the matter that obsessed him. He therefore sat down, but with an abrupt air of indefinite social liveliness, and exclaimed, not unlike Mr. Robert Green,−−

"Well, and how are things going with you, dear Lady Enid?"

She jumped under the transition as under a whip.

"Me! But−−these parties you were telling me about?"

But the Prophet remembered his oath. He was a strictly honourable little man, and never swore carelessly.

"Parties!" he said. "You and I are too old friends to waste our life in chattering about such London nonsense."

"Then we'll talk of yesterday," said Lady Enid, very firmly.

The Prophet looked rather blank.

"Yes," she repeated. "Yesterday. I've guessed your secret."

"Which one?" he cried, much startled.

"Which?" she said reproachfully. "Oh, Mr. Vivian−−and I thought you trusted in me."

The Prophet was silent. The third daughter of the clergyman had often made that remark to him when they were nearly engaged. It recalled bygone memories.

"That's what I thought," she added with pressure.

"I'm sorry," the Prophet murmured, rather obstinately.

"I always think," she continued, with deliberate expansiveness, "that nearly all the miseries of the world come about from people not trusting in−−in people."

"Or from people trusting in the wrong people. Which is it?" said the Prophet, not without slyness.

She began to look thin, but checked herself.

"Tell me," she said, "why did you stop me yesterday when I was beginning to say to Sir Tiglath that I was sure Malkiel was a man and not a syndicate?"

"Did I stop you?" said the Prophet, artlessly.

"Yes, with your eyes."

"Because−−because I was sure−−that is, certain you couldn't be sure."

"How could you be certain?"

"How?"

"Yes."

"Well, how is one certain of anything?" said the Prophet, rather feebly.

"How are you certain that I'm Miss Minerva Partridge?"

"Because you told me so yourself, because I've seen you come into Jellybrand's for your letters, because−−"

"Haven't I seen Malkiel come into Jellybrand's for his?"

This unexpected retort threw the Prophet upon his beam ends. But he remembered his oath even in that very awkward position.

"Does he go to Jellybrand's?" he exclaimed, with a wild attempt after astonishment. "But he's a company−−Sir Tiglath said so."

"And what did your eyes say yesterday?"

"I had a cold in my eyes yesterday," said the Prophet. "They were very weak. They were−−they were aching."

Lady Enid was silent for a moment. During that moment she was conferring with her feminine instinct. What it said to her must be guessed by the manner in which she once more entered into conversation with the Prophet.

"Mr. Vivian," she said, with a complete change of demeanour to girlish geniality and impulsiveness, "I'm going to confide in you. I'm going to thrown myself upon your mercy."

The Prophet blinked with amazement, like a martyr who suddenly finds himself snatched from the rack and laid upon a plush divan with a satin cushion under his head.

"I'm going to trust you," Lady Enid went on, emphasising the two pronouns.

"Many thanks," said the Prophet, unoriginally.

She was sitting on a square piece of furniture which the Marquis of Glome called an "Aberdeen lean−to." She now spread herself out upon it in the easy attitude of one who is about to converse intimately for some centuries, and proceeded.

"I daresay you know, Mr. Vivian, that people always call me a very sensible sort of girl."

The Prophet remembered his grandmother's remark about Lady Enid.

"I know they do," he assented, trying not to think of five o'clock.

"What do they mean by that, Mr. Vivian?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I say what do they mean by a sensible sort of girl?"

"Why, I suppose−−"

"I'm going to tell you," she interrupted him. "They mean a sort of girl who likes fresh air, washes her face with yellow soap, sports dogskin gloves, drives in an open cart in preference to a shut brougham, enjoys a cold tub and Whyte Melville's novels, laughs at ghosts and cries over 'Misunderstood,' considers the Bishop of London a deity and the Albert Memorial a gem of art, would wear a neat Royal fringe in her grave, and a straw hat and shirt on the Judgment Day if she were in the country for it−−walks with the guns, sings 'Home, Sweet Home' in the evening after dinner to her bald−headed father, thinks the /Daily Mail/ an intellectual paper, the Royal Academy an uplifting institution, the British officer a demi−god with a heart of gold in a body of steel, and the road from Calais to Paris the way to heaven. That's what they mean by a sensible sort of girl, isn't it?"

"I daresay it is," said the Prophet, endeavouring not to feel as if he were sitting with a dozen or two of very practised stump orators.

"Yes, and that's what they think I am."

"And aren't you?" inquired the Prophet.

Lady Enid drew herself upon the Aberdeen lean−to.

"No," she said decisively, "I'm not. I'm a Miss Minerva Partridge."

"Well, but what is that?" asked the Prophet, with all the air of a man inquiring about some savage race.

"That's the secret−−"

"Oh, I beg your pardon!"

"That I'm going to tell you now, because I trust you−−"

Again the pronouns were emphasised, and the Prophet thought how difficult it would be to keep his oath.

"And because I know now that you're silly too."

The Prophet jumped, though not for joy.

"I've been Miss Minerva Partridge for−−wait a moment, I must look."

She got up, went to a writing table, opened a drawer in it, and took out a large red book and turned its leaves.

"My diary," she explained. "It's foolish to keep one, isn't it?"

Her intonation so obviously called for an affirmative that the Prophet felt constrained to reply,−−

"Very foolish indeed."

She smiled with pleasure.

"I'm so glad you think so. Ah−−exactly a year and a half."

"You've been Miss Minerva Partridge?"

"Yes."

"So long as that?"

"Yes, indeed. Mr. Vivian, during that time I have been leading a double life."

The Prophet remembered the other double life beside the borders of the River Mouse, and began to wonder if he were acquainted with any human being who led a single one.

"Many people do that," he remarked rather aimlessly.

Lady Enid looked vexed.

"I did not say I had a monopoly of the commodity," she rejoined, evidently wishing that she had.

"Oh, no," said the Prophet, making things worse; "one meets people who live double lives every day, I might almost say every hour."

The clock had just struck four, and he had begun to think of five. Lady Enid's pleasant plumpness began rapidly to disappear.

"I can't say I do," she said sharply, feeling that most of the gilt was being stripped off her sin.

She stopped in such obvious dissatisfaction that the Prophet, vaguely aware that he had made some mistake, said,−−

"Please go on. I am so interested. Why have you led a double life for the last week and a half?"

"Year and a half, I said."

"I mean year and a half."

He forced his mobile features to assume a fixed expression of greedy, though rather too constant, curiosity. Lady Enid brightened up.

"Mr. Vivian," she said, "many girls are born sensible−looking without wishing it."

"Are they really? It never occurred to me."

"Such things very seldom do occur to men. Now that places these girls in a very painful position. I was placed in this position as soon as I was born, or at least as soon as I began to look like anything at all. For babies really don't."

"That's very true," assented the Prophet, with more fervour.

"People continually said to me, 'What a nice sensible girl you are'; or−−'One always feels your Common sense'; or−−'There's nothing foolish about you, Enid, thank Heaven!' The Chieftain relied upon me thoroughly. So did the tenants. So did everybody. You can understand that it became very trying?"

"Of course, of course."

"It's something to do with the shape of my eyebrows, the colour of my hair, the way I smile and that sort of thing."

"No doubt it is."

"Mr. Vivian, I'll tell you now, that I've never felt sensible in all my life."

"Really!" ejaculated the Prophet, still firmly holding all his features together in an unyielding expression of fixed curiosity.

"Never once, however great the provocation. And in my family, with the Chieftain, the provocation you can understand is exceptionally great."

The Marquis of Glome, who was the head of a clan called "The MacArdells," was always named the Chieftain by his relations and friends.

"I felt sure it must be," said the Prophet, decisively.

"Nevertheless it is so extremely difficult, if not impossible, not to try to be what people take you for that I was in a perpetual condition of acting sensibly, against my true nature."

"How very trying!" murmured the Prophet, mechanically.

"It was, Mr. Vivian. It often made me fell quite ill. Nobody but you knows how I have suffered."

"And why do I know?" inquired the Prophet.

"Because I realised yesterday that you must be almost as silly by nature as I am."

"Yesterday−−why? When?"

"When you said to Sir Tiglath that you could prophesy."

The Prophet stiffened. She laughed almost affectionately.

"So absurd! But I was vexed when you said you'd give it up. You mustn't do that, or you'll be flying in the face of your own folly."

She drew the Aberdeen lean−to, which ran easily on Edinburgh castors, a little nearer to him, and continued.

"At least I felt obliged to seek an outlet. I could not stifle my real self for ever, and yet I could not be comfortably silly with those who were absolutely convinced of my permanent good sense. I tried to be several times.

"Didn't you succeed?"

"Not once."

"Tch! Tch!"

"So at last I was driven to the double life."

"Then your coachman knows?"

"MacSpillan! No! I took a cab−−a four−wheeler−−at the corner of the Square, and the name of Minerva Partridge. It's a silly name, isn't it?"

She asked the question with earnest anxiety.

"Quite idiotic," said the Prophet, reassuringly.

"I felt quite sure it was," she cried, obviously comforted. "Because it came to me so inevitably. I was so perfectly natural−−and alone−−when I invented it. No one helped me."

"I assure you," reiterated the Prophet, "there is no doubt the name is absolutely and entirely idiotic."

"Thank you, dear Mr. Vivian! What a pleasure it is to talk to you! Under this name I have, for a year and a half, led an idiotic life, such a life as really suits me, such a life as is in complete accord with my true nature. Oh, the joy of it! The sense of freedom! If only all other silly girls who look sensible like me had the courage to do what I have done!"

"It is a pity!" said the Prophet, in assent, beginning to be genuinely moved by the obvious sincerity of this human being's bent towards folly. "But what have you done during this year and a half of truth and freedom?"

"More foolish things than many crowd into a lifetime," she cried ecstatically. "It would take me days to tell you of half of them!"

"Oh, then you mustn't," said the Prophet, glancing furtively at the clock. "Had you come out to be silly yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes, I had−−to be sillier even than usual. And if it hadn't been for Sir Tiglath catching sight of me in the avenue, and then−−Mr. Sagittarius and you being in the parlour−−"

She stopped.

"By the way," she said, in her usual tone of breezy common sense, "were you living a double life in the parlour?"

"I!" said the Prophet. "Oh, no, not at all. I never do anything of that kind."

"Sure?"

"Quite certain."

"You're not going to?"

"Certainly not. Nothing would induce me."

She looked at him, as if unconvinced, raising her dark, sensible eyebrows.

"All Jellybrand's clients do," she said. "And I'm certain Mr. Sagittarius−−"

"I assure you," said the Prophet, with the heavy earnestness of absolute insincerity, "Mr. Sagittarius is the most single lived man I ever met, the very most. But why did Sir Tiglath, that is, why did you−−?"

"Try to avoid him? Well−−"

For the first time she hesitated, and began to look slightly confused.

"Well," she repeated, "Sir Tiglath is a very strange, peculiar old man."

The Prophet thought that if the young librarian had been present he would have eliminated the second adjective.

"Peculiar! Yes, he is. His appearance, his manner−−"

"Oh, I don't mean that."

"No?"

"No. Lots of elderly men have purple faces, turned legs and roaring voices. You must know that. Sir Tiglath is peculiar in this way−−he is quite elderly and yet he's not in the least little bit silly."

"Oh!"

"He's a thoroughly sensible old man, the only one I ever met."

"Your father?"

"The Chieftain can be very foolish at times. That's why he's always relied so on me."

She gave this proof triumphantly. The Prophet felt bound to accept it.

"Sir Tiglath is really, as an old man, what everybody thinks I am, as a young woman. D'you see?"

"You mean?"

"The opposite of me. And in this way too. While I hide my silliness under my eyebrows, and hair, and smile,

and manner, he hides his sensibleness under his. When people meet me they always think−−what a common−sense young woman! When they meet him they always think−−what a preposterous old man!"

"Well, but then," cried the Prophet, struck by a sudden idea, "if that is so, how can you live a double life as Miss Minerva Partridge? You can't change your eyebrows with your name!"

"Ah, you don't know women!" she murmured. "No, but you see I begin at once."

"Begin?"

"Being silly. All the people who know me as Miss Partridge know I'm an absurd person in spite of my looks. I've proved it to them by my actions. I've begun at once before they could have time to judge by my appearance. I've told them instantly that I'm a Christian Scientist, and a believer in the value of tight−lacing and in ghosts, an anti− vaccinator, a Fabian, a member of 'The Masculine Club,' a 'spirit,' a friend of Mahatmas, an intimate of the 'Rational Dress' set−−you know, who wear things like half inflated balloons in Piccadilly−−a vegetarian, a follower of Mrs. Besant, a drinker of hop bitters and Zozophine, a Jacobite, a hater of false hair and of all collective action to stamp out hydrophobia, a stamp−collector, an engager of lady− helps instead of servants, an amateur reciter and skirt dancer, an owner of a lock of Paderewski's hair−−torn fresh from the head personally at a concert−−an admirer of George Bernard Shaw as a thinker but a hater of him as a humourist, a rationalist and reader of /Punch/, an atheist and table−turner, a friend of all who think that women don't desire to be slaves, a homoeopathist and Sandowite, an enemy of babies−−as if all women didn’t worship them!−−a lover of cats−−as if all women didn't hate one another!−−a−−"

"One−−one moment!" gasped the Prophet at this juncture. "Many of these views are surely in opposition, in direct opposition to each other."

"I daresay. That doesn't matter in the least to a real silly woman such as I am."

"And then you said that you proved by your actions instantly that−−"

"So I did. I caught up a happy dog in the street, cried over its agony, unmuzzled it and allowed it to add its little contribution to the joy of life by mangling a passing archdeacon. I sat on the floor and handled snakes. I wore my hair parted on one side and smoked a cigarette in a chiffon gown. I refused food in a public restaurant because it had been cooked by a Frenchman. I−−"

"Enough! Enough!" cried the Prophet. "I understand. You forced Miss Partridge's acquaintances to believe in Miss Partridge's folly. But who were these acquaintances?"

"It would take me hours to tell you. First there was−−"

"I really have to go at five."

"Then I'll finish about Sir Tiglath. He's an utterly sensible old man, and so is different from all other old men, for you know human folly increases enormously with age. Isn't that lovely? Now, Mr. Vivian, Sir Tiglath admires me."

"Ah!"

"I know. You think that proves him the contrary of what I've said."

"Not at all!" exclaimed the Prophet, with frenzied courtesy, "not at all!"

"Yes, you do. But you're wrong. He doesn't exactly admire my character, but he likes me because I'm tall, and have pleasant coloured eyes, and thick hair, and walk well, and know that he's really an unusually sensible old man."

"Oh, is that it?"

"Yes. But now, if he could be made to think that I really am what I look like−−a thoroughly sensible young woman, he would more than admire me, he would adore me."

"But if you wish him to?" asked the Prophet in blank amazement.

"I do."

"Why?"

"The Miss Minerva part of me desires it."

"Indeed."

"Yes. He's got to do one or two things for Miss Minerva without knowing that I'm Miss Minerva. That is why I bolted into the parlour yesterday. Just as I was stepping into Jellybrand's I happened to see Sir Tiglath and he happened to think he saw me."

"Only to think?"

"Yes. He is not certain. I saw that by the expression of his face. He was wondering whether I was me−−or is it I?−−or not. I didn't give him time to be certain. I rushed into the parlour."

"You did."

"So it's all right. Frederick Smith would never betray a client."

"Really?"

"Never; so I'm saved. For Sir Tiglath isn't certain even now. I found that out on the way home with him last night. And an old man who's uncertain of the truth can soon be made certain of the lie, by a young woman he admires, however sensible he is. And now I'll tell you part of what I want Sir Tiglath to do for Miss Minerva−−"

But at this moment the clock struck five, and the Prophet bounded up with hysterical activity, and hastily took his leave, promising to call again and hear more on the following day.

"And tell more," thought Lady Enid to herself as the door of the sensible−looking boudoir shut behind him.

CHAPTER VIII. THE PROPHET RECEIVES HIS DIRECTIONS FROM MADAME

When the Prophet reached his door he rang the bell with a rather faltering hand. Mr. Ferdinand appeared.

"Any one called, Mr. Ferdinand?" asked the Prophet with an attempt at airy gaiety.

"Yes, sir," replied Mr. Ferdinand, looking rather like an elderly maiden lady when she unexpectedly encounters her cook taking an airing with a corporal in the Life Guards, "the pair of persons you expected, sir, has come."

The Prophet blushed.

"Oh! You−−you haven't disturbed Mrs. Merillia with them, I hope," he rejoined.

"No, sir, indeed. Gustavus said your orders was that they was to be shown quietly to the library."

"Exactly."

"I begged them to walk a−tiptoe, sir."

"What?" ejaculated the Prophet.

"I informed them there was illness in the house, sir."

"And did they−−er−−?"

"The male person got on his toes at once, sir, but the female person shrieks out, 'Is it catching? Ho! Think of−−of Capericornopus,' sir, or something to that effect."

"Tch! Tch!"

"I took the liberty to say, sir, that ankles was not catching, and that I would certainly think of Capericornopus if she would but walk a− tiptoe."

"Well, and−−"

"By hook and cook I got them to the library, sir. But the male person's boots creaked awful. The getting on his toes, sir seemed to induce it, as you might say."

"Yes, yes. So they're in the library?"

"They are, sir, and have been talking incessant, sir, ever since they was put there. We can hear their voices in our hall, sir."

Mr. Ferdinand again pursed his lips and looked like an elderly lady. The Prophet could no longer meet his eye.

"Bring some tea, Mr. Ferdinand, quietly to the library. And−−and if Mrs. Merillia should ask for me say I'm−−say I'm busy−−er−−writing."

Mr. Ferdinand moved a step backward.

"Master Hennessey!" he cried in a choked voice. I, a London butler, and you ask me to−−!"

"No, no. I beg your pardon, Mr. Ferdinand. Simply say I'm busy. That will be quite true. I shall be−−very busy."

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Ferdinand with a stern and at length successful effort to conquer his outraged feelings.

He wavered heavily away to fetch the tea, while the Prophet, like a guilty thing, stole towards the library. When he drew near to the door he heard a somewhat resounding hubbub of conversation proceeding within the chamber. He distinguished two voices. One was the hollow and sepulchral organ of Malkiel the Second, the other was a heavy and authoritative contralto, of the buzzing variety, which occasionally gave an almost professional click−−suggesting mechanism−−as the speaker passed from the lower to the upper register of her voice. As the Prophet reached the mat outside the door he heard the contralto voice say,−−

"How are we to know it really is only ankles?"

The voice of Malkiel the Second replied plaintively,−−

"But the gentleman who opened the door and−−"

The contralto voice clicked, and passed to its upper register.

"You are over fifty years of age," it said with devastating compassion, "and you can still trust a gentleman who opens doors! /O sanctum simplicitatus!/"

On hearing this sudden gush of classical erudition the Prophet must have been seized by a paralysing awe, for he remained as if glued to the mat, and made no effort to open the door and step into the room.

"If I am sanctified, Sophronia," said the voice of Malkiel, "I cannot help it, indeed I can't. We are as we are."

"Did Bottom say so in his epics?" cried the contralto, contemptuously. "Did Shakespeare imply that when he invented his immortal Bacon, or Carlyle, the great Cumberland sage, when he penned his world−famed 'Sartus'?"

"P'r'aps not, my dear. You know best. Still, ordinary men−−not that I, of course, can claim to be one−−must remain, to a certain extent, what they are."

"Then why was Samuel Smiles born?"

"What, my love?"

"Why, I say? Where is the use of effort? Of what benefit was Plato's existence to the republic? Of what assistance has the great Tracy Tupper been if men must still, despite all his proverbs, remain what they are? /O curum hominibus! O imitatori! Servus pecum!/"

At this point the voice of Mr. Ferdinand remarked in the small of the Prophet's back,−−

"Shall I set down the tea on the mat, sir, or−−"

The Prophet bounded into the library, tingling in every vein. His panther−like entrance evidently took the two conversationalists aback, for Malkiel the Second, who had been plaintively promenading about the room, still on his toes according to the behest of Mr. Ferdinand, sat down violently on a small table as if he had been shot, while the contralto voice, which had been sitting on a saddle−back chair by the hearth, simultaneously bounced up; both these proceedings being carried out with the frantic promptitude characteristic of complete and unhesitating terror.

"I beg your pardon!" said the Prophet. "I hope I haven't disturbed you."

Malkiel the Second leaned back, the contralto voice leaned forward, and both breathed convulsively.

"I really must apologise," continued the Prophet. "I fear I have startled you."

His guests swallowed nothing simultaneously and mechanically drew out their handkerchiefs. Then Malkiel feebly got up and the contralto voice feebly sank down again.

"I−−I thought I said sharp, sir," remarked Malkiel, at length, with a great effort recovering himself.

"Wasn't I sharp?" returned the Prophet. "Will you present me?"

"Are you equal to it, my love?" inquired Malkiel, tenderly, to the contralto voice.

The contralto voice nodded hysterically.

"Madame Sagittarius, sir," said Malkiel, turning proudly to the Prophet, "my wife, the mother of Corona and Capricornus."

The Prophet bowed and the lady inclined herself, slightly protruding her elbows as she did so, as if just to draw attention to the fact that she was possessed of those appendages and could use them if necessary.

Madame Malkiel, or rather Madame Sagittarius, as she must for the present be called, was a smallish woman of some forty winters. Her hair, which was drawn away intellectually from an ample and decidedly convex brow, was as black as a patent leather boot, and had a gloss upon it as of carefully−adjusted varnish. Her eyes were very large, very dark and very prominent. Her features were obstreperous and rippling, running from right to left, and her teeth, which were shaded by a tiny black moustache, gleamed in a manner that could scarcely be called natural. She was attired in a black velvet gown trimmed with a very large quantity of beadwork, a bonnet adorned with purple cherries, green tulips and orange−coloured ostrich tips, a pelisse, to which bugles had been applied with no uncertain hand, and an opal necklace. Her gloves were of white, her boots of black kid, the latter being furnished with elastic sides, and over her left wrist she carried a plush reticule, whose mouth was kept shut by a tightly−drawn scarlet riband. On the left side of her pelisse reposed a round bouquet of violets about the size of a Rugby football.

"I thought you might like to have some tea," began the Prophet, in his most soothing manner, while Mr. Ferdinand, with pursed lips, softly arranged that beverage upon the seat which Mr. Sagittarius−−so we must call him−−had just vacated.

"Thank you," said Madame Sagittarius, with dignity. "It would be acceptable. The long journey from the banks of the Mouse to these central districts is not without its fatigue. A beautiful equipage!"

"You said−−"

"You have a very fine equipage."

"You have seen the brougham?" said the Prophet, in some surprise.

"What broom?" buzzed Madame Sagittarius.

"I thought you were admiring−−"

"The tea equipage."

"Oh, yes, to be sure. Queen Anne silver, yes."

"A great woman!" said Madame Sagittarius, spreading a silk handkerchief that exactly matched the ostrich tips in her bonnet carefully over her velvet lap. "All who have read Mrs. Markham's work of genius with understanding must hold her name in reverence. A noble creature! A pity she died!"

"A great pity indeed!"

"Still we must remember that /Mors omnis communibus/. We must not forget that."

"No, no."

"And after all it is the will of Providence. /Mors Deo/."

"Quite so."

During this classical and historical retrospect Mr. Ferdinand had finished his task and quitted the apartment. As soon as he had gone Madame Sagittarius continued,−−

"As the mother of Corona and Capricornus I feel it my duty to ask you, sir−−that is, Mr.−−"

"Vivian."

"Mr. Vivian, whether the illness in your house is really only ankles as the gentleman who opened the door assured me?"

"It is only that."

"Not catching?"

"Oh, dear, no."

"There, Sophronia!" said Mr. Sagittarius. "I told you it was merely the prophecy."

He suddenly assumed a formidable manner, and continued,−−

"And now, sir, that we are alone−−"

But Madame interrupted him.

"Kindly permit our host to succour my fatigue, Jupiter," she said severely. "I am greatly upset by the journey. When I am restored we can proceed to business. At present I am fit only for consolation."

Mr. Sagittarius subsided, and the Prophet hastily assisted the victim of prolonged travel to some buttered toast. Having also attended to the wants of her precipitate underling, he thought it a good opportunity to proceed to a full explanation with the august couple, and he therefore remarked, with an ingratiating and almost tender smile,−−

"I think I ought to tell you at once that there will be no need for any further anxiety on your part. I have put down my telescope and have−− well, in fact, I have decided once and for all to give up prophecy for the future."

The Prophet, in his innocence, had expected that this declaration of policy would exercise a soothing influence upon his guests, more especially when he added−−it is to be feared with some insincerity,−−

"I have come to the conclusion that I overrated my powers, as amateurs will, you know, and that I have never really possessed any special talent in that direction. I think I shall take up golf instead, or perhaps the motor car."

He spoke deliberately in a light−minded, even frivolous, manner, toying airily with a sugar biscuit, as he leaned back in his chair, which stood opposite to Madame Sagittarius's. To his great surprise his well− meaning remarks were received with every symptom of grave dissatisfaction by his illustrious companions. Madame Sagittarius threw herself suddenly forward with a most vivacious snort, and her husband's face was immediately overcast by a threatening gloom that seemed to portend some very disagreeable expression of adverse humour.

"That won't do, sir, at this time of day!" he exclaimed. "You should have thought of that yesterday. That won't do at all, will it, Madame?"

"/O miseris hominorum mentas/!" exclaimed that lady, tragically. "/O pectorae caecae/!"

"You hear her, sir?" continued Mr. Sagittarius. "You grasp her meaning?"

"I do hear certainly," said the Prophet, beginning to feel that he really must rub up his classics.

"She helps Capricornus, sir, of an evening. She assists him in his Latin. Madame is a lady of deep education, sir."

"Quite so. But−−"

"There can be no going back, sir," continued Mr. Sagittarius. "Can there, Madame?"

"No human creature can go back," said Madame Sagittarius. "Such is the natural law as exemplified by the great Charles Darwin in his /Vegetable Mould and Silkworms/. No human creature can go back. Least of all this

gentleman. He must go forward and we with him."

The Prophet began to feel uncomfortable.

"But−−" he said.

"There is no such word as 'but' in my dictionary," retorted the lady.

"Ah, an abridged edition, no doubt," said the Prophet. "Still−−"

"I am better now," interposed Madame Sagittarius, brushing some crumbs of toast from her pelisse with the orange handkerchief. "Jupiter, if you are ready, we can explain the test to the gentleman."

So saying she drew a vinaigrette, set with fine imitation carbuncles, from the plush reticule, and applied it majestically to her nose. The Prophet grew really perturbed. He remembered his promise to his grandmother and Sir Tiglath, and felt that he must assert himself more strongly.

"I assure you," he began, with some show of firmness, "no tests will be necessary. My telescope has already been removed from its position, and−−"

"Then it must be reinstated, sir," said Mr. Sagittarius, "and this very night. Madame has hit upon a plan, sir, of searching you to the quick. Trust a woman, sir, to do that."

"I should naturally trust Madame Sagittarius," said the Prophet, very politely. "But I really cannot−−"

"So you say, sir. Our business is to find out whether, living in the Berkeley Square as you do, you can bring off a prophecy of any importance or not. The future of myself, Madame and family depends upon the results of the experiments which we shall make upon you during the next few days."

The Prophet began to feel as if he were shut up alone with a couple of determined practitioners of vivisection.

"Let's see, my dear," continued Mr. Sagittarius, addressing his wife, "what was it to be?"

"The honored grandmother one," replied the lady, tersely.

The Prophet started.

"I cannot possibly consent−−" he began.

"Pray, Mr. Vivian, listen to me," interposed Madame Sagittarius.

"Pray, sir, attend to Madame!" said Mr. Sagittarius, sternly.

"But I must really−−"

"January," said Madame, "is a month of grave importance to grandmothers this year, is it not, Jupiter?"

"Yes, my dear. In consequence of Scorpio being in the sign of Sagittarius. The crab will be very busy up till the third of February."

"Just so."

"At which date the little dog, my love, assumes the roll of maleficence towards the aged."

"I know. /Cane cavem/. When was the old lady born, Mr. Vivian, if you please?"

"What old lady?" stammered the Prophet, beginning to perspire.

"The old lady who's got ankles, your honoured grandmother?"

"On the twentieth of this month. But−−"

"At what time?"

"Six in the morning. But−−"

"Under what star?"

"Saturn. But−−"

"That's lucky, isn't it, Jupiter?" said Madame, in an increasingly business−like manner. "That brings her into touch with the Camelopard−− doesn't it?"

"Into very close touch indeed, my dear, and also with the bull. He goes right to her, as you may say."

"I cannot conceivably permit−−" began the Prophet in much agitation.

But Madame, without taking the smallest notice of him, proceeded.

"Will the scorpion be round her on her birthday?"

"Close round her, my love−−with the serpent. They work together."

"Together, do they? You know what effect they'll have on her, don't you, Jupiter?"

"I should rather think so, my darling," replied Mr. Sagittarius, with an air of profound and sinister information.

The Prophet's blood ran cold in his veins. Yet he felt for the moment unable to utter a syllable, or even to make a gesture of protest. So entirely detached from him did the worthy couple appear to be, so completely wrapped up in their own evidently well−considered and carefully−laid plans, that he had a sense of being in

another sphere, not theirs, of hearing their remarks from some distance off. Madame Sagittarius now turned towards him in a formal manner, and continued.

"And now, Mr. Vivian, I shall have to lay down the procedure that you will follow. Have you a good memory−−no, a pencil and notebook will be best. /Litterae scriptus manetur/, as we all know full well. Have you a pencil and−−?"

The Prophet nodded mechanically.

"Will you kindly get them?"

The Prophet rose, walked to his writing table and felt for the implements.

"If you will sit down now I will direct you," continued Madame, authoritatively.

The Prophet sat down at the table, holding a lead pencil upside down in one hand and an account−book wrong side up in the other.

"Let's see−−what's to−day?" inquired Madame, of her husband.

"The seventeenth, my dear," replied Mr. Sagittarius, looking at his wife with almost sickly adoration.

"To be sure. Capricornus's day for Homer's Idyl. Very well, Mr. Vivian, to−day being the seventeenth, and the old lady's birthday the twentieth, you have three days, or rather nights, of steady work before you."

"Steady work?" murmured the Prophet.

"What should be his hours, Jupiter?" continued Madame. "At what time of night is he to commence? Shall I say nine?"

The Prophet remembered feebly that, during the next three nights, he had two important dinner−engagements, a party at the Russian Ambassador's, and a reception at the Lord Chancellor's just opposite. However, he made no remark. Somehow he felt that words were useless when confronted with such an iron will as that of the lady in the pelisse.

"Nine would be too early, my dear," said Mr. Sagittarius. "Eleven p.m. would be more to the purpose."

"Eleven let it be then, punctually. Will you dot down, Mr. Vivian, that you have to be at the telescope to take observations at eleven p.m. every night from now till the twentieth."

"But I have had the telesc−−"

"Kindly dot it down."

The Prophet dotted it down with the wrong end of the pencil on the wrong side of the account−book.

"And what are his hours to be exactly, Jupiter?" continued Madame. "From eleven till dawn, I suppose?"

The Prophet shuddered.

"Eleven till three will be sufficient, my love. The crab, you know, has pretty well done his London work by that time. And the old lady will have to depend very much on the crab for these few nights."

At this point the Prophet's brain began to swim. Sparks seemed to float before his eyes, and amid these sparks, nebulous and fragmentary visions appeared, visions of his beloved grandmother companioned by scorpions and serpents, in close touch with camelopards and bovine monsters, and, in the last stress of terror and dismay, left entirely dependent upon crustaceans for that help and comfort which hitherto her devoted grandson had ever been thankful to afford.

"Oh, very well," replied Madame. "You will be able to get to bed at three, Mr. Vivian. Dot that down."

"Thank you," murmured the Prophet, making a minute pencil scratch in the midst of a bill for butcher's meat.

"During these hours−−but you can tell him the rest, Jupiter."

So saying, and with an air of one retiring from business upon a well− earned competence, Madame Sagittarius lay back in her chair, settled her bonnet−strings, flicked a crumb from the football of violets that decorated her left side, and, extending her kid boots towards the cheerful blaze that came from the fire, fell with a sigh into a comfortable meditation. Mr. Sagittarius, on the other hand, assumed a look of rather hectoring authority, and was about to utter what the Prophet had very little doubt was a command when there came a gentle tap to the door.

"Come in," said the Prophet.

He thought he had spoken in his ordinary voice. In reality he had merely uttered a very small whisper. The tap was repeated.

"Louder, sir, louder!" said Mr. Sagittarius, encouragingly.

"Come in!" shrieked the Prophet.

Mr. Ferdinand appeared, looking more like the elderly spinster lady when confronted with the corporal in the

Life Guards than ever.

"If you please, sir, I was to tell you that Lady Enid Thistle is with Mrs. Merillia taking tea. Mrs. Merillia thought you would wish to know."

Madame Sagittarius took the kid boots from the blaze on hearing this aristocratic name. Mr. Sagittarius assumed a look of reverence, and the Prophet realised, more acutely than ever, that even well−born young women can be inquisitive.

"Very well," he said. "Say I'll−−I'll"−−he succeeded in making his voice sound absolutely firm−−"I'll come in a moment."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Ferdinand cast a glance of respectful, but unlimited, horror upon the Prophet's guests and retired, while the Prophet, calling upon all his manhood, turned to Mr. Sagittarius.

"I regret more than I can say that I shall be obliged now to obey my grandmother's summons," he said courteously. "Suppose we defer this−− this pleasant little discussion to some future oc−−"

"Impossible, sir!" cried Mr. Sagittarius. "Quite impossible. You must get to work to−night, and how can you do it without your directions?"

"Oh, I can manage all right," said the Prophet, desperately. "I can give a guess as to−−"

"/Non sunt ad astrae mollibus a terrus viae/!" cried Madame. "The road from Berkeley square to the stars is not so easy, is it, Jupiter?"

"No indeed, my love. Why−−"

"Then," exclaimed the Prophet, much agitated, and feeling it incumbent upon him to get rid of Mr. Sagittarius at once lest the curiosity of Lady Enid should increase beyond all measure, and lead to an encounter between the two clients of Jellybrand's, "then kindly give me my directions as briefly as possible, and−−"

There was another tap upon the door.

"What is it?" cried the Prophet, distractedly, "Come in!"

Mr. Ferdinand re−entered very delicately.

"Her ladyship can only stay a minute, sir. Mrs. Merillia hopes you can leave your business−−I said as you was very busy, sir−−and come up to the drawing−room."

"Yes, yes. I'll come. Say I'll come, Mr. Ferdinand."

"Yes, sir."

As the door closed the Prophet exclaimed excitedly,−−

"I fear I really must−−"

"Take down your directions, sir," broke in Mr. Sagittarius, firmly.

"Very well," rejoined the Prophet, desperately, seizing his pencil and the account−book. "What are they?"

"You swear to follow them, sir?"

"Yes, yes, anything−−anything!"

"Have you a star map?"

"Yes−−no!"

"You must get one."

"Very well."

"You had better do so at the Stores."

Madame breathed an almost sensuous sigh which caused her husband to glance tenderly towards her.

"I know, my love, I know," he said. "It may come some day."

"/O festum dies! Longa intervallam!/" she murmured, shaking her bonnet with the manner of a martyr to duty.

Mr. Sagittarius was greatly moved.

"She's a saint," he whispered aside to the Prophet, as if imparting some necessary information.

"Certainly. Please go on!"

Mr. Sagittarius started, as if suddenly recalled to mundane matters.

"Get it at the Stores," he said. "In the astronomical department."

"Very well."

"Having done so, and keeping the old lady perpetually in your mind, you will place her in the claws of the crab−−"

"What!"

"Mentally, sir, mentally, of course."

"Oh."

"And, allowing for the natural effect of the scorpion and serpent upon one of her venerable age−−"

"Good Heavens!"

"When close round her, as they will be−−but you will observe that for yourself−−"

The Prophet shut his eyes as one who refuses to behold sacrilege.

"You will trace the cycloidal curve of the planets−−can you do that?"

The Prophet nodded.

"As it affects her birthday, the twentieth. Should the lynx be near her−−"

"No, no!" cried the Prophet. "It shall not be!"

"Well, you'll have to find that out and keep an eye to it. But should it be, you will commit to paper what result its presence is likely to produce to her, and work the whole thing out clearly for myself and Madame on paper−−in prophetic form, of course−−so that we receive it by−−what post shall I say, my dear?"

"First post, Jupiter."

"First post on−−what day is the twentieth?"

"I don't know," replied the Prophet, helplessly.

"A Thursday," said Madame. "Capricornus's day for chronic sections."

"She always knows," said Mr. Sagittarius to the Prophet.

"Always."

"Very well then, first post Thursday morning. Now is that quite clear?"

"Oh, quite, quite."

"You will of course send the old lady's horoscope to us at the same time with full particulars."

"Full particulars?" said the Prophet. "What of?"

"Of her removal from the bottle, cutting of her first tooth, short coating, going into skirts, putting of the hair up, day of marriage and widowhood, illnesses−−"

"Especially the rashes, Jupiter," struck in Madame.

"What a mind!" said Mr. Sagittarius aside to the Prophet.

"What!"

"Especially as Madame says, any illnesses taking the form of a rash−− the epidemic form, as I may say−−and so forth. We are to receive this document by the first post Thursday morning."

"Have you dotted all that down, Mr. Vivian?" inquired Madame.

The Prophet hastily made a large variety of scratches with the lead pencil.

"And now," continued Mr. Sagittarius.

There was a third tap at the door.

"Come in," cried the Prophet, distractedly, and feeling as if homicidal mania were rapidly creeping upon him.

Mr. Ferdinand appeared once more, with a mouth like a purse.

"Her ladyship says she really must go in a moment, sir, and−−and Mrs. Merillia begs that−−"

"I am coming at once, Mr. Ferdinand. I swear it. Go upstairs and swear I swear it."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Ferdinand departed, rather with the demeanour of an archbishop who has been inveigled into pledging himself, on his archiepiscopal oath, to commit some horrid crime. The Prophet turned, almost violently, towards his guests.

"I must go," he cried. "I must indeed. Pray forgive me. You see how I am circumstanced. Permit me to show you to the door."

"You swear, sir, to carry out all our directions and to dot down−−"

"I do. I swear solemnly to dot down−−if you will only−−this way. Take care of the mat."

"We trust you, Mr. Vivian," said Madame, with majestic pathos. "A wife, a mother trusts you. /Placens uxus! Mater familiaris/."

"I pledge my honour. This is the−−no, no, not that way, not that way!"

The worthy couple, by mistake, no doubt, were proceeding towards the grand staircase, having missed the

way to the hall door, and as the Prophet, following them up with almost unimaginable activity, drew near enough to drum the right direction into their backs, Lady Enid became visible on the landing above. Mr. Sagittarius perceived her.

"Why, it's Miss Minerv−−" he began.

"This way, this way!" cried the Prophet, wheeling them round and driving them, but always like a thorough gentleman, towards the square.

"Then she leads a double life, too!" said Mr. Sagittarius, solemnly, fixing his strained eyes upon the Prophet.

"She? Who?" said Madame, sharply.

She had not seen Lady Enid.

"All of us, my love, all of us," returned her husband, as the Prophet succeeded in shepherding them on to the pavement.

"Good−bye," he cried.

With almost inconceivable rapidity he shut the door. As he did so two vague echoes seemed to faint on his ear. One was male, a dreamlike−− "First post, Thursday!" The other was female, a fairylike−−"/Jactum alea sunt/."

CHAPTER IX. THE PROPHET BEGINS TO CARRY OUT HIS DIRECTIONS

"Mr. Ferdinand," said the Prophet the same evening, after he had dressed for dinner, "what has become of the telescope?"

He spoke in a low voice, not unlike that of a confirmed conspirator, and glanced rather furtively around him, as if afraid of being overheard.

"I have removed it, sir, according to your orders," replied Mr. Ferdinand, also displaying some uneasiness.

"Yes, yes. Where have you placed it?"

"Well, sir, I understood you to say I might throw it in Piccadilly, if I so wished."

The Prophet suddenly displayed relief.

"I see. You have done so."

"Well, no, sir."

The Prophet's face fell.

"Then where is it?"

"Well, sir, for the moment I have set it in the butler's pantry."

"Indeed!"

"I thought it might be of use there, sir," continued Mr. Ferdinand, in some confusion, which, however, was not noticed by the Prophet. "Of great use to−−to Gustavus and me in−−in our duties, sir."

"Quite so, quite so," returned the Prophet, abstractedly.

"Did you wish it to be taken to the drawing−room again, sir?"

The Prophet started.

"Certainly not," he said. "On no account. As you very rightly say−−a butler's pantry is the place for a telescope. It can be of great service there."

His fervour surprised Mr. Ferdinand, who began to wonder whether, by any chance, his master knew of the Lord Chancellor's agreeable−looking second−cook. After pausing a moment respectfully, Mr. Ferdinand was about to decamp when the Prophet checked him with a gesture.

"One moment, Mr. Ferdinand!"

"Sir?"

"One moment!"

Mr. Ferdinand stood still. The Prophet cleared his throat, arranged his tie, and then said, with an air of very elaborate nonchalance,−−

"At what time do you generally go to bed, Mr. Ferdinand, when you don't sit up?"

"Sometimes at one time, sir, and sometimes at another."

"That's rather ambiguous."

"I beg pardon, sir."

"What is your usual hour for being quite−−that is, entirely in bed."

"Entirely in bed, sir?"

Mr. Ferdinand's fine bass voice vibrated with surprise.

"Yes. Not partially in bed, but really and truly in bed?"

"Well, sir," returned Mr. Ferdinand, with decided dignity, "when I am in bed, sir, I am."

"And when's that?"

"By twelve, sir."

"I thought as much," cried the Prophet, with slightly theatrical solicitude. "You sit up too late, Mr. Ferdinand."

"I hope, sir, that I−−"

"That's what makes you so pale, Mr. Ferdinand, and delicate."

"Delicate, sir!" cried Mr. Ferdinand, who had in fact been hopelessly robust from the cradle, totally incapable of acquiring even the most universal complaints, and, moreover, miraculously exempt from that well−recognised affliction of the members of his profession so widely known as "butler's feet."

"Yes," said the Prophet, emphatically. "You should be in bed, thoroughly in bed, by a quarter to eleven. And

Gustavus too! He is young, and the young can't be too careful. Begin to−night, Mr. Ferdinand. I speak for your health's sake, believe me."

So saying the Prophet hurried away, leaving Mr. Ferdinand almost as firmly rooted to the Turkey carpet with surprise as if he had been woven into the pattern at birth, and never unpicked in later years.

At ten that evening the Prophet, having escaped early from his dinner on some extravagant plea of sudden illness or second gaiety, stood in the small and sober passage of the celebrated Tintack Club and inquired anxiously for Mr. Robert Green.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Green is upstairs in the smoke−room," said the functionary whom the club grew under glass for the benefit of the members and their friends.

"Sam, show this gentleman to Mr. Green."

Sam, who was a red−faced child in buttons, with a man's walk and the back of one who knew as much as most people, obeyed this command, and ushered the Prophet into a room with a sealing−wax red paper, in which Robert Green was sitting alone, smoking a large cigar and glancing at the "stony−broke edition" of an evening paper. He greeted the Prophet with his usual unaffected cordiality, offered him every drink that had yet been invented, and, on his refusal of them all, handed him a cigar and a matchbox, and whistled "Ta−ra−ra−boom−de−av" at him in the most friendly manner possible.

"Bob," said the Prophet, taking a very long time to light the cigar, "what, in your opinion, is the exact meaning of the term honour?"

Mr. Green's cheerful, though slightly belated, face assumed an expression of genial betwaddlement.

"Oh, well, Hen," he said, "exact meaning you know's not so easy. But−− hang it, we all understand the thing, eh, without sticking it down in words. What?"

"I don't, Bob," rejoined the Prophet, in the tone of a man at odds with several consciences. "In what direction does honour lie?"

"It don't lie at all, old chap," said Mr. Green, with the decided manner which had made him so universally esteemed in yeomanry circles.

The Prophet began to look very much distressed.

"Look here, Bob, I'll put it in this way," he said. "Would an honourable man feel bound to keep a promise?"

"Rather."

"Yes, but would he feel bound to keep two promises?"

"Rather, if he'd made 'em."

"Suppose he had!"

"Go ahead, Hen, I'm supposing," said Mr. Green, beginning to pucker his brows and stare very hard indeed in the endeavour to keep the supposition fixed firmly in his head.

"And, further, suppose that these two promises were diametrically opposed to one another."

Mr. Green stuck out one leg, looked obliquely at the carpet, pressed his lips together and nodded.

"So that if he fulfilled them both he'd have to break them both−−"

"Stop a sec! Gad, I've lost it! Start again, Hen!"

"No, I mean so that if he didn't break one he would be forced to break the other. Have you got that?"

"Stop a bit! Don't believe I have. Let's see!"

He moved his lips silently, repeating the Prophet's words.

"Yes. I've got that all right now," he said, after three minutes of strenuous mental exertion.

"Well, what would you say of him?"

"That he was a damned fool."

The Prophet looked very much upset.

"No, no, Bob, I meant to him. What would you say to him?"

"That he was a damned fool."

The Prophet began to appear thoroughly broken down. However, he still stuck to his interpellation.

"Very well, Bob," he said, with unutterable resignation−−as of a toad beneath the harrow−−"but, putting all that aside−−"

"Give us a chance, Hen! I've got to shunt all that, have I?"

"Yes, at least all you would say of, and to, the man."

"Oh, only that. Wait a bit! Yes, I've done that. Drive on now!"

"Putting all that aside, what should you advise the man to do?"

"Not to be such a damned fool again."

"No, no! I mean about the two promises?"

"What about 'em?"

"Which would his sense of honour compel him to keep?"

"I shouldn't think such a damned fool'd got a sense of honour."

The Prophet winced, but he stuck with feverish obstinacy to his point.

"Yes, Bob, he had."

"I don't believe it, Hen, 'pon my word I don't. You'll always find that damned f−−"

"Bob, I must beg you to take it from me. He had. Now which promise should he keep?"

"Who'd he made 'em to?"

"Who?" said the Prophet, wavering.

"Yes."

"One to−−to a very near and dear relative, the other to−−well, Bob to two comparative strangers."

"What sort of strangers."

"The sort of strangers who−−who live beside a river, and who−−who mix principally with−−well, in fact, with architects and their wives."

"Rum sort of strangers?"

"They are decidedly."

"Oh, then, you know 'em?"

"That's not the point," exclaimed the Prophet, hastily. "The point is which promise is to be kept."

"I should say the one made to the relative. Wait a bit, though! Yes, I should say that."

The Prophet breathed a sigh of relief. But some dreadful sense of honesty within him compelled him to add,−−

"I forgot to say that he'd pledged his honour to the architects−−that is, to the strangers who lived beside a river."

"What−−and not pledged it to the relative?"

"Well, no."

"Then he ought to stick to the promise he'd pledged his honour over, of course. Nice for the relative! The man's a damned fool, Hen. Do have a drink, old chap."

Thus did Mr. Robert Green drive the Prophet to take the first decisive step that was to lead to so many complications,−−the step towards Mr. Ferdinand's pantry.

At precisely a quarter to eleven p.m. the Prophet stood upon his doorstep and, very gently indeed, inserted his latchkey into the door. A shaded lamp was burning in the deserted hall, where profound silence reigned. Clear was the night and starry. As the Prophet turned to close the door he perceived the busy crab, and the thought of his beloved grandmother, sinking now to rest on the second floor all unconscious of the propinquity of the scorpion, the contiguity of the serpent, filled his expressive eyes with tears. He shut the door, stood in the hall and listened. He heard a chair crack, the ticking of a clock. There was no other sound, and he felt certain that Mr. Ferdinand and Gustavus had heeded his anxious medical directions and gone entirely to bed betimes, leaving the butler's pantry free for the nocturnal operations of the victim of Madame. For he recognised that she was the guiding spirit of the family that dwelt beside the Mouse. He might have escaped out of the snare of Mr. Sagittarius, but Madame was a fowler who would hold him fast till she had satisfied herself once and for all whether it were indeed possible to dwell in the central districts, within reach of the Army and Navy heaven in Victoria Street, and yet remain a prophet. Yes, he must now work for the information of her ambitious soul. He sighed deeply and went softly up the stairs. His chamber was on the same floor as Mrs. Merillia's, and, as he neared her door, he rose instinctively upon his toes and, grasping the tails of his evening coat firmly with his left hand, to prevent any chance rustling of their satin lining, and bearing his George the Third silver candlestick steadily to control any clattering of its extinguisher, he moved on rather like a thief who was also a trained ballerina, holding his breath and pressing his lips together in a supreme agony of dumbness.

Unluckily he tripped in the raised pattern of the carpet, the candlestick uttered a silver note, his pent−in breath

escaped with a loud gulp, and Mrs. Merillia's delicate voice cried out from behind her shut door,−−

"Hennessey! Hennessey!"

The Prophet bit his lip and went at once into her room.

Mrs. Merillia looked simply charming in bed, with her long and elegant head shaded by a beautiful muslin helmet trimmed with lace, and a delicious embroidered wrapper round her shoulders. The Prophet stood beside her, shading the candle−flame with his hand.

"Well, grannie, dear," he said, "what is it? You ought to be asleep."

"I never sleep before twelve. Have you had a pleasant dinner?"

"Very. Stanyer Phelps, the American, was there and very witty. And we had a marvellous /supreme de volaille/. Everybody asked after you."

Mrs. Merillia nodded, like an accustomed queen who receives her due. She knew very well that she was the most popular old woman in London, knew it too well to think about it.

"Well, good−night, grannie."

The Prophet bent to kiss her, his heart filled with compunction at the thought of the promise he was about to break. It seemed to him almost more than sacrilegious to make of this dear and honoured ornament of old age a vehicle for the satisfaction of the vulgar ambitions and disagreeable curiosity of the couple who dwelt beside the Mouse.

"Good−night, my dear boy."

She kissed him, then added,−−

"You like Lady Enid, don't you?"

"Very much."

"So does Robert Green. He thinks her such a thoroughly sensible girl."

"Bob! Does he?" said the Prophet, concealing a slight smile.

"Yes. If you want her to get on with you, Hennessey, you should come up to tea when she is here."

"I couldn't to−day, grannie."

"You were really busy?"

"Very busy indeed."

"I suppose you only saw her for a moment on the stairs?"

"That was all."

It was true, for Lady Enid had scarcely stayed to speak to the Prophet, having hurried out in the hope of discovering who were the "two parties" he had been entertaining on the ground floor.

Mrs. Merillia dropped the subject.

"Good−night, Hennessey," she said. "Go to bed at once. You look quite tired. I am so thankful you have given up that horrible astronomy."

The Prophet did not reply, but, as he went out of the room, he knew, for the first time, what criminals with consciences feel like when they are engaged in following their dread profession.

As he walked across the landing he heard a clock strike eleven. He started, hastened into his room, tore off his coat, replaced it with a quilted smoking−jacket, sprang lightly to his table, seized a planisphere, or star−map, which he had succeeded in obtaining that night from a small working astronomer's shop in the Edgeware Road, and, mindful of the terms of his oath and the decided opinion of Robert Green, scurried hastily, but very gingerly, down the stairs. This time Mrs. Merillia did not hear him. She had indeed become absorbed in a new romance, written by a very rising young Montenegrin who was just then making some stir in the literary circles of the elect.

Very surreptitiously the Prophet tripped across the hall and reached the stout door which gave access to the servants' quarters. But here he paused. Although he had lived in Mrs. Merillia's most comfortable home for at least fifteen years, he had actually never once penetrated beyond this door. It had never occurred to him to do so. Often he had approached it. Quite recently, when Mrs. Fancy Quinglet had broken into tears on the refusal of Sir Tiglath Butt to burst according to her prediction, he had handed her to this very portal. But he had never passed through it, nor did he know what lay beyond. No doubt there was a kitchen, very probably the mysterious region of watery activities commonly known as a scullery, quite certainly a butler's pantry. But where each separate sanctum lay, and what should be the physiognomy of each one the Prophet had not the vaguest idea. As he turned the handle of the door he felt like Sir Henry Stanley, when that intrepid explorer first set foot among the leafy

habitations of the dwarfs.

As the door opened the Prophet found himself in a large apartment whose walls were decorated with the efforts of those great painters who feed the sentimental imaginations of the masses in the beautiful Christmas numbers of our artistic day. Enchanting little girls and exceedingly human dogs observed his entrance from every hand, while such penetrating and suggestive legends as "Don't bite!" "Mustn't!" "Naughty!" "Would 'ums?" and the like, filled his mind with the lofty thoughts so suitable to the Christmas season. Over the mantelpiece was a /Cook's Almanac for the Home/, decorated in bright colours, a /Butler's own book/, bound in claret−coloured linen, and a large framed photograph of Francatelli, that immortal /chef/ whose memory is kept green in so many kitchens, and whose recipes are still followed as are followed the footprints of the great ones in the Everlasting Sands of Time. One corner of the room Gustavus had made his own, and here might be seen his tasteful what−not and his little library−−neatly arranged unabridged farthing editions of Drummond's /Ascent of Man/, Mill's /Liberty/, Crampton's /Origin of Self−Respect/, Barlow's /A Philosophical Examination into the Art and Practice of Tipping and Receiving Tips/, and other volumes suitable for an intellectual footman's reading. An eight−day clock, which was carefully and lovingly wound up by the prudent Mrs. Fancy Quinglet every morning and evening, snored peacefully in a recess by the hearth, and, from a crevice near the window, the bright, intelligent eyes of a couple of well−developed black−beetles−−mother and son−−contentedly surveyed the cheerful scene.

The Prophet, after a moment's pause of contemplation, passed on through a swing door, covered with green baize, and down some stairs to the inner courts of this interesting region. This time he came to anchor in a room which, he thought, might well have been a butler's pantry had it contained a large−sized telescope. It was in fact the parlour set apart for the use of the kitchen and scullery maids, and was brightly fitted up with a dresser, a cupboard for skewers, a rolling−pin, a basting machine, and other similar adjuncts. It gave on to the kitchen, in which the cat of the house was enjoying well−earned slumber in the attitude of a black ball. So far his exploring tour had quite fulfilled the rather vague expectations of the Prophet, but he now began to feel anxious. Time was passing on and he had sworn to be at the telescope by eleven sharp. He had, therefore, already slightly fractured his oath, and he had no desire to earn the anathema of all such men as Robert Green by breaking it into small pieces. Where was the butler's pantry? He glanced eagerly round the kitchen, perceived a door, passed through it, and found himself confronted by a sink. He had gained the scullery, but not his goal. To the right of the sink was yet another door through which the Prophet, who carried the planisphere in one hand, the George the Third candlestick in the other, rather excitedly debouched into a good−sized passage. As he did so he heard the muffled alto voice of the eight−day clock proclaim that it was a quarter−past eleven. Feeling that he was now upon the point of breaking both the promises of the damned fool, the Prophet hastened along the passage, darted through the first outlet, and found himself abruptly face to back with what appeared at first glance to be an enormously broad and bow−legged dwarf, with a bald head and a black tail coat, which, in an attitude of savage curiosity, was gazing through a gigantic instrument, whose muzzle projected from an open window into a spacious area. So great was the Prophet's surprise, so supreme the shock to his whole nervous system occasioned by this unexpected encounter, that he did not utter a cry. His amazement carried him into that terrible region which lies beyond the realms of speech. He simply stood quite still and gazed at the bow−legged dwarf, which, in its turn, continued to gaze savagely through the gigantic instrument into the area. Not for perhaps three or four minutes did the Prophet realise that this dwarf was merely an ingeniously shortened form of Mr. Ferdinand, who, with his legs very wide apart, and making two accurate right angles at their respective knee−joints, his head thrown well back, and his arms arranged in two perfect capital V's, with the elbows pointing directly at the walls on either side of him, had been busily engaged for the last hour and a quarter in trying to focus firstly the Lord Chancellor's house on the opposite side of the square, and secondly the pleasant−looking second− cook in it. That his chivalrous efforts had not yet been crowned with complete success will be understood when we say that he had seen during his first half−hour of contemplation nothing at all, during his second half−hour the left−hand top star of the Great Bear, and finally the fourth spike from the end of the iron railing which enclosed the square garden, at which he had been gazing closely for precisely fifteen minutes and a half when the Prophet darted into the pantry.

Having at length recovered from his shock of surprise sufficiently to realise that the enormous and immobile dwarf was Mr. Ferdinand, and that Mr. Ferdinand was not yet aware of his presence, the Prophet resolved to beat a rapid and noiseless retreat. He carried this resolve into execution by turning sharply round, knocking his head against a plate chest, firing the George the Third candlestick into the passage, and letting the planisphere go into

the china jar of "Butler's own special pomade" which Mr. Ferdinand kept always open for use upon the pantry table.

To say that Mr. Ferdinand ceased from looking through the telescope for the Lord Chancellor's second−cook at this juncture would, perhaps, not convey quite a fair idea of the activity which he could on occasion display even at his somewhat advanced age. It might be more just to state that, without wasting any precious time in useless elongation, he described an exceedingly rapid circular movement, still preserving the shortened form of himself which had so deceived and startled his master, and brought his eye from the orifice of the telescope to a level with the Prophet's knees exactly at the moment when the Prophet rebounded from the plate chest into the centre of the apartment.

"Oh, is it you, Mr. Ferdinand?" said the Prophet, controlling every symptom of anguish, with the exception of a rapid flutter of the eyelids. "I was looking for−−for a bradawl."

The Prophet's choice of this useful little implement as the reason for his presence in Mr. Ferdinand's special sanctum was prompted by the fact that, just as he was speaking, he happened to see a bradawl lying upon a neighbouring knife cupboard in the company of a corkscrew.

"And here, I see, is just what I want," he added calmly.

So far he had displayed extraordinary composure, but at this point he made a slight mistake, for he picked up the corkscrew and sauntered quietly away with it into the darkness, leaving Mr. Ferdinand still in the attitude of a Toby jug, the planisphere still head downwards in the butler's own special pomade, and the George the Third candlestick stretched at full length upon the passage floor.

CHAPTER X. THE PROPHET AND MALKIEL THE SECOND CONVERSE BY TELEGRAM

"Hennessey Vivian, 1000 Berkeley Square, W.

"Please wire result of last night's observations from eleven till three inclusive.−−Sagittarius."

"Jupiter Sagittarius, Sagittarius Lodge, Crampton St. Peter, N.

"Impossible wire result, will write at length after taking further observations to−night.−−Vivian."

"Certainly write at length, but meanwhile wire all important results in condensed form.−−Sagittarius."

"Results not sufficiently important to wire, letter without fail to−morrow.−−Vivian."

"Never mind unimportance, wire whatever results obtained.−− Sagittarius."

"On consideration think results too important to wire, will explain by letter.−−Vivian."

"Your second and third wires in direct contradiction; kindly reconcile opposing statements.−−Sagittarius."

"Cannot reconcile by wire, will do so by letter.−−Vivian."

"Then meanwhile request forecast of grandmother so far as gathered last night.−−Sagittarius."

"Quite impossible discuss grandmother by wire.−−Vivian."

"Not at all; couch in careful terms, shall understand; no need put grandmother's name.−−Sagittarius."

"Quite impossible; grandmother too sacred for treatment by wire, long and full letter to−morrow.−−Vivian."

"Absurd! Call her Harry and wire her future as obtained last night; shall understand.−−Sagittarius."

"Cannot possibly consent call grandmother Harry; pray cease; succession of telegraph boys to house attracting general attention in square.−−Vivian."

"Must insist; then call her Susan and wire.−−Sagittarius."

"Cannot possibly consent to call her Susan; discussion of such matter by wire not decent; regret must absolutely decline. −−Vivian."

"Madame and self insulted by accusation not decent; demand explanation and apology.−−Sagittarius."

"Regret; no desire give pain to lady, but this must cease; grandmother and square seriously upset by procession of telegraph boys.−−Vivian."

"Cannot help square and grandmother; must have last night's result to compare with own observation of grandmother with crab and scorpion.−−Sagittarius."

"Pray cease; would rather die than discuss grandmother with crab and scorpion by wire.−−Vivian."

"Rubbish! Call crab Susan, scorpion Jane, grandmother Harry, and wire; absolutely insist.−−Sagittarius."

"Absolutely decline discuss crab, scorpion and grandmother by wire; final.−−Vivian.

"Scandalous! not behaviour of gentleman; Madame cut to heart; infamous.−−Sagittarius."

"Mater familiaris pallidibus ira.−−Madame Sagittarius."

"If receive no reply as to grandmother and crab, et cetera, shall start at once for Square.−−Jupiter and Madame Sagittarius."

"On no account trouble come up; going out immediately; important engagement.−−Vivian."

"Madame putting on boots.−−Sagittarius."

"Utterly useless put on boots; leaving house.−−Vivian."

"Madame boots on; tying bonnet.−−Sagittarius."

"Totally useless tie bonnet; absolutely forced leave house. −−Vivian."

"Madame in pelisse; shall come in wait till your return. −−Sagittarius."

"Regret pelisse; quite useless; out till late evening.−−Vivian."

"Shall stay till whatever hour; have on hat and bonnet now; starting.−−Jupiter and Madame Sagittarius."

"For Heaven's sake don't; will wire whatever you wish.−−Vivian."

"Don't. Ankles perhaps catching; dangerous Capricornus.−−Vivian."

"Have you started?−−Vivian."

"Have not started, but at threshold of door; wire full explanation of crab with grandmother, et cetera, last night or shall start instanter.−−Jupiter and Madame Sagittarius."

"Truth is very little result last night; did not see crab with grandmother; deeply regret.−−Vivian."

"Then wire result of scorpion with grandmother.−−Sagittarius."

"Very sorry did not see scorpion with grandmother.−−Vivian."

"Impossible; believe stars out; clear sky; self and Madame distinctly observed crab and scorpion with grandmother for four hours.−−Sagittarius."

"On honour did not see crab, scorpion or grandmother.−−Vivian."

"Then has grandmother passed over?−−Sagittarius."

"Certainly not, but no result; pray cease discussion, grandmother and square distracted by incessant uproar of boys at door. −−Vivian."

"Leaving house; with you as soon as possible.−−Jupiter and Madame Sagittarius."

"Heaven's sake don't; tell truth; did not look through telescope at all last night.−−Vivian."

"What meaning of this swore oath broken; no gentleman; coming at once for explanation.−−Jupiter and Madame Sagittarius."

"Stop; sending boy messenger with full explanation; severe accident last night, injured head, so unable look for crab, grandmother and scorpion.−−Vivian."

"Astounded, upset, Madame says not conduct gentleman; might have seen crab, grandmother and scorpion with injured head; mere excuse −−caput mortuus decrepitum cancer.−−Sagittarius."

"Pray excuse; look to−night without fail; Heaven's sake cease writing; grandmother and whole square amazement, confusion; shall go mad if continues.−−Vivian."

"Very well, but insist on full letter; confidence in oath much shaken; wires most shifty; gross neglect of crab, grandmother and scorpion.−−Sagittarius."

"Homo miserum sed magnum est veritatus et praevalebetur.−−Madame Sagittarius."

CHAPTER XI. MISS MINERVA OPENS HER BOOK OF REVELATION IN A CAB

"Assure the Lord Chancellor that the last boy has been and gone−−gone away, that is, Mr. Ferdinand, and that I pledge my sacred word not to have another telegram to−day."

"Yes, sir. His lordship desired that you should be informed that, according to the law regulating public abominations and intolerable street noises, you was liable to−−"

"I know, I know."

"And that, by the Act dealing with gross offences against the public order and scandalous crimes against the peace of metropolitan communities, you was amenable−−"

"Exactly. Go to his lordship and swear−−"

"I couldn't do that so soon again, sir, really. I swore only as short ago as yesterday, sir, by your express order, but−−"

"I mean asseverate to his lordship that the very last boy has knocked for the very last time."

"It wasn't so much the knocking, sir, his lordship complained of, as the boys coming to the door meeting the boys going away from it, and blocking up the pavement, sir, so that no one could get past and−−"

"Yes, yes. Go and asseverate at once, Mr. Ferdinand."

"Very well, sir. And Her Grace, the Duchess of Camberwell, who is passing from one fit to another, sir, from fright at the uproar and telegrams going to the wrong house, sir?"

"Implore Her Grace to have courage and to trust me as a gentleman when I promise solemnly that the knocking shall not be renewed."

"Very well, sir."

"Mr. Ferdinand!"

"Sir?"

"Have the knockers swathed in cotton−wool at once."

"Yes, sir,"

"And−−fix a bulletin on the door. Wait! I'll write it."

The Prophet hastened to his writing table and, with a hand that trembled violently, wrote on a card as follows:−−

"Owner of this house seriously ill, pray do not knock or /death/ shall certainly ensue."

"There! Poor grannie will have peace now. Nail that up, Mr. Ferdinand, under the cotton−wool."

"Very well, sir. Mrs. Merillia, sir, would be glad to speak to you for a moment. You remember I informed you?"

"I'll go to her at once. But first bring me a glass of brandy, Mr. Ferdinand. I'm feeling extremely unwell."

And the Prophet, who was paler far than ashes, and beaded from top to toe with perspiration, sank down feebly upon a chair and let his head drop on the blotting−pad that lay on his writing−table.

When he had swallowed an inch or two of cognac he got up, pulled himself together with both hands, and walked, like an elderly person afflicted with incipient locomotor ataxy, upstairs into the drawing− room where Mrs. Merillia was lying on a sofa, ministered to by Fancy Quinglet, who, at the moment of his entrance, was busily engaged in stuffing a large wad of cotton−wool into the right ear of her beloved mistress.

"Leave us please, Fancy," said Mrs. Merillia, in a voice that sounded much older than usual. "And as your head is so bad, too, you had better lie down."

"Thank you, ma'am. If I keep upright, ma'am, I feel my head will split asunder. I can't speak different nor feel other."

"Then don't be upright."

"No, ma'am. Them that feels other, let them declare it!" and Mrs. Fancy retired, holding both hands to her temples, and uttering very distinctly sundry stifled moans.

Mrs. Merillia motioned the Prophet to a chair, and, after lying quite still for about five minutes with her eyes tightly shut, said in a weak tone of voice,−−

"How many more telegrams do you expect, Hennessey? You have had twenty− seven within the last three hours. Can you give me a rough general idea of the average number you anticipate will probably arrive every hour from now till the offices close?"

"Grannie, grannie, forgive me! I assure you−−"

"Don't be afraid to tell me, Hennessey. It is much better to know the worst, and fact it bravely. Will the present average be merely sustained, or do you expect the quantity to increase towards night? because if so−−"

"Grannie, there will be no more. I swear to you solemnly that I will not have another telegram to−day. I will not upon my sacred honour. Nothing−−not wild horses even−−shall induce me."

"Horses! Then were they racing tips, Hennessey? Yes, give me the /eau de Cologne/ and fan me gently. Were they racing tips?"

"Oh, grannie, how could you suppose−−"

At this moment Mr. Ferdinand entered softly and went up to Mrs. Merillia.

"Mr. Q. Elisha Hubsbee, ma'am. He is deeply distressed and asks for news . . ."

"The Central American Ambassador's grandfather," said Mrs. Merillia, reading the card which Mr. Ferdinand handed to her.

"Shocked to hear you are so ill that a knock will finish you. Guess you must be far gone. Earnest sympathy. Have you tried patent morphia molasses?

Q. E. H."

"Ah! how things get about! Tell Mr. Elisha Hubsbee the knocks have nearly killed us all, Mr. Ferdinand, but we are bearing up as well as can be expected. If necessary we will certainly try the molasses."

"Yes, ma'am."

"It is two o'clock now, Hennessey. The Charing Cross office is open till midnight, I believe, so at the present rate you should only have about ninety more telegrams to−day. But if you have reason to expect−−"

Mr. Ferdinand re−entered.

"Mrs. Hendrick Marshall has called, ma'am. She desired me to say she was passing the door and was much horrified to find that you are so near the point, ma'am."

"What point, Mr. Ferdinand?"

"Of death, ma'am. She had no idea at all, ma'am."

"Oh, thank Mrs. Hendrick Marshall, Mr. Ferdinand, and say we shall try to keep from the point for the present.

"Yes, ma'am."

"−−That the numbers will go up as the afternoon draws on, Hennessey−−"

"Grannie, haven't I sworn, and have you ever known me to tell you a−−"

Suddenly the Prophet stopped short, thinking how that very night he would be forced by his oath to "Madame and self" to break his promise to his grandmother, how already it would have been broken had not Mr. Ferdinand on the previous night been in possession of the telescope.

"The Chancellor of the Exchequer, ma'am, desires his compliments, and he begs you to last out, if possible, till he has fetched Sir William Broadbent to see you. He is going there on his bike, ma'am, and had no conception you was dying till he knew it this moment, ma'am."

"Thank the Chancellor, Mr. Ferdinand, and say that though we must all go out some day I have no desire for a dissolution at present, and shall do my best to prove myself worthy of my constitution."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mr. Ferdinand retired, brushing away a tear.

"It would not be feasible, I suppose, Hennessey, to station Gustavus permanently at the telegraph office with a small hamper, so that he might collect the wires in it as they arrive and convey them here, once an hour or so, entering by the area door. I thought perhaps that might obviate−−"

Mr. Ferdinand once more appeared, looking very puffy about the eyes.

"If you please, ma'am, La−−ady Julia Pos−−ostlethwaite is below, and asks whe−−ether you are truly going ma'am?"

"Going? Where to, Mr. Ferdinand?"

"The other pla−−ace, ma'am. Her ladyship is crying something terrible, ma'am, and says, till she

no−−no−−noticed the fact she had no−−no−− notion you was leaving us so soon, ma'am."

Here Mr. Ferdinand uttered a very strange and heartrending sound that was rather like the bark of a dog with a bad cold in its head.

"It is really very odd so many people finding out so soon!" said Mrs. Merillia in some surprise. "Tell her ladyship, Mr. Ferdinand, that−−"

But at this moment there was the sound of feet on the stairs, and Lady Enid Thistle hurried into the room, closely followed by Mr. Robert Green. Lady Enid went up at once to Mrs. Merillia.

"I am so shocked and distressed to see your news, dear Mrs. Merillia," she cried affectionately. "But," she added, with much inquisitiveness, "is it really true that if anyone tapped on the door you would certainly die? How can you be so sure of yourself."

"What do you mean? Ah, Mr. Green, how d'you do? See my news!"

"Yes, written up on the front door. Everyone's shocked."

"Rather!" said Mr. Green, gazing at Mrs. Merillia with confused mournfulness. "One doesn't see death on a front door every day, don't you know, in big round hand too, and then one of those modern words."

"Death on the front door in big round hand!" said Mrs. Merillia in the greatest perplexity.

"I put it there, grannie," said the Prophet, humbly. "I wrote that if another boy knocked, death would certainly ensue."

"Ensue. That's it. I knew it was one of those modern words," said Mr. Green.

"Another boy?" said Lady Enid. "Why should another boy knock?"

"Hennessey receives about nine telegrams an hour," answered Mrs. Merillia.

"Really!"

Lady Enid looked at him with keen interest, while Mrs. Merillia continued,−−

"You had better take death off the door now, Mr. Ferdinand. I feel more myself. Please thank her ladyship and tell her so."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Nine telegrams an hour!" repeated Lady Enid. "Mr. Vivian, would you mind just seeing me as far as Hill Street? Bob has to go to Tattersall's."

"Have I, Niddy?" asked Mr. Green, with evident surprise.

"Yes, to pick up a polo pony. Don't you recollect?"

"A polo pony, was it? By Jove!"

"I will come with pleasure," said the poor Prophet, who felt fit only to lie down quietly in his grave. "If you don't mind being left, grannie?"

Mrs. Merillia was looking pleased.

"No, no. Go with Lady Enid, my dear boy. If any telegrams come shall I open−−"

"No," cried the Prophet, with sudden fierce energy. "For mercy's sake−− I mean, grannie, dear; that none will come. If they should"−−his ordinary gentle eyes flamed almost furiously−−"Mr. Ferdinand is to burn them unread−−yes, to ashes. I will tell him." And he escorted Lady Enid tumultuously downstairs, missing his footing at every second step.

In the square they parted from Mr. Green, who said,−−

"Good−bye, Niddy, old girl. What do I want to pick up at Tattersall's?"

"A polo pony, Bob," she answered firmly.

"Oh, a polo pony. Thanks, Chin, chin, Hen. Polo pony is it?"

He strode off, whistling "She wore a wreath of roses" in a puzzled manner, but still preserving the accepted demeanour of a bulwark.

As soon as Mr. Green was out of sight Lady Enid said,−−

"We aren't going to Hill Street."

"Aren't we?" replied the Prophet, feebly.

"No. I must see Sir Tiglath Butt to−day. I want you to take me to his door."

"Where is his door?"

"In Kensington Square. Do you mind hailing a four−wheeler. We can talk privately there. No one will hear us."

The Prophet hailed a growler, wondering whether they would be able to hear each other. As they got in Lady Enid, after giving the direction, said to the cabman, who was a short person, with curling ebon whiskers, a broken−up expression and a broken−down manner:

"Drive slowly, please and I'll give you an extra six−pence."

"Lydy?"

"Drive slowly, and I'll give you another six−pence."

"How did yer think I was gawing to drive, lydy?"

"I wonder why cabmen are always so interested in one's inmost thoughts," said Lady Enid, as the horse fell down preparatory to starting.

"I wonder."

"I hope he will go slowly."

"He seems to be doing so."

At this point the horse, after knocking on the front of the cab with his hind feet ten or a dozen times, got up, hung his head, and drew a large number of deep and dejected breaths.

"Am I gawing slowly enough, lydy?" asked the cabman, anxiously.

"Yes, but you can let him trot along now."

"Right, lydy, I ain't preventing of him."

As eventually they scrambled slowly forward in the Kensington direction, Lady Enid remarked,−−

"Why don't you have them sent to Jellybrand's?"

"Have what?" asked the Prophet.

"Your telegrams. The messages from your double life. I do."

"But I assure you−−"

"Mr. Vivian, it's useless really. I find you hidden away in the inner room of Jellybrand's with Mr. Sagittarius, closely guarded by Frederick Smith; fourpenny champagne−−"

"Four bob−−shilling, I mean."

"Oh, was it?−−Upon the table. After I've been poisoned, and we are leaving, Mr. Sagittarius calls after you such expressions as 'Banks of the Mouse−−hear from me−−marrow−−architects and the last day.' You are obviously agitated by these expressions. We reach your house. I find you have been prophesying through a telescope. The name of Malkiel−−a well−known prophet−−is mentioned. You turn pale and glance at me imploringly, as if to solicit my silence. I am silent. The next day you announce that you are going to have two afternoon parties."

"No, no, not afternoon! I never said afternoon!" interposed the Prophet, frantically, as the horse fell down again in order to earn the extra sixpence.

"Well, two parties in the afternoon. It's the same thing. You say they are odd. You yourself acknowledge it. You tell me you have secrets."

"Did I?"

"Yes. When I said I had guessed your secret you replied, 'Which one?' "

"Oh!" murmured the Prophet, trying not to say "come in!" to the horse, which was again knocking with both feet upon the front of the cab.

"You go home. I call during the afternoon, and find that you are entertaining all your guests in your own little room and that your grandmother knows nothing of it and believes you to be working. As I am leaving I see the backs of two of your guests. One is a pelisse, the other a spotted collar. As I near them they mount into a purple omnibus on which is printed in huge letters, /'To the "Pork Butcher's Rest" '/−−"

"No! No!" ejaculated the Prophet, pale with horror at this revelation.

"/Rest/, Crampton Vale, N. I lose them in the shadows. The next day I call and find your grandmother is dying from the noise made by boys bringing you private telegrams. And then you tell me, me−−Minerva Partridge−−that you have no double life! Yes, you can let him get up now, please."

The cabman permitted the horse to do so and they again struggled funereally forward. The Prophet was still very pale.

"I suppose it is useless to−−very well," he said. "My life is double."

"Ah!"

"But only lately, quite lately."

"Never mind that. Oh! How glad I am that you have had the courage too! You will soon get into it, as I did. But you should have all your telegrams and so forth directed to Jellybrand's."

"It's too late," replied the Prophet, dejectedly. "Too late. I do wish that horse wouldn't fall down so continually! It's most monotonous."

"The poor man naturally wants the extra sixpence. I think I shall give him a shilling. But now who is Mr. Sagittarius?"

"Who is he?"

"Yes. I've seen him several times at Jellybrand's, and when I first met him I though he was an outside broker."

"You! Was it on the pier at Margate?"

"Certainly not! Really, Mr. Vivian! even in my double life I occasionally draw the line."

"I beg your pardon. I−−the horse confuses me."

"Well, he's stopped knocking now and will be up in another minute. Who did you say Mr. Sagittarius was?"

"I didn't say he was anybody, but he's a man."

"I'd guessed that."

"And an acquaintance of mine."

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid it's going to rain."

"It generally does in Knightsbridge. Yes?"

"Is Sir Tiglath likely to be in?"

"He knows I'm coming. Well, you haven't told me who Mr. Sagittarius is."

"Lady Enid," said the Prophet, desperately, "I know very little of Mr. Sagittarius beyond the fact that he's a man, which I've already informed you of."

"Is he an outside broker?"

"No."

"Then he's Malkiel. You can't deny it."

"I can deny anything," said the Prophet, who, already upset by the events of the day, was now goaded almost to desperation. "I can and−− and must. There's the horse down again!"

"I shall have to give the man one and sixpence. Are your going to keep your promise to Mrs. Merillia and Sir Tiglath?"

To this question the Prophet determined to give a direct answer, in order to draw Lady Enid away from the more dangerous subjects.

"No," he said, with a spasm of pain.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to."

"Why?"

"Because when one's once been really and truly silly it's impossible not to repeat the act, absolutely impossible. You'll never stop now. You'll go on from one thing to another, as I do."

"I cannot think that prophecy is silly," said the Prophet, with some stiffness.

She looked at him with frank admiration.

"You're worse than I am! It's splendid!"

"Worse!"

"Why, yes. You're foolish enough to think your silly acts sensible. I wish I could get to that. Then perhaps I could impose on Sir Tiglath more easily too."

She considered this idea seriously, as they started on again, and gradually got free of the little crowd that had been sitting on the horse's head.

"I must impose upon him," she said. "And you've got to help me."

"I!" cried the Prophet, feeling terribly unequal to everything. "I cannot possibly consent−−"

"Yes, dear Mr. Vivian, you can. And if two thoroughly silly people can't impose upon one sensible old man, it will be very strange indeed. And now I'm going to tell you what I hadn't time to tell you yesterday."

She leaned forward and tapped sharply on the rattling glass in front of the cab. The cabman, bending down, twisted his whiskers towards her.

"Don't go too fast."

"I can't get 'im to fall down agyne, lydy. 'E's too tired."

"I daresay. But don't let him walk quite so fast."

She drew back.

"Mr. Vivian," she said−−and the Prophet thought she had never looked more sensible than now, as she began this revelation−−"Mr. Vivian, among the silly people I have met in my dear double life, who do you think are the very silliest?"

"The anti−vaccinators?"

"No. Besides, they so often have small−pox and become quite sensible."

"The atheists?"

"I used to think so, but not now. And most of those I knew are Roman Catholics at present."

"The women who don't desire to be slaves?"

"There aren't any."

"The tearers of Paderewski's hair?"

"I so seldom meet them, because they all live out in the suburbs."

"The tight−lacers?"

"They get red noses, poor things, and disappear. They're not permanent enough to count as the very silliest."

"I give it up."

"The Spiritualists and the Christian Scientists. That's why I love them best, and spend most of my double life with them. How you would get on with them! How much at ease you would be in their midst!"

"Really! But aren't they in opposite camps?"

"Dear things! They often think so, I believe. But really they aren't. Half the Christian Scientists begin as Spiritualists. And a great many Spiritualists were once Christian Scientists."

"Which are you?"

"Both, of course."

"Dear me!"

"As you will be when you've got thoroughly into your double life. Well, my greatest friend−−in my double life, you understand−−is a Mrs. Vane Bridgeman, a Christian Scientist and Spiritualist. She is very rich, and magnificently idiotic. She supports all foolish charities. She has almshouses for broken−down mediums on Sunnington Common in Kent. She has endowed a hospital for sick fortune−tellers. She gave five hundred pounds to the home for indigent thought−readers, and nearly as much to the 'Palmists' Seaside Retreat' at Millaby Bay near Dover. I don't know how many Christian Science Temples she hasn't erected, or subscribed liberally to. She turns every table in her house. She won't leave even one alone. Her early breakfasts for star−gazers are famous, and it's impossible to dine with her without sitting next to a horoscope−caster, or being taken in−−to dinner, of course−−by a crystal diviner or a nose−prophet."

"A nose−prophet! What's that?"

"A person who tells your fortune by the shape of your nose."

"Oh, I see."

"Well, you understand now that there's no sillier person in London than dear Mrs. Bridgeman?"

"Oh, quite."

"She's done a great deal for me, more than I can ever repay."

"Indeed."

"Yes, in introducing me to the real inner circles of idiotcy. Well, in return, I've sworn−−"

"You too!"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing. I beg your pardon. Please go on."

She looked at him curiously, and continued.

"I've sworn−−that is, pledged my honour, you know−−"

"I know! I know!"

"To introduce her to at least one thoroughly sensible person−−a man, she prefers."

"And you've chosen−−?"

"Sir Tiglath, because he's the only one I know. Once, I confess, I thought of you."

"Of me!"

"Yes, but of course I didn't really know you then."

She looked at him with genuine regard. The Prophet scarcely knew whether to feel delighted or distressed.

"Now, you see, Mr. Vivian, if Sir Tiglath found out for certain that I was Miss Minerva, he might discover my double life, and if he did that, he is so sensible that I am sure he would never speak to me again, and I could not fulfil my vow to dear Mrs. Bridgeman."

"I quite see."

"Nor my other vow to myself."

"Which one?"

"Oh, never mind."

"I won't."

"He only said that about partridges in January, I find, because he happened to see one of my letters in Jellybrand's window. He doesn't associate that letter with me. So it ought to be all right, and I've arranged my campaign."

"But what can I−−?"

She smiled at him with some Scottish craft.

"Don't bother. You've got to be my aide−de−camp, that's all. Ah, here we are!"

For at this moment the horse, with a great effort succeeded in falling down, for the last time, before the astronomer's door.

CHAPTER XII. THE ELABORATE MIND OF MISS MINERVA

On being shown, by an elderly housekeeper with a Berlin wool fringe, into an old−fashioned oval book−room, Lady Enid and the Prophet discovered the astronomer sitting there /tete−a−tete/ with a muffin, which lay on a china plate surrounded by manuscripts, letters, pamphlets, books and blotting−paper. He was engaged in tracing lines upon an immense sheet of foolscap with the aid of a ruler and a pair of compasses, and when he perceived his visitors, he merely rolled his glassy eyes at them, shook his large head as if in rebuke, and then returned to his occupation without uttering a word.

Lady Enid was in nowise abashed. She looked more sensible even than usual, and at once commenced her campaign by the remark,−−

"I know you wonder why I wanted to see you this afternoon, Sir Tiglath. Well, I'll tell you at once. Mr. Vivian has persuaded me to act as his ambassador."

At this very unexpected statement the Prophet started, and was about to utter what might, perhaps, have taken the form of a carefully−worded denial, when Lady Enid made a violent face at him, and proceeded, in a calm manner.

"He wishes you to do something for him, and he has confessed to me that he does not quite like to ask you himself."

On hearing these words the Prophet's brain, already sorely tried by the tragic duel which had taken place between himself and the couple who lived beside the Mouse, temporarily collapsed. He attempted no protest. His mind indeed was not in a condition to invent one. He simply sat down on a small pile of astronomical instruments which, with some scientific works, an encyclopaedia and a pair of carpet slippers, occupied the nearest chair, and waited in a dazed manner for what would happen next.

Sir Tiglath continued measuring and drawing lines with a very thin pen, and Lady Enid proceeded further to develop her campaign.

"Mr. Vivian tells me," she said, "that he has a very old and dear friend who is most anxious to make your acquaintance−−not, of course, for any idle social purpose, but in order to consult you on some obscure point connected with astronomy that only you can render clear. Isn't this so, Mr. Vivian?"

The Prophet shifted uneasily on the astronomical instruments, and, grasping the carpet slippers with one hand to steady himself, in answer to an authoritative sign from Lady Enid, feebly nodded his head.

"But," Lady Enid continued, apparently warming to her lies, "Mr. Vivian and his friend, knowing how much your time is taken up by astronomical research and how intensely valuable it is to the world at large, have not hitherto dared to intrude upon it, although they have wished to do so for a very long time, and have even made one attempt−−at the Colley Cibber Club."

The Prophet gasped. Sir Tiglath took a bit out of the muffin and returned to his tracing and measuring.

"On that occasion you may remember," Lady Enid went on with increasing vivacity and assurance, "you declined to speak. This naturally damped Mr. Vivian−−who is very sensitive, though you might not think it"−−here she cast a glance at the instruments on which the Prophet sat−−"and his friend. So much so, in fact, that unless I had undertaken to act for them I daresay they would have let the matter drop. Wouldn't you, Mr. Vivian?" she added swiftly to the Prophet.

"Certainly," he answered, like a creature in a dream. "Certainly."

"More especially as the friend, Mrs. Vane Bridgeman"−−the Prophet at this point made an inarticulate, but very audible, noise that might have meant anything, and that did in fact mean "Merciful Heavens! what will become of me?"−−"Mrs. Vane Bridgeman is also of a very retiring disposition and would hate to put such a man as you are to the slightest inconvenience."

Sir Tiglath took another bite at the muffin, which seemed to be getting the worst of the /tete−a−tete/, rummaged among the mess of things that loaded his table till he found a gigantic book, opened it, and began to compare some measurements in it with those he had made on the foolscap paper. His brick−red face glistened in the light of the lamp that stood beside him. His moist red lips shone, and he seemed totally unaware that there was anyone in the chamber endeavouring to gain his attention.

"In these circumstances, Sir Tiglath," Lady Enid went on, with pleasant ease, and a sort of homespun self−possession that trumpeted, like a military band, her sensibleness, "Mr. Vivian consulted me as to what to do; whether to give the whole thing up, or to make an appeal to you at the risk of disturbing you and taking up a little of your precious time. When he had explained the affair to me, however, I at once felt certain that you would wish to know of it. Didn't I, Mr. Vivian? Didn't I say, only this afternoon, that we must at once take a four−wheeler to Sir Tiglath's?"

"Yes, you did," said the Prophet, in a muffled voice.

"For I knew that no investigation, no serious, reverent investigation into heavenly, that is starry, conditions could be indifferent to you, Sir Tiglath."

The astronomer, who had been in the act of lifting the last morsel of the muffin to his mouth, put it down again, and Lady Enid, thus vehemently encouraged, went on more rapidly.

"You know of Mr. Vivian's interest, almost more than interest, in the planets. This interest is shared, was indeed prompted by Mrs. Bridgeman, a woman of serious attainments and a cultivated mind. Isn't she, Mr. Vivian?"

The Prophet heard a voice reply, "Oh, yes, she is." He often wondered afterwards whether it was his own.

"It seems that she, during certain researches, hit upon an idea with regard to−−well, shall I say with regard to certain stars?−−which she communicated to Mr. Vivian in the hope that he would carry it further, and in fact clear it up. Didn't she, Mr. Vivian?"

"Oh, yes, she did," said a voice, to which the Prophet again listened with strained attention.

"It was in connection with this idea that Mr. Vivian developed his enthusiasm for the telescope−−which led him, perhaps, a little too far, Sir Tiglath, but I'm sure Mrs. Merillia and you have quite forgotten that!"

Here Lady Enid paused, and the astronomer achieved the final conquest of the muffin.

"He and Mrs. Bridgeman have been, in fact, working together, she being the brain, as it were, and Mr. Vivian the eye. You've been the eye, Mr. Vivian?"

"I've been the eye."

"But, despite all their ardour and assiduity, they have come to a sort of deadlock. In these circumstances they come to you, making me−−as your, may I say intimate, friend?−−their mouthpiece."

Here Lady Enid paused rather definitely, and cast a glance of apparently violent invitation at the Prophet, as if suggesting that he must now amplify and fill in her story. As he did not do so, a heavy silence fell in the room. Sir Tiglath had returned to his measuring, and Lady Enid, for the first time, began to look slightly embarrassed. Sending her eyes vaguely about the apartment, as people do on such occasions, she chanced to see a newspaper lying on the floor near to her. She bent down towards it, then raising herself up she said,−−

"Mrs. Bridgeman some time ago came to the conclusion that there was probably oxygen in certain stars, and not only in the fixed stars."

At this remark the astronomer's countenance completely changed. He swung round in his revolving chair, wagged his huge head from side to side, and finally roared at the Prophet,−−

"Is she telling the truth?"

"I beg your pardon," said the Prophet, bounding on the instruments.

"Get off those precious tools, young man, far more valuable than your finite carcase! Get off them this moment and answer me−−is this young female speaking the truth?"

The Prophet got off the instruments and, in answer to a firm, Scottish gesture from Lady Enid, nodded his head twice.

"What!" continued Sir Tiglath, puffing out his cheeks, "a woman be a pioneer among the Heavenly Bodies!"

The Prophet nodded again, as mechanically as a penny toy.

"The old astronomer is exercised," bawled Sir Tiglath, with every symptom of acute perturbation. "He is greatly exercised by the narrative of the young female!"

So saying, he heaved himself up out of his chair and began to roll rapidly up and down the room, alternately distending his cheeks and permitting them to collapse.

"I should tell you also, Sir Tiglath," interposed Lady Enid, as if struck by a sudden idea, "that Mrs. Bridgeman's original adviser and assistant in her astronomical researches was a certain Mr. Sagittarius, who is also an intimate friend of Mr. Vivian's."

The Prophet sat down again upon the instruments with a thud.

"Get off those precious tools, young man!" roared the astronomer furiously. "Would you impose your vile body upon the henchmen of the stars?"

The Prophet got up again and leaned against the wall.

"I feel unwell," he said in a low voice. "Exceedingly unwell. I regret that I must really be going."

Lady Enid did not seem to regret this abrupt indisposition. Perhaps she thought that she had already accomplished her purpose. At any rate she got up too, and prepared to take leave. The astronomer was still in great excitement.

"Who is this Mr. Sagittarius?" he bellowed.

"A man of science. Isn't he, Mr. Vivian?"

"Yes."

"An astronomer of remarkable attainments, Mr. Vivian?"

"Yes."

"One knows not his abnormal name," cried the astronomer.

"He is very modest, very retiring. Mrs. Bridgeman's is really the only house in London at which you can meet him. Isn't that so, Mr. Vivian?"

"Yes."

"You say he has made investigation into the possibility of there being oxygen in many of the holy stars?"

"Mr. Vivian!"

"Yes."

"The old astronomer must encounter him!" exclaimed Sir Tiglath, puffing furiously as he rolled about the room.

"Mr. Vivian will arrange it," Lady Enid said, with sparkling eyes, "at Mrs. Bridgeman's. That's a bargain. Come, Mr. Vivian!"

And almost before the Prophet knew what she was doing, she had maneuvered him out into Kensington Square, and was pioneering him swiftly towards the High street.

"We'll take a hansom home," she said gaily, "and the man can drive as fast as ever he likes."

In half a minute the Prophet found himself in a hansom, bowling along towards Mayfair. The first words he said, when he was able to speak, were,−−

"Why−−Mr. Sagittarius−−oh, why?"

Lady Enid smiled happily.

"It just struck me while I was talking to Sir Tiglath that I would introduce Mr. Sagittarius into the affair."

"Oh, why?"

"Why−−because it seemed such an utterly silly thing to do," she answered. "Didn't it?"

The Prophet was silent.

"Didn't it?" she repeated. "A thing worthy of Miss Minerva."

It seemed to the Prophet just then as if Miss Minerva were going to wreck his life and prepare him accurately for a future in Bedlam.

"And besides you wouldn't tell me who Mr. Sagittarius was," she added.

The Prophet began to realise that it is very dangerous indeed to deny the curiosity of a woman.

"What a mercy it is," Lady Enid continued lightly, "that Malkiel is a syndicate, instead of a man. If he wasn't, and Sir Tiglath ever got to know him, he would try to murder him, and how foolish that would be! It would be rather amusing, though, to see Sir Tiglath do a thoroughly foolish thing, wouldn't it!"

The Prophet's blood ran cold in the cab, as he began, for the first time, to see clearly into the elaborate mind of Miss Minerva, into the curiously deliberate complications of a definite and determined folly. He perceived the danger that threatened the prophet who dwelt beside the Mouse, but he had recovered himself by this time sufficiently to meet craft with craft. And he therefore answered carelessly,−−

"Yes, it is lucky that Malkiel's a syndicate."

When they reached Hill street Lady Enid said,−−

"I'm so much obliged to you, Mr. Vivian, for all you've done for Miss Minerva."

"Not at all."

"The next step is to introduce you to Mrs. Bridgeman, and you can introduce her to Mr. Sagittarius. Then I'll introduce Sir Tiglath to her and she will introduce Mr. Sagittarius to him. It all works out so beautifully! Thank you a thousand times. You'll hear from me. Probably I'll give you your directions how to act to−morrow. Good−night."

The Prophet drove on to Berkeley Square, feeling that, between Mr. and Madame Sagittarius and Miss Minerva, he was being rapidly directed to his doom.

CHAPTER XIII. THE PROPHET IS INTERVIEWED BY TWO KIDS

Mr. Ferdinand met the Prophet in the hall.

"I have done as you directed, sir," he said respectfully.

"As I directed, Mr. Ferdinand? I was not aware that I ever directed anybody," replied the Prophet, suspecting irony.

"I understood you to say, sir, that if any more telegrams was to arrive, I was to burn them, sir."

"Telegrams! Good Heavens! You don't mean to say that−−"

"There has been some seventeen or eighteen, sir. I have burnt them, sir, to ashes, according to your orders."

"Quite right, Mr. Ferdinand," said the Prophet, putting his hand up to his hair, to feel if it were turning grey. "Quite right. How is−−how, I say, is Mrs. Merillia?"

"Well, Master Hennessey, she's not dead yet."

And Mr. Ferdinand, with a contorted countenance moved towards the servants' hall.

The Prophet stood quite still with his hat and coat on for several minutes. An amazing self−possession had come to him, the unnatural self−possession of despair. He felt quite calm, as the statue of a dead alderman feels on the embankment of its native city. Nothing seemed to matter at all. He might have been Marcus Aurelius−−till a loud double knock came to the front door. Then he might have been any dangerous lunatic, ripe for a strait waistcoat. Mr. Ferdinand approached. The Prophet faced him.

"Kindly retire, Mr. Ferdinand," he said in a very quiet voice. "I will answer that knock."

Mr. Ferdinand retired rather rapidly. The knock was repeated. The Prophet opened the door. A telegraph boy, about two and a half feet high, stood outside upon the step.

"Telegram, sir," he said in a thin voice.

"Give it to me, my lad," replied the Prophet.

The small boy handed the telegram and turned to depart.

"Wait a moment, my lad," said the Prophet, very gently.

The small boy waited.

"Do you wish to be strangled, my lad?" asked the Prophet.

The small boy tried to recoil, but his terror rooted him firmly to the spot.

"Do all the other boys at the office wish to be strangled?" continued the Prophet. "Come, my lad, why don't you answer me?"

"No, sir," whispered the small boy, passing his little tongue over his pale lips.

"Very well, my lad, the next boy who brings a telegram to this house will be strangled, do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir," sighed the small boy, like a terror−stricken Zephyr.

"That's right. Good−night, my lad."

The Prophet closed the street door very softly, and the small boy dropped fainting on the pavement and was carried to the nearest hospital on a stretcher by two dutiful policemen.

Meanwhile the Prophet opened the telegram and read as follows:−−

"Insufferable insolence. How dare you; shall pay dearly; with you to−morrow first 'bus.

"JUPITER AND MADAME SAGITTARIUS."

"Mr. Ferdinand!" called the Prophet.

"Yes, sir."

"I am about to write a telegram. Gustavus will take it to the office."

"Yes, sir."

The Prophet went into the library and wrote these words on a telegraph form:−−

"Jupiter Sagittarius, Sagittarius Lodge, Crampton St. Peter, N. Your life is in danger; keep where you are; another telegram may destroy you. Grave news.

"VIVIAN."

The Prophet gave this telegram to Gustavus and then prepared to go upstairs to his grandmother. As he

mounted towards the drawing−room he murmured to himself over and over again,−−

"Sir Tiglath−−Malkiel! Malkiel−−Sir Tiglath!"

He found Mrs. Merillia very prostrate. It seemed that the telegraph boys had very soon worn through the cotton−wool with which the knocker had been shrouded, and that the incessant noise of their efforts to attract attention at the door had quite unnerved the gallant old lady. Nevertheless, her own condition was the last thing she thought of.

"I don't mind for myself, Hennessey," she said. "But it is very sad after all these years of respect and even, I think, a certain popularity, to be considered a nuisance by one's square. We are hopelessly embroiled with the Duchess of Camberwell, and the Lord Chancellor has sent over five times to explain the different laws and regulations that we are breaking. I don't see how you can go to his Reception to−night, really."

"I am not going, grannie," said the Prophet, overwhelmed with contrition. "I cannot go in any case."

"Why not?"

"I−−I have some work to do at home."

He avoided the glance of her bright eyes, and continued.

"Grannie, I am deeply grieved at all you have gone through to−day. Believe me it has not been my fault−−at least not entirely. I may have been injudicious, but I never−−never−−"

He paused, quite overcome with emotion.

"I don't know what will happen if the telegrams go on till midnight," said Mrs. Merillia. "The Duke of Camberwell is a very violent man, since he had that sunstroke at the last Jubilee, and I shouldn't wonder if he−−"

"Grannie, there will not be any more telegrams."

"But you said that before, Hennessey."

"And I say it again. There will not be any more. I have just informed the messenger that the next boy who knocks will certainly be−−well, destroyed."

Mrs. Merillia breathed a sigh of relief.

"I am so thankful, Hennessey. Are you dining out to−night?"

"No, grannie. I don't feel very well. I have a headache. I shall go and lie down for a little."

"Yes, do. Everybody is lying down; Fancy, the upper housemaid, the cook. Even Gustavus, they tell me, is trying to snatch a little uneasy repose on his what−not. It has been a terrible day."

Mrs. Merillia lay back and closed her eyes, and the Prophet, overwhelmed with remorse, retired to his room, lay down and stared desperately at nothing for half an hour. He then ate, with a very poor appetite, a morsel of dinner and prepared to take, if possible, a short nap before starting on the labours of the night. As he got up from the dining table to go upstairs he said to Mr. Ferdinand,−−

"By the way, Mr. Ferdinand, if I should come into the pantry again to− night, don't be alarmed. I may chance to require a bradawl as I did last night. Kindly leave one out, in case I should. But you need not sit up."

As the Prophet said the last words he looked Mr. Ferdinand full in the face. The butler's eyes fell.

"Thank you, Master Hennessey, I shall be glad to get to bed−−entirely to bed−−in good time. We are all a bit upset in the kit−−that is the hall to−day."

"Just so. Retire to rest at once if you like."

"Thank you, sir."

"Gustavus," said Mr. Ferdinand, a moment later in the servants' hall, "you are a man of the world, I believe."

Gustavus roused himself on his what−not.

"I am, Mr. Ferdinand," he replied, in a pale and exhausted manner.

"Then tell me, Gustavus, have you ever lived in service with a gentleman who was partial to a bradawl−−of a night, you understand?"

"No, never, Mr. Ferdinand. The nearest to it ever I got was the Bishop of Clapham."

"Explain yourself, Gustavus, I beg."

"He used to ask for a nip sometimes before retiring, Mr. Ferdinand."

"A nip, Gustavus?"

"Warm water, with a slice of toast in it. But he was only what they call a suburban bishop, Mr. Ferdinand."

"Ah! a nip is hardly on all fours with a bradawl, Gustavus."

"P'r'aps not, Mr. Ferdinand, but it's the nearest ever I got to it."

Mr. Ferdinand said no more, but when he retired to rest that night he double−locked his door, and dreamt of bradawls till he woke, unrefreshed, the next morning to find the area full of telegrams.

Meanwhile the Prophet was conscientiously fulfilling his promise and keeping the oath he had pledged his honour over, although he had to work under a grave disadvantage in the total loss of his planisphere, or star−map.

He entered the butler's pantry precisely on the stroke of eleven, and found it, to his great relief, untenanted. The dwarf was no longer at the telescope, and the silence in the region dedicated to Mrs. Merillia's menials was profound. The night, too, was clear and starry, propitious for prophetic labours, and as the Prophet gazed out upon the deserted square through the open window a strange peace descended upon his fevered soul. Nature, with all her shining mysteries, her distant reticences and revelations, calmed the turmoil within him. He looked upon the area railings and upon the sky, and smiled.

Then he looked for the star−map. He perceived in a very prominent position upon a silver salver, the bradawl laid out, according to order, by the obedient Mr. Ferdinand. He perceived also the open pot of "Butler's Own Special Pomade," but the planisphere had been removed from it. Where could it have been bestowed? The Prophet instituted a careful search. He explored cupboards, drawers−−such at least as were unlocked−−in vain. He glanced into a silver teapot reposing on a shelf, between the pages of an almanac hanging on the wall, among some back numbers of the /Butler's Gazette/, which were lying in a corner. But the planisphere was nowhere to be found, and at last in despair he resolved to do without it, and to trust to his fairly accurate knowledge of the heavens. He, therefore, took up his station by the window and proceeded to extract from the pocket of his smoking−jacket the account−book in which he had dotted down the directions of "Madame and self." They were very vague, for his dots had been agitated. Still, by the help of the George the Third candlestick, in which was a lighted taper, the Prophet was able to make out enough to refresh his memory. He was to begin by placing his beloved grandmother in the claws of the crab. Leaning upon the sill of the window he found the crab and−− breathing a short prayer for forgiveness−−committed his dear relation to its offices. He then retreated and, assuming very much the position of Mr. Ferdinand, applied his right eye to the telescope, at the same time holding his left eye firmly shut with the forefinger of his left hand. At once the majesty of the starry heavens burst upon him in all its glory.

Exactly at half−past one o'clock, two hours and a half later, the enthralled Prophet heard a low whistle which seemed to reach him from the square. He withdrew his fascinated right eye from the telescope and endeavoured to use it in an ordinary manner, but he could at first see nothing. The low whistle was repeated. It certainly did come from the square, and the Prophet approached the open window and once more tried to compel the eye that had looked so long upon the stars to gaze with understanding upon the earth. This time he perceived a black thing, like a blot, about six feet high, beyond the area railings. From this blot came a third whistle. The Prophet, who was still dazed by the fascination of star−gazing, mechanically whistled in reply, whereupon the blot whispered at him huskily,−−

"At it again, are you?"

"Yes," whispered the Prophet, also huskily, for the night air was cold. "But how should you know?"

Indeed he wondered; and it seemed to him as if the blot were some strange night thing that must have companioned him, invisibly, when he kept his nocturnal watches in the drawing−room, and that now partially revealed itself to him in the, perhaps, more acutely occult region of the basement.

"How should I know!" rejoined the blot with obvious, though very hoarse, irony. "Whatever d'you take me for?"

The Prophet began to wonder, but before he had gone on wondering for more than about half a minute, the blot continued,−−

"She's gone to bed."

"I know she has," said the Prophet, presuming that the blot, which seemed instinct with all knowledge, was referring to his grandmother.

"But she knows you're at it again," continued the blot.

The Prophet started violently and leaned upon the window−sill.

"No! How can that be?" he ejaculated.

"Ho! Them girls knows everything, especially the old uns," said the blot, with an audible chuckle.

"Good gracious!" gasped the Prophet, overwhelmed at this mysterious visitant's familiar description of his

revered grandmother.

"Have you seen her to−night?" inquired the blot, controlling its merriment.

"Yes," said the Prophet. "With the Crab."

"What!" cried the blot, in obvious astonishment. "Them instruments must be wonderful sight−carriers."

"They are," exclaimed the Prophet, with almost mystic enthusiasm. "Wonderful. I have seen her with the Crab distinctly."

"Ah! well, I told her she ought to keep away from it," continued the blot.

"Did you?" said the Prophet, with increasing surprise. "But how could she?"

"Ah! that's just it! She couldn't."

"No, of course not."

"She was drawn right to it."

"She was. It wasn't her fault. It was the Crab's."

"A pity it was dressed."

"What?"

"I say it's a pity 'twas dressed."

"What was dressed?"

"What! why, the Crab!"

"The Crab−−dressed!"

"Ay. They're a deal safer not dressed."

"Are they?"

"She knows it too."

"Does she?"

"But there−−them women likes a spice of danger. She's in a nice state now, you bet. Not much sleep for her, I'll lay. Well, I tried to keep her from it, so you needn't blame me."

"I won't," said the Prophet, feeling completely dazed.

"Well, go'−night. I'm off round the square."

"Good−night," said the Prophet.

Suddenly a blinding flash of light dazzled his eyes. He covered them with his hands. When he could see again the blot was gone.

Although he was retired to rest that night when the clock struck three, the Prophet did not sleep. His nervous system was in a condition of acute excitement. His brain felt like a burning ball, and the palms of his hands were hot with fever. For the spirit of prophecy was upon him once more, and he was bound fast in the golden magic of the stars. Like the morphia maniac who, after valiant fasting, returning to his drug, feels its influence the stronger for his abstinence from it, the Prophet was conscious that the heavens held more power, more meaning for him because, for a while, he had intended to neglect them. He was ravaged by their mystery, their majesty and revelation.

When he came down in the morning pale, dishevelled, but informed by a curious dignity, he was met at once by Mr. Ferdinand.

"I have cleared the area, sir," said the functionary.

"The area, Mr. Ferdinand. What of?"

"Telegrams, sir. The boys must have thrown 'em down without knocking."

"Very probably," replied the Prophet. "Their comrade was right. They did not wish to be strangled."

"No, sir. And I have placed them in a basket on the breakfast table, sir, while awaiting your orders."

"Quite right, Mr. Ferdinand. By the way, here is the bradawl. Leave it out again to−night in case I have need of it."

So saying, the Prophet handed the bradawl, which he had craftily conveyed from the pantry on the previous night, to the astonished butler and walked swiftly into the breakfast−room. The basket of telegrams was set outside beside a fried sole and the "equipage" which Madame had so much admired, and, while he sipped his tea, the Prophet opened the wires one by one. They were fraught with terror and dismay. Evidently his mysterious warning had thrown the worthies who dwelt beside the Mouse into a condition of the very gravest amazement and alarm, and they had, despite the Prophet's final injunction, spent the remaining telegraphic hours of the day in

despatching wires of frantic inquiry to the square. Madame, in particular, was evidently much upset, and expressed her angry agitation in a dead language that seemed positively to live again in fear and novelty of grammatical construction. Sir Tiglath had been a brilliant card to play in the prophetic game, although he had not achieved the Prophet's purpose of stopping the telegraphic flood.

While the Prophet was simultaneously finishing the fried sole and the perusal of the final wire Mr. Ferdinand entered, in a condition of obvious astonishment that might well have cost him his place.

"If you please, sir," he said, in an up−and−down voice, "if you please there are two−−two−−two−−"

"Two what? Be more explicit, Mr. Ferdinand."

"Two−−well, sir, kids at the door waiting for you to see them, sir."

"Two kids! What−−from the goat show that's going on at the Westminster Aquarium!" cried the Prophet in great surprise.

"Maybe, sir. I can't say, indeed, sir. Am I to show them in, sir?"

"Show them in! Are you gone mad, Mr. Ferdinand? They must be driven out at once. If Mrs. Merillia were to see them, she might be greatly alarmed. I'll−−I'll−−follow me, Mr. Ferdinand, closely."

So saying the Prophet stepped valiantly into the hall. There, by the umbrella stand, stood two small children, boy and girl, very neatly dressed in a sailor suit and a grey merino. The little boy held in his hand a large round straw hat, on the blue riband of which was inscribed in letters of gold, "H.M.S. Hercules." The little girl wore a pleasant pigtail tied with a riband of the same hue.

The meaning of Mr. Ferdinand's vulgar and misleading slang suddenly dawned on the Prophet. He cast a look of very grave rebuke on Mr. Ferdinand, then, walking up to the little boy and girl he said in his most ingratiating manner,−−

"Well, my little ones, what can I do for you?"

"Not so little, if you please, Mr. Vivian," replied the boy in a piping, but very self−possessed voice. "Can we see you in private for a moment?"

"If you please, Mr. Vivian," added the little girl. "Si sit prudentium."

"Dentia, Corona," corrected the little boy.

The Prophet turned white to the very lips.

"Certainly, certainly," he said in a violently furtive manner. "Come this way, my children. Mr. Ferdinand, if Mrs. Merillia should inquire for me, you will say that I'm busy writing−−no, no, just busy−−very busy."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not to be disturbed. This way, my little ones."

"Not so little, Mr. Vivian," piped again the small boy, trotting obediently, with his sister, into the Prophet's library, the door of which was immediately closed behind them.

"Well, I'm−−" said Mr. Ferdinand. "Kids in the library! I am−− Gustavus!"

He rushed frenetically towards the servants' hall to confer upon the situation with his intellectual subordinate.

Meanwhile the Prophet was closeted with the two kids.

"Pray sit down," he said, very nervously, and smiling forcibly. "Pray sit down, my dears."

The kids obeyed with aplomb, keeping their large and strained eyes fixed upon the Prophet.

"Is it Coronus and Capricorna?" continued the Prophet, with an effort after blithe familiarity. "Is it?"

"No," piped the little boy. "It isn't Coronus and Capricorna."

A marvellous sensation of relief invaded the Prophet.

"Thank Heaven!" he ejaculated in a sigh. "I thought it must be."

"It's Corona and Capricornus," continued the little boy. "And we've brought you a letter from pater familias."

"And mater familiaris," added the little girl.

"Milias, Corona," corrected the little boy. "Here it is, Mr. Vivian," he added, drawing a large missive from the breast of his blue−and−white sailor's blouse. "Pater and mater familias couldn't bring it themselves, because he said it wasn't safe for him to come, and she's lying down ill at what you sent to her. It wasn't kind of you, was it?"

So saying, he handed the missive to the Prophet, who took it anxiously.

"Would you like some cake, my lit−−I mean, my dears, while I read this?"

"No, thank you. Cake is bad for us in the morning," replied the little boy. "You shouldn't eat it so early."

The Prophet was about to reply that he never did when it struck him that argument would probably be useless.

He, therefore, hastened to open the letter, which proved to be from Mr. Sagittarius, and which ran as follows:−−

"SIR,−−Your terrible and mysterious wire, coming after your equally terrible and mysterious silence, has caused devastation in a hitherto peaceful and happy family. To what peril do you allude? What creature can there be so base as to wish to take my life merely on account of my sending you telegrams? Madame has been driven to despair by your announcement, and I, myself, although no ordinary man, am, very rightly and properly, going about in fear of my life since receipt of your last telegram. Under these circs, and being unable to wait upon you ourselves for a full explanation, we are sending our very life−blood to you−−per rail and 'bus−−with strict orders to bring you at once to the banks of the Mouse, there to confer with Madame and self and arrange such measures of precaution as are suited to the requirements of the situation as indicated by you.

"JUPITER SAGITTARIUS.

"P.S.−−You are to bring with you, according to solemn oath, all prophecy concerning grandmother, Crab, etc., gathered up to date, together with full details of same's removal from the bottle, cutting of her first tooth, short−coating, going into skirts, putting of hair up, day of marriage and widowhood, illnesses−− especially rashes−−and so forth. /Ab origino/.

"MADAME SAGITTARIUS."

On reading this communication the Prophet felt that all further struggle was useless. Fate−−cruel and remorseless Fate−−had him in her grasp. He could only bow his head and submit to her horrible decrees. He could only go upstairs and at once prepare for the journey to the Mouse.

He laid the letter down and got up, fixing his eyes upon the kids, who sat solemnly awaiting his further procedure.

"You−−I suppose you know, my little ones, what this−−what you have to do?" he said.

"Not so little, if you please, Mr. Vivian," returned the boy. "Yes, we've got to take you with us to see pater familias."

"And mater familiar−−familias," added the little girl.

"I see−−you know," said the Prophet, in a despairing voice. "Very well. Wait here quietly−−very quietly, while I go and get ready."

"And please don't forget the Crab and grandmother, rashes, et ceterus," said the little girl.

"Tera Corona," piped her brother.

"I won't," said the Prophet. "I will not."

And he tottered out of the room, carrying the Sagittarius letter in his hand.

In the hall he paused for a moment, holding on to the balusters and re− reading his directions. Then he crawled slowly up the stairs and sought his grandmother's room.

CHAPTER XIV. THE PROPHET JOURNEYS TO THE MOUSE

Mrs. Merillia was just beginning to recover from the prostration of the preceding day when the Prophet came into the room where she was seated with Mrs. Fancy Quinglet. She looked up at him almost brightly, but started when she saw how agitated he seemed.

"Grannie," said the Prophet, abruptly, "you would tell me anything, wouldn't you?"

"Why, of course, my dear boy. But what about?"

"About−−about yourself?"

Mrs. Merillia looked very much astonished.

"There is nothing to hide, Hennessey," she said with gentle dignity. "You know that."

"I do, I do," cried the Prophet, passionately. "Yours has been the best, the sweetest life the world has ever known!"

"Well, I don't wish to imply−−"

"But I do, grannie, I do. Can Fancy leave us for a moment?"

"Certainly. Fancy, you can go to your tatting."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mr Hennessey has something to explain to me."

"Oh, ma'am, the houses that have been broke up by explainings!"

And with this, as the Prophet thought, appallingly appropriate exclamation, Mrs. Fancy hurried feverishly from the room.

"Now what is the question you wish to ask me, Hennessey?" said Mrs. Merillia, with a soft dignity.

"There are−−one moment−−there are eight questions, grannie," responded the Prophet, shrinking visibly before the dread necessity by which he found himself confronted.

"Eight! So many?"

"Yes, oh, indeed, yes."

"Well, my dear, and what are they?"

"The first is−−is−−grannie, when were you removed from−−from the bottle?"

A very delicate flush crept into Mrs. Merillia's charming cheeks.

"The bottle, Hennessey! Never, never!" she said, with a sort of pathetic indignation. "How could you suppose−−I−−the bottle−−"

Her pretty old voice died away.

"Answered, darling grannie, answered!" ejaculated the Prophet. Please−−please don't!" And now−−your first tooth?"

"My first what!" cried Mrs. Merillia in almost terrified amazement.

"Tooth−−when did you cut it?"

"I have no idea. Surely, Hennessey−−"

"Answered, dearest grannie!" cried the Prophet, with gathering agitation. "Did you ever wear a short coat?"

"I−−I'm not a man!"

"You didn't! Always a skirt?"

"Of course! Why−−"

"And you're sixty−eight on the twentieth. So for sixty−eight years you've always worn a skirt. That's four."

"Four what? Are you−−?"

"When did you put your hair up, grannie, darling?"

"My hair−−never. You know I've always had a maid to do these things for me. Fancy−−"

"Of course. You've never put your hair up. I might have known. You were married very young, weren't you?"

"Ah, yes. On my seventeenth birthday, and was left a widow in exactly two years' time. Your poor dear granf−−"

"Thank you, grannie, thank you! Seven!"

"Seven what, Hennessey? One would th−−"

"And now, dear grannie, tell me one thing, only one little thing more. About−−that is, talking of rashes−−"

"Rashers!"

"No, grannie, rashes−−illnesses, you know, that take an epidemic form."

"Well, what about them? Surely there isn't an epidemic in the square?"

"How many have you had, grannie?"

"Where? Had what?"

"Here, anywhere in the square, grannie."

"Had what in the square?"

"Rashes."

"I! Have a rash in the square!"

"Exactly. Have you ever−−an epidemic, you know?"

"I have an epidemic in Berkeley Square? You must be crazy, Hennessey!"

"Probably, very likely, grannie. But have you? Tell me quickly! Have you?"

"Certainly not! As if any gentlewoman−−"

"Answered, grannie, answered! Eight!"

"Eight what?"

"Questions. Thank you, dearest grannie. I knew you'd tell me, I knew you would!"

And the Prophet rushed from the room, leaving Mrs. Merillia in a condition that cannot be described and that not all the subsequent ministrations of Mrs. Fancy Quinglet were able to alleviate.

Having reached the hall, the Prophet hastily put on his coat and hat and called Mr. Ferdinand to him.

"Mr. Ferdinand," he said, assuming a fixed and stony dignity to conceal his agitation and dismay, "I am leaving the house at once with the−−the lady and gentleman who are in the library."

At this description of the kids Mr. Ferdinand was very nearly seized with convulsions. However, as he said nothing and merely wrung his large hands, the Prophet, after a slight pause, continued,−−

"I may be away some time, so if Mrs. Merillia should make any inquiry, you will say that I have left to pay a visit to some friends."

"Yes, sir. Shall I tell Gustavus to pack your things?"

"Certainly not."

The Prophet was turning towards the library when Mr. Ferdinand added,−−

"When shall we expect you back, sir? Am I to forward your letters?"

"No, no. I shall return in a few hours."

"Oh, I beg pardon, sir. And if any telegrams−−"

"There will not be any. I am now going to answer the telegrams in person."

"Yes, sir."

"Come along, my children," cried the Prophet, putting his head into the library.

"Not your children, if you please, Mr. Vivian," replied the little boy. "Corona, come on."

"How do we go, my dears?" asked the Prophet, with an attempt at gaiety, and endeavouring to ignore the prostrated demeanour of Mr. Ferdinand, who was in waiting to open the hall door.

"By the purple 'bus as far as the Pork Butcher's Rest," piped the little boy−−(at this point Mr. Ferdinand could not refrain from a slight exclamation)−−"then we take the train to the Mouse, Mouse, Mouse."

"Mus, Mus, Mus," chanted the little girl.

As Mr. Ferdinand was unable to open the door, paralysis having apparently supervened, the Prophet did so, and the cheerful little party emerged upon the step to find Lady Enid Thistle in the very act of pressing the electric bell. When she beheld the vivacious trio, all agog for their morning's expedition, come thus suddenly upon her, she cried out musically,−−

"Why, where are you off to?"

The Prophet was much embarrassed by the encounter.

"I am taking these lit"−−he caught the staring eye of Capricornus−− "these friends of mine for a little walk," he said.

"I'll come with you," said Lady Enid, with an almost Highland decision. "I've got something to say to you, and we can talk as we go."

She glanced very inquisitively indeed at the two children, who had begun to frisk at sight of the square all bathed in winter sunshine. The Prophet was very much upset.

"Don't you think−−" he began.

"It will be delightful to have some exercise," she interrupted firmly. "Which way are you going?"

"Which way! Oh, to−−towards−−"

The Prophet stopped. He did not know from what point the purple 'bus started to gain the Pork Butcher's Rest. Capricornus hastened to inform him.

"We take the purple 'bus at the corner of Air Street," he piped.

"The purple 'bus!" cried Lady Enid. "The purple bus!"

She glanced searchingly at the Prophet.

"Ah!" she murmured, "so you are taking a purple 'bus to your double life!"

He could not deny it. They were now all walking forward in the sun and as the little Corona and Capricornus became speedily intent upon the wonders of this central district, Lady Enid and the Prophet were able to have a quiet word or two together.

"I came to tell you," she said, "that Mrs. Vane Bridgeman will expect you to−night at−−"

"I am engaged at eleven," cried the Prophet, in despair at the imposition of this fresh burden upon his weary shoulders.

"I know. To the Lord Chancellor, but−−"

"No. I have an engagement which I dare not break, at home."

"Really!"

She gazed at him with her large, handsome grey eyes, and added,−−

"I do believe you're silly enough to live your double life at home sometimes. How splendid!"

"No, no! I assure you−−"

"Of course you do! You dear foolish thing! You're ever so much sillier than I am. You're my master."

"No, indeed, no, no!"

"But you can go to Mrs. Bridgeman's for an hour easily. She expects you and I've promised that you will go."

"It's very kind of you, but really−−"

"So that's settled. You'll meet me there, but don't forget I'm Miss Minerva Partridge. The address is Zoological House, Regent's Park, that big house in a garden just outside the Zoo."

"The big house in the Zoological Gardens," said the Prophet, feebly. "Thank you very much."

"No, no, outside the Zoo. And then we can arrange to−night about your introducing her to Mr. Sagittarius."

"Hush! Hush!" whispered the Prophet.

But he was too late. The long ears of the little pitchers had caught the well−known word.

"Why, that’s pater familias," piped the little Capricornus.

"And mater familiaris," added the little Corona.

"You don't mean to say," cried Lady Enid to the Prophet, "that these are the children of Mr. Sagittarius?"

The Prophet bent his head.

"How very interesting!" said Lady Enid. "Everything is working out most beautifully. I must get them some chocolates."

And she immediately stepped into a confectioner's and came out with a beautiful box of bon−bons, tied with amethyst ribbon, which she gave to the delighted children.

"I know your dear father," she said. "At least I know who he is."

And she looked firmly at the Prophet, who dropped his eyes. They were now at the corner of Air Street, and the purple 'bus could be seen looming brilliantly in the distance.

"Good−bye, Lady Enid," said the Prophet.

"Oh, I'll see you off," she replied, evidently resolved to satisfy some further, unexpressed curiosity.

"There it is!" cried Capricornus. "It's coming! There it is!"

"Isn't it pretty?" shrieked the little Corona, who was evidently growing much excited by the chocolates and the centralness of the whole thing. "Let's go on the top! Let's go on the top!"

She began to jump on the pavement, and her brother was just about to follow her example when some sudden idea struck him into gravity. He turned to the Prophet and exclaimed solemnly,−−

"Oh, if you please, Mr. Vivian, have you got the crab with you?"

"The crab!" cried Lady Enid, with much vivacity.

"Yes, yes, my boy, it's all right!" said the Prophet, hastily.

"Not your boy, if you please, Mr. Vivian," returned the little inquisitor. "And have you got the fist tooth?"

"Yes, yes!"

"And the rashes, and the honoured grandmother, and−−"

"I've got everything," cried the Prophet, "every single thing!"

"Because mater familias said I was to make you bring them if I stayed for them all day."

"Yes, yes, they're all here−−every one."

Lady Enid was gazing at the Prophet's slim form with almost passionate curiosity. It was evidently a problem to her how he had managed to conceal so many various commodities about his person without altering his shape. However, she had no time to study the matter, for at this moment the purple 'bus jerked along the kerb, and the voice of the conductor was heard crying,−−

"Pork Butcher's Rest! All the way one penny! Pork−−penny−−all the way−−Butcher's−−Rest−−one−−Pork−−all−−Pork−−penny−−Pork−−Butcher's−−Pork−− Rest−−Pork−−penny!"

With a hasty farewell the Prophet, accompanied, and indeed closely clutched, by the little Corona and Capricornus, scrambled fanatically, and not without two or three heavy falls, to the summit of the 'bus, while Lady Enid read the legend printed on it with a smile, ere she turned to walk home, putting two and two together, and thinking, with keen feminine satisfaction, how useless in the long run are all the negatives of man.

In later years, though many memories intervene, the Prophet will never forget his journey to the banks of the Mouse. Always it seemed very strange to him and dream−like, that everlasting journey upon the purple 'bus, complicated by the chatter of the younger scions of the Malkiel dynasty, and by the shrill cries of the conductor summoning the passers−by to hasten to that place of repose consecrated to the worthy and hard−working individuals who drew their modest incomes from the pig. The character of the streets changed as the central districts were left behind, and a curious scent, the scent of Suburbia, seemed to float between the tall chimneys in the morose atmosphere. The purple chariot, which rolled on and on like the chariot of Fate, drew gradually away from the large thoroughfares into mean streets, whose air of dull gentility was for ever autumnal, and the Prophet, on passing some gigantic gasworks, mechanically wondered whether it might not, perhaps, be that monument to whose shadow Malkiel the First had lived and died. Once, looking up at the black sky, he remarked to the little Capricornus that it was evidently going to rain.

"No, Mr. Vivian," replied the boy. "It won't rain hard this week. January's a fine month, but there'll be heavy floods in March, especially along the banks of the Thames."

"And in February there'll be such a lot of scarlet fever in the southern portions of England," added the little Corona. "Oh, Corney, just look at that kitty on the airey railings!"

"Area, Corona," corrected her brother. "Oh, my! ain't it funny?"

The Prophet remembered that he was travelling with the scions of a prophetic house.

It seemed many years before the 'bus stopped before a brick building full of quart pots, situated upon a gentle eminence sloping to a coal− yard, and the voice of the conductor proclaimed that the place of repose was reached. The Prophet and his diminutive guides descended from the roof and were shortly in a train puffing between the hunched backs of abominable little houses, sooty as street cats and alive with crying babies. Then bits of waste land appeared, bald wildernesses in which fragments of broken crockery hibernated with old tin cans and kettles yellow as dying leaves. A furtive brown rivulet wandered here and there like a thing endeavouring to conceal itself and unable to find a hiding−place.

"That's the Mouse, Mr. Vivian," remarked Capricornus, proudly. "We shall soon be there."

"Ridiculum mus," rejoined his sister, who evidently took after her learned mother.

"Culus, Corona; and you're not to say that. Pater familias says that the Mouse is a noble stream. We get out here, Mr. Vivian."

Here proved to be a wayside station on the very bank of the noble stream, and on the edge of a piece of waste ground so large that it might almost have been called country.

The Prophet and the two kids set off across this earth, which was named by the inhabitants "the Common." In the distance rose a fringe of detached brick and stone villas towards which Capricornus now pointed a forefinger

that trembled with pride.

"That's where we live," he said, in a voice that was grown squeaky from conceit.

"Dulce domus," piped his sister, clutching the skirt of the Prophet's coat, and, thus supported, performing several very elaborate dancing steps upon the clayey soil over which he was feebly staggering. "Dulce dulce, dulce domus. Look at that rat, Corney!"

A large, raking rodent, indeed, at that instant emerged from the wreckage of what had once been a copper cauldron near by, and walked slowly away towards a slope of dust garnished with broken bottles and abandoned cabbage stalks. The Prophet shuddered and longed to flee, but the two kids, as if divining his thought, now clasped his hands and led him firmly forward to a yellow villa, fringed with white Bath stone and garnished plentifully with griffins. From its flat front shot ostentatiously forth a porch adorned with Roman columns which commanded a near view of the Mouse, and before the porch was a small garden in which several healthy−looking nettles had made their home.

As the Prophet and the two kids approached this delightful abode, a white face appeared, gluing itself to the pane of an upper window.

"There's pater familias!" piped Capricornus. "Don't he look ill?"

As they mounted the flight of imitation marble steps the face disappeared abruptly.

"He's coming to let us in," said Capricornus. "You're sure you've brought the crab and all the rashes?"

"Quite sure."

"Because, if you haven't, I don't know whatever mater familias'll−−"

At this moment the portal of the lodge was furtively opened about half an inch, and a very small segment of ashen−coloured human face, containing a large and apprehensive eye, was shown in the aperture.

"Are you alone?" said the hollow voice of Mr. Sagittarius.

"Quite, quite alone," said the Prophet, reassuringly.

"It's all right, pater familias!" cried Capricornus. "He's brought all the rashes and the first tooth and everything. I made him."

"I don't think he wanted to," added the little Corona, suddenly developing malice.

"I've taken this long journey, Mr. Sagittarius," said the Prophet, with a remnant of self−respect, "at your special request. Am I to be permitted to come in?"

"If you're sure you're quite alone," returned the sage, showing a slightly enlarged segment of face.

"I am quite sure−−positive!"

At this the door was opened just sufficiently to admit the passage of one thin person at a time, and, in single file, the Prophet, Corona and Capricornus passed into the lodge.

CHAPTER XV. THE PROPHET CREATES A DIVERSION AT HIS OWN EXPENSE

On stepping into a small vestibule, paved with black and white lozenges, and fitted up with an iron umbrella stand, a Moorish lamp and a large yellow china pug dog, the Prophet found himself at once faced by Mr. Sagittarius, whose pallid countenance, nervous eye and suspicious demeanour plainly proclaimed him to be, as he had stated, very rightly and properly going about in fear of his life.

"Go to the schoolroom, my darlings," he whispered to his children. "Why, what have you there?"

"Choclets," said Capricornus.

"From the pretty lady, mulius pulchrum," added the little Corona.

"Who is a mulibus pulchrum, my love?" asked Mr. Sagittarius, before Capricornus had time to correct his sister's Latin.

"It was Miss Minerva," said the Prophet. "We happened to meet her."

"Indeed, sir. Run away, my pretties, and don't eat more than one each, or mater familias will not approve.

Then, as the little ones disappeared into the shadows of the region above, he added to the Prophet,−−

"You've nearly been the death of Madame, sir."

"I'm sure I'm very sorry," said the Prophet.

"Sorrow is no salve, sir, no salve at all. Were it not for her books I fear we might have lost her."

"Good gracious!"

"Mercifully her books have comforted her. She is resting among them now. Madame is possessed of a magnificent library, sir, encyclopaedic in its scope and cosmopolitan in its point of view. In it are represented every age and every race since the dawn of letters; thousands upon thousands of authors, sir, Rabelais and Dean Farrar, Lamb and the Hindoos, Mettlelink and the pith of the great philosophers such as John Oliver Hobbes, Locke, Hume and Earl Spencer; the biting sarcasm of Hiny, the pathos of Peps, the oratorical master−strokes of such men as Gladstone, Demosthenes and Keir Hardie; the romance of Kipling, sir, of Bret Harte and Danty Rossini; the poetry of Kempis a Browning and of Elizabeth Thomas Barrett−−all, all are there bound in Persian calf. Among these she seeks for solace. To these she flies in hours of anguish."

"Does she indeed?" said the Prophet, feeling thoroughly overwhelmed.

"She desires me to take you to her at once, sir, there to confer and"−− he lowered his voice and trembled visibly−−"to arrange measures for the protection of my life."

The Prophet found himself wishing that he had been less precipitate in covertly alluding to Sir Tiglath's long desire of assault and battery, but before he had time to wish anything for more than half a minute, Mr. Sagittarius had guided him ceremoniously across the hall and was turning the handle of a door that was decorated with black and scarlet paint.

"Here, sir," he whispered, "you will find Madame surrounded by the authors whom she loves, by their portraits, their biographies and their writings. Here she communes with the great philosophers, sir, the poets, the historians and the humourists of the entire world, from the earliest days down to this very moment−−in Persian calf, sir."

He gazed awfully at the Prophet, and gently opened the door of this temple of the intellect.

The Prophet expected to find himself ushered into a gigantic chamber, lined from floor to ceiling with shelves that groaned beneath their burden of the literature of genius. Indeed he had, in fancy, beheld even the chairs and couches covered with stacks of volumes, the very floor littered with the choicest productions of the brains of the dead and living. His surprise was, therefore, very great when, on passing through the door, he beheld Madame Sagittarius reposing at full length upon a maroon sofa in a small apartment, whose bare walls, were entirely innocent of book−shelves. Indeed the only thing of the sort which was visible was a dwarf revolving bookcase which stood beside the sofa, and contained some twenty volumes bound, as Mr. Sagittarius had stated, in Persian calf, each of these volumes being numbered and adorned with a label on which was printed in letters of gold, "The Library of Famous Literature: Edited by Dr. Carter. Tasty Tit−bits from all Times."

"Madame, sir, in her library," whispered Mr. Sagittarius by the door. "She is absorbed, sir, and does not notice

us."

In truth Madame Sagittarius did appear to be absorbed in thought, or something else, for her eyes were closed, her mouth was open, and a sound of regular breathing filled the little room.

"She is thinking out some problem, sir," continued Mr. Sagittarius. "She is communing with the mighty dead. Sophronia, my love, Sophronia, Capricornus has brought the gentleman according to your orders. Sophy! Sophy!"

His final utterances, which were somewhat strident caused Madame Sagittarius to come away from her communion with the mighty dead with a loud ejaculation of the nature of a snort combined with a hissing whistle, to kick up her indoor kid boots into the air, turn upon her right elbow, and present a countenance marked with patches of red and white, and a pair of goggling, and yet hazy, eyes to the intruders upon her intellectual exertions.

"Mr. Vivian has come, Sophronia, according to your directions."

Madame uttered a second snort, brought her feet to the floor, arranged her face in a dignified expression with one fair hand, breathed heavily, and finally bowed to the Prophet with majestic reserve and remarked, with the professional click,−−

"I was immersed in thought and did not perceive your entrance. /Mens invictus manetur/. Be seated, I beg."

Here certain very elaborate contortions and swellings of her interesting countenance suggested that she was repressing a good−sized yawn, and she was obliged to rearrange her features with both hands before she could continue.

"Thought conquers matter, as Plauto−−I should say as Platus very rightly obesrved."

"Quite so," assented the Prophet, trying to live up to the library, but scarcely succeeding.

"Even in the days of the great Juvenile," proceeded Madame, "to whose satires I owe much"−−here she laid a loving hand upon Vol. 2 of the "Library of Famous Literature."−−"Long ere the days when Lord Lytton and his Caxtons introduced us to the blessings of the printing press there were doubtless ladies who, like myself, could forget the treachery and the lies of men in silent communion with the brains of the departed. Far better to be Milton's 'Il Penserosero' than Lord Byron's 'L'Allegra!' "

To this pronounciamento, which was interrupted several times by more alarming contortions of the brain−worker's face, the Prophet replied with a vague affirmative, while Mr. Sagittarius whispered,−−

"Her whole knowledge, sir, comes straight from there"−−pointing towards the dwarf bookcase. "She brought it on the instalment system. Dr. Carter has made her what she is! That man, sir, deserves to be canonised. Eight guineas and a half, sir, and such a result!"

"Such a result!" the Prophet whispered back.

By this time Madame Sagittarius had apparently ceased to commune with the dead, for her striking face assumed a more normal expression of feminine bitterness as she realised who was before her, and she exclaimed sharply,−−

"Oh, so you've come at last, Mr. Vivian! And pray what have you to say? What about the rashes? And what is this danger that threatens Mr. Sagittarius?"

"We'd better take the danger first, my dear," said Mr. Sagittarius, with grave anxiety.

"Very well. Not that it should be the most important to one who wears the /toga virilibus/!"

"True, my love. Still, to take it first will clear the ground, I think, and set me more at ease. Well, sir?"

Thus adjured, the Prophet resolved to make a clean breast of Sir Tiglath's declarations, and he therefore replied,−−

"I thought it only right to wire to you as I did, having learnt that there is in London a gentleman, an eminent man, who has for five−and− forty years been seeking for Malkiel with the avowed intention of−− of−−"

"Oh what, sir, of what?" said Mr. Sagittarius with trembling lips.

"Of doing him violence," replied the Prophet, impressively.

"What is the gent's name?" said Mr. Sagittarius, in great agitation.

"His name! /Nomen volens/!" added Madame.

"That," said the Prophet, "I prefer not to say at present."

"But why should he desire to−−?"

"Because you are a prophet."

"There, Jupiter!" cried Madame, with flushed spitefulness. "What have I always said! All prophets are what

they call outsiders−−/hors d'oeuvres/, neither more nor less."

"I know, my love, I know. But how should this gent recognise me for a prophet? I'm sure my dress, my manner, are those of an outside broker, as I have often told you, Sophy. How−−"

"The gentleman has not yet recognised you," said the Prophet. "At the moment he believes you to be an American syndicate."

"Thank mercy!" ejaculated Mr. Sagittarius.

"But one can never tell," added the Prophet. "He might find out."

"Nonsense!" cried Madame at this juncture. "We might quite well have gone to the square yesterday as I always suspected. But you are so timid, Jupiter. /Timeo Dan−−Dan/−−well, /Dan/ something or other, as Virgil so truly says."

"Cautious, Sophronia, only cautious, for your and the children's sakes!"

"I call a man who's afraid even when he's passing everywhere as an American syndicate a cowardly custard," rejoined Madame, who appeared to be suffering under that peculiar form of flushed irritability which is apt to follow on heavy thought, indulged in to excess in a recumbent position during the daytime. "There, that's settled. So now let us get to business. Kindly hand me your prophecy of last night, Mr. Vivian."

The Prophet drew from a breast pocket a sheet or two of notepaper, on which he had dotted down, in prophetic form, the events of the night before. Madame received it and continued,−−

"Before perusing this report, Mr. Vivian, I should wish to be made acquainted with those particulars."

"Which ones?" said the Prophet.

"Of your grandmother's career."

"Oh, I−−"

"Let us take them in order, please, and proceed /parri passo/. When was the old lady removed from the bottle?"

"Never," replied the Prophet, firmly. "Never."

An expression of incredulous amazement decorated the obstreperous features of Madame.

"Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Vivian, that she sucks it still?" she inquired.

"I mean what I say, that she has never been removed from it," returned the Prophet, with energy.

"Well, sir, she must be very partial to milk and Indian rubber, very partial indeed!" said Mr. Sagittarius. "Go on, my darling."

"Her first tooth, Mr. Vivian−−when did she cut it?"

"She has no idea."

Madame began to look decidedly grim.

"Date of short−coating?" she rapped out.

"There was no date. She never wore a short−coat."

"Do you desire me to believe, Mr. Vivian, that the old lady has been going about in long clothes ever since she was born?" inquired Madame, with incredulous sarcasm.

"Most certainly I do," replied the Prophet.

"Then how does she get along, pray? Come! Come!"

"She has always worn long clothes," cried the Prophet, boldly standing up for his beloved relative, "and always will. You can take that from me, Madame Sagittarius. I know my grandmother, and I am ready to pledge my honour to it."

"Oh, very well. She must be a very remarkable lady. That's all I can say. When did she put her hair up?"

"Never. She has never put it up."

"She has never put her hair up!"

"No, never."

"You mean to say that your grandmother goes about in long clothes with her hair down in the central districts?" cried Madame in blank amazement.

"She has never put her hair up," answered the Prophet, with almost obstinate determination.

"Oh, well−−if she prefers! But I wonder what the police are about!" retorted Madame. "And now the rashes?"

"There are none."

But at this Madame's temper−−already somewhat upset by her prolonged communion with the mighty

dead−−showed symptoms of giving way altogether.

"Rubbish, Mr. Vivian!" she said, clicking loudly and passing with an almost upheaving jerk to her upper register! "I'm a mother and was once a child. Rubbish! I must insist upon knowing the number of the rashes."

"I assure you there are none."

"D'you wish me to believe that the old lady has gone about all her life in the Berkeley Square in long clothes and her hair down, with her lips to the bottle and never had a rash? Do you wish me to believe that, Mr. Vivian?"

"Yes, sir, do you wish Madame, a lady of deep education, sir, to believe that?" cried Mr. Sagittarius.

"I can only adhere to what I have said," answered the Prophet. "My grandmother has never been removed from the bottle, has never worn a short coat, has never put her hair up and has never had an epidemic in Berkeley Square."

"Then all I can say is that she's an unnatural old lady," cried Madame, with obvious temper, tossing her head and kicking out the kid boots, as if seized with the sudden desire to use them upon a human football. "And there's not many like her."

"There is no one like her, no one at all," said the Prophet with fervour.

"So I should suppose," cried Madame, forgetting the other questions as to the day of marriage, etc., in the vexation of the moment. "She must certainly be the bird of whom Phoenix wrote that rose from ashes in the days of the classics. /Rarum avis/ indeed! Eh, Jupiter?"

"Very rarum, my dear, very indeed!" responded her husband, with imitative sarcasm. "An avis indeed, not a doubt of it."

"De Queechy should have known her," continued Madame. "He always loved everything out of the common. Well, and now for the prophecy. What is all this, Mr. Vivian?"

"The result of last night's observation," said the Prophet.

"Do you call that a cycloidal curve?" asked Madame, with a contralto laugh that shook the library. "Look, Jupiter!"

Mr. Sagittarius glanced over his wife's heaving shoulder.

"Very poor, my dear, very irregular indeed."

"It's the best I could do," said the Prophet, still politely.

"I daresay," replied Mr. Sagittarius. "I daresay. Where's your star− map?"

"I'm afraid I don't know," answered the Prophet. "I left it in the pomade."

"The pomade!"

"Yes, the butler's own special pomade, and it seems to have disappeared."

"Very careless, very careless indeed. Let's see−−prophecy first, then how arrived at. 'Grandmother apparently threatened with some danger at night in immediate future. Great turmoil in the house during dark hours.' H'm! 'Some stranger, or strangers, coming into her life and causing great trouble and confusion, almost resulting in despair, and perhaps actually inducing illness.' H'm! H'm! We didn't arrive at any of this by our observations, did we, Sophronia?"

"Decidedly not," snapped Madame, haughtily.

"And now let's see how arrived at. H'm! H'm! Grandmother−−ingress of Crab−−conjunction of Scorpio with Serpens−−moon in eleventh house. Yes, that's so. Jupiter in trine with Saturn−−What's this? 'Crab dressed implies danger−−undressed Crab much safer−−attempted intervention failure−−she's in a nice state now−−it tried to keep her from it, but she was drawn right to it.' Right to what?"

"The Crab?"

"Of course she was drawn to it. She depends on the Crab these nights. But what does the rest mean?"

"The Crab was dressed."

"Dressed−−what in?"

"I don't know," said the Prophet. "It didn’t tell me."

Mr. Sagittarius and Madame exchanged glances.

"Explain yourself, Mr. Vivian, I beg," cried Madame in a somewhat excited manner. "How could the Crab be dressed?"

"I have wondered," said the Prophet, gazing at the couple before him with shining eyes. "But it was dressed last night, and that made it exceptionally dangerous in some way. Something seemed to tell me so. Something did

tell me so."

"What told you?" inquired Madame, with more excitement and a certain respect which had been quite absent from her manner before.

"Something that came in the night. I don't know what it was. Light flashed from it."

"It sounds like a sort of comet, my darling," said Mr. Sagittarius, considerably perturbed. "We didn't observe that the Crab was specially dressed, did we?"

"It had nothing on at all when we saw it," said Madame with growing agitation. "But whatever was this comet that flashed light? That's what I want to get at."

"It was a dark thing that told me the Crab was dressed, that my grandmother had been with it and that its influence was inimical to her."

"A dark thing! That's not a comet!" said Mr. Sagittarius.

"It vanished with a flash of light into the square."

"At what time did you observe it, sir?" asked Mr. Sagittarius, while Madame leaned forward, gazing with goggling eyes at the Prophet.

"At exactly half−past one."

"Did it stay long?"

"A few minutes only−−but it made an impression upon me that I can never forget."

It had apparently also made a very great impression upon Mr. and Madame Sagittarius, who remained for some seconds staring fixedly at the Prophet without uttering a word. At last Mr. Sagittarius turned to Madame and said in a voice that shook with seriousness,−−

"Can it be, Sophronia, that prophets ought to live in the central districts? Can it really be that the nearer they are to the Circus, and even to the Stores−−"

"/O beatus illa/!" interjected Madame upon the pinions of a sigh.

"Yes, Sophronia, the Stores, the more clearly is the knowledge of the future vouchsafed to them? If it should prove to be so!"

Madame stared again upon the Prophet with a fixity and strained inquiry which made him shift in his seat.

"If it should!" she repeated, upon the lowest note of her lower register, which sounded, at that solemn moment, like the keynote of a dreamer. Then, with a sudden change of manner, she cried sharply,−−

"Jupiter, you must accompany this gentleman back to the square to−day."

The Prophet started. So did Mr. Sagittarius.

"But−−" they cried simultaneously.

"And you must share his night watch."

"But, my darling−−"

"Or I will," cried Madame. "Which is it to be?"

"Mr. Sagittarius!" exclaimed the Prophet.

"Very well," said Madame. "Let mine be the weary task to wait and watch at home. /Fata feminus/. The mystery of the dressed Crab must be unveiled. Should this mysterious visitant again vouchsafe a prophetic message, a practical prophet must be at hand to receive it. Jupiter, this gentleman is not practical. This report"−−she struck the paper on which the Prophet had dotted down his notes−−"is badly written. The cycloidal curve might have been made by a Board School child. The deductions drawn−−/deductio ad absurdibus/−−reveal no talent, none of the prophetic /feu de joie/ at all. But this mystery of the dressed Crab may mean much. Jupiter, you will accompany this gentleman back to London and you will assist him practically at the telescope to−night."

"Very well, my love. I will risk the personal danger, for your and the children's−−"

"But−−but really−−" began the Prophet. "I am very sorry, but−−"

"Madame has spoken, sir," said Mr. Sagittarius, very solemnly.

"I know she has. But−−yes, I know there are no buts in your dictionary, Madame, I know there aren't−−but I have an engagement to−night that I have sworn−−"

"What engagement, sir?" said Mr. Sagittarius, sternly. "You have sworn to us. You must know that."

"I have sworn to almost everyone," cried the distracted Prophet. "But this swear−−I mean this oath must be kept before yours."

"Before ours, sir?"

"It comes on before eleven. I keep my oath to you after it. I manage the two, don't you see?"

"He will see that you manage the two, Mr. Vivian, I can assure you," said Madame, viciously. "Won't you, Jupiter?"

"Certainly, my dear. What is the oath, sir, that you place before ours?"

"An oath to Miss Minerva," returned the Prophet, beginning to feel reckless, firm in the conviction that it was henceforth his destiny to be the very sport of Fate.

"Ha!" cried Mr. Sagittarius. "The double life!"

"Who is Miss Minerva, pray?" said Madame, shooting a very penetrating glance upon her husband.

"Your husband can tell you that," replied the Prophet, by no means without guile.

"Jupiter," cried Madame, "what is the meaning of this? Who is this person?"

Mr. Sagittarius looked exceedingly uncomfortable.

"My dear," he began, "she is a young fe−−that is, a young wo−−I should say−−"

"A fe! A wo! Explain yourself, Jupiter!"

"She is a lady, my love."

"A lady! Do I know her?"

"I believe not, my dear."

"And do you?"

"No, my darling. That is−−that is−−"

"Yes, I suppose!" said Madame, with a very violent click.

"I can hardly say, Sophronia, that, I can't indeed. I have met her, by accident, quite by accident I assure you, once or twice."

"Where?"

"At Jellybrand's. She goes there to fetch letters on the same day as I do."

Madame's very intellectual brow was over−clouded with storm. She turned upon the Prophet.

"And what of this person, Mr. Vivian?" she cried. "What of her and this oath?"

The Prophet, who was secretly very delighted with the diversion he had so cleverly created, hastened to reply,−−

"I have promised most solemnly to meet her to−night at a house in the Zoological Gardens!"

"A house in the Zoological Gardens!"

"I mean at the Zoological House, the residence of Mrs. Vane Bridgeman, who is−−"

But, at this point in his explanation, the Prophet was interrupted by both his hearers.

"The Jellybrand one!" cried Mr. Sagittarius.

"The prophets' patron!" vociferated Madame.

CHAPTER XVI. THE PROPHET RETURNS FROM THE MOUSE WITH TWO OLD AND VALUED FRIENDS

At these exclamations the Prophet started in some surprise.

"You know this lady?" he asked.

"By repute, sir," replied Mr. Sagittarius.

"Who does not?" cried Madame. "She built the 'Prophets' Rest' at Birchington."

"And the Mediums' Almshouses at Sunnington."

"And the 'Palmists' Retreat' at Millaby Bay."

"And the−−"

"I see you know all about her," interposed the Prophet. "Well, she is giving a reception to−night at Zoological House and I have sworn to be there. But I shall get home by eleven. You will understand, however, that I cannot have the pleasure of entertaining Mr. Sagittarius during the evening under my own roof. I regret this extremely, but you see it is unavoidable."

To the Prophet's great surprise this lucid explanation was received by his hearers with a strange silence and a combined meditative, and even moony, staring which was to him inexplicable. Both Madame and Mr. Sagittarius seemed suddenly immersed in contemplation. They began, he thought, to look like Buddhists, or like those devoted persons who, in the times of the desert monks, remained for long periods posed upon pillows in sandy wastes musing upon Eternity. At first, as he met their fixed eyes, he fancied that they were, perhaps, falling into a trance, but presently the conviction seized him that they must be, on the contrary, busily thinking out some problem. He hoped fervently that he did not form part of it. At length the quivering silence was broken by Mr. Sagittarius.

"I might accompany you to Mrs. Bridgeman's, sir," he said to the Prophet. "Might I not, Sophronia?"

"Oh, but−−" began the Prophet, very hastily.

"The lady has frequently pressed me to accept of her hospitality."

"Indeed!"

"For years she has been writing to me at Jellybrand's, under my real name of Malkiel the Second, you understand. She addresses me simply as the master.' "

"But do the postal authorities−−"

"Not upon the envelope, sir, not upon the envelope."

"I see."

"Hitherto, true to myself, true to the principles of Malkiel the First, and to the instincts of Madame, I have declined her personal acquaintance. But there is no reason why you should not introduce me to the house as Mr. Sagittarius, no reason at all."

The Prophet knew only too well that there was not, but before he had time to go on trying to wriggle out of the complication, Madame struck in.

"Miss Minerva is to be present at this reception, I believe," she said sharply.

"Yes, she is," answered the Prophet, illumined by a ray of hope.

"Jupiter," said Madame, "I will accompany you and Mr. Vivian to the Zoological Gardens to−night. It is my sacred duty."

The Prophet groaned.

"But, my darling−−"

"The reception over, I will assist you and Mr. Vivian at the telescope in the Berkeley Square. In your presence I can do so without departing from my principles, /salvo pudoribus/. Do not interrupt me, Jupiter, if you please. I have thought the matter out. The crisis in our fate is at hand. Upon the events of the next three nights depends our future. These mysterious messages of which Mr. Vivian speaks must be examined into by us upon the spot. This mystery of the dressed Crab must be made clear. A woman's intellect is needed. A woman's intellect shall not be wanting. Ill as I am, worn down by the occurrences of yesterday and by this gentleman's incessant telegrams, I will leave my books"−−here she waved one hand towards the dwarf bookcase−−"I will assume an appropriate

/neglige/ and my outdoor boots, a fichu and bonnet, and will accompany you at once to the Berkeley Square, there to confer and arrange the programme of the evening. Mrs. Bridgeman would fall down before us in worship could she know who we really are. As it is, Mr. Vivian will introduce us modestly as two old and valued friends. The time may be at hand when we need no longer hide ourselves beneath an /alibi/. Till then we must possess ourselves, and Mr. Vivian must possess us, in patience. Ill as I am, I will accompany you. To−night shall see me in the Zoological Gardens at my husband's side."

Before the prospect of this sublime self−sacrifice both Mr. Sagittarius and the Prophet were as men dumb. They said not a word. They only gazed−−with a sort of strange idiotcy−−at Madame as she rose, with an elaborate and studied feebleness, from the maroon couch and prepared to go upstairs to assume the appropriate /neglige/. Only when she was at her full height did the Prophet, rendered desperate by the terrible results of his own ingenuity, nerve himself to utter one last protest.

"I really do not think it would be quite according to the rules of etiquette which prevail in the central districts," he cried, "for a lady to spend the night in the butler's pantry of a comparative stranger, even when accompanied by her husband. It might give rise to talk in the square, and−−"

"The butler's pantry, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Sagittarius. "Explain yourself, I beg."

"The telescope is there, and−−"

"I have passed beyond the reach of etiquette," said Madame, looking considerably like Joan of Arc and other well−known heroines. "My duty lies plain before me. Of myself I should not have selected the Zoological Gardens and the butler's pantry of a comparative stranger as places in which to pass the night, even when accompanied by my husband. But my conscience−−/mens conscium recto/−−guides me and I will not resist it. I will assume my /neglige/ and bonnet and will be with you in a moment."

So saying she majestically quitted the apartment.

The Prophet fell down upon the maroon sofa like a man smitten with paralysis. He felt suddenly old, and very weak. He tried to think, to consider how he could explain Madame Sagittarius to his grandmother−− for she must surely now become aware of the presence of strangers in her pretty home−−how he could arrange matters with Mr. Ferdinand, how he could apologise to a lady whom he had never yet seen for appearing at her house with two uninvited guests, how he could get rid of the Sagittariuses when the horrible night watch should be at an end and the frigid winter dawn be near. But his mind refused to work. His brain was a blank, containing nothing except, perhaps, a vague desire for sudden death. Mr. Sagittarius did not disturb his contemplation of the inevitable. Indeed, that gentleman also seemed meditative, and the silence lasted until the reappearance of Madame, in a brown robe−−of a slightly tea−gown type−−trimmed with green chiffon and coffee−coloured lace, a black bonnet adorned with about a score of imitation plums made in some highly−glazed material, a heavy cloak lined with priceless rabbit−skins, and the outdoor boots.

If the Prophet had found the journey to the Mouse a painful experience, what can be said of his feelings during the journey from that noble stream? Long afterwards he recalled his state of mind during the tramp across the Common among the broken crockery, the dust−heaps, the decaying vegetables and the occasional lurking rats, the journey in the train, the reembarkment upon the purple 'bus from the gentle eminence sloping towards the coal−yard, the long pilgrimage towards the central districts with his very outlying companions. He recalled the peculiar numbness that strove against the desperation of his thoughts, his feeble efforts to lay plans frustrated by a perpetual buzzing in his brain, his flitting visions of that gentle grandmother round whose venerable age and dignity he was about to group such peculiar personalities, and beneath whose roof he was about to indulge in such unholy prophetic practices. Long afterwards−−but even then he could not smile as men so often smile when they look back on lost despairs!

He and his companions spoke but little together as they journeyed. Occasionally Madame and Mr. Sagittarius conversed in husky whispers, like brigands the Prophet thought, and the veiled click of Madame's contralto struck through the startled air. But mostly a silence prevailed−−a silence alive with fate.

At the corner of Air Street they got out and began to walk down Piccadilly towards the Berkeley square. It was now evening. The lamps were lighted and the murmur of strolling crowds filled the gloomy air. Madame stared feverishly about her, excited by the press, the flashing hansoms and the gaily−illuminated shops. Once, as she passed Benoist's, she murmured "/O festum dies/!" and again, by the Berkeley, when she was momentarily jostled by a very large and umbrageous tramp who had apparently been celebrating the joys of beggary−−"/Acto

profanus vulgam/!" But generally she was silent, enwrapped, no doubt, in bookish thought. When, at length, they stood before the door of number one thousand she breathed a heavy sigh.

"Please," said the Prophet, in a trembling voice, "please enter quietly. My grandmother is very unwell."

"Ankles seems to be a very painful complaint, sir," said Mr. Sagittarius. "But Madame and self are not in the habit of creating uproar by our movements."

"No, no. Of course not. Still−−on tiptoe if you don't mind."

"I cannot walk on tiptoe," said Madame, in a voice that sounded to the Prophet terrifically powerful. "The attitude is precarious and undignified. As the great Juvenile−−"

"Yes, yes. Ah! that's it!"

He managed to get his key into the door and very gingerly opened it. Madame and Mr. Sagittarius stepped into the hall, followed closely by the Prophet, who was content on conveying them unobserved to the library.

"This way," he whispered. "This way. Softly! Softly!"

He began to steal, like a shadow, across the hall, and, impressed by his surreptitious manner, his old and valued friends instinctively followed his example. All three of them, then, with long steps and theatrical pauses, were stagily upon the move, when suddenly the door that led to the servants' quarters swung open and Mrs. Fancy Quinglet debouched into their midst, succeeded by Mr. Ferdinand, who carried in his hand a menu card in a silver holder. At the moment of their appearance the Prophet, holding his finger to his lips, was taking a soft and secret stride in the direction of the library door, his body bent forward and his head protruded towards the sanctum he longed to gain, and Madame and Mr. Sagittarius, true to the instinct of imitation that dwells in our monkey race, were in precisely similar attitudes behind him. The hall being rather dark, and the gait of the trio it contained thus tragically surreptitious, it was perhaps not unnatural that Mrs. Fancy should give vent to a piercing cry of terror, and that Mr. Ferdinand should drop the menu and crouch back against the wall in a hunched position expressive of alarm. At any rate, such were their actions, while−−for their part−−the Prophet and his two old and valued friends uttered a united exclamation and struck three attitudes that were pregnant with defensive amazement.

Having uttered herself, Mrs. Fancy, according to her invariable custom when completely terrified, displayed all the semblance of clear−sighted composure and explanatory discrimination. While Mr. Ferdinand remained by the wall, with his face to it and his large white hands spread out upon his shut eyes, the lady's maid advanced upon Madame, and, addressing herself apparently to some hidden universe in need of information, remarked in rather a piecing voice,−−

"I say again, as I said afore, the house has been broke into and the robbers are upon us. I can't speak different nor mean other."

On hearing these words Madame's large and rippling countenance became suffused with indignant scarlet, and a preliminary click rang through the hall. The Prophet bounded forward.

"Hush, Fancy," he cried. "What are you saying?"

"What I mean, Master Hennessey. The house has been broke−−"

"Hush! Hush! This lady and gentleman are−−"

"Two old and valued friends−−" boomed Madame.

"Two old and valued friends of mine. Mr. Ferdinand! Mr. Ferdinand, take your face from the wall, if you please. There is no cause for alarm. Now, Fancy−−now!"

For Mrs. Fancy had, as usual, broken into tears on learning the reassuring truth, and was now displaying every symptom of distress and enervation. The Prophet, unable to calm her, was obliged to assist her upstairs and place her upon the landing, where he hurriedly left her uttering broken moans and murmurs, and repeating again and again her statement of affairs and assertion of inability to conceal the revealed obvious. On his return he found Madame, Mr. Sagittarius and Mr. Ferdinand grouped statuesquely in the hall as if to represent "Perturbation."

"Mr. Ferdinand," he said rather severely, "I did not expect this conduct of you, shrinking from guests in this extraordinary manner. A butler who shows terror at the sight of visitors does not conduce to the popularity of his employers."

"I beg pardon, sir. I was not prepared."

"Please be prepared another time. You will serve dinner for three to−night, very quietly, in the inner dining−room. I do not wish Mrs. Merillia to be disturbed in her illness, and−−"

"If you please, sir, Mrs. Merillia feels herself so much better that she is coming down to dinner to−night."

"Coming down to dinner!" said the Prophet, aghast.

"Yes, sir. And she has asked in Sir Tiglath Butt and the Lady Julia Postlethwaite to join her. I was about to show Mrs. Merillia the menu, sir, when−−"

"Good Heavens! Merciful Powers!" ejaculated the Prophet.

"Sir?"

"What on earth is to be done?" continued the Prophet, lost for the moment to all sense of propriety.

Mr. Ferdinand looked at the old and valued friends.

"I can't say, sir, I'm sure," he replied, pursing up his lips.

"What is the meaning−−" began Mr. Sagittarius.

"I'm not aware that−−" started Madame.

The Prophet darted to the library door and opened it.

"Pray, pray come in here," he hissed. "My grandmother! Softly!"

"But the old la−−"

"Hush, please!"

"I must remark, Mr. Viv−−"

"Tsh! Tsh! Mr. Ferdinand, wait in the hall. I shall want to speak to you in a moment."

"Yes, sir."

The Prophet closed the door and turned to this indignant visitors.

"This is terrible," he said. "Terrible!"

"Pray why?" cried Madame.

"Why," cried the Prophet, "why?"

He sought frantically for some excuse. Suddenly a bright idea occurred to him.

"Why," he said, impressively. "Because Sir Tiglath Butt, the gentleman who is coming to dinner, is the person who for five−and−forty years has been seeking Mr. Sagittarius with the firm intention of assaulting, perhaps of killing, him."

Mr. Sagittarius turned deathly pale, and made a movement as if to get out of the nearest window.

"This is a trap!" he stammered. "This is a rat−trap. This was planned."

"Really"−−began the Prophet.

But Mr. Sagittarius did not heed the exclamation. Tremblig very violently, he continued,−−

"Sophy, my darling, you are in danger. Let us fly!"

And, clutching his wife by the arm, to the Prophet's unspeakable delight he endeavoured to lead, or rather to drag her to the door. But Madame now showed the metal she was made of.

"Jupiter," she exclaimed, in her deepest note, "if you are a Prophet you can surely at moments be also a man. Where is your /toga virilibus/?"

"I don't know, my love, I'm sure. Don't let us lose a moment. Come, my angel!"

"I shall not come," retorted Madame, whose leaping ambition had been fired by the sound of titled names. "The gentleman believes you to be an American syndicate."

"I know, my blessing, I know. But−−"

"Very well. If you don't behave like one he will never suspect you."

The Prophet saw his chance slipping from him and hastened to interpose.

"He might divine the truth," he said. "One can never−−"

But at this moment he was interrupted by Mr. Ferdinand who abruptly opened the door and observed,−−

"If you please, sir, Mrs. Merillia has sent down orders that the police are to be fetched at once."

Mr. Sagittarius, now thoroughly unnerved, turned from white to grey.

"The police!" he vociferated. "Sophy, my angel, let us fly. This is no place for you!"

"The police!" cried the Prophet. "Why?"

"I believe it's Mrs. Fancy's doing, sir. If you would go to Mrs. Merillia, sir, I think−−"

The Prophet rushed from the room and hastened upstairs four steps at a time. He found his beloved grandmother in a state of grave agitation, and Mrs. Fancy, in floods of tears, reiterating her statement that there were robbers in the house.

"Oh, Hennessey!" cried Mrs. Merillia, on his entrance, "thank God that you are come. There are burglars in

the house. Fancy has just encountered them in the hall. Go for the police, my dearest boy. Don't lose a moment."

"My dear grannie, they're not burglars."

"I can't speak different, Master Hennessey, nor−−"

"Then who are they, Hennessey? Fancy declares−−"

"They are two−−two−−well, two old and valued friends of mine."

"Old and valued friends of ours!"

"Of mine, grannie. Fancy, pray don't make such a noise!"

"Fancy," said Mrs. Merillia, "you can go to your room and lie down."

"Yes, ma'am. I say again, as I said afore, the house has been broke into and the robbers−−"

At this point the Prophet shut the door on the faithful and persistent creature, who forthwith carried her determination and sobs to an upper storey.

"Hennessey, what is all this? Who is really here?"

"Grannie, dear, only two friends of mine," replied the Prophet, trying to look at ease, and feeling like a criminal.

"Friends of yours? But surely then I know them. I thought I knew all your friends."

"So you do, grannie, all except−−except just these."

"And they are old and valued, you say?"

"No, no−−that is, I mean yes."

Mrs. Merillia was too dignified to ask any further questions. She lay back on her sofa, and looked at her grandson with a shining of mild reproach in her green eyes.

"Well, my dear," she said, "go back to your friends, but don't forget that Lady Julia and Sir Tiglath are dining here at half−past seven."

"Grannie," cried the Prophet, with a desperate feeling that Madame meant to stay, "you ought not to dine downstairs to−night. Let me send and put them off."

"No, Hennessey," she answered, with gentle decision. "I feel better, and I want cheering up. My morning was not altogether pleasant."

The Prophet understood that she was alluding to his questions, and felt cut to the heart. His home seemed crumbling about him, but he knew not what to do or what to say. Mrs. Merillia observed his agitation, but she did not choose to remark upon it, for she considered curiosity the most vulgar of all the vices.

"Go to your friends, dear," she said again. "But be in time for dinner."

"Yes, grannie."

The Prophet descended the stairs and met Mr. Ferdinand at the bottom.

"Am I to send for the police, sir?"

"No, no. I've explained matters."

"And about dinner, sir?"

"I'll tell you in a moment, Mr. Ferdinand," replied the Prophet, entering the library with the fixed intention of getting Madame and Mr. Sagittarius out of the house without further delay.

The tableau that met his eyes, however, was not reassuring. He found Madame, having laid aside her bonnet, and thrown the rabbit−skin cloak carelessly upon a settee, arranging her hair before a mirror, and shaking up the coffee−coloured lace fichu in a manner that suggested a permanent occupation of the house, while her husband, sunk in a deep armchair in an attitude of complete nervous prostration, was gazing dejectedly into the fire. When the Prophet entered, the latter bounded with alarm, while Madame turned round, a couple of hairpins in her mouth and both hands to the back of her head.

"Ah," she remarked, through the pins, "/il a vous/! I am happy to say that I have induced Mr. Sagittarius to assume his /toga virilibus/, and that we have, therefore, great pleasure in yielding to your thoughtful pressure−−"

"My what?" said the Prophet, blankly.

"You thoughtful pressure, and accepting your urgent invite to dine here before proceeding to the Zoological Gardens and thence to the butler's pantry."

The Prophet tried not to groan while she emitted a pin and secured with it a wandering plait of raven hair.

"You're sure, sir," said Mr. Sagittarius, in a deplorable voice, "that the gentleman is convinced that I am really an American syndicate?"

The Prophet rang the bell. He could not trust himself to speak, and, when he looked at Madame's large and determined eyes, he knew that to do so would be useless.

Mr. Ferdinand appeared.

"Mr. Ferdinand," said the Prophet, "this lady and gentleman will join us at dinner to−night."

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Ferdinand, casting a glance of outraged prudery upon Mr. Sagittarius, who was attired in his usual morning costume, including spats.

"What's the matter, Mr. Ferdinand?" asked the Prophet, following that functionary's eyes. "Ha! He's not dressed!"

"No, sir!"

"Mr. Sagittarius," cried the Prophet, "you're not dressed!"

"Sir," cried that gentleman, "do you dare to accuse me of impropriety in a frock coat?"

"No, no. But for dinner. You can't possibly dine like that!"

"I have dined like this, sir, for the last twenty years. The architects and their wives−−"

"I daresay. But unluckily there will be no architects and their wives at dinner to−night. Please stand up."

"Sir?"

"Kindly stand up. Mr. Ferdinand!"

"Yes, sir."

"Place your back against this gentleman's if you please−−touching, touching! Don't wriggle away like that. Keep your heels to the ground while I fetch a sheet of notepaper. Don't move your heads either of you. I thought so. You're pretty much the same height. Mr. Ferdinand, you will lay out a white shirt and one of your black dress suits in my dressing−room at once. Madame, I regret that we must leave you for a few moments. Will you rest here? Allow me to place a cushion for your head. And here is Juvenal in the original."

So saying, the Prophet hurried Mr. Sagittarius from the room, driving Mr. Ferdinand, in a condition of elephantine horror, before him, and abandoning Madame to an acquaintance with the classics that she had certainly never achieved in the society of the renowned Dr. Carter.

CHAPTER XVII. MALKIEL THE SECOND IS MISTAKEN FOR A RATCATCHER

"If you tremble like that, of course it must look too big!" exclaimed the Prophet to Mr. Sagittarius, a quarter of an hour later. "Draw it in at the back."

Mr. Sagittarius, with shaking hands, drew in the waistcoat of Mr. Ferdinand, which hung in folds around his thin and agitated figure.

"That's better," said the Prophet. "They won't notice anything odd. But you've turned up your−−Mr. Ferdinand's trousers!"

"They're too long, sir. You braced them too low for−−"

"I braced them low on purpose," cried the Prophet in great excitement, "to cover the spats, since you can't get on Mr. Ferdinand's boots. Kindly turn them down."

"As to the spats, sir, the architects and their wives−−"

"Mr. Sagittarius," exclaimed the Prophet, "I think it right to inform you that if you mention the architects and their wives again, I may very probably go mad. I don't say I shall, but I will not answer for myself. Have the goodness to turn them down and follow me."

Mr. Sagittarius obeyed, and followed the Prophet from the room with a waddling gait and a terrible sensation of having nothing on. The coat and trousers which he wore flapped about him as he descended the stairs in the wake of the Prophet, glancing nervously about him and starting at the slightest sound. In the library they found Madame, holding the great Juvenile upside down and looking exceedingly cross.

"Will you be good enough to come upstairs?" said the Prophet to her very politely, though his fingers twitched to strangle her. "I wish to present you to my grandmother, and dinner is just ready."

Madame rose with dignity.

"I am ready too," she said, with a click. "/Semper paratis/."

And, shaking up the fichu, she ascended the stairs. Outside the drawing−room door the Prophet, who seemed strangely calm, but who was in reality almost bursting with nervous excitement, paused and faced his old and valued friends.

"You will forgive my saying so, I hope," he whispered, "but my grandmother is not well and much conversation tires her. So we don't talk too much in her presence. Only just now and then, you understand."

And with this last injunction−−futile, he knew as he gave it−−he commended himself to whatever powers there be and opened the door.

Sir Tiglath had not yet arrived, but Lady Julia Postlethwaite was seated on a sofa by Mrs. Merillia, and was conversing with her about the Court, the dreadful amount of money a certain duke−−her third cousin−−had recently had to pay in Death Duties, the corrupt condition of society, and the absurd pretensions of the lower middle classes. Lady Julia was sensitive and a very /grande dame/. She wore her hair powdered, and had a slight cough and exquisite manners. Once a lady in waiting, she was now a widow, possessed a set of apartments in Hampton Court Palace, worshipped Queen Alexandra, and had scarcely ever spoken to anybody who moved outside of Court Circles. The Duke of Wellington was said to have embraced her when a child.

Mrs. Merillia and this lady looked up when the door opened, and Lady Julia paused midway in a sentence, of which these were the opening words,−−

"The old duke wouldn't make it over, and so poor Loftus has to pay nearly a million to the Chancellor of the Excheq−−"

"How d'you do, Lady Julia? Grannie, I have persuaded my friends, Mr. and Madame Sagittarius, to join us at dinner. Sir Tiglath Butt is most anxious to meet Mr. Sagittarius, who is a great astronomer. Let me−− Madame Sagittarius, Mrs. Merillia−−Mr. Sagittarius−−Mrs. Merillia, my grandmother−−Lady Julia Postlethwaite."

Mrs. Merillia, although taken completely by surprise, and fully conscious that her grandson had committed an outrage in turning an arranged and intimate quartette without permission into a disorganised sextette, bowed with self−possessed graciousness, and indicated a chair to Madame, who seated herself in it with that sort of defensive and ostentatious majesty which is often supposed by ill−bred people to be a perfect society manner. Mr.

Sagittarius remained standing in his enormous suit, turning out his feet, over which Mr. Ferdinand's trousers rippled in broadcloth waves, in the first position. A slight pause ensued, during which the Prophet was uncomfortably affected by the behaviour of Madame, who gazed at the very neat and superior wig worn by Mrs. Merillia, and at that lady's charming silver grey damask gown, in a manner that suggested amazement tempered with indignation, her instant expression of these two sentiments being only held in check by a certain reverence which was doubtless inspired by the pretty room, the thick carpet, the ancestral pictures upon the walls, and the lofty bearing of Lady Julia Postlethwaite, who could scarcely conceal her very natural surprise at the extraordinary appearance of Mr. Sagittarius. As to Mrs. Merillia, although she was, in reality, near fainting with wonder at her grandson's escapade, she preserved an expression of gracious benignity, and did not allow a motion of her eyelids or a flutter of her fan to betray her emotion at finding herself the unprepared hostess of such unusual guests. The Prophet broke the silence by saying, in a voice that cracked with agitation,−−

"I trust−−I sincerely trust that we shall have a clement spring this year."

Lady Julia, at whom he had looked while uttering this original desire, was about to reply when Madame uttered a stentorian click and interposed.

"In the spring the young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love," she remarked, with the fictitious ease of profound ill−breeding.

No one dared to dispute the portentous statement, and she resumed majestically,−−

"The Mouse is delicious in spring."

There was another dead silence, and Madame, turning with patronising and heavy affability towards Lady Julia, added,−−

"Your ladyship doubtless loves the Mouse−−/Mus Pulcherrimo/−−in spring as I do?"

The Prophet felt as if he were being pricked by thousands of red−hot needles, and the perspiration burst out in beads upon his forehead.

"I am not specially fond of mice in spring, or indeed at any season," replied Lady Julia, with her slight, but very distinct and bell−like, cough.

"I said the Mouse, your ladyship," returned Madame, feeding upon this titled acquaintance with her bulging black eyes, and pushing the kid boots well out from under her brown skirt. "I observed that the Mouse was peculiarly delicious in the season of love."

"No mouse attracts me," said Lady Julia, coughing again and raising her fine eyebrows slightly. "I should much prefer to pass the spring without the companionship of any mouse whatever."

Both Madame and Mr. Sagittarius opened their lips to reply, but before they could eject a single word the door was opened by Mr. Ferdinand, who announced,−−

"Sir Tiglath Butt."

Mr. Sagittarius started violently and upset a vase of roses, the astronomer rolled into the room with a very red face, and Mr. Ferdinand added,−−

"Dinner is served."

Mrs. Merillia shook hands with Sir Tiglath and glanced despairingly around her. It was sufficiently obvious that she was considering how to arrange the procession to the dining−room.

"Hennessey," she began, "will you take Lady Julia? Sir Tiglath, will you"−−she paused, but there was no help for it, she was obliged to continue−−"take Mrs. Sagittarius? Let me introduce you, Sir Tiglath Butt−−Mrs. Sagittarius. Mr. Sagittarius, will you take−−"

"Mr. Sagittarius!" roared Sir Tiglath. "Where is he?"

That gentleman gathered Mr. Ferdinand's trousers up in both hands and prepared for instantaneous flight.

"Where is he?" bellowed Sir Tiglath, wheeling round with amazing rapidity for so fat a man. "Ha!"

He had viewed Mr. Sagittarius, who, grasping Mr. Ferdinand's suit in pleats, ducked his head like one wishing to be beforehand with violence and set the spats towards the door. Sir Tiglath advanced upon him.

"The old astronomer has heard the name of Sagittarius," he vociferated. "He has been informed that−−"

"It's not true, sir," cried Mr. Sagittarius, pale with terror. "It is not true. I deny it. I am an Ameri−−I mean I am not the American syndicate−−you are in error, in absolute error. I swear it. I take the heavens to witness."

At this remarkable and comprehensive statement Mrs. Merillia and Lady Julia looked at each other in elegant amazement.

"What do you mean, sir?" exclaimed Sir Tiglath. "And why do you insult the sacred heavens, you an astronomer!"

"I am not an astronomer," cried Mr. Sagittarius, cringing in the voluminous waistcoat of Mr. Ferdinand. "I am an outside broker. I swear it. My dress, my manner proclaim the fact. Sophronia, tell the gentleman that I am an outside broker and that all Margate has recognised me as such."

"My husband states the fact," said Madame, in response to this impassioned appeal. "My husband brokes outside, and has done for the last twenty years. Collect yourself, Jupiter. Pray do not doff your /toga virilibus/ in the presence of ladies!"

The terror of Mr. Sagittarius was such, however, that it is very doubtful whether he would not have proceeded thus to disrobe had not the Prophet, rendered desperate by the turn of events, abruptly leaped between Sir Tiglath and his old and valued friend and, gathering the outraged Lady Julia under his arm, exclaimed,−−

"Pray, pray−−we can discuss this matter more comfortably at dinner. Permit me, Lady Julia. Sir Tiglath, if you will kindly give your arm to Madame Sagittarius. Mr. Sagittarius, my grandmother."

So saying, he made a sort of flank movement, so adroitly conceived and carried out that, in the twinkling of an eye, he had driven Sir Tiglath to the side of Madame and hustled Mr. Sagittarius into the immediate neighbourhood of Mrs. Merillia. Nor had more than two minutes elapsed before the whole party found themselves−−they scarce knew how−−arranged around the dining table and being served with clear soup by Mr. Ferdinand and the astounded Gustavus, whose naturally round eyes began to take an almost oblong form as he attended to the wants of Mrs. Merillia's very unfamiliar guests, whose outlying demeanour and architectural manners evidently filled him with the most poignant dismay.

As to Mrs. Merillia and Lady Julia, the foregoing scene had so reduced them that they were almost betrayed into some hysterical departure from the rules of exquisite good breeding which they had unconsciously observed from the cradle. Indeed, the latter, strong in the belief that the terms outside broker and raving maniac were interchangeable, twice dropped her spoon into her soup−plate before she could succeed in lifting it to her mouth, and was unable to prevent herself from whispering to the Prophet,−−

"Pray, Mr. Vivian, tell me the worst−−is he absolutely dangerous?"

"No, no," whispered back the Prophet, reassuringly. "It's all his play."

"Play!" murmured Lady Julia, glancing at Mr. Sagittarius, who was holding back the right sleeve of Mr. Ferdinand's coat with his left hand in order to have the free use of his dinner limb.

"Yes," whispered the Prophet. "He's the most harmless, innocent creature. A child might stroke him. I mean he wouldn't hurt a child."

"Yes, but we are not children," said Lady Julia, still in great apprehension.

Meanwhile Sir Tiglath, concerned with his dinner, took no heed of Mr. Sagittarius for the moment, and that gentleman, slightly reassured, endeavoured to make himself agreeable to Mrs. Merillia.

"You are very pleasantly situated here, ma'am," he began.

Mrs. Merillia thought he meant because she was at his elbow, and answered politely,−−

"Yes, very pleasantly situated."

"It is indeed a blessing to be within such easy reach of the Stores," added Mr. Sagittarius, finishing his soup, and permitting Mr. Ferdinand's sleeves to flow down once more over his hands.

"The Stores!" said Mrs. Merillia.

"/O festum dies beatus illa/!" ejaculated Madame, assuming an expression of profound and almost passionate sentiment. "Happy indeed the good lady who dwells in the central districts!"

She permitted a gigantic sigh to leave her bosom and to wander freely among the locks of those at the table. Sir Tiglath, who, on being assaulted by her learning, had shown momentary symptoms of apoplexy, now gave a loud grunt, while the Prophet, perceiving that his grandmother and Lady Julia were quite unequal to the occasion, hastily replied,−−

"Yes, Berkeley Square is very convenient in may ways."

"Ah!" said Mr. Sagittarius, keeping a wary eye on Sir Tiglath and re− addressing himself to Mrs. Merillia, "the Berkeley Square. But if you lived in the one behind Kimmins's Mews, it would be quite another pair of boots, would it not, ma'am?"

Lady Julia, who was sitting next to Mr. Sagittarius, shifted her chair nearer to the Prophet, and whispered,

"I'm sure he is dangerous, Mr. Vivian!" while Mrs. Merillia, in the greatest perplexity, replied,−−

"The one behind Mr. Kimmins's Mews?"

"Ay, over against Brigwell's Buildings, just beyond the Pauper Lunatic Asylum."

Lady Julia turned pale.

"I daresay," answered Mrs. Merillia, bravely. "But I am not acquainted with the neighbourhood you mention."

"You know the Mouse?"

At this abrupt return to the subject of mice Lady Julia became really terrified.

"Be frank with me, Mr. Vivian," she whispered to the Prophet, under cover of boiled salmon; "is he a ratcatcher?"

"Good Heavens, no!" whispered back the Prophet. "He's−−he's quite the contrary."

"But−−"

"What mouse?" said Mrs. Merillia, endeavouring to seem pleasantly at ease, though she, too, was beginning to feel a certain amount of alarm at these strange beings' persistent discussion of the inhabitants of the wainscot. "Do you allude to any special mouse?"

"I do, ma'am. I allude to the Mouse that has helped to make Madame and self what we are."

Sir Tiglath began to roll about in his chair preparatory to some deliverance, and Mrs. Merillia, casting a somewhat agitated glance at her grandson, answered,−−

"Really. I did not know that anything so small could have so much influence."

"It may be small, ma'am," said Mr. Sagittarius. "But to a sensitive nature it often seems gigantic."

"You mean at night, I suppose? Does it disturb you very much?"

"We hear it, ma'am, but it lulls us to rest."

"Indeed. That is very fortunate. I fear it might keep me awake."

"So we thought at first. But now we should miss it. Should we not, Sophronia?"

"Doubtless," replied Madame, arranging a napkin carefully over her fichu, and dealing rigorously with some mayonnaise sauce. "It has been our perpetual companion for many years, /mus amicus humano generi/."

Sir Tiglath swelled, and Mrs. Merillia responded,−−

"I see, a pet. Is it white?"

"No, ma'am," returned Mr. Sagittarius, "it is a rich, chocolate brown except on wet days. Then it takes on the hue of a lead pencil."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Merillia, trying nobly to remain social. "How very curious!"

"We worship it in summer," continued Mr. Sagittarius. "In the sultry season it soothes and calms us."

"Then it is quite tame?"

"At that time of year, but in winter nights it is sometimes almost wild."

"Ah, I daresay. They often are, I know."

"The architects and their wives love it as we do."

"Do they? How very fortunate!"

"We should hate to miss it even for a moment."

"Oh, Mr. Vivian!" whispered Lady Julia, "this is dreadful. "I'm almost sure he's brought it with him."

"No, no. It's not alive."

"A dead mouse!"

"It's a river."

"A river! But he said it was a mouse."

"It's both. Mr. Sagittarius," added the Prophet, in a loud and desperate tone of voice, "you'll find this champagne quite dry. You needn't be afraid of it."

"Did you get it from by the rabbit shop, sir?" asked Mr. Sagittarius, lifting his glass. "I ordered a dozen in, only the day before yesterday."

Lady Julia began to tremble.

"I see," she whispered to the Prophet. "His mania is about animals."

Meanwhile the Prophet had made a warning face at Mr. Sagittarius, who suddenly remembered his danger and subsided, glancing uneasily at Sir Tiglath, whose intention of addressing him had been momentarily interfered with by a sweetbread masked in a puree of spinach.

Madame Sagittarius, assisted by food and dry champagne, was now−−as the Prophet perceived with horror−−beginning to feel quite at her ease. She protruded her elbows, sat more extensively in her chair, rolled her prominent eyes about the room as one accustomed to her state, and said, with condescension, to Lady Julia,−−

"Is your ladyship to make one of the party at the Zoological Gardens to−night?"

Lady Julia, who now began to suppose that Mr. Sagittarius's crazy passion for animals was shared by his wife, gasped and answered,−−

"Are you going to the Zoological Gardens?"

"Yes, to an assembly. It should be very pleasant. Do you make one?"

"I regret that I am not invited," said Lady Julia, rather stiffly.

Madame bridled, under the impression that she was scoring off a member of the aristocracy.

"Indeed," she remarked, with a click. "Yet I presume that your ladyship is not insensible to the charms of rout and collation?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Lady Julia, beginning to look like an image made of cast iron.

"I imagine that the social whirl finds in your ladyship a willing acolyte?"

"Oh, no. I go out very little."

"Indeed," said Madame, with some contempt. "Then you do not frequent the Palace?"

"The Palace! Do you mean the Crystal Palace?"

"Of Buckingham? You are not an /amicas curiae/?"

"I fear I don't catch your meaning."

"Does not your ladyship comprehend the Latin tongue?"

"Certainly not," said Lady Julia, who was born in an age when it was considered highly improper for a young female to have any dealings with the ancients. "Certainly not."

"Dear me!" said Madame, with pitying amazement. "You hear her ladyship, Jupiter?"

"I do, my angel. Madame is a lady of deep education, ma'am," said Mr. Sagittarius, turning to Mrs. Merillia, who had been listening to the foregoing cross−examination with perpetually−increasing horror.

"No decent female should understand Greek or Latin," roared Sir Tiglath at this point. "If she does she's sure to read a great deal that she's no business to know anything about."

At this challenge Madame's bulging brow was overcast with a red cloud.

"I beg to disagree, sir," she exclaimed. "In my opinion the Georgics of Horatius, Homer's Idyls and the satires of the great Juvenile−−"

"The great what?" bellowed Sir Tiglath.

"The great Juvenile, sir."

"There never was a great juvenile, ma'am. Talent must be mellow before it is worth tasting, whatever the modern whipper−snapper may say. There never was, and there never will be, a great juvenile−−there can only be a juvenile preparing to be great."

"Really, sir."

"I affirm it, madam. And as you seem so mighty fond of Latin, remember what Horace says−−/Qui cupit opatam cursu contingere metam, Multa tulit fecitque puer, sudavit et alsit/. Oh−h−h−h!"

And Sir Tiglath flung himself back in his chair, puffing out his enormous cheeks and wagging his gigantic head at Madame who, for once in her life, seemed entirely at a loss, and unable to call to her assistance a single shred of learning from the library of Dr. Carter.

Having at last emerged from his Epicurean silence, the astronomer now proceeded to take the floor. Satisfied that he had laid a presuming female low, he swung round, as if on a pivot, to where Mr. Sagittarius was sitting in the greatest agitation, and roared,−−

"And now, sir what is all this about your being an outside broker? I was distinctly informed by this gentleman only a night or two ago that you were a distinguished astronomer."

"I am betrayed!" cried Mr. Sagittarius, dropping the knife and fork which he had just picked up for the dissection of a lobster croquette. "I said this was a trap. I said it was a rat−trap from the first."

"I knew he must be a ratcatcher," whispered Lady Julia to the Prophet, who was about to rise from his seat and endeavour to calm his guest. "I was certain no one but a ratcatcher could talk in such a manner."

"He is not indeed! Mr. Sagittarius, pray sit down! You are alarming my grandmother."

"I can't help that, sir. I am not going to sit here, sir, and be slain."

"Tsh! Tsh! I merely informed Sir Tiglath the other evening that what Miss Minerva had told him about you was true."

"Miss Minerva!" cried Madame, glancing at her husband in a most terrible manner. "Miss Minerva!"

"Lady Enid Thistle, I mean," cried the Prophet, mentally cursing the day when he was born.

"Who's that?" exclaimed Madame, beginning to look almost exactly like Medusa.

"A young female who informed the old astronomer that your husband and an elderly female named Mrs. Bridgeman had for a long while been carrying on astronomical investigations together−−"

"Carrying on together!" vociferated Madame. "Jupiter!"

"And that they had come to the conclusion that there was probably oxygen in certain of the holy fixed stars. Oxygen, so the elderly female−−"

"Oxygen in an elderly female!" cried Madame, in the greatest excitement. "Jupiter, is this true?"

Mr. Sagittarius was about to bring forward a flat denial when the Prophet, leaning behind the terrified back of Lady Julia, hissed in his ear,−−

"Say yes, or he'll find out who you really are!"

"Yes," cried Mr. Sagittarius, in a catapultic manner.

Madame began to show elaborate symptoms of preparation for a large− sized fit of hysterics. She caught her breath five or six times running in a resounding manner, heaved her bosom beneath the green chiffon and coffee−coloured lace, and tore feebly with both hands at a large medallion brooch that was doing sentry duty near her throat.

"Pray, pray, Madame," exclaimed the Prophet, who was now near his wits' end. "Pray−−"

"How can I pray at table, sir?" she retorted, suddenly showing fight. "You forget yourself."

"Oh, Hennessey," said poor Mrs. Merillia, "what does all this mean?"

"Nothing, grannie, nothing except that Mr. Sagittarius is a very modest man and does not care to acknowledge the greatness of his talents. Pray sit down, Mr. Sagittarius. Here is the ice pudding. Madame, I am sure you will take some ice. Mr. Ferdinand!"

"Sir?"

"The ice to Madame Sagittarius instantly!"

Mr. Ferdinand, who was trembling in every limb at having to assist at such a scene in his dining−room, which had hitherto been the very temple of soft conversation and the most exquisite decorum, advanced towards Madame, clattering the flat silver dish, and causing the frozen delicacy that the cook had elegantly posed upon it to run first this way and then that as if in imitative agitation.

"I cannot," sobbed Madame, beginning once more to catch her breath. "At such a moment food becomes repulsive!"

"I assure you our cook's ice puddings are quite delicious; aren't they, grannie?"

"I have no idea, Hennessey," said Mrs. Merillia, who was so upset by the extraordinary scene at which she was presiding in the character of hostess, that she mechanically clutched the left bandeau of her delightful wig, and set it quite a quarter of an inch awry.

"Try it, Madame," cried the Prophet. "I implore you to try it."

Thus adjured Madame detached a large piece of the agile pudding with some difficulty, and subsided into a morose silence, while her husband sat with his eyes fixed imploringly upon her, totally regardless of his social duties. As both Mrs. Merillia and Lady Julia were by this time thoroughly unnerved, and Sir Tiglath was once more immersed in his food, the whole burden of conversation fell upon the Prophet, who indulged in a feverish monologue that lasted until the end of dinner. What he talked about he could never afterwards certainly remember, but he had a vague idea that he discussed the foreign relations of England with Madagascar, the probable future of Poland, the social habits of the women of Alaska, the prospects of tobacco culture in West Meath, and the effect that imported Mexicans would be likely to produce upon the natural simplicity of such unsophisticated persons as inhabit Lundy Island or the more remote districts of the Shetlands. When the ladies at length rose to leave the dining−room his brain was in a whirl and he had little doubt that his temperature was up to 104. Nevertheless his mind was still active, was indeed preternaturally acute for the moment, and he saw in a flash the impossibility of leaving Madame Sagittarius alone with his grandmother and Lady Julia. As they got up

from their seats he therefore took out his watch and said,−−

"Dear me! It is later than I had supposed. I am afraid we ought to be starting for Zoological House. Mrs. Bridgeman will be expecting us."

"Certainly, sir, certainly!" said Mr. Sagittarius, with all the alacrity of supreme cowardice, and casting a terror−stricken glance towards Sir Tiglath, who was glowering at him with glassy eyes above a glass of port. "Mrs. Bridgeman will be expecting us!"

"I will assume my cloak," said Madame, fiercely. "Jupiter!"

"My darling!"

"Kindly seek my furs."

"Certainly, my love," replied Mr. Sagittarius, darting eagerly from the apartment to fetch the rabbit−skins.

"Lady Julia, I hope you will forgive us," said the Prophet, with passionate contrition. "If I had had the slightest idea that we should have the pleasure of seeing you to−night, of course I should have given up this engagement. But it is such an old one−−settled months ago−−and I have promised Mrs. Bridgeman so faithfully that−−"

"The old astronomer will go with you," cried Sir Tiglath at this moment, swallowing his glass of port at a gulp, and rolling out of his chair.

The Prophet turned cold, thinking of Miss Minerva, who would be present at Mrs. Bridgeman's living her secret double life. It was imperative to prevent the astronomer from accompanying them.

"I did not think you knew Mrs. Bridgeman, Sir Tiglath," the Prophet began, while Mrs. Merillia and Lady Julia stood blankly near the door, trying to look calm and dignified while everyone was ardently preparing to desert them.

"The old astronomer must know her before the evening is one hour more advanced. He must question her regarding the holy stars. He must examine her and this Sagittarius, who claims to be an outside broker and yet to have discovered oxygen in the fixed inhabitants of the sacred heavens. My cloak!"

The last words were bellowed at Gustavus, who rushed forward with Sir Tiglath's Inverness.

The Prophet lowed his head, and metaphorically, threw up the sponge.

"Lady Julia," said Mrs. Merillia, in a soft voice that slightly trembled, "let us go upstairs."

The two old ladies bowed with tearful dignity, and retired with a sort of gentle majesty that cut the Prophet to the heart.

"One moment, if you please!" he said to his guests.

And he darted out of the room and leaped up the stairs. He found Mrs. Merillia and Lady Julia just about to dispose themselves side by side upon a sofa near the fire. They turned and looked at him with reproachful doves' eyes.

"Grannie−−Lady Julia!" he exclaimed, "I implore your forgiveness. Pardon me! Appearances are against me, I know. But some day you may understand how I am placed. My position is−−my−−my situation−−I−−you−− do not wholly condemn me! Wait−−wait a few days, I implore you!"

He rushed out of the room.

The two old ladies seated themselves upon the sofa, and tremblingly spread abroad their damask skirts. They looked at each other in silence, shaking their elegant heads. Then Mrs. Merillia said, in a fluttering voice,−−

"Oh, Julia, you were a lady in waiting to Her Majesty, you were kissed by the great Duke−−tell me−−tell me what it all means!"

"Victoria," replied Lady Julia, "it means that your grandson has fallen into the clutches of a dangerous and determined ratcatcher."

And then the two old ladies mingled their damask skirts and their lace caps and wept.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE SILLY LIFE

"Call a cab for Sir Tiglath, Mr. Ferdinand," whispered the Prophet−−"a four−wheeler with a lame horse. I'll take both Mr. and Madame Sagittarius in the brougham."

"Must the horse be lame, sir?"

"Yes. I absolutely decline to encourage the practice of using good horses in four−wheeled cabs. It's a disgrace to the poor animals. It must be a very lame horse."

"Yes, sir."

And Mr. Ferdinand, standing upon the doorstep, whistled to the night.

Strange to say, in about two minutes there appeared round the corner the very same cabman who had conveyed the Prophet and Lady Enid to the astronomer's on the previous day, driving the very same horse.

"This horse will do admirably," said the Prophet to Mr. Ferdinand.

"He isn't lame, sir."

"P'r'aps not; but he knows how to tumble down. Sir Tiglath, here is a cab for you. We shall go in the brougham. Zoological House, Regent's Park, is the direction. Let me help you in, Madame."

As the Prophet got in to sit bodkin between his old and valued friends, he whispered to the footman,−−

"Tell Simkins to drive as fast as possible. We are very late."

The footman touched his hat. Just as the carriage moved off, the Prophet protruded his head from the window, and saw the astronomer rolling into the four−wheeler, the horse of which immediately fell down in a most satisfactory manner.

There was no general conversation in the brougham, but the Prophet, who was obliged to sit partly on Madame, and partly on Mr. Sagittarius and partly on air, occasionally heard in the darkness at his back terrible matrimonial whisperings, whose exact tenor he was unable to catch. Once only he heard Madame say sibilantly and with a vicious click,−−

"I might have known what to expect when I married a Prophet−−when I passed over the /pons asinoribus/ to give myself to a /monstram horrendo/."

To this pathetic heart−cry Mr. Sagittarius made a very prolonged answer. The Prophet knew it was prolonged because Mr. Sagittarius always whispered in such a manner as to tickle the nape of his neck. But he could not hear anything except a sound like steam escaping from a small pipe. The steam went on escaping until the brougham passed through a gate, rolled down a declivity, and drew up before an enormous mansion whose windows blazed with light.

"Is this the Zoological Gardens?" inquired Madame in a stern voice. "Is this the habitation of the woman Bridgeman?"

"I suppose this is Zoological House," replied the Prophet, sliding decorously off Madame's left knee in preparation for descent.

"My darling! my love!" said Mr. Sagittarius. "I swear upon the infant head of our Capricornus that Mrs. Bridgeman and I are−−"

"Enough!" cried Madame. "/Jam satus/! Be sure that I will inquire into this matter."

The carriage door was opened and, with some struggling, the Prophet and his two valued friends emerged and speedily found themselves in a very large hall, which was nearly full of very large powdered footmen. In the distance there was the sound of united frivolities, a band of twenty guitars thrumming a wilful /seguidilla/. Roses bloomed on every side, and beyond the hall they beheld a vision of illuminated vistas, down which vague figures came and went.

Evidently when Mrs. Bridgeman let herself go she let herself go thoroughly.

Mr. Sagittarius gazed about him with awe−struck amazement, but Madame was equal to the occasion. She cast the rabbit−skins imperially to a neighbouring flunkey, arranged her hair and fichu before a glass, kicked out her skirt with the heel of one of the kid boots, nipped the green chiffon into prominence with decisive fingers, and then, turning to the Prophet with all the majesty of a suburban empress, said in a powerful voice,−−

"Step forward, I beg. /J'ai pret/."

The Prophet, thus encouraged, stepped forward towards an aperture that on ordinary days contained a door, but that now contained a stout elderly lady, with henna−dyed hair, a powdered face, black eyebrows and a yellow gown, on which rested a large number of jewelled ornaments that looked like small bombs. At this lady's elbow stood a footman with an exceedingly powerful bass voice, who shouted the names of approaching guests in a manner so uncompromising as to be terrific. Each time he so shouted the stout lady first started and then smiled, the two operations succeeding one another with almost inconceivable rapidity and violence.

"What name, sir?" asked the footman of the Prophet, bending his powdered head till it was only about six feet two inches from the floor.

"Mr. Hennessey Vivian," replied the Prophet, hesitating as to what he should add.

"Mr. Hemmerspeed Vivian!" roared the footman. "What name, Madame?" (to Madame Sagittarius).

"Mr. and Madame Sagittarius of Sagittarius Lodge, the Mouse!" replied the lady majestically.

"Mr.−−and Madame−−Segerteribus−−of−−Segerteribus−−Lodge, the Mouse!" bawled the footman.

The stout lady, who was Mrs. Vane Bridgeman, started and smiled.

"Delighted to see you, Mr. Segerteribus!" she said to the Prophet.

The Prophet hastened to explain through the uproar of twenty guitars.

"Mr. Vivian is my name. I think Miss Minerva Partridge−−"

Mrs. Bridgeman started and smiled.

"Of course," she exclaimed. "Of course. You are to be kind enough to introduce me some day to Mr. Sagi−−Sagi−−something or other, and I am to introduce him to Sir Tiglath Butt, when Sir Tiglath Butt has been introduced to me by dear Miss Partridge. It is all to work out beautifully. Yes, yes! Charming! charming!"

"I have ventured to bring Mr. and Madame Sagittarius with me to−night," said the Prophet.

Mrs. Bridgeman started and smiled.

"They are my old and valued friends, and−−and here they are."

"Delighted! delighted!" said Mrs. Bridgeman, speaking in a confused manner through the guitars. "How d'you do, Mr. Sagittarius?"

And she shook hands warmly with a very small and saturnine clergyman decorated with a shock of ebon hair, who was passing at the moment.

"Biggle!" said the little clergyman.

Mrs. Bridgeman started and smiled.

"Biggle!" repeated the little clergyman. "Biggle!"

The guitars rose up with violence, and all the hot, drubbing passion of Bayswater being Spanish.

"Yes, indeed, I so agree with you, dear Mr. Sagittarius," said Mrs. Bridgeman to the little clergyman.

"Biggle!" the little clergyman cried in a portentous voice. "Biggle! Biggle!"

"What does he mean?" whispered Mrs. Bridgeman to the Prophet. "How does one?"

"I think that is his name. These are Mr. and Madame Sagittarius."

Mrs. Bridgeman started and smiled.

"Biggle−−of course," she said to the little clergyman, who passed on with an air of reliant self−satisfaction. "Delighted to see you," she added, this time addressing the Prophet's old and valued friends. "Ah! Mr. Sagi−−Sagi−−um−−I have heard so much of you from dear Miss Minerva."

The wild, high notes of a flute, played by a silly gentleman from Tooting, shrilled through the tupping of the guitars, and Mr. Sagittarius, trembling in every limb, hissed in Mrs. Bridgeman's ear,−−

"Hush, ma'am, for mercy's sake!"

Mrs. Bridgeman started and forgot to smile.

"My loved and honoured wife," continued Mr. Sagittarius, in a loud and anxious voice, "more to me than any lunar guide or starry monitor! Madame Sagittarius, a lady of deep education, ma'am."

"Delighted!" said Mrs. Bridgeman, making a gracious grimace at Madame, who inclined herself stonily and replied in a sinister voice,−−

"It is indeed time that this renconter took place. Henceforth, ma'am, I shall be ever at my husband's side, /per fus et nefus/−−/et nefus/, ma'am."

"So glad," said Mrs. Bridgeman. "I have been longing for this−−"

"Mr. Bernard Wilkins!" roared the tall footman.

Mr. Sagittarius started and Mrs. Bridgeman did the same and smiled.

"Bernard Wilkins the Prophet!" Mr. Sagittarius exclaimed. "From the Rise!"

"Mrs. Eliza Doubleway!" shouted the footman.

"Mrs. Eliza!" cried Mr. Sagittarius, in great excitement. "That's the soothsayer from the Beck!"

"Madame Charlotte Humm!" yelled the footman.

"Madame Humm!" vociferated Mr. Sagittarius, "the crystal−gazer from the Hill!"

"Professor Elijah Chapman!" bawled the footman.

"The nose−reader!" piped Mr. Sagittarius. "The nose−reader from the Butts!"

"Verano!" screamed the footman, triumphantly submerging the flute and the twenty guitars. "Verano!"

"The South American Irish palmist from the Downs! My love," said Mr. Sagittarius, in a cracking voice, "we are in it to−night, we are indeed; we are fairly and squarely in it."

Madame began to bridle and to look as ostentatious as a leviathan.

"And if we are, Jupiter!" she said in a voice that rivalled the footman's−−"if we are, we are merely in our element. They needn't think to come over me!"

"Hush, my love! Remember that−−"

"Dr. Birdie Soames!" interposed the vibrant bass of the footman.

"The physiognomy lady from the Common!" said Mr. Sagittarius, on the point of breaking down under the emotion of the moment. "Scot! Scot! Great Scot!"

Mrs. Bridgeman was now completely surrounded by a heterogeneous mass of very remarkable−looking people, among whom were peculiarly prominent an enormously broad−shouldered man, with Roman features and his hair cut over his brow in a royal fringe, a small woman with a pointed red nose in bead bracelets and prune−coloured muslin, and an elderly female with short grizzled hair, who wore a college gown and a mortar−board with a scarlet tassel, and who carried in one hand a large skull marked out in squares with red ink. These were Verano, the Irish palmist from the Downs; Mrs. Eliza Doubleway, the soothsayer from Beck; and Dr. Birdie Soames, the physiognomy lady from the Common. Immediately around these celebrities were grouped a very pale gentleman in a short jacket, who looked as if he made his money by eating nothing and drinking a great deal, a plethoric female with a mundane face, in which was set a large and delicately distracted grey eye; and a gentleman with a jowl, a pug nose, and a large quantity of brass−coloured hair about as curly as hay, which fell down over a low collar, round which was negligently knotted a huge black tie. This trio comprised Mr. Bernard Wilkins, the Prophet from the Rise; Madame Charlotte Humm, the crystal−gazer from the Hill; and Professor Elijah Chapman, the nose−reader from the Butts. No sooner was the news of the arrival of these great and notorious people bruited abroad through the magnificent saloons of Zoological House than Mrs. Bridgeman's guests began to flock around them from all the four quarters of the mansion, deserting even the neighbourhood of the guitars and the inviting seclusion of the various refreshment− rooms. From all sides rose the hum of comment and the murmur of speculation. Pince−nez were adjusted, eyeglasses screwed into eyes, fingers pointed, feet elevated upon uneasy toes. Pretty girls boldly trod upon the gowns of elderly matrons in the endeavour to draw near to Mrs. Bridgeman and her group of celebrities; youths pushed and shoved; chaperons elbowed, and old gentlemen darted from one place to another in wild endeavours to find an inlet through the press. And amid this frantic scramble of the curious, the famous members of the occult world stood, calmly conscious of their value and in no wise upset or discomposed. Verano stroked his Roman features, and ran his large white hand through his curly fringe; Dr. Birdie Soames tapped her skull; Mrs. Eliza Doubleway played with her bead bracelets; Mr. Bernard Wilkins and Madame Charlotte Humm conversed together in dreamy murmurs; while Professor Elijah Chapman shook his brass−coloured hair till it fell forward over his variegated shirt−front, and glanced inquiringly at the multitudes of anxious noses which offered themselves to his inspection beneath the glare of the electric lights.

Mr. and Madame Sagittarius, completely overlooked in the throng, elbowed, trampled upon, jogged from behind and prodded from before, gazed with a passion of bitter envy at their worshipped rivals, who were set in the full blaze of success, while they languished in the outer darkness of anonymous obscurity.

"/O miseris hominum men/−−don't set your feet on me, sir, if you please!" cried Madame. "/O pectorae caec/−−ma'am, I beg you to take your elbow from my throat this minute!"

But even her powerful and indignant organ was lost in the hubbub that mingled with the wild music of the

guitars, to which was now added the tinkle of bells and the vehement click of a round dozen of castanets, marking the bull−fighting rhythm of a new air called "The Espada's Return to Madrid."

"Jupiter!" she gurgled. "I shall be suff−−"

"Mr. Amos Towle!" roared the footman savagely.

"The great medium from the Wick!"

"Towle the seer!"

"Amos Towle, the famous spiritualist!"

"Mr. Towle who materialises!"

"The celebrated Towle!"

"The great and only Towle!"

"Oh, is it /the/ Towle?"

"I must see Towle!"

"Where is he? Oh, where is Towle?"

"Towle who communicates with the other world!"

"Towle the magician!"

"Towle the hypnotist!"

"Towle the soothsayer!"

"The magnetic Towle!"

"The electric Towle!"

"We must−−we must see Towle!"

Such were a very few of the exclamations that instantly burst forth upon the conclusion of the footman's announcement. The elbowing and trampling became more violent than ever, and Mrs. Bridgeman was forced−−from lack of room−−to forego her society start, though she was still able to indulge in her society smile, as she bowed, with almost swooning graciousness, to a short, perspiring, bald and side−whiskered man in greasy broadcloth, who looked as if he would have been quite at home upon the box of a four−wheeled cab, as indeed he would, seeing that he had driven a growler for five−and−twenty years before discovering that he was the great and only Towle, medium, seer, and worker−of−miracles−in−chief to the large and increasing crowd that lives the silly life.

"Oh, Mr. Towle−−charmed, delighted!" cried Mrs. Bridgeman. "I was so afraid−−How sweet of you to come out all this way from your eyrie at the Wick! You'll find many friends−−dear Madame Charlotte−−the Professor−−Mrs. Eliza−−they're all here. And Miss Minerva, too! Your greatest admirer and disciple!"

At this moment the crowd, wild in its endeavour to touch the inspired broadcloth of the great Towle, surged forward, and the Prophet was driven like a ram against the left side of his hostess.

"I beg−−your−−pard−−" he gasped; "but could you tell−−me−−where Miss Minerv−−erva−−is? I special−−ly want to−−to−−"

"I think she's with Eureka in tea−room number 1," replied Mrs. Bridgeman. "Oh, dear! Near the band. Oh, dear! Oh, my gown! Oh! So sweet of you to come, Mrs. Lorrimer! Just a few interesting people! Oh, gracious mercy! Oh, for goodness' sake!"

She was thrust against a new arrival, and the Prophet, bringing his shoulders vigorously into play, according to the rules of Rugby football, presently found himself out in the open and free to wander in search of Miss Minerva, whom he was most anxious to encounter before the arrival of Sir Tiglath Butt, which must now be imminent, despite the marked disinclination of his horse to proceed at the rate of more than half a mile an hour.

The Prophet abandoned Mr. and Madame Sagittarius to their fate, thankful, indeed, to be rid for a moment of their prophetic importunity.

Following the gasped directions of Mrs. Bridgeman, he made towards the guitars, threading a number of drawing−rooms, and passing by the doors of various mysterious chambers which were carefully curtained off in a most secret manner. Here and there he saw groups of people−−men in extraordinary coats and with touzled masses of hair, women in gowns made of the cheapest materials and cut in the most impossible fashions. Some wore convolvulus on their heads, ivy−leaves, trailing fuchsia, or sprigs of plants known only to suburban haberdashers; others appeared boldly in caps of the pork−pie order, adorned with cherry−coloured streamers, clumps of feathers that had never seen a bird, bunches of shining fruits, or coins that looked as if they had just

emerged from the seclusion of the poor−box. Thread gloves abounded, and were mostly in what saleswomen call "the loud shades"−−bright scarlet, marigold yellow, grass green or acute magenta. Mittens, too, were visible covered with cabalistic inscriptions in glittering beadwork. Not a few gentlewomen, like Madame, trod in elastic−sided boots, and one small but intrepid lady carried herself boldly in a cotton skirt topped with a tartan blouse "carried out" in vermilion and sulphur colour, over which was carelessly adjusted a macintosh cape partially trimmed with distressed−looking swansdown. Here and there might be seen some smart London woman, perfectly dressed and glancing with amused amazement at the new fashions about her; here and there a well set−up man, with normal hair and a tie that would not have terrified Piccadilly. But for the most part Mrs. Bridgeman's guests were not quite usual in appearance, and, indeed, were such as the Prophet had never gazed upon before.

Presently the uproar of the guitars grew more stentorian upon his ear, and, leaving on his left an astonishing chamber that contained from a dozen to fifteen small round tables, with nothing whatever upon them, the Prophet emerged into an inner hall where, in quite a grove of shrubs hung with fairy lights, twenty young ladies, dressed from top to toe in scarlet, and each wearing a large golden medal, were being as Spanish as if they had not been paid for it, while twelve more whacked castanets and shook bells with a frenzy that was worth an excellent salary, the silly gentleman from Tooting the while blowing furiously upon his flute, and combining this intemperate indulgence with an occasional assault upon a cottage piano that stood immediately before him, or a wave of the baton that asserted his right to the position of /chef d'orchestre/. Immediately beyond this shrine of music the Prophet perceived a Moorish nook containing a British buffet, and, in quite the most Moorish corner of this nook, seated upon a divan that would have been at home in Marakesh, he caught sight of Miss Minerva in company with a thin, fatigued and wispy lady in a very long vermilion gown, and an extremely small gentleman−−apparently of the Hebrew persuasion−−who was smartly dressed, wore white gloves and a buttonhole, and indulged in a great deal of florid gesticulation while talking with abnormal vivacity. Miss Minerva, who was playing quietly with a lemon ice, looked even more sensible than usual, the Prophet thought, in her simple white frock. She seemed to be quite at home and perfectly happy with her silly friends, but, as soon as she saw him hovering anxiously to the left of the guitars, she beckoned to him eagerly, and he hurried forward.

"Oh, Mr. Vivian, I'm so glad you've come! Let me introduce you to my great friend Eureka"−−the lady in vermilion bowed absent−mindedly, and rolled her huge brown eyes wearily at the Prophet−−"and to Mr. Briskin Moses."

The little gentleman made a stage reverence and fluttered his small hands airily.

"Pretty sight, pretty sight!" he said in a quick and impudent voice. "All these little dears enjoying themselves so innocently. Mother Bridgeman's chickens, I call them. But it's impossible to count them, even after they're hatched. Cheese it!"

The final imperative was flung demurely at a mighty footman, who just then tried to impound Mr. Moses's not quite finished brandy−and−soda.

"Sir?" said the mighty footman.

"Cheese it!" cried Mr. Moses, making a gesture of tragic repugnance in the direction of the footman.

The mighty footman cheesed it with dignity, and afterwards, in the servants' hall, spoke very bitterly of Israel.

The Prophet was extremely anxious to get a word alone with Miss Minerva. Indeed, it was really important that he should warn her of Sir Tiglath's approach, but he could find no opportunity of doing so, for Mr. Moses, who was not afflicted with diffidence, rapidly continued, in a slightly affected and tripping cockney voice,−−

"Mother Bridgeman's a dear one! God bless her for a pretty soul! She'd be sublime in musical comedy−−the black satin society lady, you know, who makes the aristocratic relief,−−

" 'I'm a Dowager Duchess, and everyone knows I'm a lady right down to the tip of my toes.'

"Very valuable among the minxes; worth her weight in half−crowns! I'd give her an engagement any day, pretty bird! Ever seen her driving in a cab? She takes off her gloves and spreads her hands over the apron to get the air. A canary! Anything for me to−night, Eureka? A dove, a mongoose−−anything lucky? Give us a chance, mother!"

The lady in vermilion, who had a tuft of golden hair in the midst of her otherwise raven locks, glanced mysteriously at Mr. Moses.

"See anything, mother?" he asked, with theatrical solemnity. "A tiny chunk of luck for tricky little Briskin?"

"I do see something," said Eureka, in a dim and heavy voice. "It's just close to you on that table by the brandy."

Mr. Moses started, and cast a glance of awe at the tumbler.

"My word," he cried−−"my word, mother! What's the blessed little symbol like? Not a pony fresh from Jerusalem for your believing boy!"

"You must wait a moment. It is not clear," replied Eureka, slowly and dreamily, fixing her heavy eyes on the brandy−and−soda. "It's all cloudy."

"Been imbibing, mother? Has the blessed little symbol been at it again? Briskin's shock−−shocked!"

"It's getting clearer. It stands in a band of fire."

"Shade of Shadrach! Apparition of Abednego! Draw it mild and bitter, mother!"

"Ah! now it steps out. It's got a hump."

"Got the hump, mother? My word! then it must be either a camel or an undischarged bankrupt! Which is it, pretty soul?"

"It's a rhinoceros. It's moving to you."

"Yokohama, mother! Tell the pretty bird to keep back! What's it mean?"

"It's a sign of plenty."

"Plenty of what, mother? The ready or the nose−bag? Give us a chance!"

"Plenty of good fortune, because its head is towards you. If it had presented its tail, it would mean black weather."

"Don't let it turn tail, for Saturday's sake, mother. Keep its head straight while I finish the brandy!"

And so saying, little Mr. Moses, with elaborate furtiveness, caught up the tumbler, poured its contents down his throat, and threw himself back on the divan with the air of a man who had just escaped from peril by the consummate personal exercise of unparalleled and sustained ingenuity.

During this scene Miss Minerva had preserved her air of pronounced Scottish good sense, while listening attentively, and she now said to Eureka,−−

"D'you see anything for Mr. Vivian, dear Eureka? Even the littlest thing would be welcomed."

Eureka stared upon the Prophet, who began to feel very nervous.

"There's something round his head," she remarked, with her usual almost sacred earnestness.

The Prophet mechanically put up his hands, like a man anxious to interfere with the assiduous attentions of a swarm of bees.

"Something right round his head."

"Is it a halo?" asked Miss Minerva.

"Is it a Lincoln &Bennet, mother?" cried Mr. Moses. "One of the shiny ones−−twenty−one bob, and twenty−five−and−six if you want a kid lining?"

"No; it's like some sort of bird."

" 'I heard the owl beneath my eaves complaining,' " chirped Mr. Moses, taking two or three high notes in a delicate tenor voice. " 'I looked forth−−great Scot! How it was raining!' Is it an owl, mother? Ask it to screech to Briskin."

"It is no owl," said Eureka to the Prophet. "It is a sparrow−−your bird."

"Is it upon the housetop, mother, having a spree all on its little alone?"

"No; it is hovering over the gentleman."

"What does that mean?" said the Prophet, anxiously.

But at this point Eureka suddenly seemed to lose interest in the matter. "Oh, you're all right," she said carelessly. "I'm tired. I should like a wafer."

"Mother's peckish. Mother, I see an ostrich by your left elbow. That's a sign that you're so peckish you could swallow anything. Waiter!"

"Sir!"

"This lady's so peckish she could eat anything. Bring her some tin− tacks and a wafer. Stop a sec. Another brandy for Briskin. Your calves'd do for the front row; 'pon my word, they would. Trot, boy, trot!"

"I must speak to you alone for one moment," whispered the Prophet to Miss Minerva, under cover of the quips of Mr. Moses. "Sir Tiglath's coming!"

Miss Minerva started.

"Sir Tig−−" she exclaimed and put her finger to her lips just in time to stop the "lath" from coming out. "Mr. Moses, I'm going to the buffet for a moment with Mr. Vivian. Eureka, darling, do eat something substantial! All this second sight takes it out of you."

Eureka acquiesced with a heavy sigh, Mr. Moses cried, "Aunt Eureka's so hungry that one would declare she could even eat oats if she found they were there!" and Miss Minerva and the Prophet moved languidly towards the buffet, endeavouring, by the indifference of their movements, to cover the agitation in their hearts.

"Sir Tiglath coming here!" cried Miss Minerva under her breath, as soon as they were out of earshot. "But he doesn't know Mrs. Bridgeman!"

"I know−−but he's coming. And not only that, Mr. and Madame Sagittarius are here already!"

Miss Minerva looked closely at the Prophet in silence for a moment. Then she said,−−

"I see−−I see!"

"What?" cried the Prophet, in great anxiety, "not the sparrow on my head?"

"No. But I see that you're taking to your double life in real earnest."

"I?"

"Yes. Now, Mr. Vivian, that's all very well, and you know I'm the last person to complain of anything of that sort, so long as it doesn't get me into difficulties."

"Think of the difficulties you and everyone else have got me into," ejaculated the poor Prophet, for once in his life stepping, perhaps, a hair's−breadth from the paths of good breeding.

"Well, I'm sure I've done nothing."

"Nothing!" said the Prophet, losing his head under the influence of the guitars, which were now getting under way in a fantasia on "Carmen." "Nothing! Why, you made me come here, you insisted on my introducing Mr. Sagittarius to Mrs. Bridgeman, you told Sir Tiglath Mrs. Bridgeman and I were old friends and had made investigations together, assisted by Mr. Sagittarius, you−−"

"Oh, well, that's nothing. But Sir Tiglath mustn't see me here as Miss Minerva. Has he arrived yet?"

"I don't think so. He's got the cab we had yesterday and the horse."

"The one that tumbles down so cleverly when it's not too tired? Capital! Run to the cloak−room, meet Sir Tiglath there, and persuade him to go home."

But here the Prophet struck.

"I regret I can't," he said, almost firmly.

"But you must."

"I regret sincerely that I am unable."

"Why? Mr. Vivian, when a lady asks you!"

"I am grieved," said the Prophet, with a species of intoxicated obstinacy−−the guitars seemed to be playing inside his brain and the flute piping in the small of his back,−−"to decline, but I cannot contend physically with Sir Tiglath, a man whom I reverence, in the cloak−room of a total stranger."

"I don't ask you to contend physically."

"Nothing but personal violence would keep Sir Tiglath from coming in."

"Really! Then what's to be done?"

She pursed up her sensible lips and drew down her sensible eyebrows.

"I know!" she cried, after a moment's thought. "I'll masquerade to−night as myself."

"As yourself?"

"Yes. All these dear silly people here think that I've got an astral body."

"What's that?"

"A sort of floating business−−a business that you can set floating."

"What−−a company?"

"No, no. A replica of yourself. The great Towle−−"

"He's here to−night."

"I knew he was coming. Well, the great Towle detached this astral body once at a séance and, for a joke−−a silly joke, you know−−"

"Yes, yes."

"I christened it by my real name, Lady Enid Thistle, and said Lady Enid was an ancestress of mine."

"Why did you?"

"Because it was so idiotic."

"I see."

"Well, I've only now to spread a report among these dear creatures that I'm astral to−night, and get Towle to back me up, and I can easily be Lady Enid for an hour or two. In this crowd Sir Tiglath need never find out that I'm generally known in these circles as Miss Partridge."

"Do you really think−−"

"Yes, I do. But I must find Towle at once."

So saying she hastened away from the buffet, followed by the trotting Prophet. As she passed Eureka and Mr. Moses, she said,−−

"Eureka, darling, do I look odd? I suddenly began to feel astral just as I was going to eat a sandwich. I can't help thinking that Lady Enid −−you know, my astral ancestress, who's always with me−−is peculiarly powerful to−night. D'you notice anything?"

"Watch out for it, mother!" cried Mr. Moses. "See if it's got the lump."

Eureka fixed her heavy eyes on Miss Minerva and swayed her thin body to and fro in as panther−like a manner as she could manage.

"Mother's after it," continued Mr. Moses, twitching his left ear with his thumb in a Hebraic manner and shooting his shining cuffs; "mother's on the trail. Doves for a bishop and the little mangel−wurzel for the labouring man. Clever mother! She'll take care it's suitable. Is it a haggis, mother, hovering over the lady with outspread wings?"

Eureka closed her eyes and rocked herself more violently.

"I see you," she said in a deep voice. "You are astral. You are Lady Enid emerged for an hour from our dear Minerva."

"I thought so," cried Lady Enid, with decision. "I thought so, because when someone called me Miss Minerva just now I felt angry, and didn't seem to know what they meant. Tell them, dear Eureka,−−tell all my friends of your discovery."

And she hastened on with the Prophet in search of the great Towle.

"I'll get him to back Eureka up, and then it will be quite safe," she said. "Ah! there he is with Harriet Browne, the demonstrator from the Rye."

Indeed, at this moment a small crowd was visible in one of the further drawing−rooms, moving obsequiously along in reverent attendance upon the great Towle, Mrs. Bridgeman and a thickset, red−faced lady, without a waist and plainly clad in untrimmed linsey−wolsey, who was speaking authoritatively to a hysterical−looking young girl, upon whose narrow shoulder she rested a heavy, fat−fingered hand as she walked.

"Harriet's evidently going to demonstrate," added Lady Enid. "That's lucky, because then I can get a quiet word with Towle."

"Demonstrate?" said the Prophet.

"Yes. She's the great Christian Scientist and has the healing power. She demonstrated over Agatha Marshall's left ear. You know. The case got into the papers. Ah, Harriet, darling!"

"My blessing! My Minerva!" said Harriet in a thick and guttural voice.

"Lady Enid, Harriet love, to−night. Eureka says I'm astral. Oh, Mr. Towle, what an honour to meet you−−what an honour for us all!"

The great Towle ducked and scraped in cabman fashion.

"Oh, will you materialise for us to−night?"

"Yes, yes," cried Mrs. Bridgeman, trembling with excitement. "He's promised to after supper. He says he feels less material then−−more /en rapport/ with the dear spirits."

"How delightful! Mr. Towle, tell me, do you agree with Eureka? I await your fiat. Am I astral?"

"Ay, miss, as like as not," said the great man, twisting his lips as if they held a straw between them. "Astral, that's it. That's it to a T."

"Then I'm Lady Enid Thistle, my ancestress, who's always with me?"

"Ay, ay! Every bit of her. Her ladyship to a T."

The company was much impressed, and whispers of "It's Lady Enid; Eureka and Mr. Towle say it's her ladyship in the astral plane!" flew like wildfire through the rooms.

At this point Harriet Browne, who was sufficiently Christian and scientific to like to have all the attention of the company centred upon her, cleared her throat loudly and exclaimed,−−

"If I am to heal this poor sufferer, I must be provided with an armchair."

"An armchair for Mrs. Browne!"

"Fetch a chair for Harriet!"

"Mrs. Harriet can't demonstrate without a chair!"

"What is she going to do?" whispered the Prophet to Lady Enid, feeling thoroughly ashamed of his ignorance.

"Demonstrate."

"Yes, but what's that?"

"Put her hands over that girl and think about her."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Does she do it out of kindness?"

"Of course. But she's paid something, not because she wants to be paid, but because it's the rule."

"Oh!"

An armchair was now wheeled forward, and Mrs. Harriet ensconced herself in it comfortably.

"I'm very tired to−night," she remarked in her thick voice. "I've had a hard afternoon."

"Poor darling!" cried Mrs. Bridgeman. "Fetch a glass of champagne for Mrs. Harriet somebody. Oh, would you, Mr. Brummich?"

Mr. Brummich, a gentleman with a remarkably foolish, ascetic face and a feebly−wandering sandy beard, was just about to hasten religiously towards the Moorish nook when the great Towle happened, by accident, to groan. Mrs. Bridgeman, started and smiled.

"Oh, and a glass of champagne for Mr. Towle, too, dear Mr. Brummich!"

"Certainly, Mrs. Bridgeman!" said dear Mr. Brummich, hurrying off with the demeanour of the head of an Embassy entrusted with some important mission to a foreign Court.

"Were you at work this afternoon, Harriet, beloved?" inquired Mrs. Bridgeman of Mrs. Browne, who was leaning back in the armchair with her eyes closed and in an attitude of severe prostration.

"Yes."

"Which was it, lovebird? Hysteric Henry?"

"No, he's cured."

Cries of joy resounded from those gathered about the chair.

"Hysteric Henry's cured!"

"Henry's better!"

"The poor man with the ball in his throat's been saved!"

"How wonderful you are, Harriet, sweet!" cried Mrs. Bridgeman. "But, then which was it?"

"The madwoman at Brussels. I've been thinking about her for two hours this afternoon, with only a cup of tea between."

"Poor darling! No wonder you're done up! Ought you to demonstrate? Ah! here's the champagne!"

"I take it merely as medicine," said Mrs. Harriet.

At this moment, Mr. Brummich, flushed with assiduity, burst into the circle with a goblet of beaded wine in either hand. There was a moment of solemn silence while Mrs. Harriet and the great Towle condescended to the Pommery. It was broken only by a loud gulp from the hysterical− looking girl who was, it seemed, nervously affected by an imitative spasm, and who suddenly began to swallow nothing with extreme persistence and violence.

"Look at that poor misguided soul!" ejaculated Mrs. Harriet, with her lips to the Pommery. "She fancies she's drinking!"

The poor, misguided soul, yielded again to her distraught imagination, amid the pitiful ejaculations of the entire company, with the exception of one mundane, young man who, suddenly assailed by the wild fancy that he wasn't drinking, crept furtively to the Moorish rook, and was no more seen.

"Give her a cushion!" continued Mrs. Harriet, authoritatively.

"Mr. Brummich!" said Mrs. Bridgeman.

Mr. Brummich ran, and returned with a cushion.

"Sit down, poor thing! Sit at my feet!" said Mrs. Harriet, giving the hysterical−looking girl a healing push.

The girl subsided in a piteous heap, and Mrs. Harriet, who had by this time taken all her medicine, leant over her and inquired,−−

"Where d'you feel it?"

The girl put her hands to her head.

"Here," she said feebly. "It's like fire running over me and drums beating."

"Fire and drums!" announced Mrs. Harriet to the staring assembly. "That's what she's got, poor soul!"

Ejaculations of sympathy and horror made themselves heard.

"Drums! How shocking!" cried Mrs. Bridgeman. "Can you cure even drums, Harriet, my own?"

"Give me ten minutes, Catherine! I ask but that!"

And, so saying, Mrs. Harriet planted her fat hands upon the head of the young patient, closed her eyes and began to breathe very hard.

Silence now fell upon the people, who said not a word, but who could not prevent themselves from rustling as they pressed about this exhibition of a latter−day apostle. The Prophet and Lady Enid were close to the armchair, and the Prophet, who had never before been present at any such ceremony−−it was accompanied by the twenty guitars, now tearing out the serenade, "From the bull−ring I come to thee!"−−was so interested that he completely forgot Mr. and Madame Sagittarius, and lost for the moment all memory of Sir Tiglath. The silly life engrossed him. He had no eyes for anyone but Mrs. Harriet, who, as she leaned forward in the chair with closed eyes, looked like a determined middle− aged man about to offer up the thin girl on the footstool as a burnt sacrifice.

"You're better now, poor thing," said Mrs. Harriet, after five minutes has elapsed. "You're feeling much better?"

"Oh, no, I'm not!" said the girl, shaking her head under the hands of the demonstrator. "The fire's blazing and the drums are beating like anything."

Mrs. Harriet's hue deepened, and there was a faint murmur of vague reproof from the company.

"H'sh!" said the demonstrator, closing her hands upon the patient's head with some acrimony. "H'sh!"

And she began to breathe hard once more. Another five minutes elapsed, and then Mrs. Harriet exclaimed with decision,−−

"There! It's gone now, all gone! I've sent it right away. The fire's out and the drums have stopped beating!"

Exclamations of wonder and joy rose up from the spectators. They were, however, a trifle premature, for the hysterical girl−−who was, it seemed, a person of considerable determination, despite her feeble appearance−−replied from the footstool,−−

"No, it isn't. No they haven't!"

Mrs. Harriet developed a purple shade.

"Nonsense!" she said. "You're cured, love, entirely cured!"

"I'm not," said the girl, beginning to cry. "I feel much worse since you pressed my head."

There was a burst of remonstrance from the crowd, and Mrs. Harriet, speaking with the air of an angry martyr, remarked,−−

"It's just like the drinking−−she fancies she isn't cured when she is, just the same as she fancied she was drinking when she wasn't."

This unanswerable logic naturally carried conviction to everyone present, and the hysterical girl was warmly advised to make due acknowledgement of the benefits received by her at the healing hands of Mrs. Harriet, while the latter was covered with compliments and assiduously conducted towards the buffet, escorted by the great Towle.

"Isn't she wonderful?" said Mrs. Bridgeman, turning ecstatically to the person nearest to her, who happened to be the saturnine little clergyman. "Isn't she marvellous, Mr.−−er−−Mr. Segerteribus?"

"Biggle!" cried the little clergyman.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Biggle!" vociferated the little clergyman. "Biggle!"

"Certainly. Did you ever see anything like that cure? Ah! you ought to preach about dear Harriet, Mr. Segerteribus, you really−−"

"Biggle!" reiterated the little clergyman, excitedly. "Biggle! Biggle!"

"What does he−−" began Mrs. Bridgeman, turning helplessly towards the Prophet.

"It's his name, I fancy," whispered the Prophet.

Mrs. Bridgeman started and smiled.

"Mr. Biggle," she said.

The little clergyman moved on towards the guitars with all the air of a future colonial bishop. Mrs. Bridgeman, who seemed to be somewhat confused, and whose manner grew increasingly vague as the evening wore on, now said to those nearest to her,−−

"There are fifteen tables set out−−yes, set out,−−in the green boudoir."

"Bedad!" remarked an Irish colonel, "then it's meself'll enjoy a good rubber."

"For table−turning," added Mrs. Bridgeman. "Materialisation in the same room after supper. Mr. Towle−−yes−−will enter the cabinet at about eleven. Where's Madame Charlotte?"

"Looking into the crystal for Lady Ferrier," said someone.

"Oh, and the professor?"

"He's reading Archdeacon Andrew's nose, by the cloak−room.

Mrs. Bridgeman sighed.

"It seems to be going off quite pleasantly," she said vaguely to the Prophet. "I think−−perhaps−−might I have a cup of tea?"

The Prophet offered his arm. Mrs. Bridgeman took it. They walked forward, and almost instantly came upon Sir Tiglath Butt, who, with a face even redder than usual, was rolling away from the hall of the guitars, holding one enormous hand to his ear and snorting indignantly at the various clairvoyants, card−readers, spiritualists and palmists whom he encountered at every step he took. The Prophet turned pale, and Lady Enid, who was just behind him, put on her most sensible expression and moved quickly forward.

"Ah, Sir Tiglath!" she said. "How delightful of you to come! Catherine, dear, let me introduce Sir Tiglath Butt to you. Sir Tiglath Butt−−Mrs. Vane Bridgeman."

Mrs. Bridgeman behaved as usual.

"So glad!" she said. "So enchanted! Just a few interesting people. So good of you to come. Table−turning is−−"

At this moment Lady Enid nipped her friend's arm, and Sir Tiglath exclaimed, looking from Mrs. Bridgeman to the Prophet,−−

"What, madam? So you're the brain and eye, eh? Is that it?"

The guitars engaged in "The Gipsies of Granada are wild as mountain birds," and Mrs. Bridgeman looked engagingly distraught, and replied,−−

"Ah, yes, indeed! The brain and I, Sir Tiglath; so good of you to say so!"

"You prompted his interest in the holy stars?" continued Sir Tiglath, speaking very loud, and still stopping one ear with his hand. "You drove him to the telescope; you told him to clear the matter up, did you?"

"What matter?" said Mrs. Bridgeman, trying not to look as stupid as she felt, but only with moderate success.

"Say the oxygen, darling," whispered Lady Enid in one of her ears.

"Say the oxygen!" hissed the Prophet into the other.

"The occiput?" said Mrs. Bridgeman, hearing imperfectly. "Oh, yes, Sir Tiglath, I told him,−−I told Mr. Biggle−−to make quite sure−−yes, as to the occiput matter."

The saturnine little clergyman, who was again in motion near by, caught his name and stopped, as Sir Tiglath, roaring against "The Gipsies of Granada," continued,−−

"And your original adviser was Mr. Sagittarius, was he?"

On hearing a word she understood, Mrs. Bridgeman brightened up, and, perceiving the little clergyman, she answered,−−

"Mr. Sagittarius−−ah, yes! Sir Tiglath is speaking of you, Mr. Sagittarius."

The little clergyman turned almost black in the face.

"Biggle!" he exclaimed, in a voice of thunder. "Biggle! Biggle!"

And, without further parley, he rushed to the cloak−room, seized someone else's hat and coat, and fared forth into the night. Lady Enid, who had meant to coach Mrs. Bridgeman very carefully for the meeting with Sir Tiglath, but whose plans were completely upset by the astronomer's premature advent, now endeavoured to interpose.

"By the way," she said, in a very calm voice, where is dear Mr. Sagittarius? I haven't seen him yet."

"I'm afraid he's angry with me," said Mrs. Bridgeman, alluding to the little clergyman. "I really can't think why."

"Sir Tiglath," said Lady Enid, boldly taking the astronomer's arm. "Come with me. I want you to find Mr. Sagittarius for me. Yes, they do make rather a noise!"

This was in allusion to the guitars, for the astronomer had now placed both hands over his ears in the vain endeavour to exclude "The Gipsies." Deafness, perhaps, rendered him yielding. In any case, he permitted Lady Enid to detach him from Mrs. Bridgeman and to lead him through the rooms in search of Mr. Sagittarius.

"Perhaps he's here," said Lady Enid, entering a darkened chamber. "Oh, no!"

And she hastily moved away, perceiving a large number of devoted adherents of table−tapping busily engaged, with outspread fingers and solemn faces, at their intellectual pursuit. Avoiding the archdeacon, who was now having his nose read by the professor, she conducted the astronomer, rendered strangely meek by the guitars, into a drawing−room near the hall, in which only four people remained−−Verano and Mrs. Eliza Doubleway, who were conferring in one corner, and Mr. and Madame Sagittarius, who were apparently having rather more than a few words together in another.

"Ah! there's Mr. Sagittarius!" said Lady Enid.

"Minnie!" cried Mrs. Eliza, beckoning to Lady Enid. "Minnie, ducky!"

Lady Enid pretended not to hear and tried to hasten with the astronomer towards the Sagittariuses. But Mrs. Eliza was not to be put off.

"Minnie, my pet!" she piped. "Come here, Minnie!"

Lady Enid was obliged to pause.

"What is it, dear Eliza?" she asked, at the same time making a face at the soothsayer to indicate caution.

Mrs. Eliza and Verano rose and approached Lady Enid and the astronomer.

"I was laying the cards last night at Jane Seaman's−−you know, dear, the Angel Gabriel who lives on the Hackney Downs−−and whatever do you think? The hace of spades came up three times in conjugation with the Knave of 'earts!"

"Terrific! Very great!" buzzed Verano, with a strong South American Irish brogue−−a real broth of a brogue.

"Wonderful!" said Lady Enid, hastily, endeavouring to pass on.

"Wait a minute, darling. Well, I says to Jane−−I was laying the cards for her 'usband, dear−−I says to Jane, I says, without doubt Hisaac is about to pass over, I says, seeing the red boy's come up in conjugation with the hace. 'Lord! Mrs. Eliza! Lay them out again,' she says, 'for,' she says, 'if Hike is going to pass over,' she says−−"

"Extraordinary, dear Mrs. Eliza! You're a genius!" cried Lady Enid in despair.

"Tremendous! Very big!" buzzed Verano, staring at Sir Tiglath. "You got a very spatulate hand there, sir! Allow me!"

And to Lady Enid's horror he seized the astronomer's hand with both his own.

"How dare you tamper with the old astronomer, sir?" roared Sir Tiglath. "Am I in a madhouse? Who are all these crazy Janes! Drop my hand, sir!"

Verano obeyed rather hastily, and Lady Enid convoyed the spluttering astronomer towards the corner which contained Mr. and Madame Sagittarius.

Now these worthies were in a mental condition of a most complicated kind. The reception at Zoological House had upset in an hour the theories and beliefs of a lifetime. Hitherto Madame had always been filled with shame at the thought that she was not the wife of an architect but of a prophet, and Mr. Sagittarius had endeavoured to assume the mein and costume of an outside broker, and had dreamed dreams of retiring eventually from a hated and despised profession. But now they found themselves in a magnificent mansion in which the second− rate members of their own tribe were worshipped and adored, smothered with attentions, plied with Pommery and looked upon as gods, while they, in their incognito, were neglected, and paid no more heed to than if they had been, in reality, mere architects and outside brokers, totally unconnected with that mysterious occult

world which is the fashion of the moment.

This position of affairs had, not unnaturally, thrown then into a condition of the gravest excitement. Madame, more especially, had reached boiling point. Feeling herself, for the first time, an Imperial creature in exile, who had only to declare herself to receive instant homage and to be overwhelmed with the most flattering attentions, her lust of glory developed with alarming rapidity, and she urged her husband to cast the traditions that had hitherto guided him to the winds and to declare forthwith his identity with Malkiel the Second, the business−like and as it were official head of the whole prophetic tribe.

Mr. Sagittarius, for his part, was also fired with the longing for instant glory, but he was by nature an extremely timid−−or shall we say rather, an extremely prudent−−man. He remembered the repeated injunctions of his great forebear who had lived and died in the Susan Road beside the gasworks. More, he remembered Sir Tiglath Butt. He was torn between ambition and terror.

"Declare yourself, Jupiter!" cried Madame. "Declare yourself this moment!"

"My love!" replied Mr. Sagittarius. "My angel, we must reflect."

"I have reflected," retorted Madame.

"There are difficulties, my dear, many difficulties in the way."

"And what if there are? /Per augustum ad augustibus/. Every fool knows that."

"My dear, you are a little hard upon me."

"And what have you been upon me, I should like to know? What about those goings−on with the woman Bridgeman? What about your investigations with that hussy Minerva? You've been her owl, that's what you've been!"

She began to show grave symptoms of hysteria. Mr. Sagittarius patted her hands in great anxiety.

"My love, I have told you, I have sworn−−"

"And what man doesn't swear whenever he gets the chance?" cried Madame. "Why did I ever marry? /Heu miserum me/."

"My angel, be calm. I assure you−−"

"Very well then, declare yourself, Jupiter, this minute, or I'll declare yourself for you!"

"But, my love, think of Sir Tiglath! I dare not declare myself. He will be here at any moment, and he has sworn to kill me, if I'm not an American syndicate!"

"Rubbish!"

"But, my−−"

"Rubbish! That's only what Mr. Vivian says."

"Well, but−−"

"Besides, you can put on your /toga virilibus/ and knock him down. It's no use talking to me, Jupiter."

"I know it isn't, my darling, I know. But−−"

"If you don't declare yourself I shall declare yourself for you this very moment. I will not endure to be left in the corner while all these nobodies are being truckled to. Bernard Wilkins, indeed! A prophet we wouldn't so much as recognise to be a prophet, and that there Mrs. Eliza−−people from the Wick going down to supper in front of us, and a man from the Butts put before you! It's right down disgusting, and I won't have it."

It was exactly at this point in the matrimonial conference that Lady Enid and Sir Tiglath Butt, shaking themselves free of Mrs. Eliza and Verano, bore down upon Mr. and Madame Sagittarius, who were so busily engaged in disputation that they did not perceive that anyone was near until Lady Enid touched Mr. Sagittarius upon the arm.

That gentleman started violently and, on perceiving Sir Tiglath Butt, who was positively sputtering with wrath at the palmistic attentions paid to him by Verano, shrank against his wife, who pushed him vigorously from her, and, getting upon her feet, announced in a loud voice,−−

"Very well, Jupiter, since you won't declare yourself I shall go at once to the woman Bridgeman and declare yourself for you!"

And with this remark she scowled at Lady Enid and walked majestically away, tossing her head vehemently at Mrs. Eliza and Verano as she swept into the adjoining drawing−room.

"Dear me," said Lady Enid, with great curiosity. "Dear me, Mr. Sagittarius, is your wife going to make a declaration? This is most interesting!"

And, moved by her besetting idiosyncrasy, she added to the astronomer, "Excuse me, Sir Tiglath, "I'll be back in one moment!" and glided swiftly away in the wake of Madame, leaving Mr. Sagittarius and his deadliest foe /tete−a−tete/.

"Is this a madhouse, sir?" cried Sir Tiglath, on being thus abandoned. "The old astronomer demands to know at once if one is, or is not, in a vast madhouse?"

"I don't know, sir, indeed," replied Mr. Sagittarius. "I should not like to express an opinion on the point. If you will excu−−"

"Sir, the old astronomer will not excuse you," roared Sir Tiglath, forcibly preventing Mr. Sagittarius, who was pale as ashes, from escaping into the farther room. "He will not be run away from by everybody in this manner."

"I beg pardon, sir, I had no intention of running away," said Mr. Sagittarius, making one last despairing effort to assume his /toga virilibus/.

"Then why did you do it, sir? Tell the old astronomer that!" cried Sir Tiglath, seizing him by the arm. "And tell him, moreover, what you and the old female Bridgeman have been about together?"

"Nothing, sir; I swear that Mrs. Bridgeman and myself have never−−"

"Never made investigations into the possibility of there being oxygen in many of the holy stars? Do you affirm that, sir?"

"I do!" cried Mr. Sagittarius. "I am an outside broker."

"Do you affirm that you are no astronomer, sir? Do you declare that you are not a man of science?"

"I do! I do!"

"Not an astronomer of remarkable attainments, but very modest and retiring withal? Oh−h−h!"

"Modest and retiring, sir?" cried Mr. Sagittarius, suddenly illumined by a ray of hope. "That's just it! I am a modest and retiring outside broker, sir."

And he violently endeavoured to prove the truth of the words by escaping forthwith into obscurity.

"There never was a modest and retiring outside broker!" bellowed Sir Tiglath. "There never was, and there never will be. The old−−"

"What's that?" interrupted Mr. Sagittarius. "Whatever's that?"

For at this moment an extraordinary hum of voices made itself audible above the fifty guitars, and a noise of many feet trampling eagerly upon Mrs. Bridgeman's parquet grew louder and louder in the brilliant rooms. Attracted by the uproar, Sir Tiglath paused for a moment, still keeping his hand upon the lapel of Mr. Ferdinand's coat, however. The noise increased. It was evident that a multitude of people was rapidly approaching. Words uttered by the moving guests, exclamations, and ejaculations of excitement now detached themselves from the general murmur.

"The Prophet from the Mouse!"

"The great Malkiel here!"

"The founder of the almanac!"

"The greatest Prophet of the age!"

"Malkiel the Second from the Mouse!"

"Where is Malkiel?"

"We must find Malkiel!"

"We must see Malkiel!"

"Is it really Malkiel?"

"Oh, is it /the/ Malkiel? Where−−where is Malkiel?"

Such cries as these broke upon the ears of the astronomer and Mr. Sagittarius.

Sir Tiglath grew purple.

"Malkiel who has insulted the holy stars here!" he roared, letting go of Mr. Sagittarius. "Where−−where is he?"

"In there, sir, I verily believe!" cried Mr. Sagittarius, pointing in the direction of the crowd with a hand that shook like all the leaves in Vallombrosa.

"Let me find him!" shouted the astronomer. "Let me only discover him! I'll break every bone in his accursed body."

And with this rather bald statement he rolled out of the room in one direction, while Mr. Sagittarius, without

more ado, cast aside his /toga virilibus/ and darted out of it into another, just as Madame escorted by Mrs. Bridgeman, Lady Enid, the great Towle and the whole of the company assembled at Zoological House, appeared majestically−−and proceeding as an Empress−−in the aperture of the main doorway.

CHAPTER XIX. MRS. MERILLIA HEATS THE POKER

When Mr. Sagittarius, running at his fullest speed, emerged from Zoological House, wearing the hat and coat that the saturnine little clergyman had left behind him, the night was damp and gusty. As he hastened down the drive, and the sound of twenty guitars, playing "Oh would I were a Spaniard among you lemon groves!" died away in the lighted mansion behind him, he heard the roaring of the beasts in the gardens close by. In the wet darkness it sounded peculiarly terrific. He shuddered, and, holding up Mr. Ferdinand's trousers with both hands, hurried onward through the mire, whither he knew not. His only thought was that all was now discovered and that his life was in danger. A woman's vanity had wrecked his future. He must hide somewhere for the night, and get away in the morning, perhaps on board some tramp steamer bound for Buenos Ayres, or on a junk weighing anchor for Hayti or Java, or some other distant place. Vague memories of books he had read when a boy came back to him as he ran through the unkempt wilds of the Regent's Park. He saw himself a stowaway hidden in a hold, alone with rats and ships' biscuits. He saw himself working his way out before the mast, sent aloft in hurricanes on pitch−black nights, or turning the wheel the wrong way round and bringing the ship to wreck upon iron− bound coasts swarming with sharks and savages. The lions roared again, and the black panthers snarled behind their prison bars. He thought of the peaceful waters of the river Mouse, of the library of Madame, of the happy little circle of architects and their wives, of all that he must leave.

What wonder if he dropped a tear into the muddy road? What wonder if a sob rent the bosom of Mr. Ferdinand's now disordered shirt front? On and on Mr. Sagittarius−−or Malkiel the Second, as he may from henceforth be called−−went blindly, on and on till the Park was left behind, till crescents gave way to squares, and squares to streets. He passed an occasional policeman and slunk away from the penetrating bull's−eye. He heard now and then the far−off rattle of a cab, the shrill cry of a whistle, the howl of a butler summoning a vehicle, the coo of a cook bidding good−night to the young tradesman whom she loved before the area gate. And all these familiar London sounds struck strangely on his ear. When would he hear them again? Perhaps never. He stumbled on blinded with emotion.

Dogs, we know are guided by a strange instinct to find their homes even by unfamiliar paths. Pigeons will fly across wide spaces and drop down to the wicker cage that awaits them. And it would appear that prophets are not without a certain faculty that may be called topographical. For how else can the following fact be explained? Malkiel the Second, after apparently endless wandering, found himself totally unable to proceed further. His legs gave way beneath him. His breath failed. His brain swam. He reeled, stretched forth his hands and clutched at the nearest support. This chanced to be a railing, wet, slimy, cold. He grasped it, leaned against it, and for a few moments remained where he was in a sort of trance. Then, gradually, full consciousness returned. He glanced up and beheld the black garden of a square. Somehow it looked familiar. He seemed to know those shadowy, leafless trees, the roadway between him and them, even the pavement upon which his boots−−his own boots−−were set. His lack−lustre eyes travelled to the houses that bordered the square, then to the house against whose area railings he was leaning, and he started with amazement. For he was in Berkeley Square, leaning against the railing of number one thousand. He gazed up at the windows. One or two faint lights twinkled. Then perhaps the household had not yet retired for the night. An idea seized him. He must rest. He must snatch a brief interval of repose, before starting for the docks at dawn to find a ship in whose hold he could seek seclusion, till the great seas roared round her, and he could declare himself to the captain and crew without fear of being put ashore. Why not rest here in number one thousand? True, the Prophet would presently be returning possibly with Madame, but he would bribe Mr. Ferdinand not to mention his whereabouts. It was no doubt a very rash proceeding, but he was utterly exhausted, he felt that he could go no further, he found himself before an almost friendly door. What wonder then if he tottered up the steps and tapped feebly upon it? There was no answer. He tapped again more loudly. This time his summons was heard. Steps approached. There was a moment's pause. Then the door opened, and Gustavus appeared looking rather sleepy, but still decidedly intellectual. Malkiel the Second pulled himself together and faced the footman boldly.

"You know me?" he said.

Gustavus examined him closely.

"Yes, sir," he replied at length. "By the clothes. I should know Mr. Ferdinand's trouserings among a thousand."

Malkiel the Second realised that emotion probably rendered his face unrecognisable. But at least his legs spoke for him. That was something, and he continued, with an attempt at ease and boldness,−−

"Right! I have returned to change them."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Ferdinand has retired to bed, sir."

"Don't wake him. I can just leave them for him."

"Very well, sir."

And Gustavus admitted Malkiel to the dimly−lit hall and shut the door softly.

"What is your name, young man?" said Malkiel, whispering.

"Gustavus, sir."

"Ah! Gustavus, would you like to earn a hundred pounds to−night?"

Gustavus started.

"I don't say as how I'd rather not, sir," he replied. "I don't go so far as to say that."

"Right! Do as I tell you and you will earn a hundred pounds."

The footman's eyes began to glow, almost like a cat's in the twilight.

"Why, I could buy the library near twelve times over," he murmured.

"The library?" said Malkiel, whose brain had suddenly become strangely clear.

"Ah, sir−−Dr. Carter's," returned Gustavus, beginning to tremble.

"Dr. Carter's!" whispered Malkiel, excitedly. "I should think so. Eight guineas and a half, and you pay in instalments."

"I'll do it, sir," hissed Gustavus, utterly carried away by the prospect. "What d'you want me to do?"

"First to let me change my clothes quickly, then to hide me somewhere so as I can get a sleep till dawn. Call me directly it begins to get light and I shall be off to the docks."

"The docks, sir?"

"Ay. I start for−−for Java to−morrow."

"Java, sir−−what, where the sparrows and the jelly−−"

"Ay, ay," returned Malkiel, secretly rehearsing his new nautical role.

"I'll do it sir. And the hundred?"

"I'll write you an order on my banker's. You can trust me. Now let me change my clothes. Quick!"

"They're in Mr. Vivian's bedroom, ain't they?"

Malkiel nodded.

"You must go very soft, sir, because of the old lady. She's abed, but she might be wakeful, specially to−night. She's been awful upset. My word, she has!"

"I'll go as soft as a mouse," whispered Malkiel. "Show me the way."

Gustavus advanced on tiptoe towards the staircase, followed by Malkiel, who held Mr. Ferdinand's clothes together lest they should rustle, and proceeded with the most infinite precaution. In this manner they gained the second floor and neared the bedroom door of Mrs. Merillia. Here Gustavus turned round, pointed to the door, and put his finger to his pouting lips, at the same time rounding his hazel eyes and shaking his powdered head in a most warning manner. Malkiel nodded, held Mr. Ferdinand's clothes tighter, and stole on, as he thought, without making a sound. What was his horror, then, just as he was passing Mrs. Merillia's door, to hear a voice cry,−−

"Hennessey! Hennessey!"

Gustavus and Malkiel stopped dead, as if they had both been shot. They now perceived that the door was partially open, and that a faint light shone within the room.

"Hennessey!" cried the voice of Mrs. Merillia again. "Come in here. I must speak to you."

Gustavus darted on into the darkness of the Prophet's room, but Malkiel the Second was so alarmed that he stayed where he was, finding himself totally incapable of movement.

"Hennessey!" repeated the voice.

Then there was a faint rustling, the door was opened more widely, and Mrs. Merillia appeared in the aperture, clad in a most charming night bonnet, and robed in a dressing−gown of white watered silk.

"The ratcatcher!" she cried. "The ratcatcher!"

Malkiel turned and darted down the stairs, while Mrs. Merillia, in the extreme of terror, shut her door, locked it as many times as she could, and then hastened trembling to the bell which communicated with the faithful Mrs. Fancy, rang it, and dropped half fainting into a chair. Mrs. Fancy woke from her second dream just as Malkiel, closely followed by the now shattered Gustavus, reached the hall.

"Hide me! Hide me!" whispered Malkiel. "In here!"

And he darted into the servants' quarters, leaving Gustavus on the mat. Mrs. Merillia's other bell now pealed shrilly downstairs. Gustavus paused and pulled himself together. He was by nature a fairly intrepid youth, and moreover, he had recently made a close study of Carlyle's /Heroes and Hero−worship/, which greatly impressed him. He therefore resolved in this moment of peril to acquit himself in similar circumstances, and he remounted the stairs and reached Mrs. Merillia's door just as Mrs. Fancy, wrapped in a woollen shawl and wearing a pair of knitted night−socks, descended to the landing, candle in hand.

"Oh, Mr. Gustavus!" said Mrs. Fancy. "Is it the robbers again? Is it murder, Mr. Gustavus? Is it fire?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Fancy, I'll ask the mistress."

He tapped upon the door.

"You can't come in!" cried poor Mrs. Merillia, who was losing her head perhaps for the first time in her life. "You can't come in, and if you do I shall give you in charge to the police."

And she rang both her bells again.

"Ma'am!" said Gustavus, knocking once more. "Ma'am!"

"It's no use your knocking," returned Mrs. Merillia. "The door is bolted. Go away, go away!"

And again she rang her two bells.

"Madam!" piped Mrs. Fancy. "Madam! It's me!"

"I know," said Mrs. Merillia. "I know it's you! I saw you! Leave the house unless you wish to be at once put in prison.

Her bells pealed. Mrs. Fancy began to sob.

"Me to leave the house!" she wailed. "Me to go to prison!"

"Bear up, Mrs. Fancy, she doesn't know who it is!" said Gustavus. "Ma'am! Ma'am! Missis! Missis!"

"I am ringing," said Mrs. Merillia, in a muffled manner through the door. "I am summoning assistance! You will be captured if you don't go away."

And again she pealed her bells. This time, as she did so, the tingling of a third bell became audible in the silent house.

"Lord!" cried Gustavus, "if there isn't the hall door. It must be master. He left his key to−night. Here's a nice go!"

The three bells raised their piercing chorus. Mrs. Fancy sobbed, and Gustavus, after a terrible moment of hesitation, bounded down the hall. His instinct had not played him false. The person who had rung the bell was indeed the Prophet, who had basely slunk away from Zoological House, leaving Madame surrounded by her new and adoring friends.

"Thank you, Gustavus," he said, entering. "Take my coat, please. What's that?"

For Mrs. Merillia's bells struck shrilly upon his astonished ears.

"I think it's Mrs. Merillia, sir. She keeps on ringing."

"Mrs. Merillia. At this hour! Heavens! Is she ill?"

"I don't know, sir. She keeps ringing; but when I answer it she says, 'Go away!' she says. 'Go−−' she says, sir."

"How very strange!"

And the Prophet bounded upstairs and arrived at his grandmother's door just in time to hear her cry out, in reply to poor Mrs. Fancy's distracted knocking,−−

"If you try to break in you will be put in prison at once. I hear assistance coming. I hear the police. Go away, you wicked, wicked man!"

"Grannie!" cried the Prophet through the keyhole. "Grannie, let me in! Grannie! Grannie! Don't ring! Grannie! Grannie!"

But Mrs. Merillia was now completely out of herself, and her only response to her grandson's appeal was to place her trembling fingers upon the two bells, and to reply, through their uproar,−−

"It is useless for you to say that. I know who you are. I saw you. I shall go on ringing as long as I can stand. I

shall die ringing, but I shall never let you in. Go away! Go away!"

"What does she mean?" cried the Prophet, turning to Gustavus.

"I don't know indeed, sir," replied the footman, thinking of Mr. Carter's library. "I couldn't say indeed, sir."

"Oh, my poor missis!" wailed Mrs. Fancy, trembling in her night−socks. "Oh, my poor dear missis! I can't speak different nor mean other. Oh, missis, missis!"

"Hush, Fancy!" said the Prophet, in the greatest distraction. "Grannie! Grannie!"

And seizing the handle of the door he shook it violently. Mrs. Merillia was now very naturally under the impression that the ratcatcher was determined to break in and murder her without more ado. Extreme danger often seems to exercise a strangely calming influence upon the human soul. So it was now. Upon hearing her bedroom door quivering under the assault of the Prophet, Mrs. Merillia was abruptly invaded by a sort of desperate courage. She left the bells, tottered to the grate in which a good fire was blazing, seized the poker and thrust it between the bars and into the heart of the flames, at the same time crying out in a quavering but determined voice,−−

"I am heating the poker! If you come in you will repent it. I am heating the poker!"

On hearing this remark, the Prophet desisted from his assault upon the door, overcome by the absolute conviction that his beloved grandmother was suffering from a pronounced form of homicidal mania. His affection prompted him to keep such a catastrophe secret as long as possible, and he therefore turned to Mrs. Fancy and Gustavus, and said hurriedly,−−

"This is a matter for me alone. Mrs. Fancy, please go away at once. Gustavus, you will accompany Mrs. Fancy."

His manner was so firm, his face so iron in its determination, that Mrs. Fancy and Gustavus dared not proffer a word. They turned away and disappeared softly down the stairs, to wait the /denouement/ of this tragedy in the hall below. Meantime the poker was growing red hot in the coals, and Mrs. Merillia announced to the supposed ratcatcher,−−

"I can hear you−−I hear you breathing−−" (the Prophet endeavoured not to breathe). "I hear you rustling, but you can't touch me. The poker is red hot."

And she drew it smoking from the grate and approached the door, holding it in her delicate hand like a weapon.

"Grannie!" said the Prophet, making his voice as much like it generally was as he possibly could. "Dearest grannie!"

"I dare you to come in!" replied Mrs. Merillia, in an almost formidable manner. "I dare you to do it."

"I am not coming in, grannie," said the Prophet.

"Then go away!" said Mrs. Merillia. "Go away−−and let me hear you going."

A sudden idea struck the Prophet. He did not say another word, but immediately walked downstairs, tramping heavily and shaking the wood balusters violently at every step he took. His ruse succeeded. Hearing the intruder depart, Mrs. Merillia's curious courage deserted her, she dropped the poker into the grate, and once more set both bells going with all her might and main. The Prophet let her ring for nearly five minutes, then he bounded once more upstairs and tapped very gently on the door.

"Grannie," he cried, "are you ringing? What is it?"

This time Mrs. Merillia recognised his voice, tottered to the door, unlocked it, and fell, trembling, into his anxious arms.

"Oh, Hennessey!" she gasped. "Oh−−Hennessey!"

"Grannie, what is it? What on earth is the matter?"

"The ratcatcher! The ratcatcher!"

"The ratcatcher!" cried the Prophet.

"He has come back. He is here. He has been trying to break into my room."

"What ratcatcher?"

"The one that dined to−night−−the one you called your old and−−and valued−−friend."

"Mr. Sagittarius?" exclaimed the Prophet.

"He is here."

"Here!"

"I have seen him. He has tried to murder me."

"I will look into this at once," said the Prophet.

He ran to the head of the stairs and called out,−−

"Gustavus!"

"Sir!"

"Come up here at once,"

Gustavus came, followed closely by Mrs. Fancy, who was in a state of abject confusion and alarm.

"Has Mr. Sagittarius returned here−−the gentleman who dined to−night?" asked the Prophet.

Gustavus hesitated, thought of Dr. Carter's library, and replied,−−

"No, sir,"

"Has anybody entered the house?"

"No, sir."

"You have been up the whole evening?"

"Yes, sir."

"And nobody has been?"

"Nobody, sir."

"Grannie, you hear what Gustavus says."

"But, Hennessey, he is here; I saw him."

"Where?"

"By the door. I heard someone, and I thought it was you. I came to the door after calling you, and there he stood, all dirty and wet, with a huge hat on his head" (the saturnine little clergyman was largely blessed with brain), "and a most awful murderous expression on his face."

The Prophet began to suspect that his dear relative, upset by the tragic events of the dinner table, had gone to sleep and had the nightmare.

"Grannie, it must have been a dream."

"No, Hennessey, no."

"It must indeed. I left Mr. Sagittarius at Zoological House. I feel certain of that."

The Prophet spoke the honest truth. He fully believed that Mr. Sagittarius was at that very moment sharing in the triumph of his wife and receiving the worship of those who live the silly life.

"But I saw him, Hennessey," said Mrs. Merillia, adding rather unnecessarily, "with my own eyes."

"Grannie, darling, you must have been dreaming. At any rate, I'm here now. Nothing can hurt you. Go to bed. Fancy will stay with you, and I swear to you that no harm will happen to you so long as I am breathing."

With these noble words the Prophet kissed his grandmother tenderly, assisted Mrs. Fancy into the room, and walked downstairs quite determined that, come what might, whether he broke a thousand oaths or not, he would put an end forthwith to the tyranny of the couple from the Mouse and abandon for ever the shocking pursuit of prophecy.

CHAPTER XX. THE PROPHET RETIRES FROM BUSINESS

Exactly as the Prophet arrived at his resolution the hall door bell rang violently, and Gustavus, who had slipped down before the Prophet in order to seek the traveller to Java in the servants' quarters, hurried into the hall in rather a distracted manner.

"Stop, Gustavus!" said the Prophet.

Gustavus stopped. The bell rang again.

"Gustavus," said the Prophet, "if that is a visitor I am not at home. Mrs. Merillia is not at home either."

It was by this time between one and two in the morning.

"Not at home, sir. Yes, sir."

The Prophet concealed himself near the hat−rack, and Gustavus went softly to the door and opened it.

"Not at home, ma'am," the Prophet heard him say, formally.

"What d'you mean, young man?" replied the powerful voice of Madame. "Where is my husband?"

"Ma'am?"

"Where, I say, is my husband?"

"I couldn't say, I'm sure, ma'am. But Mrs. Merillia and Mr. Vivian are not at home."

"Then all I can say is they ought to be in at this time of night. Permit me to pass. Are you aware that Mr. Vivian has invited me to spend the night here? /Noctes ambrosianes/."

"But, ma'am, Mr. Viv−−"

"That'll do. If I have any more of your impertinence I'll make you repent of it. You are evidently not aware who I am."

The Prophet, by the hat−rack, did not fail to hear a new note in the deep contralto of Madame, a note of triumph, a trumpet note of profound conceit. His heart sank before this determined music, and it sank even lower towards his pumps when, a moment later, he found himself confronted by the lady, wrapped closely in the rabbit−skins, and absolutely bulging with vanity and self−appreciation.

"What! Mr. Vivian!" began the lady.

"Hush! said the Prophet, "for mercy's sake−−hush!"

And, acting upon the impulse of the moment, he suddenly seized Madame by the hand, and hurried her through the swinging door into the servants' hall.

"Here's a go," murmured Gustavus in the greatest trepidation. "If they don't find the thin party I'm a josser."

Meanwhile the Prophet and Madame were standing face to face before the what−not of Gustavus.

"My grandmother is awake−−that is asleep," said the Prophet. "We must not wake her on any account."

"Oh," returned Madame, with a toss of her head, "your grandmother seems to be a very fidgety old lady, I'm sure−−although you do tell a parcel of lies about her."

"Lies!" said the Prophet, with some dignity.

"Yes−−lies. She don't wear long clothes−−"

"I beg your pardon!"

"She do not. She don't wear her hair down. She don't put her lips to the bottle. She don't. Where is Mr. Sagi−−where is Malkiel the Second?"

"I have no idea. And now, Madame, I regret that I must conduct you to your carriage. The hour is late, my grandmother is seriously indisposed, and I myself need rest."

"Well, then, you can't have it," retorted the lady with authoritative spitefulness. "You can't have it, not till three o'clock."

"I beg your pardon!" said the Prophet, with trembling lips.

"What for?"

"I really regret that I must retire. Allow me−−"

"I'll not allow you. Where is my husband? He's not at the Zoological Gardens."

"He has probably returned home."

"To the Mouse! Then he's a coward and an oath−breaker, and if Sir Tiglath was to catch him I shouldn't be

sorry. Kindly lead me at once to the telescope. I will take his place. No one shall say that Madame Malkiel ever flinched at duty's call. /Praesto et persistibus/. Conduct me at once to the telescope."

"The telescope!" cried the Prophet. "What for?"

"Lawks!" cried Madame, with pronounced temper. "Did we not journey from the Mouse a−purpose to go practically into the mystery of the dressed Crab?"

"I really−−I really cannot consent without a chaperon," began the Prophet.

"The wife of Malkiel the Second needs no chaperone," retorted Madame. "This night has altered my condition−−I stand from henceforth far beyond the reach of etiquette. The world knows me now and will not dare to carp. /Carpe dies/."

During the foregoing colloquy her voice had become louder and louder, and the Prophet, dreading unspeakably lest his grandmother should be disturbed and affrighted once more, gave up the struggle, and, without more ado, conducted Madame into the butler's pantry in which the telescope still remained.

Meanwhile what had become of Malkiel the Second?

When Mrs. Merillia suddenly appeared before him in her night−bonnet and accused him of being a ratcatcher he had very naturally fled, his first impulse being to leave the house at once and continue his journey to the docks. But even a prophet is but mortal. Malkiel had passed through an eventful day followed by a still more eventful evening. His mind was completely exhausted. Even so, however, he might have continued upon his journey towards Java had not his legs prosaically shown signs of giving way under him just as he once more gained the hall. This decided him. He must have some short repose at whatever cost. He therefore pushed feebly at the nearest door, and found himself promptly in the apartment of the upper servants. Staggering to the what−not of Gustavus, he sank down upon it and fell into a melancholy reverie, from which he was roused by the constant tingling cry of Mrs. Merillia's second bell, which rang close to where he was reposing. He tried to start up, but failed, and it was only when the hall door bell, attacked by the Prophet, added its voice to its companion's that his terror lent him sufficient strength to flee very slowly into the inner fastnesses of this unknown region. There was a light in the servant's hall, but darkness lay beyond and Malkiel knew not whither he was penetrating. He barked his shins, but could not tell against what hard substance. He bruised his elbow, but could not know what piece of furniture had assailed it. On coming in contact with a dresser he saw a few sparks, but they speedily died out, and he was obliged to feel his way onward, till presently he came across a large leather chair in which Mrs. Merillia's cook was wont to sit while directing her subordinates at the basting machine. Into this he sank palpitating, and for a moment remained undisturbed. Then, to his horror, he heard in the adjoining room the strident voice of his loved and honoured wife apparently carrying on a decidedly vivacious argument with some person unknown. He bounded up. Possibly she was accompanied by Sir Tiglath, who must now be aware of his identity. In any case, her wrath at his scarcely chivalrous desertion of her in the house of a stranger would, he knew, be terrible. He dared not face it. He dared not allow his project of flight at dawn to be interfered with, as it certainly would be if he came across Madame. He therefore proceeded to flee once more. Nor did he pause until he had gained Mr. Ferdinand's pantry, where stood the telescope. Now, in this pantry there was a large cupboard in which were kept the very numerous and magnificent pieces of plate, etc., possessed by Mrs. Merillia; tall silver candelabra, standard lamps of polished bronze, richly−chased cups, gigantic vases for containing flowers, oriental incense holders upon stands of ebony, Spanish charcoal dishes of burnished brass, and other treasures far too numerous to mention. This cupboard was always carefully locked at night, but on this occasion Mr. Ferdinand, totally disorganised by the frightful scenes which had taken place at his dinner table during the evening, had retired to bed in a condition of collapse, leaving it open. Malkiel the Second, feeling frantically about in the dark, came upon the door of this cupboard, pulled it, found that it yielded to his hand, and, hearing the rapidly approaching voices of Madame and the Prophet, stumbled into the cupboard and sank down on a large gold loving−cup, with one foot in a silver soup tureen, and the other in a priceless sugar basin, just as the light of the candle borne by the Prophet glimmered in the darkness of the adjacent corridor.

"This way, Madame," said the Prophet. "But I really think such a proceeding is calculated to cause a grave scandal in the square."

Malkiel the Second drew the cupboard door to, and grasped a silver candelabrum in each hand to sustain himself upon the rather sharp rim of the loving−cup.

"What is the square to me or I to the square?" returned Madame with ungrammatical majesty. "Madame

Malkiel is not governed by any ordinary laws. /Lexes non scripta/ is her motto. To these alone she clings."

Her husband clung to the candelabra and burst into a violent perspiration. Through the keyhole of the cupboard a ray of light now shone, and he heard the frou−frou of his partner's skirt, the flump of the rabbit−skins as she cast them from her ample shoulders upon the floor. The Prophet's voice became audible again.

"What do you wish me to do?" he said, with a sort of embittered courtesy.

"Throw open the window, place yourself before the telescope, and proceed at once to your investigations," replied the lady.

"I am not in a condition to investigate," said the Prophet. "I am not indeed. If you will only let me get you a cab, to−morrow night−−"

'It is useless to talk, Mr. Vivian," said Madame, very sharply. "The cab has not yet been made that will convey me to the Mouse to−night."

"But your husband−−"

"My husband is a coward, unworthy of such a wife as he possesses. At the crisis of our fortunes−−What's that?"

At this painful moment Malkiel the Second was so overcome by emotion, that he trembled, and allowed his left foot to rattle slightly on the sugar basin.

"What was it?" repeated Madame.

"Rats, I have no doubt," answered the Prophet, who had heard nothing. "I believe that the basements of these old houses are simply−−well−− simply permeated with rats."

For a moment Madame blanched, but she was a woman of spirit, and moreover she was almost intoxicated with ambition. Recognised at last as a lady of position and importance in one of the mansions of the idiotic great, she was more anxious than ever to remove forthwith into the central districts, there to exercise that sway which she had so long desired. Finding that there exists a world in which prophets−−far from being considered as dirty and deceitful persons−−are worshipped and adored, entertained with Pommery and treated almost as gods, she yearned to dwell in the midst of it. The peaceful seclusion of the Mouse was become hateful to her. The architects and their wives began to seem to her uplifted fancy little better than the circle that frequented Hagglin's Buildings, or appeared at the paltry entertainments given by the inhabitants of Drakeman's Villas. She was resolved to soar, and even rats should not turn her from her passionate purpose. Accordingly she replied,−−

"Rats or no rats, I intend to see this matter out. /Dixisti!/ The night wanes. Kindly go at once to the telescope."

The Prophet obeyed, first opening the window into the area. The rain had now cleared off, but the sky was still rather cloudy, and only a few stars peeped here and there.

"Really," said the Prophet, after applying his weary eye to the machine, "really I don't think it's any good, there are so very−−"

"Have the goodness to place the old lady in the claws of the Crab, according to the directions of the coward who has deserted me."

Malkiel shook with shame upon the loving−cup.

"But I really can't find the Crab," said the Prophet, who was so tired that he could scarcely stand. "I can see the Great Bear."

"That is no use. The Bear has nothing to do with the old lady. You must find the Crab. Look again."

The Prophet did so. But his eye blinked with fatigue and the heavens swam before it.

"There is no Crab to−night," he said. "I assure you on my honour there is none."

Exactly as he finished making this statement a low whistle rang through the silence of the night. The Prophet started, Madame jumped, and Malkiel bounded on the loving−cup.

The whistle was repeated.

"It's the thing!" whispered the Prophet.

"What thing?" inquired Madame, who had become rather pale.

"The dark thing that told me the Crab was dressed. It has come again."

"My word!" ejaculated Madame, looking uneasily around. "Where is it?"

Just then Malkiel the Second's feet once more began to tremble among the plate of Mrs. Merillia.

"You hear it!" said the Prophet, much impressed.

"Did it rattle like that the other night?" gasped Madame, seizing the Prophet by the arm.

The Prophet told a lie with his head.

"Address it, I beg," said Madame, in a great state of excitement. "Meanwhile I will retire a few paces."

So saying, she backed into the passage, bearing the candle with her for company, and leaving the Prophet in total darkness. The low whistle sounded again, and a husky voice said,−−

"Are you there?"

"Yes," replied the Prophet, summoning all his courage. "I am."

"What 'a' you put out the light for?" said the voice, which seemed to come from far away.

"I haven't put it out," returned the Prophet. "It's gone away."

At this juncture Malkiel, impelled by curiosity, ceased from trembling, and, leaning forward upon the loving−cup, glued his ear to the key−hole of the cupboard.

"Why was you so late to−night?" proceeded the voice. "She's been in a rare taking, I can tell you."

"Who?"

"Who? You know well enough."

"Do you mean my grandmother?"

"Your grandmother!" ejaculated the voice with apparent sarcasm. "Ah! of course, what do you think?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said the poor Prophet, whose reason was beginning to totter upon its throne.

"Well," proceeded the voice, "she thought you'd give it up."

"What−−my grandmother did?"

"Ah, your grandmother. Get away with you! Ha! ha! ha!"

And the mysterious visitant broke forth into a peal of rather mundane laughter. After indulging in this unseemly mirth for about a minute and a half, the personage resumed,−−

"The Crab did for her."

Upon hearing the mystic word Madame crept stealthily a pace or two nearer to the door, while the Prophet exclaimed,−−

"The dressed Crab?"

"Ah, what do /you/ think? Not a wink of sleep and thought every minute'd be 'er next."

"Good Heavens!"

"She says she'd never go near a crab again, not if it's ever so."

"You are sure?" said the Prophet, eagerly. "You are positive she said that?"

"I'd stake my Davy, and I wouldn't do that on everything. There ain't a man living as'll ever get her to go within fifty miles of a crab this side of Judgment."

At this point in the colloquy the curiosity of Madame overcame her, and she protruded her head suddenly beyond the edge of the doorway.

"Ulloh!" exclaimed the voice. "Why, what's 'a' you got there?"

Madame hastily withdrew, and the voice continued,−−

"Blessed if it ain't a female!"

"I beg your pardon!" said the Prophet, trembling with propriety. "I−− I−−there is no female here!"

"Yes there is!" cried the voice, with a chuckle. "There's a female creeping and crawling about behind that there door."

The Prophet's sense of chivalry was now fully aroused.

"You are mistaken," he said firmly. "There are no females creeping and−−and crawling about in this−−this respectable house."

"Respectable!" ejaculated the voice, "respectable! I say there is a female. You're a nice one, you are! 'Pon my word, I've a good mind to run you in for Mormonism, I have. Wherever's she got to?"

On the last words a sudden blaze of light shot into the pantry, and at the same moment there was the sound of wheels rapidly approaching in the square.

"Hulloh!" said the voice, "someone a−comin'."

The light died out as rapidly as it had flashed in, the wheels drew close and stopped, and a bell pealed forth in the silent house.

"Merciful Heavens!" cried the Prophet, pressing his hands to his throbbing brow. "Merciful Heavens! who can that be?"

There was no answer, and the bell pealed again.

"Grannie will be disturbed!" exclaimed the Prophet, addressing himself, passionately to the darkness. "Grannie will be killed by all this uproar."

The bell pealed again.

"This must cease," cried the Prophet. "This must and shall cease. I will bring it all to an end once and for ever!"

And, with sudden desperate decision, he shut the window, burst out of the pantry and came upon Madame, who was standing in a somewhat furtive manner by the door that opened into the cellars of the mansion.

"Mr. Vivian," she began, in a rather subdued voice, "that isn't a comet, that's a copper!"

The bell rang again.

"D'you think−−d'you think that can be my husband?" continued Madame, still seeming subdued. "I should like him−− Do you think it's him?"

"What?"

"The bell."

"I will very soon see," replied the Prophet, in a most determined manner.

"But Mr. Viv−−"

"Don't hold me, if you please. Kindly let me pass!"

And, breaking from the lady's anxious grasp, the Prophet rushed into the hall just as Gustavus appeared, descending the front stairs from the landing before Mrs. Merillia's door, where he had been in close conference with Mrs. Fancy.

"Stand back, Gustavus," said the Prophet.

"Sir!"

"Stand back!"

"But, sir, there is someone−−"

"I know there is. I am about to answer the door myself."

"If you please, sir, Mrs. Merillia is greatly alarmed by the constant ringing, and Mrs. Fancy thinks−−"

"Gustavus," said the Prophet in an awful voice, "you may retire, but first let me tell you one thing."

"Certainly, sir," said the footman, beginning to tremble.

"The circumstances that have rendered a hitherto peaceful household more disordered than an abode of madmen are about to be brought to an end for ever. There is a point at which a gentleman must either cease to be a gentleman or cease to be a man. I have reached that point, Gustavus, and I am about to cease to be a gentleman."

And, with this terrible statement, the Prophet advanced with a sort of appalling deliberation and threw the front door wide open.

Upon the doorstep stood Lady Enid wrapped in a pink opera cloak and Sir Tiglath Butt shrouded in the Inverness. The Prophet faced them with a marble demeanour.

"I thought you'd be here, Mr. Vivian," began Lady Enid in a bright manner.

"I am here," said the Prophet, speaking in a voice that might well have issued from a statue.

"Where is he?" roared Sir Tiglath. "Where is he? Oh−h−h−h!"

"Sir Tiglath means Malkiel," explained Lady Enid. "He is most anxious to meet him."

"Why?" said the Prophet, still in the same inhuman voice.

"Well, we shall see when they do meet," said Lady Enid, throwing a look of keen curiosity at the astronomer. "I rather think−−" here she lowered her voice and whispered in the Prophet's ear−−"I rather think Sir Tiglath wishes to try if he can murder Malkiel. Do you believe he could bring it off?"

"I'm sure I don't know," answered the Prophet, with stony indifference. "Good−night to you!"

"But we want to come in," cried Lady Enid.

"Young man," roared Sir Tiglath, "the old astronomer will not leave this house till he has searched it from attic to cellar."

"I am sorry," replied the Prophet, "but I cannot permit my grandmother's servants or wine to be disturbed at such an hour. If you wish to murder Malkiel the Second, I shall not prevent you, but he is not here."

"Then where is he?" cried Lady Enid.

"I don't know. And now−−"

The Prophet stepped back into the hall, and was about to close the door unceremoniously−−having, as he intended, ceased to be a gentleman−−when Lady Enid caught sight of the round and fixed eyes of Gustavus glaring out into the night from behind his master. The appalling feminine instinct, which makes woman the mistress of creation, suddenly woke within her, and she cried out in a piercing voice,−−

"Malkiel's in the house, and Gustavus knows it!"

She spoke these words with such conviction that the Prophet spun round, top−wise, and stared at the unfortunate flunkey, who instantly fell upon his knee−breeches and stammered out,−−

"Oh, sir, forgive me! It's Dr. Carter done it, sir, it is indeed. It's Dr. Carter done it!"

"Dr. Carter!" ejaculated the Prophet.

"The library, sir. He offered me the library eight times over, sir!"

"Who offered you the library?"

"The gent, sir, in Mr. Ferdinand's trouserings, what was at dinner, sir. He only wanted to change 'em, sir, and he says to me, he says, 'Let me,' he says, 'but remove these trouserings,' he says, 'before I make off to Java,' he says−−"

"To where?" roared Sir Tiglath.

"To Java, sir, where the jelly and the sparrows is manufactured, sir, that is born, sir. 'And,' he says, 'here is a hundred pounds,' he says."

"Then he is in the house?" said the Prophet, sternly.

"Well, sir, he was, sir. And, as I ain't seen him go, sir, I expect as he's somewhere about changing of 'em, sir. Oh, sir, if you'll only look it over sir, It's all the thirst, sir, it's all the thirst−−"

"What? You have been drinking?" cried the Prophet, in an outraged manner.

"No, sir, the thirst for knowledge, sir, as has brought me to this. Oh, sir, if only you'll−−"

"Hush!" said the Prophet fiercely. "Sir Tiglath," he added, turning towards the puffing astronomer, "you can enter. My grandmother must have been right."

"Your grandmother?" said Lady Enid, with eager inquisitiveness.

"She informed me that the ruffian was in the house and had attempted to make away with her−−"

"Dear me! this is most interesting!" interposed Lady Enid.

"But I supposed she had had the nightmare. It seems that I was wrong. If you will step in, you can search the house at once. And if you discover this nameless creature changing his−−that is Mr. Ferdinand's trouserings−−trousers, that is,−−in any part of the building, as far as I am concerned you can murder him forthwith."

The Prophet spoke quite calmly, in a soft and level voice. Yet there was something so frightful in his tone and manner that even Sir Tiglath seemed slightly awe−stricken. At any rate, he accepted the Prophet's invitation in silence, and stepped almost furtively into the hall, on whose floor Gustavus was still posed in the conventional attitude of the Christian martyr. Lady Enid eagerly followed, and the Prophet was just about to close the door, when a dark, hovering figure that was pausing at a short distance off upon the pavement attracted his attention. He stopped short, and, perceiving that it was a policeman, beckoned to it. The figure approached.

"What's up now?" it said familiarly, emphasising the question with a sharp contraction of the left eyelid. "You're having a nice game to−night, and no mistake."

"Game!" replied the Prophet, sternly. "This is no game. Stand there, by the area gate, and if anyone should run out, knock him down with your truncheon. Do you hear me?"

With these impressive words he entered the house and shut the door, leaving the policeman to whistle inquiringly to the stars that were watching over this house, once peaceful, but now the abode of violence and tragedy.

In the hall he found Gustavus still on his knees between Lady Enid and Sir Tiglath.

"Lady Enid," he said, even in this hour mindful of the proprieties, "you have heard what this villain is doing here, and must be sensible that you can take no part in this search."

"Oh, but I particularly want−−" began Lady Enid, hastily.

"Pardon me," said the Prophet, with more firmness than Napoleon ever showed to his marshals. "You must retire. Please come this way. Mrs. Fancy will look after you."

"Oh, but really, Mr. Vivian, I−−"

"Kindly follow me."

Lady Enid hesitated for a moment, but the Prophet's manner was too much for her, and when he stepped, like a clockwork automaton with a steel interior, towards the staircase, she crept mildly in his wake.

"Can't I really−−?" she whispered in his ear.

"Certainly not. If you were a married woman, possibly−−"

"Well, but I am engaged," she murmured.

The Prophet stopped short.

"Engaged!" he said. "To whom?"

"Sir Tiglath."

"Engaged to Sir Tiglath!"

"Yes. He proposed to me to−night at Zoological House."

"Why?"

She might well have resented the question, but perhaps she divined the distraught and almost maniacal condition of mind that the Prophet masked beneath his impassive demeanour. At any rate she answered frankly,−−

"Because he didn't find out I'm Miss Minerva, and in the midst of Mrs. Bridgeman's silly world I stood right out as the only sensible creature living. Isn't it fun?"

"Fun!"

"Yes. I always meant him to propose to me."

"Why?"

"Because I always thought it would be supremely idiotic of me to accept him."

The Prophet felt that if he listened to another remark of such a nature his brain would snap and he would instantly be taken with a tearing fit of hysterics. He therefore turned round and slowly ascended to the first floor.

"Kindly step into the drawing−room," he said, having first, by a rapid glance, assured himself that Malkiel was not changing Mr. Ferdinand's trousers there. "I will send Mrs. Fancy to chaperon you."

Lady Enid stepped in obediently, and the Prophet, who could distinctly hear Mrs. Fancy sobbing on the landing above, proceeded thither, took her hand and guided her down to the drawing−room.

"Oh, my poor, poor missis!" gulped the devoted creature. "Oh, my−−"

"Precisely," rejoined the Prophet, with passionless equanimity. "Please go in there and remain to guard this young lady."

He assisted Mrs. Fancy to fall in a heap upon the nearest sociable, and then, still moving with a species of frozen deliberation, betook himself once more to the hall. The astronomer and Gustavus were standing there in silence.

"Sir Tiglath," said the Prophet, in a very formal manner, "you can now begin to search for this ruffian."

Sir Tiglath cleared his throat, and continued to stand still.

"I hope you will find him," continued the Prophet.

Sir Tiglath cleared his throat again and added,−−

"Why?"

"Why? Because I think it quite time that he was murdered," answered the Prophet, unemotionally. "Well! why don't you search?"

The astronomer, whose face began to look less red than usual, rolled his glassy eyes round upon the shadowy hall, the dim staircase and the gloomy−looking closed doors that confronted them.

"Where is the old astronomer to search?" he asked, in a low voice. "Oh−h−h−h!"

The final exclamation sounded remarkably tremulous.

"Anywhere−−except in my grandmother's bedroom. That of course is sacred. Well, why don't you begin?"

Sir Tiglath eyed the Prophet furtively.

"I'm−−I'm going to," he murmured hoarsely. "The old astronomer does not know the meaning of the word−−fear."

Exactly as he uttered these inspiring words the hall clock growled, like a very large dog, and struck two. Sir Tiglath started and caught hold of Gustavus, who started in his turn and shrank away. The Prophet alone stood up to the clock, which finished its remark with a click, and resumed its habitual occupation of ticking.

"Pray begin, Sir Tiglath," said the Prophet.

"The old astronomer−−must have a−−a−−a−−candle."

"Here is one," said the Prophet, handing the desired article.

"A lighted candle."

"Why lighted? Oh, so that you can see to murder him! Gustavus, light the candle."

Gustavus, who was trembling a good deal more than an autumn leaf, complied after about fifteen unavailing attempts.

"There, Sir Tiglath," said the Prophet. "Now you can begin." And he seated himself upon a settee, leaned back and crossed his legs.

"You will not accompany the old astronomer? Oh−h−h"

"No. I will rest here. When you have found the ruffian and murdered him, I shall be glad to hear your news."

And, so saying, the Prophet settled himself comfortably with a cushion behind his back, and calmly closed his eyes. The candlestick clattered in Sir Tiglath's gouty hand. The Prophet heard it, heard heavy feet shuffling very slowly and cautiously over the floor of the hall, finally heard the door leading to the servants' quarters swing on its hinges. Still he did not open his eyes. He felt that if he were to do so just then he would probably begin to shriek, rave, foam at the mouth, and in all known ways comport himself as do the inhabitants of Bedlam. A delicate silence fell in the hall. How long it lasted the Prophet never knew. It might have been five minutes or five years as far as he was concerned. It was broken at length by the following symphony of sounds−−an elderly man's voice roaring, a woman's voice uttering a considerable number of very powerful screams on a rather low but still resounding note, a loud thump, a crash of glass, a prodigious clattering, as of utensils made in some noisy material falling from a height and rolling vigorously in innumerable directions, two or three bangs of doors, and the peculiar patter of rather large and flat feet, unaccustomed to any rapid exercise, moving over boards, oilcloth and carpet. Then the swing door sang, and the Prophet, opening his eyes, perceived Madame Malkiel moving forward with considerable vivacity, and screaming as she moved, her bonnet depending down her back and the rabbit−skins flowing from her ample shoulders. Immediately behind her ran her spouse, holding in one hand a silver pepper castor, and in the other a small and very beautifully finished bronze teapot of the William of Orange period. The worthy couple fleeted by, and the Prophet turned his expressionless eyes towards the swing door expecting immediately to perceive Sir Tiglath Butt in valiant pursuit. As no such figure presented itself, and as the Malkiels were now beginning to mount the stairs with continually increasing velocity, the Prophet slowly uncrossed his legs, and was thinking of getting upon his feet when there came a loud knock upon the hall door.

"Gustavus!" said the Prophet, glancing round.

He perceived the footman lying in a dead faint near the umbrella stand.

"Oh!" he said, speaking to himself aloud. "Oh! Then I must go myself."

Acting upon his conception of his duty, he accordingly walked to the front door, opened it, and found the policeman outside supporting the senseless form of Sir Tiglath Butt in one hand and holding a broken truncheon in the other.

"Well?" said the Prophet, calmly. "Well?"

"I knocked him down as he was making a bolt," said the policeman.

The Prophet found himself wondering why so industrious and even useful an occupation should be interfered with in such a manner. However, he only replied,−−

"Indeed!"

"Ah," said the policeman, stepping into the hall and laying the astronomer out across a chair, "what's up?"

"They are both up," answered the Prophet, pointing with a lethargic finger towards the staircase, from which, at this moment, arose a perfect hubbub of voices.

"Come on!" cried the policeman.

"Why?" asked the Prophet.

"Why! you're a nice un, you are! Why! And nab 'em, of course!"

"You think it would be wise to−−what was the word−−nab them?" inquired the Prophet. "You really think so?"

"Well, what am I here for then?" said the policeman, with angry irony.

"Oh, if you prefer," rejoined the Prophet, civilly. "Nab them by all means. I shall not prevent you."

The policeman, who was an active and industrious fellow deserving of praise, waited for no further permission, but immediately darted up the stairs, and in less than a minute returned with Mrs. Merillia−−attired in a black silk gown, a bonnet, and an Indian shawl presented to her on her marriage by a very great personage−−in close custody.

"Here's one of 'em!" he shouted. "Here, you lay hold of her while I fetch the rest!"

And with these words he thrust the Prophet's grandmother into one of his hands, the broken truncheon into the other, and turning smartly round, again bounded up the stairs.

In a famous poem of the late Lord Tennyson there is related a dramatic incident of a lady whose disinclination to cry, when such emotion would have been only natural, was overcome by the presentation to her of her child. A somewhat similar effect was produced upon our Prophet by the constable's presentation to him of his honoured grandmother. The sight of her reverent head, surmounted by the bonnet which she had assumed in readiness to flee from the house which she could no longer regard as a home−−the touch of her delicate hand−−the flutter of her so hallowed Indian shawl−−these things broke down the strange calm of her devoted grandson. Like summer tempest came his emotion, and, when the policeman presently returned with Malkiel the Second and Madame nabbed by his right and left hands, and followed by Lady Enid and the weeping Mrs. Fancy, he was confronted by a most pathetic tableau. The Prophet and Mrs. Merillia were weeping in each other's arm's while Sir Tiglath and Gustavus−−just returned to consciousness−−were engaged in examining the proceeding with puppy dog's eyes.

Over the explanations that ensued a veil may be partially drawn. One lifted corner, however, allows us to note that Sir Tiglath Butt, having come upon Madame hidden behind a bin of old port in the Prophet's cellar, had been seized by a desire not to alarm a lady so profound that it prompted him to hurry to the butler's pantry, and to seek concealment in the very cupboard which already contained Malkiel the Second. On perceiving that gentleman perched upon the loving−cup, and protected by candlesticks, sugar basins, teapots and other weapons, the astronomer's anxiety to become a murderer apparently forsook him. At any rate, he passed through the plate−glass of the window rather hastily into the area, where, as we know, he received the solicitous attentions of the policeman who had served as an intermediary between the Lord Chancellor's second cook−−whose supper of dressed crab had caused so much confusion−−and the supposed Mr. Ferdinand. Malkiel the Second, finding himself discovered, took to the open just as Madame fled forth from the cellar, to be overtaken by the very natural misconception that she was about to become the victim of a husband whose jealousy had at length caused him to assume his /toga virilibus/.

Perhaps it was Sir Tiglath's throwing off of the said garment which caused Lady Enid to throw him over. At any rate, she eventually married Mr. Robert Green and made him a very sensible wife.

The Malkiels returned to the Mouse, where they still live, and still carry on a certain amount of intercourse with architects and their wives. From time to time, however, they attend the receptions at Zoological House, and a rumour recently ran through the circles of the silly to the effect that they had been looking at a house not far from the Earls Court Station, with a view−−it is surmised−−of removing to more central districts.

They are no longer on terms with the Prophet.

He has retired from business and put down his telescope once and for all, recognising that prophecy is a dangerous employment, and one likely to bring about the very evils it foreshadows. Calmly he dwells with his beloved grandmother in the Berkeley Square, which has received them once more into its former favour. Sometimes, at night, when the sky is clear, and the bright stars, the guardian stars, keep watch over his aristocratic neighbourhood, he draws aside the curtain from the drawing−room window and glances forth at Mercury and Uranus, Jupiter, Saturn and Venus. And when his eyes meet their twinkling eyes, he exchanges with them−−not a question and answer, not a demand for unholy information and a reluctant reply, but a serene, gentlemanly and perfectly decorous good−night.