

***ARTHUR
STRINGER***



***THE CITY
OF PERIL***

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CHAPTER I—THE TIME CHOPPER

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I stood with my hand on the bronze car-rail, staring up at Natalie Stillwell. She, in turn, stared down at me. I was only too acutely conscious of those calmly judicial eyes, of that mild look of appraisal which was all the more penetrating for being impersonal.

By the very poise of the white chin, I knew that I was being weighed in the balance. If a silence fell between us, it was at least an eloquent silence.

As she leaned above me there, alone on the car platform, immured in her own thoughts, some creeping spirit of isolation seemed to surround her, as though she stood looking down at me from the last lonely promontory of a receding world. I would miss her. And she in turn would miss me. We did not even need to articulate that decision. Our ever paralleling planes of life had bestowed on us what I can only describe as a hyperaesthesia of silence. Just as a violinist's trained ear, I suppose, can detect quarter tones and sixteenths, so Natalie and I could catch the subtler vibrations of each other's moods. There was something both compelling and comfortable in that sense of silent companionship. We were of the same world. We had the same habits and the same outlook on life. We had many things in common, as men and women already married are said to have.

And some day, I had always felt, Natalie and I would be husband and wife. How or where or when it was ordained, neither of us seemed to comprehend. But I think we each

accepted it, tacitly, no more stopping to question it, in our secret souls, than we stopped to question death. Yet it was a rule of the game that she should elude, and that I should pursue. We were compelled to dramatize contingencies which did not actually exist, to the end that a decent interest in life might be preserved, very much as chicken-feed is tossed into a straw-bed to keep fowls from going flabby.

There were moments, however, when we both rebelled against what seemed a conspiracy of environment. There were times when she distrusted me, just as there were moods when I questioned if she, with all her beauty, could forever stand between me and those adventuring seas which are eternally enticing to the eternally idle. And she was beautiful; of that there was no doubt. She was consciously and calmly beautiful. She possessed that languorous and ivory-toned loveliness which so often made me feel that she should have been painted by Monticelli, strolling through the dappled light and shade of a lovely park. If she seemed quiescent, it was at least the quiescence into which the imaginative mind could read the attributes it sought. To the thoughtful, she would always be full of thought. To the emotional, she would always seem a deep well of emotion. To the spiritual, she would always possess a soft aura of spirit.

"You have no wants, Rebbie," I suddenly remembered that she had once said to me, "and therefore you have no incentives." For as I looked at the coldly judicial eyes which even her answering smile did not soften, I saw that the thought of separation from her was touching our

relationship with a new poignancy. She, too, must have known some vague shadow of that feeling. I "sensed" it in her general attitude. The moment demanded something of me which I had failed to contribute. The blight of the Laodiceans was on us both. Yet it was easy, as I looked up at the soft chin above the white furs, to give what was expected of me. I extemporized a Romeo-like dolour and tried to take her hand through the bronze grating.

"For the nineteenth time, Natalie, will you--"

She cut me short, with a laugh that was not without its wistfulness. I have often enough been compelled to think of her as a sort of replacing switch, to keep my erratic ponderosities on the rails of reasonableness.

"For the nineteenth time, dear Rebbie, I will not. And I'm afraid you're in the way of the men who want to ice the car."

"Then this is final?" I demanded, as I stepped aside to let the ice-truck swing past.

Natalie laughed at the gloom in my voice. The wrinkled-nosed, hairy-eared and altogether ugly little King Charles under her arm showed his teeth at me, resentfully, as though he, too, had an inkling of the situation. I could have wrung his peevish little neck for him.

"Then this is final?" I repeated, quite as tragically as before. Women, as a rule, are strangely like ruffed grouse; when too closely pressed they invariably fly in a corkscrew line. So once again I repeated my lugubrious question.

Natalie remarked that I was as reiterative as the Bellman himself. Her little hand-grenades of humour, in some way, usually seemed able to quench my hottest fires of affection.

"Is anything ever final, Rebbie, in this world?" she demanded, growing quite serious again.

"Everything, but my love for you," I solemnly averred. Whereupon the King Charles once more showed his teeth at me. "I'm like the old Roman that Seneca spoke about," I had the audacity to continue, "who was drunk only once in his life."

"But it lasted forever, didn't it?"

"Yes, and that's what my devotion to you is--a lifework!"

Natalie emitted a scornful little laugh. Yet some ghost of a tremor in her voice, as she first put her question to me, made my spirits rise a bit. I dare say that was why I was bold enough to essay a second effort to take her white-gloved hand in mine. But Natalie out-manœuvred me by interposing the King Charles and stepping to the farther side of the bronze-railed car platform. Our friendship, she had once said, was brazen, with a silver-plating of politeness to keep the tarnish off.

"But why won't you?" I persisted, as I saw her deep and studious eyes once more looking down at me from the car-steps. They were very beautiful eyes. I had heard foolish women describe them as being exactly like turquoise velvet. Some studio-rat of a minor poet with a Gallicized name had once called them "pansy gold." But to me they were the softest violet, which deepened at times into the purest sapphire.

"You are a nice boy, Rebbie, and there are times when I almost like you," Natalie was saying in the most calm and cordial of tones.

"Boy?" I repeated, in disgust.

"Yes. I know you are thirty-one, but you're still a good deal of a boy," continued Natalie, with the dispassionate candour with which she might size up a third-rater of a hackney at the Garden. "I even like you very much, at times. But you see, Rebbie, you have never learned to take life seriously. You've only played and toyed with things." She paused for a moment and sighed. "And I have always imagined that it would be safer to be the avocation of a busy life than the vocation of an idle one."

She stood as calm and austere as a marble statue, sizing me up with her shadowy, sapphire-coloured eyes, in which I could see just the faintest touch of troubled thought. Somewhere about the softly curving lips, however, I could detect the familiar smile of scorn. Because a whip has been tied with baby-ribbon is no reason for assuming that it cannot sting. She hurt me, and hurt me a lot--yet no one could or would be so foolish as to lose his temper with Natalie Ethelwyn Stillwell.

"Hasn't my devotion to you been a lifework?" I inquired.

"The trouble with you, Rebbie," went on the placid and implacable goddess of the car-steps, quite ignoring my question, "the trouble with you is that you're not a good American. You should have been a Valencian grandee with a moth-eaten title and a mortgaged sherry-farm. Then you could thrum guitars and idle about the four quarters of the globe to your heart's content."

"I'd thrum anything, if you were the audience," I persisted.

"Precisely," argued Natalie, "you'd make a plaything out of affection itself. You'd even toy with love, the most sacred

thing in the world, until you grew tired of it as you grow tired of everything."

"Marry me, and I'll grow serious."

"You're serious enough now, Rebbie, only it's always about the wrong things."

"Then marry me and make it the right thing."

"Wouldn't that be terribly like buying violets for the sword-knots, or Chianti for the bottles? You see, I've never denied that you weren't ornamental."

"I handled the *Attila* for the Kaiserlicker Cup," I retorted with a pardonable enough touch of pride.

"Which was merely another plaything! Of course I know you shoot and sail and ride well. And I know you're going to tell me about the Temagami moose, and those two Arab stallions you brought over from Suakim, and the Inter-Urban tennis trophy--"

"And the challenge cup for the Sewanhaka Corinthian fifteen-footers," I gently interpolated.

"Yes, and the same old seven-foot tarpon you brought to gaff off Boca Grande, and the Florida motor-driving and all the other playthings you take up and get tired of. No, please don't interrupt me, Rebbie. I know that you're going to say that you've always been studying life, whatever happened."

"Slander away!" I mocked, resignedly.

"But you see, Rebbie, you've made even that a sort of luxury. You've stood away from it and looked at it just as you'd look at a picture in a shadow-box."

It was plain that I was not getting on very well.

"Then hadn't I better go down to Wall Street and do stenography, say, for your father's firm?" I suggested. The

interrogation was meant to be doubly barbed, but Natalie took it without wincing. She herself had once tried toying with the interests of her father's office, and at the end of a month had given it up as beyond her.

"No," she said meditatively, "I shouldn't care to see you working like father. That's only the other extreme. Work carried to the point of obsession can be as bad as no work at all."

It was the person addressing me, I remembered, who had once implored me not to work so hard over the experiments with a new giant-powder for my Aguacate copper-mines. But such is the inconsistency of woman. I could also recall the time when I had played engineer for a season or two in those same Aguacate mines. After electrifying the lower galleries in a new-fangled way of my own I had come north with tunnel-fever. It was Natalie who had forbidden me to return to Costa Rica, although the mines were going to the dogs and every operating engineer south of Guatemala was stealing my electrical ideas. No, Natalie was not always consistent.

For here was the Stillwell private car side-tracked in the Pennsylvania yards, sandwiched in between a string of Lehigh Valley day-coaches and a South Bethlehem milk-train; here was this abode of indolence on wheels, heaped with Jacques roses and winter violets, waiting to be stocked and iced and manned for its migration to Palm Beach and Miami. In half an hour it would be gone, humming and drumming on its way southward, and with it would go the only woman I had ever been able to love.

"The only woman I could ever love." I repeated the phrase, thus modified, to myself, and then aloud to Natalie, as she stood looking down at me with her troubled sapphire eyes--for when once the choice of a man's life has been decided, the more inextricably that choice can be identified with destiny, the better for his peace of mind.

The unresponsive Natalie gazed out across the yards to where a train-load of Jersey City commuters twined and curled out from under the great glass-roofed vault of the terminal station like a snake creeping out of a cave. A yard-engine pulsed and jolted across the serried lines of track that stood as close and straight, to the eye, as the strings of a grand piano. A high-shouldered engineer, wielding a long-pointed oil can, swung down from the steps of his cab. I could see Natalie's eyes rest on him as he stood there, huge, titanic, stained with grease. Then her gaze came back to me, and once more I could detect that unconscious curl of the lips as she studied my hand-laundried linen and the high lights on my patent-leathers. I knew quite well what she was thinking.

"Then supposing I do turn stevedore or scow-trimmer or white-wings or steel-puddler," I suggested.

Natalie sighed.

"There it is again, you see! You can never be serious, Rebbie."

"Try me!"

"How?"

"I mean, marry me and see."

"That might be too much like burning the house to roast the pig!" replied the aphoristic Natalie. She turned away for

a moment to thrust her restive King Charles into the coach-door. The yard-engine was backing down for the Stillwell car. There was not much time left for me.

"Just what is it you want me to do?" I asked her, more seriously, as she once more gazed down at me out of her abstracted eyes.

"I only want you to be worthy of yourself--I mean worthy of the chances that you have been given," she replied with a tremor of reproof in a disturbingly earnest voice.

"But I wish you'd show me where these chances are," I protested, wondering if after all I was unable to see the forest of duty because of the trees of opportunity.

"There are always people to help," answered the girl, quite simply.

I always loved Natalie in her solemn moments. She was so admirably self-contradictory. Here she was fluttering off to Florida for a month of palm-strewn ease, yet enlarging on the altruistic life as she went. Some new turn of her spirits was always surprising you. But as Natalie herself had once said: "When you eat game you have to be ready to bite on bird-shot!"

"You are the only person I have ever hungered to help," was my response.

"'Purty squaw--gimme ten cents!'" said Natalie. The point to this cryptic exclamation rested on a Western trip we had made three summers before. A red-skin Chesterfield not above begging from passing tourists, had thus diplomatically accosted Natalie at my side. The insinuation was that I was doling out "squaw-talk." But again I saw that

more serious look of troubled thought return to Natalie's face as she came a step or two closer to me.

"I wonder if you mean that about wanting to help me?" she asked, studying me as Hamlet must have sometimes studied his inadequate Ophelia.

"Put me to the test," I answered with alacrity.

For once she had taken me seriously. She was fumbling in the gold-initialed morocco bag that had swung over her white-gloved wrist.

"It's too foolish to be called a test," she said. "It's so utterly trivial. Yet it has been worrying me for over a week, now."

She drew a worn and closely folded slip of paper from her bag. This she opened and thoughtfully regarded before she surrendered it to my hand.

"Well?" I asked at last. I noticed her embarrassment, although she did not answer me directly as she handed the paper to me. "Am I to read it?"

"Yes, you must read it," she answered. "It's one of those letters that sometimes come to all men of affairs, I suppose. But, for some absurd reason, it keeps making me more and more uneasy."

I glanced down at the slip of paper. It contained nothing more than two typewritten lines. "Why, uneasy?" I asked.

"Because it came in father's mail. It came that last week I was trying to do secretarial work for him. It came to me first, of course, and it sounded so foolish that I didn't even worry him about it. He has so much on his mind, as it is."

I read the two typewritten lines carefully. They were to this effect:

"Cease assailing United States Rubber or a greater blow than the loss of a fortune will fall on you!

"THE HAMMER OF GOD."

There was no date-line, no salutation, no signature. I read the puzzling message again, quite in the dark.

"Where is the envelope?" I asked.

"I didn't save it," Natalie explained. "It didn't seem important."

"Can you remember anything about it."

"Yes, I made a point of looking it over carefully. I can remember that it was a plain envelope--addressed of course to father, in typewriting, and that it had the cancellation stamp of carrier station "B" on it. I remember that, distinctly, because I thought it might give me an inkling of where the letter came from."

"That at least is something. It is true, then, that your father has been pounding United States Rubber a bit?"

"I went to the trouble to find out that he has been identified with the bear movement in rubber for two or three months past. A foolish threat like this, of course, would never influence him. But I keep wondering what it can possibly mean."

"I wish I had that envelope."

"It meant nothing, or I should have saved it," explained Natalie.

"The thing seems to be what you call a crank letter. But since you say I'm not to die of dry-rot, and--"

"Rebbie!" cried the girl.

"--And I've got to have something to shake it off, why, I'm going to keep this slip of paper and try to find out where it

comes from. I intend to make sure of what it means, just to set your mind at rest."

"But how can you?"

"It may not be easy, of course, but I'll stick at it even though it takes me a week of Sundays and leads me to the purlieu of the longest-whiskered Bolshevik or the youngest parlour-socialist in all Manhattan! And besides, 'what's time to a shoat?'--as your father's North Carolina mountaineer said."

"I can't have you putting yourself in danger!" cried the girl on the car-steps, ignoring my tone of mockery.

"I'd go through hell itself for you," I said quite soberly, as I looked up into her glorious eyes.

"Oh, Rebbie," she cried. What she meant by that exclamation heaven only knows; Natalie, herself had no chance to explain. For even as she uttered it there came a muffled jolt and a grind and whine of brakes that carried the glory of her brooding face slowly away from me. The yard-engine had backed into the bumpers of the Stillwell private car. My time was up. But I still clung to the step-rail.

"Aren't you sorry?" asked the inconsequential Natalie, as the car gained speed.

"Will you marry me?" I reiterated as the moving car dragged me implacably along over a path of oil and iron and coal-clinkers.

She did not answer in words, but her eyes dwelt on mine during that last moment or two. I could see the familiar violet of the iris deepen into that softest sapphire which foolish women had said was so like turquoise velvet. The imperiously curved lips themselves seemed to undergo no

change; they knew no relaxing. The judicial poise of the head was as uncompromising as ever. But surely those half-mournful and half-mysterious eyes said that some day she might learn to forgive a few of my transgressions; surely they seemed to imply that I was not so base and ignoble and worthless as the gently scornful and uncapitulating lips implied. I caught her hand as the car swung forward.

"Wait and you'll see!" I cried with a sudden fierce determination.

"What does that mean?" she asked, trying to free her hand.

"It means that I'm going to work--to work for you!"

"Good-bye!" she said as the car swung out on its track.

"Good-bye!" I answered while the yard-engine, with open throttle, carried the only woman I ever loved down the line of harp-string tracks, to swing the low-bellied car against the rear of the Washington Limited. I saw the flutter of her white-gloved hand across the drifting billow of steam from the engine. It seemed almost as though she had thrown a kiss to me. Then the clangour of bell and steam passed away behind a signal-tower.

CHAPTER II—A MATTER OF WATER-MARKS

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When I reached those bachelor apartments almost across the Avenue from Brentano's, where I reconciled a life of loneliness with the inadequate consolation of clubdom, I found Davis packing my bags. To call Davis merely my "man" would be both to make use of a misnomer and to leave the gentleman in question altogether undefined. For Davis seems to operate with all the unerring punctuality, regularity, and passivity, of a piece of cap-oiled, ball-bearing machinery.

"We'll not go down to Lakewood this afternoon, Davis," I told him. He did not even raise an eyebrow.

"Very good, sir," said Davis, starting as methodically to unpack the bag as he had been methodically filling it.

"And I'd like you to phone the Country Club and say I'm out of the drag-hound run this week. And get Hill of the Racquet and Tennis on the wire and ask him to make the committee-meeting Monday week."

"Yes, sir," responded the ever-dependable Davis.

I began to realize the extent of the problem I was facing. I was not a story-book sleuth. I saw no hope, by those processes of superhuman deductive reasoning peculiar to the human bloodhound of hearsay, of ever building up one of those thrilling and compelling cases which eventually piece together with the mathematical precision of the last cards in a successful solitaire layout. I felt that I would scarcely prove to be one of those miracle-working

detectives who comprehend and master a case from some amazingly trivial clue, such as a missing vest-button or a scratch on a watch-case.

Once, indeed, I had somewhat blindly prided myself on the possibilities of the microscopic clue in the ferreting out of crime. It was on the occasion when practically all my ship's plate was carted off the *Attila*. I had seized on my clue, worked out my case and scudded across the Atlantic on a wild-goose chase after a Scotch steward, whom I enmeshed in a web of circumstantial evidence, practically found guilty, and was on the point of arresting in Glasgow, when a cable overtook me saying my plate had been recovered and the real culprit caught in Hoboken.

In the present case I felt puzzled and helpless; I admitted as much to myself. But I did not feel hopeless. My knowledge of the usual procedure, under such circumstances, was woefully limited. My old-time friend, Lieutenant Belton of the Tenderloin force, had often enough taken me along on his underground excursions. On many occasions, too, "Lefty" Boyle, the Chatham Square stool-pigeon, had smoked my Havanas and shown me a little of the wonders of midnight life as seen through the eyes of a plain-clothes man. But there my experience of the undergroove came to an end. The game, I confess, had its allurements. But I had to confess also that I was new at that game.

My first move was a visit to carrier-station "B". This office I found on the southeast corner of Grand and Attorney Streets. To the south lay Division Street and East Broadway,

and on every hand stretched that crowded and mysterious lower East Side where, I knew, more drama was enacted in an hour than in all the Rialto playhouses in a season.

My inquiries at the office, as I feared, resulted in nothing enlightening, beyond the discovery that in Manhattan and the Bronx alone the city employed over two thousand letter carriers, and that each one of these handled weekly thousands of letters of which no record was kept. A typewritten letter delivered at a down-town business office was as destitute of individuality, to the postal authorities, as a grain of sand on a Jersey coast sea-dune.

My next move was to order out my car and hurry down to the head of a typewriting agency whom I chanced to know. This superintendent, who was a member of the Carrelian Club, gave my two brief lines scarcely more than a glance before he declared the type to be that of an "Underland." Twenty minutes later I was at the "Underland" head office. The acting manager of the company, as I entered, was about to leave for an up-town luncheon at the Biltmore Hotel. I offered to run him up in the car and he gladly accepted. He was a quick-witted, prematurely bald, shrewd-eyed man between thirty-five and forty.

"These two lines, I've been told, were written on one of your machines," I explained as I handed him my slip of paper. "And I'm rather anxious to find out where that machine is."

I slowed down while he studied the words for several minutes in silence.

"Then you've got an uncommonly hard job ahead of you," was his brief and somewhat discouraging reply. He handed

the slip back, then turned and looked at me somewhat curiously.

"Merely a crank letter, I suppose," he ventured.

"I hope it's nothing more," was my answer as I swung out of the noise of Broadway into Madison Square west and on up Fourth Avenue. "I firmly believe it's nothing more, but it's my duty to make sure."

"I'm sorry I can't help you out," he answered, politely enough. "But, you see, we have a good many thousand of these machines in operation in this city at this very moment."

"Then you would say there is no individuality of touch, no character of type, or make of ink, to distinguish it from any other?" I asked.

He took the slip from me and once more studied the somewhat worn and dimmed lines of writing.

"It seems the touch of a normal operator. There's nothing amateurish in the key-impressions. I mean by that, it hasn't been picked out by a novice, letter by letter."

"That is something," I acknowledged.

"I may also say that this machine must have gone out from our works at least three years ago. It's that long since we gave up using this particular make of type-die. The ink, of course, is that of the ordinary commercial ribbon."

I took the paper from him again as I swung into Forty-third Street and drew up at the carriage-entrance of the Biltmore. I still held the well-thumbed sheet in my hand when a new thought occurred to me. I raised the paper and held it up against the sunlight. I could discern a barely

distinguishable water-mark. It was that, apparently, of a broad cross on an almost square escutcheon or shield, like that which you will see at the center of so many national coats-of-arms. Above the shield I made out a helmet with open visor, surmounted by a crown. The mark, I knew was distinctively Italian; it was almost a rough duplicate of the coat-of-arms of Italy.

The discovery was a small one, but it was at least a discovery. It took me back to college times and the days of my Shakespearean research work in the Bodleian, when I had shown from the water-marks in two supposedly rare volumes that they were only Shakespearean reprints. And there are people who argue against the advantages of higher education!

I took my leave of the manager with a somewhat lighter heart. The letter, then, was supposititiously written by an Italian, and by an Italian of the East Side. But the East Side covered a great deal of ground. And it was very crowded ground, I remembered to my growing dismay; for its population included over two hundred thousand Italians.

CHAPTER III—THE SCENE IN THE OFFICE

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My next move was a visit to the Wall Street offices of Stillwell, Hundley & Fysh. The senior member of that important firm, let me hasten at once to explain, had even further claims to distinction in being the father of Miss Natalie Ethelwyn Stillwell. I remembered that during such unsettled times in the business world he would most likely be on the floor of the Stock Exchange in person, for Marvin Stillwell was strong-minded and old-fashioned enough to defy the *fin-de-siècle* tradition that all such trading should be left to the younger and nimbler minions of the business world.

So I timed my visit accordingly, and found myself one of several waiting for the aged financier when he stepped into his office, with a gardenia still in his button-hole. He was a very spick-and-span old gentleman, but I could not fail to notice that tell-tale greyness and finely pebbled pallor which told of overcrowded days and over-strained nerves. He caught my eye at once and made a half-humorous sign for me to be patient until he had dispatched the mob.

He was one of the fighting financiers of the old school, both proud and conscious of his power in the business world, and yet equally conscious of his obligations to that silent and somewhat neglected Goddess called Honour. More in keeping with the newer century and school, however, seemed his insatiable passion for work. He still was, despite his years, one of the sprightliest and most aggressive members of the Exchange. His "bear"

movements against Missouri Pacific during the past few weeks had been the subject of much talk and editorial comment. His activities in United States Rubber, apparently, had been almost as marked. So there I was, I thought, just a tinge of banter, a touch of the busy man's condescension for the idler, in his tones as he accosted me.

"Why, Woodruff, is it you--and south of the dead line?"

I assured him that it was.

"But the *Herald* had you at the Lakewood meet this week."

Then I noticed that he glanced down at his watch.

"May I have five minutes of your time?" I asked in a spirit of fit and proper meekness.

"Three times that much, if you like," he answered as he began signing a pile of typewritten letters which a secretarial youth, with eye-glasses and a narrow white forehead, had left on the desk before him.

"Have you any idea who wrote this?" I asked, as I handed him my two short lines of typewriting.

He took the well-worn sheet in his hand, read it, and then dropped both the paper and the tone of condescending impersonality with which he had greeted me.

"For the love of God!" he gasped. "Are you getting these things too?"

"I have this one, as you see," I replied.

He gazed at me over his *pince-nez* for a silent moment or two, then swung about and opened a drawer in his rosewood desk. From this drawer he took out three letters. These he removed from their envelopes and handed to me without a word. I felt it my duty not to seem too interested.

"Where do these things come from?" I casually inquired.

"That's what I want to know."

"Before I read these--" I interposed. "Your time is limited, is it not?"

"I should be at the Republican Club at four," he answered, with another glance at his watch and a still longer glance at the sheet I had first given him.

I read the letters he had taken from his desk-drawer. Each was typewritten: the type was, so far as I could tell, the same as that in the letter which his daughter Natalie had intercepted. And I knew, as soon as I read the first message, that her effort at guardianship had been for nothing. She had not been altogether successful as a shock-absorber, for the words before me read:

"When the Hammer of God once strikes, it obliterates! You were given one week to make amends! Unless this is done, both you and your kind will be no more!"

"That came in my morning's mail today," explained the financier.

I read the next message.

"That came a week ago," interposed Marvin Stillwell.

"You are robbing the poor to enrich those already over-cursed with wealth. You are closing the rubber plantations of Colombia and taking the bread out of the mouth of a starving countryside. You are grinding a people under a heel of gold. Unless the heel is lifted the end of the path is before you!"

"THE HAMMER OF GOD."

The third note was a duplicate of the one that had already come into my hands.

"This is rather--well, interesting," I said as I handed the three sheets back to Marvin Stillwell.

"Yes, rather," he answered--indifferently, as I thought.

"Then this sort of thing doesn't disturb you?" I asked.

"It might, if I had nothing to do; but I haven't time to give matters like this much thought, you know." He looked over at me leniently. I had a strong suspicion that at that precise moment he was sharing in Natalie's estimate of my shortcomings.

"About four years ago a sort of anarchistic Black Hand rascal called MacGirr sent me a specimen of the real article," he explained, a little impatiently. "It might have been very romantic. But this isn't Sicily, and I soon put a stop to the romance. I got in touch with the district attorney's office and had him sent up for six years."

Here was a new turn to affairs.

"And this man MacGirr is still in State's prison?" I asked.

"He is."

"And you have no knowledge whatever of the person who is favouring us with these vague yet gently persuasive epistles?"

"Not a jot. Nor can I quite understand in what way hammers are associated with the activities of the Deity!"

"You have been pounding United States Rubber down for some time, I understand."

"My dear Woodruff," solemnly answered the august diplomat before me, "I never pound things down, as you put

it. It is not my vocation!"

"You have merely been legitimately active on the bear side of the market in connection with this particular stock, I take it?"

He snapped off his *pince-nez* and wheeled about on me.

"I am one of those who not only hold that Wall Street cannot always indulge in that missionary work peculiar to the Sunshine Society," he retorted, "but also that there are excellent reasons for assuming United States Rubber stock, common and preferred, to be inflated beyond its natural and reasonable figure."

"And so believing," I suggested, almost unwittingly affected by the tone of his oration, "you have merely attempted to readjust that figure."

"Precisely," was his answer. "There's no law, you know, compelling any one to entertain undeviatingly cheerful views."

"But I've sometimes noticed that there's a law penalizing those who are tardy in doing so," I added, ruefully recalling a certain dip of my own in a one-time promising "short" market.

The old gentleman's appreciative laughter was interrupted by the entrance of the secretarial youth with the narrow forehead. He handed Marvin Stillwell a card and a note, with a terse and quiet-toned word or two of explanation.

"Send him in, then, right away," said Marvin Stillwell, once more attacking the letter pile with his gold-banded pen.

"You'll excuse me, I know," he explained without looking up. "But this is the third time I have kept this young man waiting, and it's more a matter of courtesy than commerce."

Before I had time to answer, the office door swung open and a youth of about twenty-one entered. He was a seemingly mild-mannered and yet distinguished-looking boy, with a touch of the poet about him, dressed in black as he was, with a roll collar and a flowing black tie. His hair was dark and long, and brushed back from a high forehead across which ran querulous lines of thought. His delicate black eyebrows might have been arched and painted by a Japanese. Yet he seemed more of the Parisian artist type--or, rather, as a Parisian artist in mourning might look. There was something strangely melancholy and aloof about his pale, shy face, something rapt and unworldly in his deep-set eyes. His dome-shaped head, narrow at the base and wide at the crown, seemed like that of a lonely bloodhound in its moments of most pensive repose. I could see that he was a little surprised and discomfited by my presence in the office.

Marvin Stillwell looked from the young man to the note which lay open before him.

"You come from the Italian consulate?" he asked.

"I do," replied the youth.

"I'm always glad to do anything for my friend Nicchia over there."

"Thank you."

"And this won't cost me much, will it?" said the Wall Street man, jocularly, as he reached for one of his cards and adjusted his *pince-nez*.

"No, it will not cost much," replied the youth, in his slow and deliberate tones. There was scarcely a trace of foreign accent in his speech. Yet I noticed that he did not smile at the other's well-intentioned sally.

"The visitors' gallery of the Exchange has been closed for repairs," continued Mr. Stillwell, as he handed the card that he had signed to the youth before him. "But it opened again sometime during this week. All you will have to do is to present this card."

"Thank you," said the youth, with his eyes still on the man.

"By the way, what is your--your vocation?"

"I have been a journalist," answered the visitor.

"In the city here?"

There was a pause.

"No, I come from Trieste, originally."

"Are you an Austrian, then?" asked the other in surprise.

"No, my parents were Italians in exile--Trieste is almost an Italian city."

"And since then you've--"

"I have lived in Spanish America. I was a *cronica*-writer on the Buenos Ayres *El Dairio* for two years."

"Buenos Ayres!" I said surprised. "Then you know Breccia of *La Prensa*?"

He hesitated.

"And little Cicui of *La Nacion*?" I asked.

"No," he answered shortly.

"That's odd," I murmured as I thought of the city of the Avenida Sarmiento and its four-rowed crush of carriages, of the Calle Florida strung with electric globes, of those

rustling, flashing, glittering, Paris-like Sunday *fêtes* of the Jockey Club Hippodrome.

"There are one hundred and eighty-nine newspapers printed in Buenos Ayres," replied the youth, with a Latin-like shrug of his narrow shoulders.

"But only one Brecchia," I contended.

"I know nothing of that," he retorted, shortly, with what seemed a flush of mingled anger and embarrassment. Yet his eyes were still turned in the direction of Marvin Stillwell's desk. My own glance happened to fall on the sheet of official note-paper that lay open on the polished rosewood. I could just make out the design embossed on the upper portion of this sheet. Something about the wide cross imposed on the escutcheon and surmounted by a crown, took me back at a leap to the business I had in hand. It brought to my mind the thought of the water-mark in the first "Hammer of God" letter. It suddenly suggested something which I scarcely dared to formulate.

My interest in that mild-mannered young man became unaccountably keen. I was on my feet the moment he had withdrawn.

"By the way, could you spare me one of those cards for the visitors' gallery?" I casually asked.

"Of course, if you find any amusement in us," said the man of business as he handed me the card.

I had no time to parry that muffled thrust. I had no time to explain my departure. I merely called back to the man with the *pince-nez*, as I started for the door, that after all I'd have to cut out the pleasure of running him up to the Republican Club. I had just time to see him look at me with