

***FRANK
L. PACKARD***

A person is silhouetted against a bright sunset sky, standing on a mountain peak with arms raised. The sky is filled with soft, glowing clouds in shades of orange, yellow, and pink. The overall scene is serene and inspiring.

***THE MIRACLE
MAN***

Frank L. Packard

The Miracle Man

A Thriller

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I. The "Roost"

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He was a misshapen thing, bulking a black blotch in the night at the entrance of the dark alleyway—like some lurking creature in its lair. He neither stood, nor kneeled, nor sat—no single word would describe his posture—he combined all three in a sort of repulsive, formless heap.

The Flopper moved. He came out from the alleyway onto the pavement, into the lurid lights of the Bowery, flopping along knee to toe on one leg, dragging the other leg behind him—and the leg he dragged was limp and wobbled from the knee. One hand sought the pavement to balance himself and aid in locomotion; the other arm, the right, was twisted out from his body in the shape of an inverted V, the palm of his hand, with half curled, contorted fingers, almost touching his chin, as his head sagged at a stiff, set angle into his right shoulder. Hair straggled from the brim of a nondescript felt hat into his eyes, and curled, dirty and unshorn, around his ears and the nape of his neck. His face was covered with a stubble of four days' growth, his body with rags—a coat; a shirt, the button long since gone at the neck; and trousers gaping in wide rents at the knees, and torn at the ankles where they flapped around miss-mated socks and shoes.

A hundred, two hundred people passed him in a block, the populace of the Bowery awakening into fullest life at midnight, men, women and children—the dregs of the city's scum—the aristocracy of upper Fifth Avenue, of Riverside Drive, aping Bohemianism, seeking the lure of the Turkey

Trot, transported from the Barbary Coast of San Francisco. Rich and poor, squalor and affluence, vice and near-vice surged by him, voicing their different interests with laughter and sobs and soft words and blasphemy, and, in a sort of mocking chorus, the composite effect rose and fell in pitiful, jangling discords.

Few gave him heed—and these few but a cursory, callous glance. The Flopper, on the inside of the sidewalk, in the shadow of the buildings, gave as little as he got, though his eyes were fastened sharply, now ahead, now, screwing around his body to look behind him, on the faces of the pedestrians as they passed; or, rather, he appeared to look through and beyond those in his immediate vicinity to the ones that followed in his rear from further down the street, or approached him from the next corner.

Suddenly the Flopper shrank into a doorway. From amidst the crowd behind, the yellow flare of a gasoline lamp, outhanging from a secondhand shop, glinted on brass buttons. An officer, leisurely accommodating his pace to his own monarchical pleasure, causing his hurrying fellow occupants of the pavement to break and circle around him, sauntered casually by. The Flopper's black eyes contracted with hate and a scowl settled on his face, as he watched the policeman pass; then, as the other was lost again in the crowd ahead, he once more resumed his progress down the block.

The Flopper crossed the intersecting street, his leg trailing a helpless, sinuous path on its not over-clean surface, and started along the next block. Halfway down was a garishly lighted establishment. When near this the Flopper began to hurry desperately, as from further along the street again his ear caught the peculiar raucous note of an automobile horn accompanied by the rumbling approach

of a heavy motor vehicle. He edged his way now, wriggling, squirming and dodging between the pedestrians, to the outer edge of the sidewalk, and stopped in front of the music hall.

A sight-seeing car, crammed to capacity, reaching its momentary Mecca, drew up at the curb; and the guide's voice rose over the screech of the brakes:

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, we will get out here for a little while. This is Black Ike's famous Auditorium, the scene of last week's sensational triple murder! Please remember that there is no charge for admission to patrons of the company. Just show your coupons, ladies and gentlemen, and walk right ahead."

The passengers began to pour from the long seats to the ground. The Flopper's hat was in his hand.

"Fer God's sake, gents an' ladies, don't pass me by," he cried piteously. "I could work once, but look at me now—I was run over by a fire truck. God bring pity to yer hearts—youse have money fer pleasure, spare something fer me."

The first man down from the seat halted and stared at the twisted, unsightly thing before him, and, with a little gasp, reached into his pocket and dropped a bill into the Flopper's hat.

"God bless you!" stammered the Flopper—and the tears sprang swimming to his eyes.

The first man passed on with a gruff, "Oh, all right," but he had left an example behind him that few of his fellow passengers ignored.

"T'ank you, mum," mumbled the Flopper, as the money dropped into his hat. "God reward you, sir.... Ah, miss, may you never know a tear.... 'Twas heaven brought you 'ere to-night, lady."

They passed, following the guide. The Flopper scooped the money into a pile in his hat, began to tuck it away in some recess of his shirt—when a hand was thrust suddenly under his nose.

"Come on, now, divvy!" snapped a voice in his ear.

It was the driver of the car, who had dropped from his seat to the ground. A gleam of hate replaced the tears in the Flopper's eyes.

"Go to hell!" he snarled through thin lips—and his hand closed automatically over the cap.

"Come on, now, I ain't got no time to fool!" prompted the man, with a leer. "I'm dead onto your lay, and there's a bull comin' along now—half or him, which?"

The Flopper's eyes caught the brass buttons of the officer returning on his beat, and his face was white with an inhuman passion, as, clutching a portion of what was left in the hat, he lifted his hand from the rest.

"Thanks!" grinned the chauffeur, snatching at the remainder. "'Tain't half, but it'll do"—and he hurried across the sidewalk, and disappeared inside a saloon.

Oaths, voicing a passion that rocked the Flopper to his soul, purred in a torrid stream from his lips, and for a moment made him forget the proximity of the brass buttons. He raised his fist, that still clenched some of the money, and shook it after the other—and his fist, uplifted in midair, was caught in a vicious grip—the harness bull was standing over him.

"Beat it!" rasped the officer roughly, "or I'll—hullo, what you got here? Open your hand!"—he gave a sharp twist as he spoke, the Flopper's fingers uncurled, and the money dropped into the policeman's other hand—held conveniently below the Flopper's.

"It's mine—gimme it back," whined the Flopper.

"Yours! Yours, is it!" growled the officer. "Where'd you get it? Stole it, eh? Go on, now, beat it—or I'll run you in! Beat it!"

With twitching fingers, the Flopper picked up his cap, placed it on his head and sidled away. Ten yards along, in the shadow of the buildings again, he looked back—the officer was still standing there, twirling his stick, one hand just emerging from his pocket. The Flopper's finger nails scratched along the stone pavement and curved into the palm of his hand until the skin under the knuckles was bloodless white, and his lips moved in ugly, whispered words—then, still whispering, he went on again.

Down the Bowery he went like a human toad, keeping in the shadows, keeping his eyes on the ground before him, a glint like a shudder in their depths—on he went with hopping, lurching jerks, with whispering lips. Street after street he passed, and then at a corner he turned and went East—not far, only to the side entrance of the saloon on the corner known, to those who *knew*, as the "Roost."

The door before which he stopped, on a level with the street, might readily have passed for the entrance to one of the adjoining tenements, for it was innocent to all appearances of any connection with the unlovely resort of which it was a part—and it was closed.

The Flopper rang no bell. After a quick glance around him to assure himself that he was not observed, he reached up for the doorknob, turned it, and with surprising agility hopped over the threshold and closed the door behind him.

A staircase, making one side of a narrow and dimly lighted hall, from down whose length came muffled sounds from the barroom, was before him; and this, without hesitation, the Flopper began to mount, his knee thumping from step to step, his dangling leg echoing the sound in a

peculiar; quick double thump. He reached the first landing, went along it, and started up the second flight—but now the thumping sound he made seemed accentuated intentionally, and upon his face there spread a grin of malicious humor.

He halted before the door opposite the head of the second flight of stairs, opened it, wriggled inside and shut it behind him.

"Hullo, Helena!" he snickered. "Pipe me comin'?"

The room was a fairly large one, gaudily appointed with cheap furnishings, one of the Roost's private parlors—a girl on a couch in the corner had raised herself on her elbow, and her dark eyes were fixed uncompromisingly upon the Flopper, but she made no answer.

The Flopper laughed—then a spasm seemed to run through him, a horrible boneless contortion of limbs and body, a slippery, twitching movement, a repulsive though almost inaudible clicking of rehabilitated joints—and the Flopper stood erect.

The girl was on her feet, her eyes flashing.

"Can that stunt!" she cried angrily. "You give me the shivers! Next time you throw your fit, you throw it before you come around me, or I'll make you wish you had—see?"

The Flopper was swinging legs and arms to restore a normal channel of circulation.

"Y'oughter get used to it," said he, with a grin. "Ain't Pale Face Harry come yet, an' where's the Doc?"

"Behind the axe under the table," said the girl tartly—and flung herself back on the couch.

"T'anks," said the Flopper. "Say, Helena, wot's de new lay de Doc has got up his sleeve?"

Helena made no answer.

"Is yer grouch painin' you so's yer tongue's hurt?" inquired the Flopper solicitously.

Still no answer.

"Well, go to the devil!" said the Flopper politely.

He resumed the swinging of his arms and legs, but stopped suddenly a moment later as a step, sounded outside in the hall and he turned expectantly.

A young man, thin, emaciated, with gaunt, hollow face, abnormally bright eyes and sallow skin, entered. He was well, but modestly, dressed; and he coughed a little now, as though the two flights' climb had overtaxed him—it was the man who had headed the subscription list to the Flopper half an hour before in front of Black Ike's Auditorium.

"Hello, Helena!" he greeted, nodding toward the couch. "I shook the rubber-neck bunch at Ike's, Flopper. That was a peach of a haul, eh, old pal—the boobs came to it as though they couldn't get enough."

A sudden and reminiscent scowl clouded the Flopper's face. He stepped to the table, reached his hand into his shirt, and flung down a single one-dollar bill and a few coins.

"Dere's de haul, Harry—help yerself"—his invitation was a snarl.

Pale Face Harry had followed to the table. He looked first at the money, then at the Flopper—and a tinge of red dyed his cheek. He coughed before he spoke.

"Y'ain't going to stall on *me*, Flopper, are you?" he demanded, in an ominous monotone.

"Stall!"—the word came away in a roar too genuine to leave any doubt of the Flopper's sincerity, or the turbulent state of the Flopper's soul. "Stall nothin'! De driver held me up fer some of it, an' de cop pinched de rest."

"And you the king of Floppers!" breathed Pale Face Harry sadly. "D'ye hear that, Helena? Come over here and listen.

Go ahead, Flopper, tell us about it."

Helena rose from the couch and came over to the table.

"Poor Flopper!" said she sweetly.

"Shut up!" snapped the Flopper savagely.

"Go on," prompted Pale Face Harry. "Go on, Flopper—tell us about it."

"I told you, ain't I?" growled the Flopper. "De driver called a divvy wid de cop comin', an I had ter shell—an' wot he left de cop pinched. Dat's all"—the Flopper's mouth was working again with the rage that burned within him.

Pale Face Harry, with pointed forefinger, gingerly and facetiously laid the coins out in a row on the table.

"And you the king of Floppers!" he murmured softly. "It's a wonder you didn't let the Salvation Army get the rest away from you on the way along!"

Helena laughed—but the Flopper didn't. He stepped close to Pale Face Harry, and shoved his face within an inch of the other's.

"You close yer jaw," he snarled, "or I'll make yer map look like wot's goin' ter happen ter dat cross-eyed snitch of a guy dat did me—him an' de harness bull, when I—" The Flopper stopped abruptly, and edged away from Pale Face Harry. "Hullo, Doc," he said meekly. "I didn't hear youse comin' in."

A man, fair-haired, broad-shouldered, immaculate in well-tailored tweeds, reliant in poise, leaned nonchalantly against the door—inside the room. He was young, not more than twenty-eight, with clean-shaven, pleasant, open face—a handsome face, marred only to the close observer by the wrinkles beginning to pucker around his eyes, and a slight, scarcely discernible puffiness in his skin—"Doc" Madison, gentleman crook and high-class, polished con-man, who had lifted his profession to an art, was still too young to be indelibly stamped with the hall-marks of dissipation.

His gray eyes travelled from one to another, lingered an instant on Helena, and came back to the Flopper.

"What's the trouble?" he demanded quietly.

It was Pale Face Harry who answered him.

"The Flopper's got it in for a couple of ginks that handed him one—a bull and a chauffeur on a gape-wagon," he grinned, punctuating his words with a cough. "The Flopper's got an idea the corpse-preserved's business is dull, and he's going to help 'em out with two orders and pay for the flowers himself."

Doc Madison shook his head and smiled a little grimly.

"Forget it, Flopper!" he said crisply. "I've something better for you to do. You fade away, disappear and lay low from this minute. I don't care what you do when you're resurrected, but from now on the three of you are dead and buried, and the police go into mourning for at least six months."

"What you got for us, Doc?—something nice?"—Helena pushed Pale Face Harry and the Flopper unceremoniously out of her line of vision as she spoke.

"Yes—the drinks. Cleggy's bringing them," Madison laughed—and opened the door, as the tinkle of glass and a shuffling footstep sounded without.

A man, big, hulking, thick-set and slouching, with shifty, cunning little black eyes and the face of a bruiser, his nose bent over and almost flattened down on one cheek, entered the room, carrying four glasses on a tin tray. He set down the tray, and, as he lifted the glasses from it and placed them on the table, he leered around at the little group.

"Gee!" he said, sucking in his breath. "De Doc, an' Helena, an' Pale Face, an' de Flopper! Gee, dis looks like de real t'ing—dis looks like biz."

"It does—fifty-cents' worth—ten for yourself," said Doc Madison suavely, flipping the coin into the tray. "Now, clear out!"

"Say"—Cleggy put his forefinger significantly to the side of his nose—"say, can't youse let a sport in on—"

"Clear out!" Doc Madison broke in quite as suavely as before—but there was a sudden glint of steel in the gray eyes as they held the bruiser's, and Cleggy, hastily picking up the tray, scuffled from the room.

Madison watched the door close, then he began to pace slowly up and down the room.

"Pull the chairs up to the table so we can take things comfortably," he directed.

"There ain't but two," grinned Pale Face Harry.

"Oh, well, never mind," said Madison.

"Slew the couch around and pull that up—Helena and I will sit on the head of it."

Still pacing up and down the length of the room, his hands in his pockets, Doc Madison watched the others as they carried out his directions; and then, suddenly, as he neared the door, his hand shot out, wrenched the door open, and, quick as a panther in its spring, he was in the hall without.

There was a yell, a scuffle, the rip and crash of rending bannisters, an instant's silence, then a heavy thud—and then Cleggy's voice from somewhere below in a choice and fervent flow of profanity.

Doc Madison re-entered the room, closed the door, dispassionately arranged a disordered cuff, brushed a few particles of dust from his sleeves and shoulder, and, this done, started toward the table—and stopped.

Helena had swung herself to the table edge, and, glass in hand, dangling her neatly shod little feet, was smoking a

cigarette, her brown hair with a glint of amber in it, her dark eyes veiled now by their heavy lashes; on the other side of the table Pale Face Harry coughed, as, with sleeve rolled back, he was intent on the hypodermic needle he was pushing into his arm; while the Flopper, his eyes with a dog-like admiration in them fixed on Madison, stood facing the door, a grotesque, unpleasant figure, unkempt, unshaven, furtive-faced, his rags hanging disreputably about him, his trousers with their frayed edges, now that he stood upright, reaching far above his boot tops and flagrantly exposing his wretched substitutes for socks.

Doc Madison reached thoughtfully into his pocket, brought out a silver cigarette case, and carefully selected a cigarette from amongst its fellows.

"Yes; Cleggy was right," he said softly, tapping the end of the cigarette on his thumb nail. "You're the real thing—the real, real thing."

II. A New Cult

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Doc Madison swung Helena lightly down from the table to the head of the couch, sat down beside her, one arm circling her waist, and motioned the Flopper to a chair—then he leaned forward and watched Pale Face Harry critically, as the latter carefully replaced the shining little hypodermic in its case.

"Harry," said he abruptly, jerking his free hand toward the hypodermic, "could you give up that dope-needle?"

"Sure, I could—if I wanted to!" asserted Pale Face Harry defiantly.

"That's good," said Madison cheerfully. "Because you'll have to."

"Eh?"—Pale Face Harry stared at Doc Madison in amazement.

"Because you'll have to—by and by," said Madison coolly. "And how about that cough—can you quit coughing?"

"When I'm dead—which won't be long," sniffed Pale Face Harry. "D'ye think I cough because I like it? How'm I going to quit coughing?"

"I don't know," admitted Doc Madison, frowning seriously. "I only know you'll have to."

Pale Face Harry, with jaw dropped, accentuating the gaunt leanness of his hollow-cheeked, emaciated face, gazed at Doc Madison with a curious mingling of incredulity and affront—and coughed.

"Say," he inquired grimly, "what's the answer?"

Doc Madison took his arm from Helena's waist, pulled a newspaper from his pocket, spread it out on the table—and his manner changed suddenly—enthusiasm was in his eyes, his voice, his face.

"I've steered you three through a few deals," said he impressively, "that have sized up big enough to keep you out of the raw vaudeville turn you, Harry, and you, Flopper, are so fond of, and that would have put Helena here on easy street, if you hadn't blown in all you got about ten minutes after you got your hands on it—but I've got one here that sizes up so big you wouldn't be able to spend the money fast enough to close out your bank account if you did your damndest! Get that? It's the greatest cinch that ever came down from the gateway of heaven—and that's where it came from—heaven. It couldn't have come from anywhere else—it's too good. And it's new, bran new—it's never had the string cut or the wrapper taken off. It's got anything that was ever run beaten by more laps than there are in the track, and it's got a purse tied on to the end of it that's the biggest ever offered since Adam. But you've got to work for it, and that's what I brought you here for to-night—to learn your little pieces so's you can say 'em nice and cute when you get up on the platform before the audience."

The Flopper's tongue made a greedy circuit of his upper and under lips, and he hitched his chair closer to the table.

A flush spread over Pale Face Harry's cheeks, and his eyes, abnormally bright, grew brighter.

"You're all right, Doc," he assured Doc Madison anxiously. "You're all right."

"U-uu-mm!" cooed Helena excitedly. "Go on, Doc—go on!"

"Listen," said Doc Madison, his voice lowered a little. "I found this tucked away as a filler in a corner of the

newspaper this evening. It's headed, 'A New Cult,' with an interrogation mark after it. Now listen, while I read it:"

A NEW CULT?

Needley, Maine, offers no attraction for aspiring young medical men. One who tried it recently, and who pulled down his shingle in disgust after a week, says competition is too strong, as the village is obsessed with the belief that they have a sort of faith-healer in their midst to whom is attributed cures of all descriptions stretching back for a generation or more. The healer, he adds, who rejoices in the name of the Patriarch and lives in solitude a mile or so from the village, is something of an anomaly in himself, being both deaf and dumb. We—

"But that's all that interests us," said Doc Madison, as he stopped reading abruptly and lifted his head to scrutinize his companions quizzically.

Pale Face Harry's eyes had lost their gleam and dulled—he gaped reproachfully at Doc Madison. Helena's small mouth drooped downward in a disappointed *moue*. Only the Flopper evidenced enthusiastic response.

"Sure!" he chortled. "Sure t'ing! I see. De old geezer'll have a pile of shekels hid away, an' he lives by his lonesome a mile from de town. We sneaks down dere, croaks de guy wid de queer monaker, an' beats it wid de shekels—sure!"

Doc Madison turned a sad gray eye on the Flopper.

"Flopper," said he pathetically, "your soul, like your bones, runs to rank realism. No; we don't 'croak de guy'—we cherish him, we nurse him, we fondle him. He's our one best bet, and we fold him to our breasts tenderly, and we protect him from all harm and danger and sudden death."

The Flopper blinked a little helplessly.

"Mabbe," said the Flopper, "I got de wrong dope. Some of dem words you read I ain't hip to. Wot's anymaly mean?"

"Anomaly?"—Doc Madison reached for his glass, tossed off the contents and set it down. "It means, Flopper, in this particular instance," he said gravely, "that there shouldn't be any interrogation point after the heading."

Again the Flopper blinked helplessly—and his fingers picked uncertainly at the stubble on his chin. The other two gazed disconsolately—and Helena a little pityingly as well—at Doc Madison.

Doc Madison flung out his arms suddenly.

"What's the matter with you all?" he demanded sarcastically. "You look as though your faces pained you! What's the matter with you? You're bright enough ordinarily, Helena, and, Harry, you're no dub—what's the matter with you? Can't you see it—can't you see it! Why, it's sticking out a mile—it's *waiting* for us! The whole plant's there and all we've got to do is get steam under the boilers. We'll have 'em coming for the cure from every State in the Union, and begging us to let them throw their diamond tiaras at us for a look-in at the shrine. Don't you see it—can't you get it—can't you *get* it!"

Helena bent suddenly over Doc Madison's shoulder, her eyes opening wide with dawning comprehension.

"The cure?" she breathed.

"Sure—the cure," said Doc Madison earnestly. "The new cult—that's us. Get the people talking, show 'em something, and you'll have to put up fences and 'keep off the grass' signs to stop the lame and the halt and the blind and the neurasthenics from crowding and suffocating to death for want of air. We'll start a shrine down there that'll be a

winner, and the railroads will be running excursion-rate pilgrimages inside of two months."

Pale Face Harry's chair creaked, as, like the Flopper, he now crowded it in toward the table.

"I get you!" said he feverishly. "I get you! I've read about them shrines—only you gotter have churches, and a carload of crutches, and that sort of thing laying around."

Doc Madison smiled pleasantly.

"Yes; you've got me, Harry—only we'll do the stage setting a little differently. Mostly what is required is—faith. Get them going on that, and everybody that's sick or near-sick in this great United States, that's got the swellest collection of boobs and millionaires on earth, will swarm thitherward like bees—there won't be any one left in the sanatoriums throughout the length of this broad land of freedom but the bell boys and the elevator men. Get them going, and all we've got to do is look out we don't let anything get by us in the crush—a snowball rolling down hill will size up like a plugged nickel alongside of a twenty-dollar gold piece when it gets to the bottom, compared with what we start rolling."

"I've got you, too," said Helena. "But I don't see where the faith is coming from, or how you're going to get them coming. You've got to show them—you said so yourself—even the boobs. How are you going to do that?"

"Well," said Doc Madison placidly, "we'll start the show with—a miracle. I haven't thought of anything more effective than that so far."

"A what?" inquired Pale Face Harry, with a grin.

"A miracle," repeated Doc Madison imperturbably. "A miracle—with the Flopper here in the star rôle. The Flopper goes down there all tied up in knots, the high priest, alias the deaf and dumb healer, alias the Patriarch, lays his

soothing hands upon him, the Flopper uncoils into something that looks like a human being—and the trumpets blow, the band plays, and the box office opens for receipts."

Helena slid from her seat, and, with hands on the edge of the table, advanced her piquant little face close to Doc Madison's, staring at him, breathing hard.

"Say that again," she gasped. "Say that again—say it just once more."

Pale Face Harry's hand, trembling visibly with emotion, was thrust out across the table.

"Put it there, Doc," he whispered hoarsely.

The Flopper, practical, earnestly so, lifted his right arm, wriggled it a little and began to twist it around, as though it were on a pivot at the elbow, preparatory to drawing it in, a crippled thing, toward his chin.

Doc Madison reached out hurriedly and stopped him.

"Here, that'll do, Flopper," he said quietly. "You don't need any rehearsal to hold your job—you're down for the number and your check's written out."

"Swipe me!" said the Flopper to the universe. "I can smell de pine woods of Maine in me nostrils now. When does I beat it, Doc—to-morrer?"

Doc Madison laughed.

"No, Flopper, not to-morrow—nor for several to-morrows—not till the bill-posters get through, and the stage is dark, and you can hear a pin drop in the house. I don't want you camping out and catching cold and missing any of the luxuries you're accustomed to, so I'll start along ahead in a day or so myself and see what kind of accommodations I can secure."

"Swipe me!" said the Flopper again. "An' to think of me wastin' me talent on rubber-neck fleets!"

A puzzled little frown puckered Helena's forehead.

"I was thinking about the deaf and dumb man," she said slowly. "How about him, when we pull this off—will he stand for it—and what'll he do?"

"Aw!" said Pale Face Harry impatiently. "He don't count! He'll have bats in his belfry anyway, and if he ain't he'll go off his chump for fair getting stuck on himself when he sees the stunt he'll think he's done. He'll be looking for the wings between his shoulder blades, and hunting for the halo around his head."

"Harry is waking up," observed Doc Madison affably. "That's about the idea, Helena. I haven't seen the Patriarch yet, but I don't imagine from his description that it'll be very hard to make him believe in himself. He doesn't stand for anything—we don't deal him any cards—he's just the kitty that circles around with the jackpots while we annex the chips."

Doc Madison reached into his vest pocket, took out a penknife whose handle was gold-chased, opened it, and very carefully cut the article he had read from the paper.

"Flopper," said he, "you've heard of gold bonds, haven't you?"

The Flopper's eyes gleamed an eloquent response.

"Only you've never had any, eh?" supplied Doc Madison.

"Where'd I get 'em?" inquired the Flopper, with some bitterness.

"Right here," smiled Doc Madison, handing him the clipping. "Here's a trainload and a bank vault full of them combined. Put it away, Flopper, and don't lose it. Lose anything you've got first—lose your life. It's worth a private car to you with a buffet full of fizz, and Sambo to wait on you for the rest of your life. Get that? Don't lose it!"

The Flopper tucked the clipping into the mysterious recess of his shirt.

"Say," he said earnestly, "if you say so, Doc, it'll be here when dey plant me."

"All right, Flopper," nodded Doc Madison. "And now let's get down to cases. I've been able to pay my club dues lately, and there's money enough on deck to buy the costumes and put the show on the road. I start for Needley as soon as I can get away. When I'm ready for the support, you three will hear from me—and in the meantime you lay low. Nothing doing—understand? You'll get all the lime-light you want before you're through, and it's just as well not to show up so familiar when they throw the spot on you that even the school kids will know the date of your birth, and the population will start in squabbling over the choice of reserved niches for you in the Hall of Fame. See?"

The Flopper, Pale Face Harry and Helena nodded their heads with one accord.

"Give us the whole lay, Doc," urged Pale Face Harry. "And give it to us quick."

"Me mouth's waterin'," observed the Flopper, licking his lips again.

Helena lighted another cigarette, and swung herself back to her perch on the head of the couch.

Doc Madison surveyed the three with mingled admiration and delight.

"The world is ours!" he murmured softly.

"Oh, hurry up and give us the rest of it," purred Helena. "We know we're an all-star cast, all right."

"Very good," said Doc Madison—and laughed. "Well then, the order of your stage cues will depend on circumstances and what turns up down there, but we'll start with the Flopper now. First of all, Flopper, you've got to have a name. What's your real name—what did they decorate you with at the baptismal font back in the dark ages?"

The Flopper scrubbed at his very dirty chin with a very dirty thumb and forefinger.

"I dunno," said the Flopper anxiously.

"Well, never mind," said Doc Madison reassuringly. "Maybe you are blessed above most people—you can pick one out for yourself. What'll it be?"

The Flopper's thumb and forefinger scratched desperately for a moment, then his face lighted with inspiration.

"Swipe me!" said he excitedly. "I got it—Jimmy de Squirm."

Doc Madison shook his head gravely.

"No, Flopper, I'm afraid not," he said gently. "That's another weak point in your interpretation of the rôle, that I'll come to in a minute. We'll give you an Irish name by way of charity—it'll help to make your classical English sound like brogue. We'll call you Coogan—Michael Coogan—that lets you off with plain Mike in times of stress."

"Swipe me!" said the Flopper, with perfect complacency.

"Glad it pleases you," smiled Doc Madison, "Here's your lay, then. You've got to remember that you were born crooked and—"

Helena giggled.

"I didn't mean it"—Doc Madison's gray eyes twinkled. "You are waking up, too, Helena. I mean, Flopper, you've got to remember that you were born twisted up into the same shape you are in when you hit Needley. You come from—let's see—we'll have to have a big city where the next door neighbors pass each other with a vacant stare. Ever been in Chicago?"

"Naw! Wot fer?" said the Flopper, with withering spontaneity. "Noo Yoik fer mine."