

MR. HAWKINS' HUMOROUS ADVENTURES

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[Illustration: "That's enough, Hawkins," I said, "come home."]

CHAPTER I.

Hawkins is part inventor and part idiot.

Hawkins has money, which generally mitigates idiocy; but in his case it also allows free rein to his inventive genius, and that is a bad thing.

When I decided to build a nice, quiet summer home in the Berkshires, I paid for the ground before discovering that the next villa belonged to Hawkins.

Had I known then what I know now, my country-seat would be located somewhere in central Illinois or western Oregon; but at that time my knowledge of Hawkins extended no farther than the facts that he resided a few doors below me in New York, and that we exchanged a kindly smile every morning on the L.

One day last August, having mastered the mechanism of our little steam runabout, my wife ventured out alone, to call upon Mrs. Hawkins.

I am not a worrying man, but automobile repairs are expensive, and when she had been gone an hour or so I strolled toward our neighbors.

The auto I was relieved to find standing before the door, apparently in good health, and I had already turned back when Hawkins came trotting along the drive from the stable.

"Just in time, Griggs, just in time!" he cried, exuberantly.

"In time for what?"

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"The first trial of—"

"Now, see here, Hawkins—" I began, preparing to flee, for I knew too well the meaning of that light in his eyes.

"The Hawkins Horse-brake!", he finished, triumphantly.

"Hawkins," I said, solemnly, "far be it from me to disparage your work; but I recall most distinctly the Hawkins Aero-motor, which moted you to the top of that maple tree and dropped you on my devoted head. I also have some recollection of your gasolene milker, the one that exploded and burned every hair off the starboard side of my best Alderney cow. If you are bent on trying something new, hold it off until I can get my poor wife out of harm's way."

Hawkins favored me with a stare that would have withered a row of hardy sunflowers and turned his eyes to the stable.

Something was being led toward us from that direction.

The foundation of the something I recognized as Hawkins' aged work horse, facetiously christened Maud S. The superstructure was the most remarkable collection of mechanism I ever saw.

Four tall steel rods stuck into the air at the four corners of the animal. They seemed to be connected in some way to a machine strapped to the back of the saddle.

I presume the machine was logical enough if you understood it, but beyond noting that it bore striking resemblance to the vital organs of a clock, I cannot attempt a description.

"That will do, Patrick," said Hawkins, taking the bridle and regarding his handiwork with an enraptured smile. "Well, Griggs, frankly, what do you think of it?"

"Frankly," I said, "when I look at that thing, I feel somehow incapable of thought."

"I rather imagined that it would take your eye," replied Hawkins, complacently. "Now, just see the simplicity of the thing, Griggs. Drop your childish prejudices for a minute and examine it.

"Let us suppose that this brake is fitted to a fiery saddle-horse. The rider has lost all control. In another minute, unless he can stop the beast, he will be dashed to the ground and kicked into pulp. What does he do? Simply pulls this lever—thus! The animal can't budge!"

An uncanny clankety-clankety-clank accompanied his words, and the rods dropped suddenly. In their descent they somehow managed to gather two

steel cuffs apiece.

When they ceased dropping, Maud S. had a steel bar down the back of each leg, with a cuff above and a cuff below the knee. Hawkins was quite right—so far as I could see; Maud was anchored until some well-disposed person brought a hack-saw and cut off her shackles.

”You see how it acts when she is standing still?” chuckled the inventor, replacing the rods. ”Just keep your eyes open and note the suddenness with which she stops running.”

”Hawkins,” I cried, despairingly, as he led the animal up the road, ”don’t go to all that trouble on my account. I can see perfectly that the thing is a success. Don’t try it again.”

”My dear Griggs,” said Hawkins, coldly, ”this trial trip is for my own personal satisfaction, not yours. To tell the truth, I had no idea that you or any one else would be here to witness my triumph.”

He went perhaps three or four hundred feet up the road; then he turned Maud’s nose homeward and clambered to her back.

As I waited behind the hedge, I grieved for the old mare. Hawkins evidently intended urging her into something more rapid than the walk she had used for so many years, and I feared that at her advanced age the excitement might prove injurious.

But Maud broke into such a sedate canter when Hawkins had thumped her ribs a few times with his heels, and her kindly old face seemed to wear such a gentle expression as she approached, that I breathed easier.

”Now, Griggs!” cried Hawkins, coming abreast. ”Watch—now!”

He thrust one hand behind, grasped the lever, and gave it a tug. The little rods remained in the air.

A puzzled expression flitted over Hawkins’ face, and as he cantered by he appeared to tug a trifle harder.

This time something happened.

I heard a whir like the echo of a sawmill, and saw several yards of steel spring shoot out of the inwards of the machine. I heard a sort of frantic shriek from Maud S. I saw a sudden cloud of pebbles and dust in the road, such as I should imagine would be kicked up by an exploding shell—and that was all.

Hawkins, Maud, and the infernal machine were making for the county town with none of the grace, but nearly all the speed, of a shooting star.

For a few seconds I stood dazed.

Then it occurred to me that Hawkins' wife would later wish to know what his dying words had been, and I went into the auto with a flying leap, sent it about in its own length, almost jumped the hedge, and thus started upon a race whose memory will haunt me when greater things have faded into the forgotten past.

My runabout, while hardly a racer, is supposed to have some pretty speedy machinery stored away in it, but the engine had a big undertaking in trying to overhaul that old mare.

It was painfully apparent that something—possibly righteous indignation at being the victim of one of Hawkins' experiments—had roused a latent devil within Maud S. Her heels were viciously threshing up the dirt at the foot of the hill before I began my blood-curdling coast at the top.

How under the sun anything could go faster than did that automobile is beyond my conception; yet when I reached the level ground again and breathed a little prayer of thanks that an all-wise Providence had spared my life on the hill, Hawkins seemed still to have the same lead.

That he was traveling like a hurricane was evidenced by the wake of fear-maddened chickens and barking dogs that were just recovering their senses when I came upon them.

I put my lever back to the last notch.

Heavens, how that auto went! It rocked from one side of the road to the other. It bounded over great stones and tried to veer into ditches, with the express purpose of hurling me to destruction.

It snorted and puffed and rattled and skidded; but above all, it went!

There is no use attempting a record of my impressions during that first half mile—in fact, I am not aware that I had any. But after a time I drew nearer to Hawkins, and at last came within thirty feet of the galloping Maud.

Hawkins' face was white and set, he bounced painfully up and down, risking his neck at every bounce, but one hand kept a death-like grip on the lever of the horse-brake.

"Jump!" I screamed. "Throw yourself off!"

Hawkins regarded me with much the expression the early Christians must have worn when conducted into the arena.

"No," he shouted. "It's"—bump—"it's all right. It'll"—bump—"work in a minute."

"No, it won't! Jump, for Heaven's sake, jump!"

I think that Hawkins had framed a reply, but just then a particularly hard bump appeared to knock the breath out of his body. He took a better grip on the bridle and said no more.

I hardly knew what to do. Every minute brought us nearer to the town, where traffic is rather heavy all day.

Up to now we had had a clear track, but in another five minutes a collision would be almost as inevitable as the sunset.

I endeavored to recall the "First Aid to the Injured" treatment for fractured skulls and broken backs, and I thanked goodness that there would be only one auto to complete the mangling of Hawkins' remains, should they drop into the road after the smash.

Would there? I glanced backward and gasped. Others had joined the pursuit, and I was merely the vanguard of a procession.

Twenty feet to the rear loomed the black muzzle of Enos Jackson's trotter, with Jackson in his little road-cart. Behind him, three bicyclists filled up the gap between the road-cart and Dr. Brotherton's buggy.

I felt a little better at seeing Brotherton there. He set my hired man's leg two years ago, and made a splendid job.

There was more of the cavalcade behind Brotherton, although the dust revealed only glimpses of it; but I had seen enough to realize that if Hawkins' brake did work, and Hawkins' mare stopped suddenly, there was going to be a piled-up mass of men and things in the road that for sheer mixed-up-edness would pale the average freight wreck.

Maud maintained her pace, and I did my best to keep up.

By this time I could see the reason for her mad flight. When the explosion, or whatever it was, took place in the brake machinery, a jagged piece of brass had been forced into her side, and there it remained, stabbing the poor old beast with conscientious regularity at every leap.

I was still trying to devise some way of pulling loose the goad and persuading Maud to slow down when we entered town.

At first the houses whizzed past at intervals of two or three seconds; but it seemed hardly half a minute before we came in sight of the square and the court house. We were creating quite an excitement, too.

People screamed frantically at us from porches and windows and the sidewalk.

Occasionally a man would spring into the road to stop Maud, think better of it, and spring out again.

One misguided individual hurled a fence-rail across the path. It didn't worry Maud in the slightest, for she happened to be all in the air while passing over that particular point, but when the auto went over the rail it nearly jarred out my teeth.

Another fellow pranced up, waving a many-looped rope over his head. I think Maud must have transfixed him with her fiery eye, for before he could throw it his nerve failed and he scuttled back to safety.

Those who had teams hitched in the square were hurrying them out of danger, and when we whirled by the court-house only one buggy remained in the road.

That buggy belonged to Burkett, the constable. The town pays Burkett a percentage on the amount of work he does, and Burkett is keen on looking up new business.

"Stop, there!" he shouted, as we came up. "Stop!"

Nobody stopped.

"Stop, or I'll arrest the whole danged lot of ye fer fast drivin'!" roared Burkett, gathering up reins and whip.

And with that he dashed into the place behind Enos Jackson and crowded the bicyclists to the side of the road.

Our county town is a small one, and at the pace set by Maud it didn't take us long to reach the far side and sweep out on the highway which leads, eventually, to Boston.

I began to wonder dimly whether Maud's wind and my water and gasolene would carry us to the Hub, and, if so, what would happen when we had passed through the city.

Just beyond Boston, you know, is the Atlantic Ocean.

At this point in my meditations we started down the slope to the big creamery.

The building is located to the right of the road. On the left, a rather steep grassy embankment drops perhaps thirty feet to the little river.

On this beautiful sunny afternoon, the creamery's milk cans, something like a hundred in number, were airing by the roadside, just on the edge of the embankment; and as we thundered down I smiled grimly to think of the attractive little frill Maud might add to her performance by kicking a dozen or two of the milk cans into the river as she passed.

Maud, however, as she approached the cans, kept fairly in the middle of the road—and stopped!

Heavens! She stopped so short that I gasped for breath. All in a twinkling the steel rods dropped into position beside her legs, the cuffs snapped, and the Hawkins Horse-brake had worked at last!

Poor old Maud! She slid a few yards with rigid limbs, squealing in terror, and then crashed to the ground like an overturned toy horse.

Hawkins shot off into space, and at the moment I didn't care greatly where he landed. I was vaguely conscious that he collided head-on with the row of milk-cans, but my main anxiety was to shut off my power, set the brake, point the auto into the ditch, and jump.

And I did it all in about one second.

After the jump, my recollection grows hazy. I know that one of my feet landed in an open milk-can, and that I grabbed wildly at several others. Then the cans and I toppled headlong over the embankment and went down, down, down, while, fainter and fainter, I could hear something like:

"Whoa! Whoa! Gol darn ye! Ow! Stop that hoss! Bang! Rattle! Rattle! Bang! Whoa! Stop, can't ye?"

Then a peculiarly unyielding milk-can landed on my head and I seemed to float away.

I have reason to believe that I sat up about two minutes later. The crash was over and peace had settled once more upon the face of nature.

From far away came the sound of galloping hoofs, belonging, no doubt, to some of the horses who had participated in the late excitement.

The embankment was strewn with men and milk-cans, chiefly the latter. No one seemed to be wholly dead, although one or two looked pretty near it.

A few feet away, Burkett, the constable, was having a convulsion in his vain endeavour to extricate his cranium from a milk-can. The sounds that issued from that can made me blush.

Jackson was sitting up and staring dully at the river, while Dr. Brotherton, with his frock-coat split to the collar, was fishing

fragments of his medicine case out of another can.

Others of the erstwhile procession were distributed about the embankment in various conditions, but, as I have said, nobody seemed to have parted company with the vital spark.

Hawkins alone was invisible, and as I struggled to my feet this fact puzzled me considerably.

A pile of milk-cans balanced on the river's edge, and on the chance of finding the inventor's remains, I tipped them into the stream. Underneath, stretched on the cold, unsympathetic ground, his feet dabbling idly in the water, his clothes in a hundred shreds, a great lump on his brow, was Hawkins, stunned and bleeding!

As I turned to summon Brotherton, Hawkins opened his eyes.

I am not one to cherish a grudge. I felt that Hawkins' invention had been its own terrible punishment. So I helped him to his feet as gently as possible, and waited for apologetic utterances.

"You see, Griggs," began Hawkins, uncertainly—"you see, the—the ratchet on the big wheel—stuck. I'll put a new—a new ratchet there, and oil—lots of oil—on the—the—"

"That's enough, Hawkins," I said.

"Come home."

"Yes, but don't you see," he groaned, holding fast to his battered skull as I helped him back to the road, "if I get that one little point perfected—it—it will revol—"

"Let it!" I snapped. "Sit here until I see what's left of my automobile."

Ten minutes later, Patrick having appeared to take charge of Maud S., Hawkins and I were making our homeward way in the runabout, which had mercifully been spared.

Something in my face must have forbidden conversation, for Hawkins wrapped the soiled fragments of his raiment about him in offended dignity, and was silent on the subject of horse-brake.

Nor have I ever heard of the thing since. Possibly Mrs. Hawkins succeeded in demonstrating the fallacy of the whole horse-brake theory; in fact, from the expression on her face when we reached the house, I am inclined to think that she did.

Mrs. Hawkins can be strong-minded on occasion, and her tongue is in no way

inadequate to the needs of her mind. At any rate, a friend of mine in the patent office, whom I asked about the matter some time ago, tells, me that the Hawkins Horse-brake has never been patented, so that I presume the invention is in its grave. As a public spirited citizen, I venture to add that this is a blessing.

CHAPTER II.

My wife is averse to widowhood. Lately she exacted my solemn pledge not to assist Hawkins with any more of his diabolical inventions.

For a similar reason, his own good lady drew me aside a few evenings since, and insisted upon my promising to use every means, physical force included, which might prevent her "Herbert" from experimenting further with his motor.

Hawkins hadn't favored me with any confidences about the motor, and at the first opportunity I indicated with brutal directness that none was desired.

Hawkins inquired with frigid asperity as to my meaning; but the very iciness of his manner satisfied me that he understood perfectly, and, believing that he was sufficiently offended to keep entirely to himself all details of his machine—whatever it might be—I breathed more easily.

Some of these days one of Hawkins' inventions is going to take him on a personally conducted tour to a quiet little grave, and I have no wish to learn the itinerary beforehand.

Now, bitter experience has taught me that eternal vigilance is the price of freedom from complicity with the mechanical contrivances of Hawkins, and I should have been suspicious. Yet when Hawkins appeared Sunday morning and asked me to go for a little jaunt up the Hudson in his launch, I accepted with guileless good faith.

His launch was—perhaps it is still—the neatest of neat little pleasure boats, and when we left the house I anticipated several hours of keen enjoyment.

Crossing Riverside Drive, it struck me that Hawkins was hurrying, but the balmy air, the sunshine, and the beautiful sweep of the river filled my mind with infinite peace, and it was not until we had descended to the little dock that I smelled anything suggestive of rat.

Hawkins climbed into the launch, and I smiled benignly on him as I handed down the lunch and our overcoats. I had just finished passing them over

when I stopped smiling so suddenly that it jarred my facial muscles.

"Where has the engine gone?" I demanded.

"That engine, Griggs," responded Hawkins, pleasantly, "has gone where all other steam engines will go within the next two years—into the scrap heap."

"Which very cheerful prophecy means—"

"It means, my dear boy, that before you stands the first full-sized working model of the Hawkins A. P. motor, patent applied for!"

The inventor flicked off a waterproof cover and exposed to view in the stern of the launch what looked like an inverted wash-boiler. At first glance it appeared to be merely a dome of heavy steel, bolted to a massive bed-plate, but I didn't spend much time examining the thing.

"There, Griggs," began Hawkins, triumphantly, "in that small—"

"Hawkins," I cried, desperately, "you get out of that boat! Get out of it, I say! Come home with me at once. I'm not going to be mixed up in any more of your wretched trial-trips. Come on, or I'll drag you out!"

Hawkins eyed me coldly for a minute, admonished me not to be an ass, and went on untying the launch.

He is stronger and heavier than I. Frankly, had I meditated such a course seriously, I couldn't have hoisted him out of his boat.

If I had ever studied medicine, I suppose I should have known how to stun Hawkins from above without killing him, but I have never even seen the inside of a hospital.

Again, could I have conjured up any plausible charge, I might have called a policeman and requested him to incarcerate Hawkins; at the moment, however, I was a bit too flustered for such refined strategy.

Obviously, I couldn't prevent Hawkins testing his motor, but my heart quaked at the idea of accompanying him.

On the other hand, it quaked quite as much before the prospect of returning to his wife and admitting that I had allowed Hawkins to sail away alone with his accursed motor.

If I went with him, a relatively easy death by drowning was about the best I could expect. If I didn't, his wife—

I stepped down into the launch.

"Coming, are you?" observed Hawkins. "Quite the sensible thing to do, Griggs. You'll never regret it."

"God knows, I hope not," I sighed.

"Now, in the first place, I may as well call your attention again to the motor. The A. P. stands for 'almost perpetual'—good name, isn't it? You don't know much about chemistry, Griggs, or I could make the whole proposition clear to you."

"The great point about my motor, however, is that she's run by a fluid somewhat similar to gasoline—another of the distillation products of petroleum, in fact—which, having been exploded, passes into my new and absolutely unique catalytic condensers, where it is returned to its original molecular structure and run back into the reservoir."

"Hence," finished Hawkins, dramatically, "the fuel retains its chemical integrity indefinitely, and, as it circulates automatically through the motor, the little engine will run for months at a time without a particle of attention. Is that quite clear?"

"Perfectly," I lied.

"All right. Now I'll show you how she starts," smiled the inventor, opening with a key a little door in the wash-boiler and lighting a match.

"Careful, Hawkins, careful," I ventured, backing toward the cabin.

"My dear fellow," he sneered, "can you not grasp that in an engine of this construction, there is absolutely no danger of any kind of explo—"

Just then a heavy report issued from the wash-boiler. A sheet of flame seemed to flash from the little opening and precipitate Hawkins into my arms.

At any rate, he landed there with a violent shock, and I clutched him tightly, and tried to steady the launch.

"Leggo! Leggo!" he screamed. "Let me go, you idiot! It always does that! It's working now."

He was right. The launch was churning up a peculiarly serpentine wake, and the motor was buzzing furiously.

Hawkins dived toward his machinery, tinkered it with nervous haste for a little, and finally managed to head the boat down-stream just as a collision with the Palisades seemed inevitable.

"Really, Griggs," he remarked, smoothing down his ruffled feathers, "you mustn't interfere with me like that again. We might have hit something

that time.”

”We did come near uprooting that cliff,” I admitted.

Hawkins thereupon ignored me for a period of three minutes. Then his temper returned and he began a discourse on the virtues of his motor.

It was long and involved and utterly unintelligible, I think, to any one save Hawkins. It lasted until we had passed the Battery and were in the shadow of Governor’s Island.

Then it seemed time for me to remark:

”We’re going to turn back pretty soon, aren’t we, Hawkins?”

”Turn back? What for?”

”Well, if we’re going up the Hudson, we can’t run much farther in this direction.”

”Hang the Hudson!” smiled the inventor. ”We’ll go down around Sandy Hook, eat our lunch, and be back in the city at two, sharp. Why, Griggs, this is no scow. What speed do you suppose this motor can develop?”

”I give it up.”

”One hundred knots an hour!”

”Indeed?”

”Confound it! You don’t believe it, do you?” snapped Hawkins, who must have read my thoughts. ”Well, she can make it easy. I’ll just start her up to show you.”

Argument with Hawkins is futile. I saved my breath on the chance of finding better use for it later on.

Hawkins unlocked his little door, fished around in the machinery, and fastened the door again with a calm smile.

Simultaneously, the launch seemed to leap from the water in its anxiety to get ahead. For a few seconds it quivered from end to end. Then it settled down at a gait that actually made me gasp.

I am not positive that we made one hundred knots to the hour, but I do know that I never traveled in an express train that hastened as did that poor launch when the Hawkins A. P. motor began to push it through the water.

An account of our trip down the Narrows and into the Lower Bay would be interesting, but extraneous. Hawkins sat erect beside his infernal machine, looking like a cavalryman in the charge. I squatted in the cabin and watched things flash past.

The main point is that we reached the open water without smashing anything or smashing into anything.

"Well, I think we may as well swing around," said Hawkins, glancing at his watch. "It's wonderful, the control I have over the launch now. Every bit of the steering-gear is located in that steel dome, along with the motor, Griggs. Nothing at all exposed but this little wheel.

"You observed, probably, that I set it a few moments ago, so that the wind wouldn't blow us about, and haven't touched it since. Now note how we shall turn back."

Hawkins grasped his little wheel, puffed up his chest, and gave a tremendous twist.

And the wheel snapped off in Hawkins' hands!

"Why—why—why—" he stuttered, in amazement.

"Yes, now you've done it!" I rapped out, savagely. "How the dickens are we to get back?"

"There, Griggs, there," said Hawkins, "don't be so childishly impatient. I shall simply unlock this case again and control the steering-gear from the inside. Certainly even you must be able to understand that."

The calm superiority of his tone was maddening.

One or two of my sentiments defied restraint.

Heaven knows I didn't suppose it would make Hawkins nervous to hear them, but it did. His hands shook as he fumbled with the key of his steel box, and at a particularly vicious remark of mine he stood erect.

"Well, Griggs, you've put us in a hole this time!" he groaned.

"How?"

"You made me so nervous that I snapped that key off short in the lock!"

"What!" I shrieked.

"Yes, sir. The motor's locked up in there with fuel enough to keep her going for three months. I can't stop her or move the rudder without

getting into the case, and nothing but dynamite would dent that case!”

”Then, Hawkins,” I said, a terrible calm coming over me, ”we shall have to go straight ahead now until we hit something or are blown up. Am I right?”

”Quite right,” muttered Hawkins, defiantly. ”And it’s all your fault!”

I transfixed the inventor with a vindictive stare, until he abandoned the attempt at bravado and looked away.

”We—we may blow back, you know,” he said, vaguely, addressing the breeze.

”The chances of that being particularly favorable by reason of your having set your miserable rudder to correspond with the present wind?” I asked. ”Can’t we tear up the woodwork and contrive some sort of rudder?”

”We could,” admitted Hawkins, ”if it wasn’t all riveted down with my own patented rivets, which can’t be removed, once they’re set.”

Hawkins’ rivets are really what they claim to be. Only one consideration has delayed their universal adoption. They cost a trifle less than one dollar apiece to manufacture and set.

But they stay where they are put, and I knew that if the launch’s woodwork was held together by them, it wasn’t likely to come apart much before Judgment Day.

”Real nice mess, isn’t it, Hawkins?” I said.

”It—it might be worse.”

”Far worse,” I agreed. ”We might be wallowing helplessly around in those heaving billows, or a gale might be tiring itself all out in the effort to swamp us. But, as it is, we are merely careering gaily over the sunlit waves at an unearthly speed. In a day or two, Hawkins, we shall sight the French coast, barring accidents, go ashore, and—”

”By Jove, Griggs!” exclaimed the inventor, lighting up on the instant. ”Do you know, I hadn’t thought of that? Just let me see. Yes, my boy, at this rate we shall be in the Bay of Biscay Monday night or Tuesday morning, at the latest. Think of it, Griggs! Think of the fame! Think of—”

I couldn’t bear to think of it any longer. I knew that if I thought about it for another ten seconds, I should hurl Hawkins into the sea and go to my own watery grave with murder on my hands.

The bow of the launch being the furthest possible point from its owner, I gathered up my overcoat, cigars, and a sandwich, and crouched there, keeping out of the terrific wind as much as possible, watching for a possible vessel and munching the food with a growing wonder as to whether

I should ever return to the happy home wherein it was prepared.

There I sat until sunset, and it was the latest sunset I have ever observed. With dusk descending over the lonely ocean, I returned in silence to Hawkins.

He was in bounding spirits. He chattered incessantly about the trip, planned a lecture tour—"Across the Atlantic in Forty Hours"—formed a stock company to manufacture his motor, offered me the London agency at an incredible salary, and built a stately mansion just off Central Park with his own portion of the proceeds.

Having babbled himself dry, Hawkins informed me that salt air invariably made him sleepy, and crawled into the cabin for slumber.

And he slept. It passed my understanding, but the man had such utter confidence in himself and his unintentional trip that he snored peacefully throughout the night.

I didn't. I felt that my last hours in the land of the living should be passed in consciousness, and I spent that terrible time of darkness in more or less prayerful meditation.

After ages, the dawn arrived. I lit another cigar, and wriggled wearily to the bow of the boat and scanned the waters.

There was a vessel! Far, far away, to be sure, but steaming so that we must cross her path in another fifteen minutes.

I tore off my overcoat, scrambled to the little deck, wound one arm about a post, and waved the coat frantically.

Nearer and nearer we came to the steamer. More and more I feared that the signal might be unnoticed, or noticed too late. But it wasn't.

I have known some happy sights in my time, but I never saw anything that filled me with one-half the joy I felt on realizing that the steamer-people were lowering one of their boats.

They were doing it, there was no doubt about the matter. In five minutes we should be near enough to their cutter to swim for it.

I dived to the stern to awaken Hawkins.

He was already awake. He stood there, tousled and happy, sniffing the crisp air, and he had seen the approaching boat.

"Got it ready?" he inquired, placidly.

"Got what ready?"

"Why, the message," exclaimed Hawkins, opening his eyes in astonishment. "We'll have to hustle with it, I reckon."

"Hawkins, what new idiocy is this?" I gasped.

"Surely we're going to give that steamer a few lines to tell the world about our trip?"

Seconds passed, before the full, terrible significance of his words filtered into my brain.

"Do you mean to say," I roared, "that you are not going to swim for that boat?"

"Certainly I do mean to say it," he replied stiffly. "Let me have your fountain pen, Griggs."

I took one glance at the boat. I took another at Hawkins. Then I gripped him about the waist and threw my whole soul into the task of pitching him overboard.

Hawkins, as I have said, is heavier than I. He puffed and strained and pulled and hauled at me, swearing like a trooper the while. And neither of us budged an inch.

The cutter came nearer, nearer, always nearer. Thirty seconds more and we should shoot by it forever. The thought of losing this chance of rescue almost maddened me.

I had just gathered all my strength for one last heave when the middle of my back experienced the most excruciating pain it has ever known. Something seemed to lift me clear of the launch, with Hawkins in my arms; I heard a dull report from somewhere, and then we dropped together, right through the surface of the sparkling Atlantic Ocean!

Hawkins was picked up first. When I came to the surface, two dark-skinned sailormen were dragging him in, struggling and cursing and pointing wildly toward the horizon, where his launch was careering away with the speed of the wind.

It was the French liner La France which had the honor of our rescue. She deposited us in New York on Wednesday morning.

Over the rest of this tale hover some painful memories. I am not a fighting man, but I am free to say that when my wife and Mrs. Hawkins delivered to me their joint opinion on broken promises, their sex alone saved them from personal damage.

It was upon me that the blame appeared to rest entirely. At least, Hawkins didn't come in for any of it at the time.

Just at the moment of that emotional interview, Hawkins was busy in his work-shop—perfecting something.

It seems that the motor, after all, was our salvation. Hawkins says that some of the power must have dribbled out of the machine proper and blown the steel dome from its foundations.

Assuredly there was plenty of energy behind the thing when it struck me; I have darting pains in that portion of my anatomy every damp day.

The launch has never been reported, which is probably quite as well.

Perhaps it has reached the open Polar Sea, and is butting itself into flinders against the ice-cakes. Perhaps it is terrorizing some cannibal tribe in the southern oceans by inflicting dents on the shoreline of their island.

Wherever the poor little boat may be, it contains eleven of my best cigars, the better part of a substantial meal, and, what is in my eyes of less importance, the sole existing example of what Hawkins still considers an ideal generator of power.

CHAPTER III.

We were sitting on my porch, smoking placidly in the sunset glow, when Hawkins aroused himself from a momentary reverie and remarked:

"Now, if the body were made of aluminum it would be far lighter and just as strong, wouldn't it?"

"Probably, Hawkins," I replied, "but it would also be decidedly stiff and inconvenient. Just imagine how one's aluminium knees would crackle and bend going up and down-stairs, and what an awful job one would have conforming one's aluminum spinal column to the back of a chair."

"No, no, no, no," cried Hawkins, impatiently. "I don't mean the human body, Griggs; I—"

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "Don't you go to inventing an aluminum man, Hawkins. Good, old-fashioned flesh and bones have been giving thorough satisfaction for the past few thousand years, and it would be wiser for you to turn your peculiar talents toward—"

"There! there! That will do!" snapped the inventor, standing stiffly erect and throwing away his cigar. "This is not the first time that that mistaken humor of yours has prevented your absorbing new ideas, Griggs. Incidentally, I may mention that I was referring to the body of an automobile. Good-evening!"

Whereupon Hawkins stalked up the road in the direction of his summer home, and I wondered for a minute if his words might not be prophetic of future trouble.

Now, where any aspersion is cast upon his inventive genius, Hawkins is quick to anger, but usually he is equally ready to forgive and forget. Hence it astonished me that two whole weeks passed Without the appearance of his genial countenance on my premises.

They were really two weeks of peace unbroken, but I had begun to think that it might be better for me to stroll over and beg pardon for my levity when one bright morning Hawkins came chug-chugging up the drive in a huge, new, red automobile.

It was of the type so constructed that the two rear seats of the car may be dropped off at will, converting it into a carriage for two, and the only peculiar detail I noted was the odd-looking top or canopy.

"Well, what do you think of her?" demanded Hawkins with some pride.

"She's all right," I said, admiringly.

"Body's built of aluminum," continued the inventor. "Jump in and feel the action of her."

As I have said, barring the canopy, the thing appeared to be an ordinary touring-car, and I was tired of lolling in the hammock. Without misgiving, I climbed in beside Hawkins, and he turned back to the road.

The auto did run beautifully. I had never been in a machine that was so totally indifferent to rough spots.

When we came to a hillock, we simply floated over it. If we reached an uncomfortably sharp turn, the auto seemed to rise and cut it off with hardly a swerve.

Once or twice I noticed that Hawkins deliberately steered out of the road and into big rocks; but the auto, in the most peculiar manner, just touched them and bounced over with never a jar.

In fact, after two miles of rather heavy going, I suddenly realized that I hadn't experienced the slightest of jolts.

"Hawkins," I observed, "the man that made the springs under this thing must have been a magician."

"Well, well!" said the inventor. "On to it at last that there is something out of the ordinary about this auto, are you? But it's not the springs, my dear boy, it's not the springs!"

"What is it?"

"Griggs," said Hawkins, beaming upon me, "you are riding in the first and only Hawkins' Auto-aero-mobile! That's what it is!"

"Another invention!" I gasped.

"Yes, another invention. What the deuce are you turning pale about?"

"Well, your inventions, Hawkins—"

"Don't be such a coward, Griggs. Except that I had the body built of aluminum, this is just an ordinary automobile. The invention lies in the canopy. It's a balloon!"

"Is it—is it?" I said weakly.

"Yes, sir. Just at present it's a balloon with not quite enough gas in it to counterbalance the pull of gravitation on the car and ourselves. I've got two cylinders of compressed gas still connected with it. When I let them feed automatically into the balloon, and then automatically drop the iron cylinders themselves in to the road, we shall fairly bound over the ground, because the balloon will just a trifle more than carry the whole outfit."

"Well, don't waste all that good gas, Hawkins," I said hastily. "I can—I can understand perfectly just how we should bound without that."

"Don't worry about the gas," smiled Hawkins placidly. "It costs practically nothing. There! One of the cylinders is discharging now."

I glanced timidly above. Sure enough, the canopy was expanding slowly and assuming a spherical shape.

Presently a thud announced that Hawkins had dropped the cylinder. Then he pulled another lever, and the process was repeated.

As the second cylinder dropped, we rose nearly a foot into the air. Still we maintained a forward motion, and that was puzzling.

"How is it, Hawkins," I quavered, "that we're still going ahead when we don't touch the ground more than once in a hundred feet?"

"That's the propeller," chuckled the inventor. "I put a propeller at the back, so that the auto is almost a dirigible balloon. Oh, there's nothing lacking about the Hawkins Auto-aero-mobile, Griggs, I can tell you."

When I had recovered from the first nervous shock, the contrivance really did not seem so dangerous.

We traveled in long, low leaps, the machine rarely rising more than a foot from the ground, and the motion was certainly unique and rather pleasant.

Nevertheless, I have a haunting fear of anything invented by Hawkins, and my mind would insist upon wandering to thoughts of home.

"Not going down-town, are you, Hawkins?" I asked with what carelessness I could assume.

"Just for a minute. I want some cigars."

"Hawkins," I murmured, "you are a pretty heavy man. When you get out of this budding airship, it won't soar into the heavens with me, will it?"

"It would if I got out," said the inventor, with pleasant assurance. "But I'm not going to get out. We'll let the cigar man bring the stuff to us."

So it would rise if any weight left the car! That was food for thought.

Suppose Hawkins, who operated the auto according to the magazine pictures of racing chauffeurs, leaning far forward, should topple into the road? Suppose a stray breeze should tilt the machine and throw out some part?

Up without doubt, we should go, and there seemed to be quite an open space up above, through which we might travel indefinitely without hitting anything that would stay our celestial journey.

"How do you let the gas out of the balloon, Hawkins?" I ventured presently.

"Oh, the cock's down underneath the machine," said that gentleman briefly. "Don't worry, Griggs. I'm here."

That, in a nutshell, was just what was worrying me, but there seemed to be nothing more to say. I relapsed into silence.

We rolled or floated or bounced, or whatever you may choose to call it, into town without accident or incident. People stared considerably at the kangaroo antics of our car, and one or two horses, after their first glance, developed *furor transitorius* on the spot; but Hawkins managed to pull up before his cigar store, which was in the outskirts of the

town, without kicking up any very serious disturbance.

The cigars aboard, I had hoped to turn my face homeward. Not so Hawkins.

"Now, down we go to the square," he cried buoyantly, "do a turn before the court house, float straight over the common, and then bounce away home. I guess it'll make the natives talk, eh, Griggs?"

"Your things usually do, Hawkins," I sighed. "But why perform to-day? This is only the first trial trip. Something might go wrong."

"My dear boy," laughed the inventor, "this is one of those trial trips that simply can't go wrong, because every detail is perfected to the uttermost limit."

That settled it; we made for the square.

The square, be it remarked, is in the center of the town. The court house stands on one side, the post office on the other, and the square itself is a beautifully kept lawn.

We were just in sight of the grass when I fancied that I detected a rattle.

"What's that noise, Hawkins?" I said.

"Give it up. Something in the machinery. It's nothing."

"But I seem to feel a peculiar shaking in the machine," I persisted.

"You seem to feel a great many things that don't exist, Griggs," remarked Hawkins, with a touch of contempt.

"But—"

"Hey, mister!" yelled a small boy. "Hey! Yer back seat's fallin' off!"

"What did he say?" muttered Hawkins, too full of importance to turn his head.

"Hey! Hey!" cried the youngster, pursuing us. "Dat back seat's most fell off!"

"What!" shrieked Hawkins, whirling about. "Good Lord! So it is! Catch it, Griggs, catch it quick!"

I turned. The boy was right. The rear seats of the automobile had managed to detach themselves.

In fact, even as we stared, they were hanging by a single bolt, and the head of that was missing.

"Griggs! Griggs!" shouted Hawkins, wildly endeavoring to stop the engine. "Grab those seats before they fall! I didn't screw 'em on with a wrench—only used my hands—but I supposed they were fast. Heavens! If they drop, we shall go—"

Just at that moment a sudden jolt sent the seats into the road.

Two hundred pounds of solid material had left the Hawkins Auto-aeromobile!

Hawkins didn't have to finish the sentence.

It became painfully evident where we should go.

We went up!

Up, up, up! In the suddenness of it, it seemed to me that we were shooting straight for the midday sun, that another thirty seconds would see us frying in the solar flames.

As I gripped the cushions, I believe that I shrieked with terror.

But Hawkins, scared though he was, didn't lose his head entirely. The machine hadn't turned turtle. It was ascending slowly in its normal attitude, and as a matter of cold fact we hadn't risen more than thirty feet when Hawkins remarked, shakily:

"There, there, Griggs! Sit still! It's all right. We're safe!"

"Safe!" I gasped, when sufficient breath had returned. "It looks as if we were safe, doesn't it?"

"N-n-never mind how it looks, Griggs. We are. The propeller's working now."

"What good does that do us?" I demanded.

"Good!" cried the inventor, pulling himself together. "Why, we shall simply steer for the roof of a house and alight."

"Always provided that this cursed contrivance doesn't heave us out first!"

"Oh, it won't," smiled Hawkins, settling down to his machinery once more. "Dear me, Griggs, do look at the crowd!"

There was indeed a crowd. They had sprung up on the instant, and they were racing along beneath us across the common, quite regardless of the "Keep

Off the Grass” signs.

”How they will stare when we step out on the roof, won’t they?” observed Hawkins.

”If we don’t step out on their heads!” I snapped. ”Steer away from those telegraph wires, Hawkins.”

”Yes, yes, of course,” said the inventor, nervously regarding the thirty or forty wires strung directly across our path. ”Queer this thing doesn’t respond more readily!”

”Well, make her respond!” I cried, excitedly, for the wires were dangerously near.

”I’m doing my best, Griggs,” grunted the inventor, twisting this wheel and pulling that lever. ”Don’t worry, we’ll sail over them all right. We’ll just—pshaw!”

With a gentle, swaying kind of bump, the auto stopped. We had grounded, so to speak, on the telegraph wires.

”That’s the end of this trial trip!” I remarked, caustically. ”The epilogue will consist of the scene we create in distributing our brains over that green grass below.”

”Oh, tut, tut!” said Hawkins. ”This is nothing serious. I’ll just start the propeller on the reverse and we’ll float off backward.”

”Well, wait a minute before you start it,” I said. ”They’re shouting something.”

”Don’t jump! Don’t jump!” cried the crowd.

”Who the dickens is going to jump?” replied Hawkins, angrily, leaning over the side. ”Fools!” he observed to me.

”The hook and ladder’s coming!” continued a stentorian voice.

[Illustration: ”Don’t jump! Don’t jump!” cried the crowd.]

”Well, they’ll have their trouble for their pains,” snapped Hawkins. ”We shall be on the ground before they get here.”

”Why not wait?” I said. ”We’ll be sure to get down safely that way, and you don’t know what you may do by starting the machinery. The wires are all mixed up in it, and they may smash and drag us down, or upset us, Hawkins.”

"Croak! Croak! Croak!" replied Hawkins, sourly. "Go on and croak till your dying day, Griggs. If any one ever offers a prize for a pessimistic alarmist, you take my advice and compete. You'll win. I'm going to start the engine and get out of this."

He pulled the reverse lever, and the engine buzzed merrily. The auto indulged in a series of unwholesome convulsive shivers, but it didn't budge.

"Hey! Hey!" floated up from the crowd.

"Oh, look and see what they're howling about now," growled Hawkins.

The cause of their vociferations was only too apparent.

Ping! Ping! Ping! One by one, sawed in two by the machine, the telegraph wires were snapping!

"Stop it! Stop it, Hawkins!" I cried. "You're smashing the wires!"

"Well, suppose I am? That'll let us out, won't it?"

"See here," I said, sternly, "if an all wise Providence should happen to spare us from being dragged down and dashed to pieces, consider the bill for repairs which you'll have to foot. You stop that engine, Hawkins, or I'll do it myself."

"Well—" said the inventor, doubtfully. "There! Now be satisfied. I've stopped it, and we'll wait and be taken down the ladder like a couple of confounded Italian women in a tenement house fire."

Hawkins sat back with a sullen scowl. I drew a long breath of relief, and began to scan the landscape for signs of the hook and ladder company.

They were a long time in coming. Meanwhile, we were hanging in space, a frisky balloon overhead, and below, Hawkins' engine having considerably left a little of the telegraph company's property uninjured, six telegraph wires and a gaping crowd.

But the ladders couldn't be very far off now, and we seemed safe enough, until—

"What's that sizzling, Hawkins?" I inquired.

"I don't know," he replied, gruffly.

"Well, why don't you try to find out?" I said, sharply. "It seems to me that we're resting pretty heavily on those wires."

"Indeed?"

"Yes." I glanced out at the balloon canopy. "Great Scott, Hawkins, the balloon's leaking!"

"Eh? What?" he cried, suddenly galvanized into action. "Where, Griggs, where?"

"I don't know. But that's what is happening. See how the wires are sagging—more and more every second."

"Great Cesar's ghost! Listen. Yes, the wires must have hit the escape valve. Why, the gas is simply pouring out of the balloon. And the machine's getting heavier and heavier. And we're just resting on those six wires, Griggs! Oh, Lord!"

"And presently, Hawkins, we shall break the wires and drop?" I suggested, with forced calm.

"Yes, yes!" cried the inventor. "What'll we do, Griggs, what'll we do?"

Frightened as I was, I couldn't see what was to be gained by hysterics.

"I presume," I said, "that the best thing is to sit still and wait for the end."

"Yes, but think, man, think of that awful drop! Forty feet, if it's an inch!"

"Fully."

"Why, we'll simply be knocked to flinders!"

"Probably."

"Oh, the idiots! The idiots!" raged Hawkins, shaking his fists at the crowd. "Why didn't they bring a fire net? Why hasn't one of them sense enough to get one? We could jump then."

Ping! The first of the six wires had snapped.

Ping! The second had followed suit.

The Hawkins Auto-aero-mobile was very delicately balanced now on four slim wires, and the balloon was collapsing with heart-rending rapidity. From below sounds of excitement were audible, here and there a groan and now a scream of horror, as some new-comer realized our position.

"Hawkins," I said, solemnly, "why don't you make a vow right now that if we ever get out of this alive—"

Ping! went the third wire. The auto swayed gently for a moment.

"You'll never invent another thing as long as you live?"

"Griggs," said Hawkins, in trembling tones, "I almost believe that you are right. Where on earth can that hook and ladder be? Yes, you are right. I'll do—I'll—can you see them yet, Griggs? I'll do it! I swear—"

Ping! Ping! Ping!

Still sitting upon the cushions, I felt my heart literally leap into my throat. My eyes closed before a sudden rush of wind. My hands gripped out wildly.

For one infinitesimal second, I was astonished at the deathly stillness of everything. Then the roar of a thousand voices nearly deafened me, the seat seemed to hurl me violently into the air, for another brief instant I shot through space. Then my hands clutched some one's hair, and I crashed to the ground, with an obliging stout man underneath.

And I knew that I still lived!

Well, the auto had dropped—that was all. Ready hands placed me upon my feet. Vaguely I realized that Dr. Brotherton, our physician, was running his fingers rapidly over my anatomy.

Later he addressed me through a dreamland haze and said that not a bone was broken. I recall giving him a foolish smile and thanking him politely.

Some twenty feet away I was conscious that Hawkins was chattering volubly to a crowd of eager faces. His own features were bruised almost beyond recognition, but he, too, was evidently on this side of the River Jordan, and I felt a faint sense of irritation that the Auto-aero-mobile hadn't made an end of him.

My wits must have remained some time aloft for a last inspection of the spot where ended our aerial flight. Certainly they did not wholly return until I found myself sitting beside Hawkins in Brotherton's carriage.

We were just driving past a pile of red scrap-metal that had once been the auto, and the wondering crowd was parting to let us through.

"Well, that's the end of your aérothingamajig, Hawkins," I observed, with deep satisfaction.

"Oh, yes, experience is expensive, but a great teacher," replied the inventor, thickly, removing a wet cloth from his much lacerated upper lip

to permit speech. "When I build the next one—"

"You'll have to get a divorce before you build the next one," I added, with still deeper satisfaction, as I pictured in imagination the lively little domestic fracas that awaited Hawkins.

If his excellent lady gets wind of the doings in his "workshop," Hawkins rarely invents the same thing twice.

"Well, then, if I build another," corrected Hawkins, sobering suddenly, "I shall be careful not to use that rear arrangement at all. I shall place the valve of the balloon where I can get at it more easily. I shall—"

"Mr. Hawkins," said Brotherton, abruptly, "I thought I asked you to keep that cloth over your mouth until I get you where I can sew up that lip."

Apart from any medical bearing, it struck me that that remark indicated good, sound sense on Brotherton's part.

CHAPTER IV.

There are some men to whom experience never teaches anything.

Hawkins is one of them; I am another.

As concerns Hawkins, I feel pretty sure that some obscure mental aberration lies at the seat of his trouble; for my own part, I am inclined to blame my confiding, unsuspecting nature.

Now, when the Hawkins' cook and the Hawkins' maid came "'cross lots" and carried off our own domestic staff to some festivity, I should have been able to see the hand of Fate groping around in my locality, clearing the scene so as to leave me, alone and unprotected, with Hawkins.

Moreover, when Mrs. Hawkins drove over in style with Patrick, to take my wife to somebody's afternoon euchre, and brought me a message from her "Herbert," asking me to come and assist him in fighting off the demon of loneliness, I should have realized that Fate was fairly clutching at me.

By this time I should be aware that when Hawkins is left alone he doesn't bother with that sort of demon; he links arms with the old, original Satan, and together they stroll into Hawkins' workshop—to perfect an invention.

But I suspected nothing. I went over at once to keep Hawkins company.

When I reached his place, Hawkins didn't meet my eye at first, but something else did.

For a moment, I fancied that the Weather Bureau had recognized Hawkins' scientific attainments, and built an observatory for him out by the barn. Then I saw that the thing was merely a tall, skeleton steel tower, with a wind-mill on top—the contrivance with which many farmers pump water from their wells.

"Well," remarked Hawkins, appearing at this point, "can you name it?"

"Well," I said, leaning on the gate and regarding the affair, "I imagine that it is the common or domestic windmill."

"And your imagination, as usual, is all wrong," smiled Hawkins. "That, Griggs, is the Hawkins Pumpless Pump!"

"What!" I gasped, vaulting into the road. "Another invention!"

"Now, don't be a clown, Griggs," snapped the inventor. "It is—"

"Wait. Did you lure me over here, Hawkins, with the fiendish purpose of demonstrating that thing?"

"Certainly not. It is—"

"Just one minute more. Is it tied down? Will it, by any chance, suddenly gallop over here and fall upon us?"

"No, it will not," replied Hawkins shortly. "The foundations run twenty feet into the ground. Are you coming in or not?"

"Under the circumstances—yes," I said, entering again, but keeping a wary eye on the steel tower. "But can't we spend the afternoon out here by the gate?"

"We cannot," said Hawkins sourly. "Your humor, Griggs, is as pointless as it is childish. When you see every farmer in the United States using that contrivance, you will blush to recall your idiotic words."

I was tempted to make some remark about the greater likelihood of memory producing a consumptive pallor; but I refrained and followed Hawkins to the veranda.

"When I built that tower," pursued the inventor, waving his hand at it, "I intended, of course, to use the regulation pump, taking the power from the windmill.

"Then I got an idea.

"You know how a grain elevator works—a series of buckets on an endless chain, running over two pulleys, just as a bicycle chain runs over two sprockets? Very well. Up at the top of that tower I extended the hub of the windmill back to form a shaft with big cogs. Down at the bottom of the well there is another corresponding shaft with the same cogs. Over the two, as you will see, runs an endless ladder of steel cable. Is that clear?"

"I guess so," I said, wearily. "Go on."

"Well, that's as far as I have gone. Next week the buckets are coming. I shall hitch one to each rung of the chain, or ladder, throw on the gear, and let her go.

"The buckets will run down into the well upside down, come up on the other side filled, run to the top of the tower, and dump the water into a reservoir tank—and go down again. Thus I pump water without a pump—in other words, with a pumpless pump!

"Simple! Efficient! Nothing to get out of order—no valves, no pistons, no air-chambers—nothing whatever!" finished Hawkins triumphantly.

"Wonderful!" I said absently.

"Isn't it?" cried the inventor. "Now, do you want to look over it, to-day, Griggs, or shall we run through those drawings of my new loom?"

Hawkins has invented a loom, too. I don't know much about machinery in general, but I do know something about the plans, and from what I can judge by the plans, if any workman was fool-hardy enough to enter the room with Hawkins' loom in action, that intricate bit of mechanism would reach out for him, drag him in, macerate him, and weave him into the cloth, all in about thirty seconds.

But an explanation of this to Hawkins would merely have precipitated another conflict. I chose what seemed to be the lesser evil; I elected to examine the pumpless pump.

"All right," said the inventor happily. "Come along, Griggs. You're the only one that knows anything about this. In a week or two, when somebody writes it up in the *Scientific American*, you'll feel mighty proud of having heard my first explanation of the thing."

The pump was just as Hawkins had described—a thin steel ladder coming out of the well's black mouth, running up to and over the shaft, and descending into the blackness again. When we reached its side, it was stationary, for the air was still.

"There!" cried Hawkins. "All it needs is the buckets and the tank on top. That idea comes pretty near to actual execution, Griggs, doesn't it?"

"Most of your ideas do come pretty near to actual execution, Hawkins," I sighed.

That passed over Hawkins' head.

"Now, look down here," he continued, leaning over the well with a calm disregard of the frailty of the human make-up, and grasping one of the rungs of the ladder. "Just look down here, Griggs. Sixty feet deep!"

"I'll take your word for it," I said. "I wouldn't hold on to that ladder, Hawkins; it might take a notion to go down with you."

"Nonsense!" smiled the inventor. "The gear's locked. It can't move. Why, look here!"

The man actually swung himself out to the ladder and stood there. It made my blood run cold.

I expected to see Hawkins, ladder, and all shoot down into the water, and I wondered whether Heaven would send wind enough to hoist him out before he drowned.

But nothing happened. Hawkins himself stood there and surveyed me with sneering triumph.

"You see, Griggs," he observed caustically, "once in a while I do know something about my inventions. Now, if your faint heart will allow it, I should advise you to take a peep down here. So far as I know, it's the only well in the State built entirely of white tiles. Just steady yourself on the ladder and look."

Like a senseless boy taking a dare, I reached out, gripped the rung above Hawkins, and looked down.

Certainly it was a fine well. I never paid much attention to wells, but I could see at a glance that this one was exceptional.

"I had it tiled last week," continued Hawkins. "A tiled well is absolutely safe, you see. Nothing can happen in a tiled well, no—"

That was another of Hawkins' fallacies. Something happened right then and there.

A gentle breeze started the windmill. Slowly, spectacularly, the ladder began to move—downwards!

"Why, say!" cried the inventor, in amazement, as he made one futile effort to regain the ground. "Do you think—"

I wasn't thinking for him, just then. All my wits were centered on one great, awful problem.

Before I could realize it and release my hold, the ladder had dropped far enough to throw me off my balance. The problem was whether to let go and risk dashing down sixty feet, or to keep hold and run the very promising chance of a slow and chilly ducking.

I took the latter alternative, threw myself upon the ladder, and clung there, gasping with astonishment at the suddenness of the thing.

"Well, Hawkins?" I said, getting breath as my head sank below the level of the beautiful earth.

"Well, Griggs," said the inventor defiantly, from the second rung below, "the gear must have slipped—that's all."

"Isn't it lucky that this is a tiled well?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why," I said, "a tiled well is absolutely safe, you see. Nothing can happen in a tiled well, Hawkins."

"Now, don't stand there grinding out your cheap wit, Griggs," snapped Hawkins. "How the dickens are we going to escape being soaked?"

Down, down, down, down, went the ladder.

"Well," I said, thoughtfully, "the bottom usually falls out of your schemes, Hawkins. If the bottom will only fall out of the water department of your pumpless pump within the next half-minute, all will be lovely."

"Oh, dry up!" exclaimed the inventor nervously. "Goodness! We're halfway down already!"

"Why not climb?" I suggested.

"Really, Griggs," cried the inventor, "for such an unpractical man as yourself, that idea is remarkable! Climb, Griggs, climb. Get about it!"

I think myself that the notion was rather bright. If the ladder was climbing down into the well, we could climb up the ladder.

And we climbed! Good heavens, how we did climb! It was simply a perpendicular treadmill, and with the rungs a full yard apart, a mighty hard one to tread.

Every rung seemed to strain my muscles to the breaking point; but we kept on climbing, and we were gaining on the ladder. We were not ten feet from

the top when Hawkins called out:

"Wait, Griggs! Hey! Wait a minute! Yes, by Jove, she's stopped!"

She had. I noted that, far above, the windmill had ceased to revolve. The ladder was motionless.

"Oh, I knew we'd get out all right," remarked the inventor, dashing all perspiration from his brow. "I felt it."

"Yes, I noticed that you were entirely confident a minute or two ago," I observed.

"Well, go on now and climb out," said Hawkins, waving an answer to the observation. "Go ahead, Griggs."

I was too thankful for our near deliverance to spend my breath on vituperation. I reached toward the rung above me and prepared to pull myself back to earth.

And then a strange thing happened. The rung shot upward. I shot after it. One instant I was in the twilight of the well; the next instant I was blinded by the sun.

Too late I realized that I had ascended above the mouth, and was journeying rapidly toward the top of the tower. It had all happened with that sickening, surprising suddenness that characterizes Hawkins' inventions.

Up, up, up, I went, at first quickly, and then more slowly, and still more slowly, until the ladder stopped again, with my eyes peering over the top of the tower.

It was obliging of the ladder to stop there; it could have hurled me over the top just as easily and broken my neck.

I didn't waste any time in thanking the ladder. Before the accursed thing could get into motion again, I climbed to the shaft and perched there, dizzy and bewildered.

Hawkins followed suit, clambered to the opposite end of the shaft, and arranged himself there, astride.

"Well," I remarked, when I had found a comparatively secure seat on the bearing—a seat fully two inches wide by four long—"did the gear slip again?"

"No, of course not," said the inventor. "The windmill simply started turning in the opposite direction."

"It's a weak, powerless little thing, your windmill, isn't it?"

"Well, when I built it I calculated it to hoist two tons."

"Instead of which it has hoisted two—or rather, one misguided man, who allowed himself to be enticed within its reach."

"See here," cried Hawkins wrathfully, "I suppose you blame me for getting you into a hole?"

"Not at all," I replied. "I blame you for getting me altogether too far out of the hole."

"Well, you needn't. If it hadn't been for your stupidity, we shouldn't be here now."

"What!"

"Certainly. Why didn't you jump off as we passed the mouth of the well?"

"My dear Hawkins," I said mildly, "do you realize that we flitted past that particular point at a speed of about seventy feet per second? Why didn't you jump?"

"I—I-I didn't want to desert you, Griggs," rejoined Hawkins weakly, looking away.

"That was truly noble of you," I observed. "It reveals a beautiful side of your character which I had never suspected, Hawkins."

"That'll do," said the inventor shortly. "Are you going down first or shall I?"

"Do you propose to trust all that is mortal of yourself to that capricious little ladder again?"

"Certainly. What else?"

"I was thinking that it might be safer, if slightly less comfortable, to wait here until Patrick gets back. He could put up a ladder—a real, old-fashioned, wooden ladder—for us."

"Yes, and when Patrick gets back those women will get back with him," replied Hawkins heatedly. "Your wife's coming over here to tea."

"Well?"

"Well, do you suppose I'm going to be found stuck up here like a confounded rooster on a weather vane?" shouted the inventor. "No, sir! You can stay and look all the fool you like. I won't. I'm going

down now!"

Hawkins reached gingerly with one foot for a place on the ladder. I looked at him, wondered whether it would be really wicked to hurl him into space, and looked away again, in the direction of the woods.

My gaze traveled about a mile; and my nerves received another shock.

"See here, Hawkins!" I cried.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded the inventor gruffly, still striving for a footing.

"What will happen if a breeze hits this infernal machine now?"

"You'll be knocked into Kingdom Come, for one thing," snapped Hawkins with apparent satisfaction. "That arm of the windmill right behind you will rap your head with force enough to put some sense in it."

I glanced backward. He was right—about the fact of the rapping, at any rate.

The huge wing was precisely in line to deal my unoffending cranium a terrific whack, which would probably stun me, and certainly brush me from my perch.

"There's a big wind coming!" I cried. "Look at those trees."

"By Jimminy! You're right!" gasped the inventor, recklessly hurling himself upon the ladder. "Quick, Griggs. Come down after me. Quick!"

When one of Hawkins' inventions gets you in its toils, you have to make rapid decisions as to the manner of death you would prefer. In the twinkling of an eye, I decided to cast my fate with Hawkins on the ladder.

Nerving myself for the task, I swung to the quivering steel cable, kicked wildly for a moment, and then found a footing.

"Now, down!" shouted Hawkins, below me. "Be quick!"

That diabolical windmill must have heard him and taken the remark for a personal injunction. It obeyed to the letter.

When an elevator drops suddenly, you feel as if your entire internal organism was struggling for exit through the top of your head. As the words left Hawkins' mouth, that was precisely the sensation I experienced.

Clinging to the ladder for dear life, down we went!

They say that a stone will drop sixteen feet in the first second, thirty-two in the next, and so on. We made far better time than that. The wind had hit the windmill, and she was reeling us back into the well to the very best of her ability.

Before I could draw breath we flashed to the level of the earth, down through the mouth of the well, and on down into the white-tiled twilight.

My observations ceased at that point. A gurgling shriek came from Hawkins. Then a splash.

My nether limbs turned icy cold, next my body and shoulders, and then cracked ice seemed to fill my ears, and I still clung to the ladder, and prayed fervently.

For a time I descended through roaring, swirling water. Then my feet were wrenched from their hold, and for a moment I hung downward by my hands alone. Still I clung tightly, and wondered dimly why I seemed to be going up again. Not that it mattered much, for I had given up hope long ago, but still I wondered.

And then, still clutching the ladder with a death-grip, with Hawkins kicking about above me, out of the water I shot, and up the well once more. An instant of the half-light, the flash of the sun again—and I hurled myself away from the ladder.

I landed on the grass. Hawkins landed on me. Soaking wet, breathless, dazed, we sat up and stared at each other.

"I'm glad, Griggs," said Hawkins, with a watery smile—"I'm glad you had sense enough to keep your grip going around that sprocket at the bottom. I knew we'd be all right if you didn't let go—"

"Hawkins," I said viciously, "shut up!"

"But—oh, good Lord!"

I glanced toward the gate. The carriage was driving in. The ladies were in the carriage. Evidently the afternoon euchre had been postponed.

"There, Hawkins," I gloated, "you can explain to your wife just why you knew we'd be all right. She'll be a sympathetic listener."

Said Hawkins, with a sickly smile:

"Oh, Griggs!"

Said Mrs. Hawkins, gasping with horror as Patrick whipped the horses to our side—.

But never mind what Mrs. Hawkins said. This chronicle contains enough unpleasantness as it is. There are remarks which, when addressed to one, one feels were better left unsaid.

I think that Hawkins felt that way about practically everything his wife said upon this occasion. Let that suffice.

CHAPTER V.

In the country, social intercourse between Hawkins' family and my own is upon the most informal basis. If it pleases us to dine together coatless and cuffless, we do so; and no one suggests that a national upheaval is likely to result.

But in town it is different. The bugaboo of strict propriety seems to take mysterious ascendancy. We still dine together, but it is done in the most proper evening dress. It seems to be the law—unwritten but unalterable—that Hawkins and I shall display upon our respective bosoms something like a square foot of starchy white linen.

I hardly know why I mention this matter of evening clothes, unless it is that the memory of my brand-new dress suit, which passed to another sphere that night, still preys upon my mind.

That night, above mentioned, my wife and I dined in the Hawkins' home.

Hawkins seemed particularly jovial. He appeared to be chuckling with triumph, or some kindred emotion, and his air was even more expansive than usual.

When I mentioned the terrible explosion of the powder works at Pompton—hardly a subject to excite mirth in the normal individual—Hawkins fairly guffawed.

"But, Herbert," cried his wife, somewhat horrified, "is there anything humorous in the dismemberment of three poor workmen?"

"Oh, it isn't that—it isn't that, my dear," smiled the inventor. "It merely struck me as funny—this old notion of explosives."

"What old notion?" I inquired.

"Why, the fallacy of the present methods of manipulating nitro-glycerine."

"I presume you have a better scheme?" I advanced.

"Mr. Griggs," cried Hawkins' wife, in terror that was not all feigned, "don't suggest it!"

"Now, my dear—" began Hawkins, stiffening at once.

"Hush, Herbert, hush! You've made mischief enough with your inventions, but you have never, thank goodness, dabbled in explosives."

"If I wanted to tell you what I know about explosives, and what I could do—" declaimed Hawkins.

"Don't tell us, Mr. Hawkins," laughed my wife. "A sort of superstitious dread comes over me at the notion."

"Mrs. Griggs!" exclaimed Hawkins, eying my wife with a glare which in any other man would have earned him the best licking I could give him—but which, like many other things, had to be excused in Hawkins.

"Herbert!" said his wife, authoritatively. "Be still. Actually, you're quite excited!"

Hawkins lapsed into sulky silence, and the meal ended with just a hint of constraint.

Mrs. Hawkins and my wife adjourned to the drawing-room, and Hawkins and I were left, theoretically, to smoke a post-prandial cigar. Hawkins, however, had other plans for my entertainment.

"Are they up-stairs?" he muttered, as footsteps sounded above us.

"They seem to be."

"Then you come with me," whispered Hawkins, heading me toward the servants' staircase.

"Where?" I inquired suspiciously.

There was a peculiar glitter in his eye.

"Come along and you'll see," chuckled Hawkins, beginning the ascent. "Oh, I'll tell you what," he continued, pausing on the second landing, "these women make me tired!"

"Indeed?"

"Yes, they do. You needn't look huffy, Griggs. It isn't your wife or my wife. It's the whole sex. They chatter and prattle and make silly

jokes about things they're absolutely incapable of understanding."

"My dear Hawkins," I said soothingly, "you wrong the fair sex."

"Oh, I wrong 'em, eh? Well, what woman knows the first thing about explosives?" demanded Hawkins heatedly. "Dynamite or rhexite or meganite or carbonite or stonite or vigorite or cordite or ballistite or thorite or maxamite—"

"Stop, Hawkins, stop!" I cried.

"Well, that's all, anyway," said the inventor. "But what woman knows enough about them to argue the thing intelligently? And yet my wife tells me—I, who have spent nearly half a lifetime in scientific labor—she actually tells me to—to shut up, when I hint at having some slight knowledge of the subject!"

"I know, Hawkins, but your scientific labors have made her—and me—suffer in the past."

"Oh, they have, have they?" grunted Hawkins, climbing toward the top floor. "Well, come up, Griggs."

I knew the door at which he stopped. It was that of Hawkins' workshop or laboratory. It was on the floor with the servants, who, poor things, probably did not know or dared not object to the risk they ran.

"What's the peculiar humming?" I asked, pausing on the threshold.

"Only my electric motor," sneered Hawkins. "It won't bite you, Griggs. Come in."

"And what is this big, brass bolt on the door?" I continued.

"That? Oh, that's an ideal!" cried the inventor. "That's my new springlock. Just look at that lock, Griggs. It simply can't be opened from the outside, and only from the inside by one who knows how to work it. And I'm the only one who knows. When I patent this thing—"

"Well, I wouldn't close the door, Hawkins," I murmured. "You might faint or something, and I'd be shut in here till somebody remembered to hunt for me."

"Bah!" exclaimed Hawkins, slamming the door, violently. "Really, for a grown man, you're the most chicken-hearted individual I ever met. But—what's the use of talking about it? To get back to explosives—"

"Oh, never mind the explosives," I said wearily. "You're right, and that settles it."

"See here," said Hawkins sharply; "I had no intention of mentioning explosives to-night, for a particular reason. In a day or two, you'll hear the country ringing with my name, in connection with explosives. But since the subject has come up, if you want to listen to me for a few minutes, I'll interest you mightily."

Kind Heaven! Could I have realized then the bitter truth of those last words!

"Yes, sir," the inventor went on, "as I was saying—or was I saying it?—they all have their faults—dynamite, rhexite, meganite, carbonite, ston—"

"You went over that list before."

"Well, they all have their faults. Either they explode when you don't want them to, or they don't explode when you do want them to, or they're liable to explode spontaneously, or something else. It's all due, as I have invariably contended, to impure nitro-glycerine or unscientific handling of the pure article."

"Yes."

"Yes, indeed. Now, what would you say to an explosive—"

"Absolutely nothing," I replied decidedly. "I should pass it without even a nod."

"Never mind your nonsense, Griggs. What would you—er—what would you think of an explosive that could be dropped from the roof of a house without detonating?"

"Remarkable!"

"An explosive," continued Hawkins impressively, "into which a man might throw a lighted lamp without the slightest fear! How would that strike you?"

"Well, Hawkins," I said, "I think I should have grave doubts of the man's mental condition."

"Oh, just cut out that foolish talk," snapped the inventor. "I'm quite serious. Suppose I should tell you that I had thought and thought over this problem, and finally hit upon an idea for just such a powder? Where would dynamite and rhexite and meganite and all the rest of them be, beside—"

He paused theatrically.

"Hawkinsite!"

"Don't know, Hawkins," I said, unable to absorb any of his enthusiasm. "But let us thank goodness that it is only an idea as yet."

"Oh, but it isn't!" cried the inventor.

"Hawkins!" I gasped, springing to my feet. "What do you mean?"

"I mean just this: Do you see that little vat in the corner?"

I stared fearfully in the direction indicated. A little vat, indeed, I saw. It stood there, half-filled with a sticky mess, through which an agitator, run by the electric motor, was revolving slowly.

"That's Hawkinsite, in the process of manufacture!" the inventor announced.

A sickly terror crept over me. I made instinctively for the door.

"Oh, come back," said Hawkins. "You can't get out, anyway, until I undo the lock. But there's no danger whatever, my dear boy. Just sit down and I'll explain why."

I had no choice about sitting down; a most peculiar weakness of the knees made standing for the moment impossible. I drew my chair to the diagonally opposite corner of the apartment, and sat there with my eyes glued upon the vat.

"Now, when all these fellows go about nitrating their glycerine," said Hawkins serenely, "they simply overlook the scientific principle which I have discovered. For instance, out there at Pompton the vat exploded in the very act of mixing in the glycerine. That's just what is being done over in that corner at this minute—"

"Ouch!" I cried involuntarily.

"But it won't happen here—it can't happen here," said the inventor impatiently. "I am using an entirely different combination of chemicals. Now, if there was any trouble of that sort coming, Griggs, the contents of that vat would have begun to turn green before now. But as you see—"

"Haw-Hawkins!" I croaked hoarsely, pointing a shaking finger at the machine.

"Well, what is it now?"

"Look!" I managed to articulate.

"Oh, Lord!" sniffed the inventor. "I suppose as soon as I said that, you began to see green shades appear, eh? Why—dear me!"

Hawkins stepped rapidly over to the side of his mixer. Then he stepped away with considerably greater alacrity.

There was no two ways about it; the devilish mess in the vat was taking on a marked tinge of green!

"Well—I—I guess I'll shut off the power," muttered Hawkins, suiting the action to the word.

"When the agitator has stopped, Griggs, the mass will cool at once, so you needn't worry."

"If it didn't cool, would it—would it blow up?" I quavered.

"Oh, it would," admitted Hawkins, rather nervously. "But as soon as the mixing ceases, the slight color disappears, as you see."

"I don't see it; it seems to me to be getting greener than ever."

"Well, it's not!" the inventor snapped. "Five minutes from now, that stuff will be an even brown once more."

"And while it's regaining the even brown, why not clear out of here?" I said eagerly.

"Yes, we may as well, I suppose," said Hawkins, with a readiness which refused to be masked under his assumption of reluctance. "Come on, Griggs."

Hawkins turned the lever on his fancy lock, remarking again:

"Come on."

"Well, open the door."

"It's op—why, what's wrong here?" muttered the inventor, twisting the lever back and forth several times.

"Oh, good heavens, Hawkins!" I groaned. "Has your lock gone back on you, too?"

"No, it has not. Of course not," growled the inventor, tugging at his lever with almost frantic energy. "It's stuck—a little new—that's all. Er—do you see a screw-driver on that table, Griggs?"

I handed him the tool as quickly as possible, noting at the same time that despite the cessation of the stirring "Hawkinsite" was getting greener every second.

"I'll just take it off," panted Hawkins, digging at one of the screws. "No time to tinker with it now."

"Why not? There's no danger."

"Certainly there isn't. But you—you seem to be a little nervous about it, Griggs, and—"

"Hawkins," I cried, "what are those bubbles of red gas?"

"What bubbles?" Hawkins turned as if he had been shot. "Great Scott, Griggs! There were no bubbles of red gas rising out of that stuff, were there?"

"There they go again," I said, pointing to the vat, from which a new ebullition of scarlet vapor had just risen. "What does it mean?"

"Mean?" shrieked Hawkins, turning white and trembling in every limb.

"Yes, mean!" I repeated, shaking him. "Does it mean that—"

"It means that the cursed stuff has over-heated itself, after all. Lord! Lord! However did it happen? Something must have been impure. Something—"

"Never mind something. What will it do?"

"It-it-oh, my God, Griggs! It'll blow this house into ten thousand pieces within two minutes! Why-why, there's power enough in that little vat to demolish the Brooklyn Bridge, according to my calculations. There's enough explosive force in that much Hawkinsite to wreck every office building down-town!"

"And we're shut in here with it!"

"Yes! Yes! But let us—"

"Here! Suppose I turn the water into the thing?"

"Don't!" shouted the inventor wildly, battering at the door with his fists. "It would send us into kingdom come the second it touched! Don't stand there gaping, Griggs! Help me smash down this door! We must get out, man! We must get the women out! We must warn the neighborhood! Smash her, Griggs! Smash her! Smash the door!"

"Hawkins," I said, resignedly, as a vicious "sizzzz" announced the evolution of a great puff of red gas, "we can never do it in two minutes. Better not attract the rest of the household by your racket. They may possibly escape. Stop!"

"And stay here and be blown to blazes?" cried Hawkins. "No, sir! Down she goes!"

He seized a stool and dealt a crashing blow upon the panel. It splintered. He raised the stool again, and I could hear footsteps hurrying from below. I opened my mouth to shout a warning, and—

Well, I don't know that I can describe my sensations with any accuracy, vivid as they were at the time.

Some resistless force lifted me from the floor and propelled me toward the half shattered door. Dimly I noted that the same thing had happened to Hawkins. For the tiniest fraction of a second he seemed to be floating horizontally in the air. Then I felt my head collide with wood; the door parted, and I shot through the opening.

I saw the hallway before me; I remember observing with vague wonder that the gas-light went out just as it caught my eye. And then an awful flash blinded me, a roar of ten thousand cannon seemed to split my skull—and that was all.

My eyes opened in the Hawkins' drawing-room—or what remained of it. Our family physician was diligently winding a bandage around my right ankle. An important-looking youth in the uniform of an ambulance surgeon was stitching up a portion of my left forearm with cheerful nonchalance.

My brand new dress suit, I observed, had lost all semblance to an article of clothing; they had covered me, as I lay upon the couch, with a torn portiere.

[Illustration: "I saw the figure of a policeman standing tiptoe upon a satin chair.."]

The apartment was strangely dark. Here and there stood a lantern, such as are used by the fire department. In the dim light, I saw the figure of a policeman standing tiptoe upon a satin chair, plugging with soap the broken gaspipe which had once supported the Hawkins' chandelier.

The ceiling was all down. The walls were bare to the lath in huge patches. The windows had disappeared, and a chill autumn night wind swept through the room.

Bric-a-brac there was none, although here and there, in the mass of plaster on the floor, gleamed bits of glass and china which might once

have been parts of ornaments. Hawkinsite had evidently not been quite as powerful as its inventor had imagined, but it had certainly contained force enough to blow about ten thousand dollars out of Hawkins' bank account.

From the street came the hoarse murmur of a crowd. I twisted my head and my eyes fell upon two firemen in the hallway. They were dragging down a line of hose from somewhere up-stairs.

Across the room sat my wife and Mrs. Hawkins, disheveled, but alive and apparently unharmed. Hawkins himself leaned wearily back upon a divan, a huge bandage sewed about his forehead, one arm in a sling, and a police sergeant at his side, notebook in hand.

I felt a fiendish exultation at the sight of that official; for one fond moment I hoped that Hawkins was under arrest, that he was in for a life sentence.

"He's conscious, doctor," said the ambulance surgeon.

"Ah, so he is," said my own medical man, as the ladies rushed to my side. "Now, Mr. Griggs, do you feel any pain in the—"

"Oh, Griggs!" cried Hawkins, staggering toward me. "Have you come back to life? Say, Griggs, just think of it! My workshop's blown to smithereens! Every single note I ever made has been destroyed! Isn't it aw—"

In joyful chorus, my wife, Mrs. Hawkins and I said:

"Thank Heaven!"

"But think of it! My notes! The careful record of half a—"

"Herbert!" said his-considerably-better half. "That-will-do!"

"It-oh, well," groaned the inventor disconsolately, limping back to the divan and the somewhat astonished sergeant of police. Hawkins must have had some sort of influence with the press. Beyond a bare mention of the explosion, the matter never found its way into the newspapers.

After I got around again I tried in vain to spread the tale broadcast. I had some notion that the notoriety might cure Hawkins.

But, after all, I don't know that it would have done much good. I cannot think that a man whose inventive genius will survive an explosion of Hawkinsite is likely to be greatly worried by mere newspaper notoriety.

CHAPTER VI.

The name and the precise location of the hotel are immaterial. If you happened to be there that night you know very nearly all that occurred; if not, you have in all probability never heard of it, for I understand that the proprietors took every precaution against publicity.

Let it suffice, then, that the hotel is a prominent and a fashionable one, located somewhere between the Battery and the Bronx, and that Hawkins and I sat at a table in the restaurant on that particular evening and feasted.

The inventor had called at my office and dragged me away to dine with him, rather to my surprise, for I believed him to be somewhere in the South with his wife.

You see, after a certain explosion in their home, a month or two of reconstruction had been necessary; and I opine that Mrs. Hawkins had thought best to remove her husband while the repairs were being made. If he had been there it is dollars to doughnuts he would have invented a new bricklayer or a novel plastering machine and wrecked the whole place anew.

It was in reply to my query as to his presence in New York that Hawkins said:

"Well, you know, Griggs, it impressed me as very foolish from the first—that idea of my wife's of getting out of town while the place was being rebuilt."

"She may have had her reasons, Hawkins," I suggested.

"Possibly, although I fail to see what they were. When a man's own home is being built—or rebuilt—his place is on the spot, to see that everything is done right. Now, how, for instance, could I, away down in Georgia, know that those workmen were properly fitting up my new workshop?"

"Workshop?" I gasped. "Are you having another one built?"

"Certainly," snapped Hawkins. "I didn't mention it to Mrs. Hawkins, for she seems foolishly set against my continuing my scientific labors. But I fixed it on the sly with the architect. It's all finished now—has been for a week and over—power and everything else."

"Hawkins," I said, sadly, "are you going right on with your

experimenting?"

"Of course I am," replied the inventor, rather warmly. "It's altogether beyond your poor little brain, Griggs, but scientific work is the very breath of my life! I can't be happy without it; I'm not going to try. Why, all those seven weeks down South one idea simply roared in my head. I had to come home and perfect it—and I did. I've been in New York nearly three weeks, working on it," concluded Hawkins, complacently.

"And you've managed to perfect another accursed—" I began.

Just then I ceased speaking and watched Hawkins. His ears had pricked up like a horse's. I, too, listened and heard what seemed to be a heavy automobile outdoors; at any rate, it was the characteristic chugg-chugg-chugg of a touring car, and nowadays a commonplace sound enough.

But it affected Hawkins deeply. An ecstatic smile overspread his face, and he drew in his breath with a long, happy:

"A-a-a-a-ah!"

"Been buying a new auto, Hawkins?" I asked, carelessly.

"Auto be hanged!" replied the inventor, energetically. "Do you imagine that an automobile is making that noise? I guess not! That's my new invention, Griggs!"

"What!" I cried. "Here? In this hotel?"

"Right here in this hotel—right under our feet," said Hawkins, proudly. "That noise comes from the Hawkins Gasowashine!"

I think I stared open-mouthed at Hawkins for a moment or two; I know that I leaned back and shook with as violent mirth as might be permitted in so solemnly proper a resort.

"Well, does that impress you as particularly humorous?" demanded Hawkins, angrily.

"Hawkins," I said, "why don't you start in and write nonsense verse? There's a fortune waiting for you."

"I must say, Griggs," rejoined the inventor, sourly, "that you have very little comprehension of the advertising value of a good name. Who under the sun would ever remember the 'Hawkins Gasolene Washing Machine,' if they saw it in a magazine? But—'The Gasowashine'!"

"So it's a washing machine?"

"Of course. It's the one perfect contrivance for washing and drying dishes; and let me tell you the basic principle of that machine breathes genius, if I do say it. Why, Griggs, just think! You can pile in three or four hundred dishes, simply start the motor, and then sit down while the clean, dry dishes are piled neatly on the table."

"And they're really using it here? It-it works?" I asked, wonderingly.

"Well, they're going to use it," said Hawkins, rising. "I have consented to allow them to try my model. It arrived here just before we did."

"Hawkins, have we been sitting right over that thing all this time?"

"Don't try to be comic, Griggs," said the inventor, bruskiy. "I'm going down to see who's fooling with that motor. It should not have been touched, although I must say it's a satisfaction to sit in a first-class place like this and hear my own machinery running. Are you coming?"

I will admit that I was curious about the contrivance. I followed Hawkins through the crowded dining-room to a door in the back.

Then, dodging a dozen hurrying waiters, we made our way down an incline into the kitchen and through that apartment, past steam tables and ranges and pots and kettles and other paraphernalia of the cuisine.

At the farther end of the room stood a massive affair of oak. It looked, as nearly as it resembled any other thing on earth, like a piano box; but on each side, near the top, was a huge fly-wheel, the two being apparently fastened to the ends of an axle.

For the rest of the mechanism, it was all concealed. I rightly surmised the monstrosity to be the Gasowashine.

The fly-wheels were revolving slowly, and this seemed to irritate Hawkins.

"Good-evening, Mr. Macdougall," he said to a puzzled looking gentleman, who stood eying the affair. "Mr. Griggs, Mr. Macdougall, the manager. So some one started it, did he?"

"One of the 'buses happened to touch it, and it started itself," replied the manager, gazing on the contrivance. "It's quite safe to have about, is it not, Mr. Hawkins?"

"Safe? Certainly it is safe."

"I mean to say, it won't injure the dishes?" the gentleman continued, with a doubtful smile. "You see, we have filled the main compartment with hot water, as you directed, and put in three hundred pieces of our best crockery."

"Mr. Macdougall," said Hawkins icily, "if one dish is broken, I'll pay for it and make you a present of the machine, if you say so. If you do not wish to make the test, doubtless there are other hotel men in New York who will appreciate its advantages."

"Not at all, not at all," cried the manager. "I appreciate fully—"

"All right," said Hawkins shortly. "Now, the dishes are all in, are they? Very well. I'll explain the thing to Mr. Griggs and then start it. You see, Griggs, the dishes are in here."

He tapped the side of the big box.

"When I turn on the power, they are thoroughly rubbed and soused by my Automatic Scrubber—a separate patent, by the way—and then they reach this spot."

He rapped upon the box near the end.

"Here they are forced against a continuous dish-towel, which runs across rollers all the time. Just think of it! Sixty yards of dish-towel, rolling over and over and over! After that—but you shall see how they look after that. I'll start her."

He twisted a valve of some sort. The chugg-chugging became more pronounced, and the fly-wheels revolved with very perceptibly increased rapidity.

From somewhere inside the thing emanated a gentle rattle and swish of crockery and suds. Hawkins stood back and regarded it proudly.

"There's another great point about the Gasowashine, too," he said. "As you see, it's too heavy to shove from place to place. What do we do?"

"Leave it where it is," I hazarded.

"Not at all. We simply invert it! The whole business is water-tight. Every door fits so closely that it's impossible for a drop to escape. Now, if I wished to move it to the other end of this room, I should simply turn the Gasowashine upside down, allow it to rest upon the fly-wheels, which keep on revolving of course, and steer it wherever I desired."

"And so you might go a little better and put on a saddle and a steering-wheel and take a ride around the Park while you were washing dishes?" I suggested, somewhat to the manager's amusement.

"Possibly you think it's impracticable?" Hawkins rapped out. "Perhaps you don't realize that there's a five horsepower motor running that?"

"There, there, Hawkins," I said soothingly, "if you say that Washy-washine is good for a trans-kitchen on a transcontinental tour, I'll take your word for it."

"You don't have to!" cried the inventor wrathfully. "I'll demonstrate it. See here, you!"

This to a corpulent French gentleman in white, who had just flipped an omelette to a platter and sent it upon its way. "Come and give me a hand here. Just help turn this thing over."

"_Comme cela?_" inquired the astonished cook, making pantomime with his hands.

"Exactly. That's right. Catch hold of the other side and don't let go until I tell you."

The cook complied. Really, the Gasowashine seemed to turn more easily than might have been expected from its huge bulk.

A strain or two, a puffed command from Hawkins, an ominous sliding about of hidden dishes, and the machine lurched forward, poised a moment on its edge and turned quite gently, so that the wheels approached the floor.

"Now, easy! Easy!" cried Hawkins. "Don't let the wheels down until I tell you, and don't let go till I give the word. Now down! Down! Gently."

The cook seemed to be feeling for a new grip.

"Here! What are you doing?" cried the inventor. "Don't touch any of those handles."

"It is that I seek a place for ze hand," murmured the cook apologetically.

"Well, find it and let her down. Got your grip?"

"Aha! I have eet!" announced the Frenchman, clutching one of the brass knobs.

"All right. Down!"

Down went the Gasowashine. And a very small fraction of one second later things began to happen.

Each of Hawkins' inventions possesses a latent devil. You have only to brush against the handle or the valve or the string, or whatever it may be that connects him with the outer world, and the demon awakes.

In this case, the cook must have pinched the tail of the devil of the Gasowashine, for he sprang into action with a rush.

"Is it to release the hold?" asked the Frenchman as the wheels touched the floor.

"No, not till I-hey!" cried Hawkins, starting back in amazement.

"Our-our dishes!" ejaculated the manager breathlessly.

The Gasowashine and the cook were traveling across the kitchen together. The Frenchman, with remarkable presence of mind, was behind the machine and dragging back with all his might; but as well could he have hauled to a standstill the locomotive of the Empire State Express.

The Gasowashine, puffing heavily as any racing auto, had plans of its own and was executing them to the accompaniment of a simply appalling rattle of crockery.

"Don't let go! Don't let go!" cried Hawkins. "Keep hold, my man!"

"I do! I do! _Mais, mon Dieu!_" called the Frenchman jerkily.

"But, Mr. Hawkins," gasped the manager as we hurried after, "what will become of our china?"

"The devil take your china!" snapped Hawkins, forgetful of his recent guarantee. "If they run into the wall, it'll break the motor!"

They were not going to run into the wall. The Gasowashine approached the side of the apartment, swerved easily to the left, and made for the incline which led to the hotel dining-room.

"Good gracious!" screamed the manager. "Not up there! Knock that thing over on its side, Henri!"

"Don't you do it, Henri," cried Hawkins. "If you do it'll smash."

"Let it smash!" roared the manager. "Throw it over, Henri!"

"But I cannot," gasped the Frenchman as the Gasowashine sets its wheels upon the incline.

"Here! Somebody get in front of that thing!" commanded Macdougall. "Don't let it go up. Knock it over!"

"If you knock that over!" stormed Hawkins, springing to the side of his contrivance and feeling excitedly for the valve which should shut off the supply of gasolene.

Two or three waiters, having in mind that their jobs depended upon Macdougall's approbation rather than Hawkins' strove to obey the former's injunction. They ran to the fore end of the Gasowashine and seized it and pushed back upon it and sideways.

And did the Gasowashine mind? Hardly.

It bowled the first man over so neatly that he fell squarely beneath one of his fellows, who was descending loaded with dishes. It rolled one of its wheels across the toes of the next antagonist, and drew from him a shriek which sent people in the dining-room to their feet.

After that *coup-*, the Gasowashine had things all its own way on the incline.

The French cook still maintained his hold. Hawkins pranced alongside and fumbled feverishly, first with that knob, then with this little wheel.

Several of them he managed to move, but to no good end. Whether excitement had confused Hawkins' mind on the details of his invention I cannot say; but certainly, far from controlling the Gasowashine, he made matters worse.

The machine puffed harder, the wheels revolved more rapidly, and the whole affair climbed steadily toward the dining-room, dragging the tenacious cook along the incline in a sitting posture.

Thus was made the first public appearance of the Gasowashine, to the utter amazement of some hundred diners.

Bursting through the doors, it snorted for a moment, and seemed to be considering the long rows of tables before it. Several waiters, gasping with astonishment at the uncouth apparition, ran to check its progress.

That seemed to stir the Gasowashine anew. It emitted a sharp puff of rage and plunged headlong forward.

Hawkins pranced along by its side, half turning as he ran to cry:

"Now, just—just make way, ladies and gentlemen, please. It's not at all dangerous. Just make way."

They made way, without losing any undue amount of time.

One or two women fainted unostentatiously.

Most of them, men and women, scrambled away from the main aisle, which seemed to have been selected by the Gasowashine for its further performances.

"Hawkins," I panted when I had managed to regain breath, "why don't you knock the cursed thing over?"

"There, there, there, Griggs," sizzled Hawkins, dashing the perspiration from his eyes. "I've almost control of it now. I'll just shut off this—"

He gave a powerful twist at one of the handles.

"That'll—" he began.

"Pouff!" roared the Gasowashine, rearing up and lunging wildly from side to side for a moment.

Then it started down the aisle in earnest. Bang! Bang! Bang! echoed from the crockery inside. Puff! Puff! Puff! said the motor, driving its hardest.

[Illustration: "_I shall let go? Yes?_"]

"_Ciel!_" wailed the cook "I shall let it go? Yes?"

"No!" shouted Hawkins, running beside the unhappy man. "In just a second it'll—"

It did, although not perhaps what Hawkins expected.

I saw a little door in the side of the infernal machine flip open. I perceived a shower of finely subdivided crockery hanging over the cook for a moment.

Then the bits of china and some two or three gallons of greasy water descended upon the Frenchman and the door flipped to once more. The Gasowashine had dislodged the cook and was free to pursue its wanderings unhindered.

And certainly it made the most of the opportunity.

For three or four yards it bumped along, ramming its top-heavy nose into the carpet and seeming to become more and more enraged at its slow progress. Then it paused a moment and pawed at the floor with its whizzing wheels.

I fancied that I could upset it then, and sprang forward to do so, regardless of Hawkins.

I might have known better. I was within perhaps ten feet of the Gasowashine when another door, this time a smaller one toward the front, squeaked for a moment and then flew open. Simultaneously a bolt of something white shot forth and made for my head.

Regardless of appearances, I dropped flat to the floor and wriggled out of the danger zone.

When I arose, I realized what new disaster had taken place. It was the sixty yards of dish-towel this time!

Presumably, a roller had smashed and released the thing; at any rate, there it was, yard after yard of it, trailing after the Gasowashine as it thumped energetically toward the street door.

And that was not the worst. The end of the toweling entwined itself about one of the dining-tables and held there. The table went over, collided with the next and emptied that, too.

Then the next followed and the next, each new crash echoed by the frightened squeals of the guests, now lined up against the opposite walls.

The tenth table, with its load of crockery and glassware, had been sent to destruction before Macdougall, the manager, finally gained the dining-room. Tears rose to his eyes as he made a rapid survey of the havoc, but he kept his wits and shouted:

"Knock it over! Somebody knock it over!" A big military-looking man in evening clothes sprang forward. I offered a prayer for him and held my breath. He rushed to the Gasowashine, seized it with his mighty arms, and gave a shove.

"M-m-m-mister," quavered Hawkins, wriggling from under one of the tables, "don't do that! The g-g-g-gasolene tank!"

But it was done. With a dull crash, the only perfect machine for washing and drying dishes fell to its side. The big man smiled at it.

And then—well, then a sheet of flame seemed to envelope the unfortunate. A heavy boom shook the apartment, the big glass door splintered musically and fell inward, the lights in that end of the room were extinguished.

Then followed the screams of the terrified guests, the patter of numberless fragments of crockery and countless drops of filthy dishwater as they reached the floor. And then the big man picked himself up some twenty feet from the spot where he had dared the wrath of the Gasowashine.

And Hawkins standing majestically in the wreck of a table, with one foot in a salad bowl and the other oozing nesselrode pudding, while an unbroken stream of mayonnaise dressing meandered down the back of his coat—Hawkins, standing thus, shook his fist at the big man and, above the turmoil, shouted at him:

”I told you so!”

Such was the fate of the first, last, and only Gasowashine.

Bellboys, clerks, and waiters pelted with hand grenades its smoldering remains and squirted chemical fire-extinguishers upon it; but the Gasowashine’s day was done. Its turbulent spirit had passed to another sphere.

Later, when some measure of order had been restored to the dining-room, when the door had been boarded up and the inquisitive police satisfied and the street crowd dispersed; when a sympathetic waiter had partially cleansed Hawkins, and that gentleman had suggested that we might as well depart, he received a peremptory invitation to call upon the proprietor in his private office.

The proprietor was a calm, cold man. He viewed Hawkins with an inscrutable stare for some time before he spoke.

”I hardly know, Mr. Hawkins,” he said at last, ”whom to blame for this.”

”Well, I know! That hulking lummoX who knocked over my—”

”At any rate, the machine was yours, I fear you will have to pay for the damage.”

”I will, eh?” blustered Hawkins. ”Well, I told your man Macdougall that if one dish was broken I’d pay for it. Here’s the dollar for the dish! Come, Griggs.”

”Um-um. So you refuse to settle?” smiled the proprietor.

"Absolutely and positively!" declared Hawkins.

"Well, I think that, pending a suit for damages, I can have you held on a charge of disorderly conduct," mused the calm man. "Mr. Macdougall, will you kindly call an officer?"

Hawkins wilted at that. His checkbook came forth, and the string of figures he was compelled to write made my heart bleed.

When he had exchanged the slip for a receipt, Hawkins and I made for the side door and slunk out into the night.

The Gasowashine, I presume, or such combustible fragments as remained, found an inglorious grave next day in the ranges of the same kitchen which had witnessed the start of its short little life.

CHAPTER VII.

Perhaps some of the blame should rest upon the barbaric habit of having Sunday dinner in the middle of the afternoon.

Had it been evening when Hawkins and his better half sat down to dinner with us, it would not, naturally, have been daylight; and much unpleasantness might have been avoided, for the gas had not yet been turned on in the modeled Hawkins residence, and an inspection would have been impossible.

Again, I may have started the trouble myself by bringing up the subject of the renovations.

"Yes, the work's all done," said Hawkins, with a more genial air than he usually exhibited when that topic was touched. "I tell you, it's a model home now."

"Particularly in containing no new inventions by its owner," added Mrs. Hawkins.

"Oh, those may come later," said the gifted inventor, casting a complacent wink in my direction.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," replied the lady rather tartly. "We escaped with our lives when the house was wrecked, but next time—"

"Madam," flared Hawkins, "if you knew what that house—"

Just here my wife broke in with a spasmodic remark anent the doings of the Russians in Manchuria, and a discussion of the merits of Hawkins' inventions was happily averted.

But the spunky light didn't die out of Hawkins' eye. He appeared to be nursing something beside wrath, and when we arose from the table he remarked shortly:

"Come up to the house, Griggs, and smoke a cigar while we look it over."

"And note the charm of the inventionless home," supplemented his wife.

"Inventionless fiddlestick!" snapped Hawkins as he slammed the door behind us. "It's a wonder to me that women weren't created either with sense or without tongues."

I made no comment and we walked in silence to the Hawkins house.

It had been done over in a style which must have made Hawkins' bank account look like an Arabian grain field after a particularly bad locust year; but beyond noting the general beauty of the decorations, I found nothing remarkable until we reached the second floor.

There, as we gazed from the back windows, it struck me that something familiar had departed, and I asked:

"What's become of the fire-escape?"

"Don't you see, eh?" said the inventor, with a prodigiously mysterious smile.

"Hardly. Have you made it invisible?"

"No and yes," chuckled Hawkins. "What would you say, Griggs, to a fire-escape that you kept indoors until it was needed?"

"I should say 'nay, nay,' if any one wanted me to use it."

"No, I mean—oh, come up-stairs and I'll show it to you at once."

"Show me what, Hawkins?" I cried, detaining him with a firm hand. "Is it another contrivance? Has it a motor? Does it use gasolene or gunpowder or dynamite?"

"No, it does not!" said the inventor gruffly, trudging toward the top of the house.

"There!" he exclaimed when we had reached the upper floor. "That's it. What do you think of it?"

It was a device of strange appearance. It seemed to be a huge clothes-basket, such as is used for transportation of the family "wash," and it was piled with what appeared to be the remains of as many white sun-umbrellas as could have been collected at half a dozen seaside resorts.

"What is it?" I said with a blank smile. "Junk?"

"No, it's not junk. That mass of ribs and white silk which looks like junk to your unaccustomed eye constitutes a set of aeroplanes or wings."

"But the other thing is merely the common or domestic variety of wash-basket, is it not?"

"Well—er—yes," admitted Hawkins with cold dignity. "That happened to be the most suitable thing for my purpose in this experimental model. Now, you see, when the wings are spread the basket is suspended beneath just as the car of a balloon is suspended from a gas-bag, and—"

"Aha! I see it all now!" I cried. "You fill the basket, point it in the right direction, and it flaps its wings and flies away to the washlady!"

"That, Griggs," sneered Hawkins, "is about the view a poor little brain like yours, permeated with cheap humor, would take. Really, I don't suppose you could guess the purpose or the name of that thing if you tried a week."

"Candidly, I don't think I could. What is it?"

"It's the Hawkins Anti-Fire-Fly!" said the inventor.

"The Hawkins—what?" I ejaculated.

"The Anti-Fire-Fly!" repeated Hawkins enthusiastically. "Say, Griggs, how that will sound in an advertisement: 'Fly Away From Fire With The Anti-Fire-Fly!' Great, isn't it?"

"So it's a fire escape?"

"Certainly," chuckled Hawkins, digging around among the ribs and bringing into tangible shape what looked like several sets of huge bird-wings. "No more climbing down red-hot ladders through belching flames! No more children being thrown from fifth story windows! No, siree! All we have to do now is to place the Anti-Fire-Fly on the window-sill, spread the wings, jump into the basket, push her off, and—"

"And drop to instant death!"

"And float gently away from the fire and down to the earth!" concluded Hawkins, opening the window and shoving out the basket until it fairly hung over the back yard. "Just watch me."

"See here!" I cried. "You're not going to get into that thing?"

"I'm not, eh? You watch me!"

Hawkins had clambered into the basket before I could lay a hand on him.

"Now!" he cried, giving a push with his foot.

My breathing apparatus seemed to go on strike. Hawkins, basket, wings, and all dropped from the window.

For an instant they went straight toward the earth; then, like a parachute opening, the wings spread gracefully, the descent slackened, and Hawkins floated down, down, down—until he landed in the center of the yard without a jar.

Really, I was amazed. It seemed to be either a special dispensation of Providence or an invention of Hawkins' which really worked.

A minute or two later he had labored back to my side, up the stairs, with the aerial fire-escape on his back.

"There!" he exclaimed. "What do you think of that?"

"It certainly seems to be a success."

"Well, rather! Now come up to the roof and have a drop with me. We'll go into the street this time, and—"

"Thank you, Hawkins," I said, positively. "Don't count me in on that. I'll wait for the fire before dabbling with your Anti-Fire-Fly."

"Oh, well, come with me, anyway. I'm going down once more. You've no idea of the sensation."

It was a considerable feat of engineering to persuade the Anti-Fire-Fly into passing through the scuttle, but Hawkins finally accomplished it, and pushed the contrivance to the edge of the roof.

"Now that thing will carry a small family with ease and safety," he said proudly. "Just sit down in the basket and feel the roominess. Oh, don't be afraid. I'll come, too."

"Yes, it's very nice," I said somewhat nervously, after crouching beside him for a moment. "I think I'll get out now."

"All ri—oh! Here! Wait!" cried Hawkins, grabbing my coat and pulling me back. "Sit down!"

"What for?"

"The—the—the wings!" stuttered the inventor. "The—the wind!"

"Great Scott!" I shouted as a sudden breeze caught the wings and tilted the basket far to one side. "Let me out!"

"No, no!" shrieked Hawkins wildly. "You'll break your neck, man! We're right on the edge of the roof now, and—"

And we were over the edge!

There was the street—miles below! Sickening dread choked me. I closed my eyes and gripped the basket as the accursed thing swayed from side to side and threatened every instant to precipitate us on the hard stones.

But it grew steadier presently. I looked about.

There was Hawkins hanging on for dear life, and white as death, but still serene. There, also, were numerous graveled roofs—some twenty feet below.

We were going up! Also, I was startled to note that the high wind was driving us down-town at a rapid pace.

"See here, Hawkins!" I said. "What does this mean?"

"M-m-means that a big wind has caught us," replied the inventor with a sickly smile.

"And when do you suppose it's going to let go of us?"

"Well—we—we may be able to catch one of those high roofs over there," murmured Hawkins with assurance that did not reassure. "You—you know we can't go up very far, Griggs. This thing was not built for flying."

"For anything that wasn't made for the purpose, it's doing wonders," I retorted. Then a sudden puff sent us up fully ten feet. "Heavens! There goes our chance at those roofs!"

"Dear me! So it does!" muttered the inventor as we sailed gracefully over the chimney-tops. "How unfortunate!"

"It'll be a lot more unfortunate when we pitch down into the street!" I snarled.

"Now, Griggs," said Hawkins argumentatively as we sped down-town on the steadily rising wind, "why do you always take this pessimistic view of things? Can't you see—is it beyond your little mental scope to realize that we have fairly fallen over a great discovery, something that men have been seeking for ages? Don't you comprehend, from the very fact of our being up here and still rising that these wings accidentally embody the vital principles of the dirigible—"

"Oh, dry up!" I growled as we flitted swiftly past a church steeple.

Hawkins regarded me sadly, and I sadly regarded the street below and tried to assimilate the fact that we were two hundred feet above the ground and rising at every puff of wind; that we were in a crazy clothes-basket, suspended from a crazier pair of wings, absolutely at the mercy of the breeze and likely at any moment to drop to eternal smash!

I did realize, without any effort, that my lower limbs were developing excruciating shooting pains from the cramped position.

The time passed very slowly. The houses below passed with astounding rapidity.

I thought of our wives, sitting calmly in my home, ignorant of our plight. I wondered what their sentiments would be when some kindly ambulance surgeon had brought home such fragments of Hawkins and me as might have been collected with a dust-pan and brush.

I wondered whether the accursed Anti-Fire-Fly would dump us out and flutter away into eternity, to leave our fate unexplained, or whether it would accompany us to our doom and be found gloating over the respective grease-spots that would represent all that was mortal of Hawkins and myself.

And at about this point in my meditations, I noted that we were sailing over Union Square.

"Isn't it fine?" cried Hawkins enthusiastically. "You never came down-town like this before, Griggs."

"I never expect to again, Hawkins," I sighed.

"Why not? Why, Griggs, this thing is only the nucleus of my future airship, and yet see how it floats! Oh, I've thought it all out in the last five minutes. It's astonishing that it never occurred to me

before. Now, these wings, you see, are so constructed—”

”See here, Hawkins,” I said, ”do you mean to say that you expect to get out of this thing alive?”

”Certainly,” replied the inventor in astonishment. ”There’s no danger. I can see that now, although I was a trifle startled at first. It’s only a matter of minutes when we shall go near enough to one of those big office buildings to grab it and stop ourselves.”

”And clamber down the side—twenty or thirty stories?”

”And even if we can’t land, we shan’t fall. The construction of these wings is such—”

”Oh, hang the construction of your wings!” I cried. ”We’re going right toward the bay—suppose the wind dies down and lets us into the water?”

”Well, these wings are water-proof, you know,” said Hawkins. ”They might—”

”Yes, and the bay might dry up, so that we could walk back if we escaped being broken in pieces, Hawkins,” I sneered.

Hawkins subsided. The breeze did not.

It was one of the most impolitely persistent breezes I have ever encountered. It seemed bent on landing us in New York harbor, and before many minutes we were suspended high above that expansive, and in some circumstances, charming body of water.

[Illustration: ”_Before many minutes we were suspended high above that expansive, and in some circumstances charming, body of water..”]

Furthermore, having wafted us something like a quarter of a mile from shore, it proceeded to die out in a manner which was, to say the least, disheartening.

Hawkins grew paler by perceptible shades as we progressed, ever nearer the water and farther from hope; and it was not until I opened my mouth to vent a few last invidious criticisms of him and his methods that the inventor’s face brightened.

”By Jove, Griggs! Look! That ferry-boat! That fellow on the roof! He’s got a boat-hook! Hey! Hey! Hey! you!”

The individual gazed aloft and nearly collapsed with astonishment.

"Catch us!" bawled the inventor frantically. "Catch the basket with that hook! We want to come aboard! Hurry up!"

The boat was going in our direction and rather faster. The man on the roof seemed to comprehend. He reached up with his hook. He leaped a couple of times in vain.

And then we felt a shock which told of our capture! I breathed a long, happy sigh.

In dealing with Hawkins' inventions, long, happy sighs are premature unless you are positive that your entire anatomical structure is complete, and likewise certain that the contrivance lies at your feet in a condition of total wreck.

The basket was suspended from a thin, steel frame, from which several dozen stout cords rose to that idiotic pair of wings. When we were fairly caught, Hawkins cried:

"Now, Griggs, stand up and catch the frame and pull the whole business down with us. And you, down there, pull hard! Pull hard, now!"

I seized the steel frame on one side, Hawkins on the other, and we pulled. And the man with the boat-hook pulled. And at the psychological moment the wind rose afresh and pulled at the wings with a mighty pull!

Some seconds of dizzy swirling in the air, and the clothes-basket portion of the Anti-Fire-Fly lay on the roof of the ferry-boat, while Hawkins and I hung far above, entangled in the cords and clutching them wildly and rising steadily once more!

"Great Caesar's ghost!" gurgled the inventor. "This is awful!"

"Awful!" I gasped when breath had returned. "It's—it's—"

"Lord! Lord! We're going straight for Staten Island. Don't move, Griggs."

"I can't," I said. "I'm caught tight here. Good-by, Hawkins."

"We're—we're not done for yet," quavered that individual. "We may hit land. But isn't—isn't it terrible?"

"Oh, no," I groaned. "It's all right. No more climbing down red-hot ladders through belching flames! No more throwing children from—"

"Don't joke, Griggs," wailed Hawkins. "I will say I'm sorry I got you into this."

"Thank you, Hawkins," I said, nearly strangled by a cord which persisted in twisting itself about my neck. "So am I."

Conversation lagged after that. For my part, I was too dazed and too firmly enmeshed in the cords to say much.

I fancy that the same applied to Hawkins, but he happened to be facing ahead, and now and then he called back bulletins of our progress.

"Getting nearer the island," he announced after some ten minutes of the agony.

A little later: "Thank Heaven! We're almost over land!"

And still later, when I had been choked and twisted almost into insensibility by the eccentric dives of the affair and the consequent tightening of the cords, he revived me with:

"By George, Griggs, we're sinking toward land!"

I managed to look downward. Hawkins had told the truth. The wind was indeed going down, and with it the remains of the Anti-Fire-Fly.

Beneath appeared a big factory, its chimney belching forth black smoke in disregard of the Sabbath, and we seemed likely to land within its precincts.

"I knew it! I knew it!" Hawkins cried joyfully. "We're safe, after all, just as I said. We'll drop just outside the fence."

"Thank the Lord," I murmured.

"No! No! We'll drop right on that heap of dirt!" predicted Hawkins excitedly. "Yes, sir, that's where we'll drop. D'ye see that fellow wheeling a wheelbarrow toward the pile? Hey!"

The man glanced up in amazement.

"Farther down every minute!" pursued Hawkins. "I knew we'd be all right! Maybe the Anti-Fire-Fly isn't such a bad thing after all, eh?"

"Maybe not," I sighed. "But I'll take the red-hot ladder."

"Go ahead and take it," chattered the inventor. "We're not thirty feet from the ground and steering straight for that dirt-pile. Yes, sir, the wind's gone down completely. Hooray!"

"Hey, youse!" shouted the man with the wheelbarrow, somewhat excitedly.

"Well?" bawled Hawkins.

"Steer away from it!" continued the workman, waving his arms at the pile.

"We can't steer," replied Hawkins cheerfully. "But it's all right."

"The poile! The poile! Sure, we've just drew the foire, an' thim's the hot coals! Be careful o' the cinder poile!"

"What did he say?" asked Hawkins superciliously.

"'Be careful of the cinder pile,' I think."

"Oh, we won't hurt your old cinder pile!" called the inventor jocosely, as the wreck of the Anti-Fire-Fly swooped down with a rush.

"But the cinders!" howled the man. "Bedad! They're into it! Mike! Mike! Bring the hose! The hose!"

And we were into it.

A final rush of air and we struck the pile with a thud. And for my part, I had no sooner landed than I bounced to my feet with a shriek, for that cinder pile was about the hottest proposition it has ever been my misfortune to meet.

The cords were all about me, and as I pulled wildly in one direction, I could feel Hawkins pulling as wildly in the opposite.

"Let go! Let go, Griggs!" he screamed. "Come my way! Lord! I'm all afire! Come, quick!"

"I'm not going to climb back over that infernal heap!" I shouted. "You come this way!"

"But my feet! They're burning, and—"

A mighty stream of water knocked me headlong to the ground. Sizzling, steaming on the red-hot cinders, it caught Hawkins and hurled his panting person to the other side, Anti-Fire-Fly and all. Mike had arrived with the hose.

After a period of wallowing in water and mud I regained my feet.

Hawkins was already standing a little distance away, torn, scorched, drenched, black with cinders and staring wild-eyed about him.

"Why—why—Griggs," he mumbled, "what—did—we—"

"Oh, we flew away from fire with the Anti-Fire-Fly!" I said.

Such was the end of the Anti-Fire-Fly.

Attired in such of our own raiment as had survived the cinder pile and the hose, and in other bits of clothing contributed by kindly factory workmen, we took the next boat for New York, and a cab thereafter.

We reached home in time to see the ladies mounting the Hawkins' steps, presumably to investigate the reason for our prolonged inspection.

For a few moments they seemed quite incapable of speech. Mrs. Hawkins was the first to regain the use of her tongue.

"Herbert," she said in an ominously calm tone, "what was it this time?"

Hawkins smiled foolishly.

"It was the Hawkins Anti-Fire-Fly," I said spitefully. "Fly away from fire with the Anti-Fire-Fly, you know. Tell your wife about it, Hawkins."

Then Mrs. Hawkins addressed her husband and said—but let that pass.

We have all the essential facts of the case as it is. Moreover, a successful author told me last week that unhappy endings are in the worst possible taste just now.

CHAPTER VIII.

Hawkins and his wife had been just one month in their new house.

My memory on that point is particularly clear, for the Executive Committee of the Ladies' Missionary Society met at Hawkins' home the very day they moved in officially; and it had been hanging over me, more or less, that the next assembly of that body was to be held at my own residence.

Not that I am in any way unsympathetic as to church work and benighted savages and such matters; but when half a dozen women get together and discuss a few heathen and a great many hats and similar things, the solitary man in the house is apt to feel—

At any rate, when I saw Mrs. Hawkins enter my door that evening, the first of the Executive Committee to arrive, I experienced a sinking

sensation for the moment. Then I secured my hat, mumbled a few excuses, and disappeared, to see how Hawkins was spending the evening.

The inventor himself answered my ring.

"Ah, Griggs," he remarked. "Committee talk you out of the house?"

"Something of the sort," I admitted.

"Glad you came in. There's something I want to—but hang up your hat."

"Hawkins," I said, closing the door, "why do you pay a large overfed English gentleman to stand around the premises if it's necessary for you to answer the bell? I'm not much on style, you know, but—"

"William? Oh, it's his night out," laughed Hawkins. "I believe the cook and the girls have gone, too, for that matter."

"Then we're altogether alone?"

"Yes," said the inventor comfortably, pushing forward one of the big library chairs for my accommodation, "all alone in the house."

"And it's a mighty nice house," I mused, gazing into the next apartment, the dining-room. "That's a splendid room, Hawkins."

"Isn't it?" smiled Hawkins, drawing back the heavy curtains rather proudly. "Most of the little wrinkles are my own ideas, too."

"That sideboard?" I asked, indicating a frail-looking but artistic bit of furniture built into the wall.

"That, too—combination of sideboard and silver-safe."

"Safe!" I laughed. "You don't keep the silver in there?"

"Why not?"

"My dear man, any one could pry that door off with a pen-knife."

"Admitted. But supposing your 'any one' to be a burglar, he'd have to get to the door before he could pry it off, would he not, Griggs?"

"Burglars do not, as a rule, find great difficulty in entering the average house," I suggested.

"Aha! That's just it—the average house!" cried the inventor. "This isn't the average house, Griggs. The burglar who tries to get into this particular house is distinctly up against it!"

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir! The crook that attempts a nocturnal entrance here has my sincere and heartfelt sympathy."

"Hawkins' Patent Automatic Burglar Alarm?" I suggested.

"What the deuce are you sneering at?" snapped the inventor. "No, there's no patent burglar alarm in this house."

"Hawkins' Steel Dynamite-Proof Shutters?"

Hawkins ignored the remark and busied himself lighting a cigar.

"Hawkins' Triple-Expansion Spring-Gun?" I hazarded once more.

"Oh, drop it! Drop it!" cried Hawkins. "Positively, Griggs, your efforts at humor disgust one. In some ways, you are as bad as a woman. Go back and sit with the Executive Committee."

"What's the connection?"

"Why, the thing I expected to show you in a few minutes is the very same one which my wife fought against for two weeks, before she let me put it into operation peacefully!" Hawkins burst out. "There's where the connection comes in between your degenerate little wits and those of the generality of women."

"If it was an invention, I don't blame your wife one little bit, Hawkins," I said. "I can see just how she must have felt about—"

"There's the evening paper, if you want to read," spat forth the inventor, poking the sheet across the library table.

Therewith he turned his back squarely upon me and settled down to a book.

It wasn't polite of Hawkins.

Indeed, after a short space the situation waxed distinctly uncomfortable; and although I am pretty well accustomed to the inventor's moods, I must admit that in another five minutes I should have cleared out had it not been for a rather unexpected happening.

Hawkins was sitting near the window—in fact, his chair brushed the hangings. As I sat gazing pensively at the back of his neck, a sudden breeze swayed the curtains above him.

There was an undue amount of swishing overhead, it seemed to me. Something near the top of the window, and concealed by the hangings,

rattled distinctly; simultaneously a gong struck sharply somewhere up-stairs.

Hawkins whirled about, a most remarkable expression on his lately sullen countenance. As nearly as I could analyze it, it was a mixture of joy, excitement, and trembling expectancy.

"One!" he exclaimed.

The bell struck again.

"Two!" cried Hawkins. "By Jove! That's—"

Crash!

Out of the curtains something dropped heavily on the inventor!

For an instant it held the appearance of a grain sack, but there was something distinctly solid about it, too, for it dealt Hawkins a resounding whack upon his cranium before it rolled to the floor.

"Phew!" he gasped, sinking back into his chair caressing the bump with an unsteady hand. "That—that did startle me, Griggs!"

"I shouldn't wonder," I smiled. "What on earth did you have concealed up there?"

"Aha! You'd never guess," remarked Hawkins, his ill-humor departed.

"No, I don't believe I should," I mused, staring at the pile of canvas on the floor. "Did the painters leave it?"

"They did not," replied Hawkins coldly. "That, Griggs, is the Hawkins Crook-Trap!"

"Hawkins-Crook-Trap!" I repeated.

"That's what I said," pursued the gentleman. "Possibly—now—it may not be past your understanding to grasp why I feel so secure about that flimsy little silver-safe."

"I think I see. The burglar, presumably, comes in at the window, is knocked senseless by your trap, and next morning you find and capture him as you go down to breakfast?"

"Nothing of the sort. Look here." Hawkins picked up the affair.

As he grasped the end, the thing hung downward and showed itself to be a long canvas bag, fully large enough to contain the upper half of the average man. It was distended, too, by ribs, and appeared to be of

considerable weight.

"There she is—just a bag, telescoped and hung on a frame above the window. The burglar steps in, the bag is released, drops over him, these circular steel ribs contract and clutch his arms like a vise—and there you are! How's that for an idea, Griggs?"

"Looks good," I assented.

"Moreover, the same spring which releases the ribs breaks a bottle of chloroform," continued the inventor enthusiastically. "It runs into a hood, is pressed against the burglar's nose, and two minutes later the man is stark and stiff on the floor!"

"Meanwhile the annunciator bell tells me what window has been opened. I ring up the police—and it's all over with the man who tried to break in."

"It sounds all right," I admitted. "Why didn't it do all that just now?"

"Just now? Oh—you mean—just now?" stammered the inventor. "Well, it did do practically all of that, didn't it? The window wasn't opened, anyway—it was the breeze that knocked down the thing. Furthermore, the ones on this floor aren't adjusted yet—I only got them from the fellow who made them to-day.

"But up-stairs they're all fixed—chloroform and all, ready for the burglar. I tell you, Griggs, when this crook-trap of mine is on every window in New York City, there'll be a sensation in criminal circles!"

"Very likely. How much does it cost?"

"Um—well—er—well it cost me about—er—one hundred dollars a window, Griggs, but—"

"About twenty windows to the average house," I murmured. "Two thousand dollars for—"

"Well, it won't cost a tenth of that when I'm having the parts turned out in quantities," cried Hawkins, with considerable heat. "Why under the sun do you always try to throw a wet blanket over everything? Suppose it does cost two thousand dollars to equip a house with my crook-trap? If a man has ten thousand dollars' worth of silverware, he'll be willing enough to spend—"

I laughed. It wasn't meant for a nasty laugh at all—it was simply amusement at the inventor's emotionalism. But it riled Hawkins.

"Where the devil does the joke come in?" he thundered. "If I—"

"Hush!" I cried.

"I won't hush! I—"

"Two!" I counted. "Be quiet."

Hawkins calmed down on the instant.

"Was—was it the bell?" he whispered.

Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding!

The gong up-stairs had chimed six times and stopped.

I stared at Hawkins, and Hawkins at me, and the inventor's countenance went white.

Far above, the evening calm was disturbed by a stamping and threshing noise, punctuated now and then by a muffled shout.

"There!" cried the inventor. There was a wealth of satisfaction in that one word.

"Well, somebody's caught," I said.

"You bet he is!" replied Hawkins, with a nervous chuckle. "Six bells—that's the top story back—one of the servants' rooms. Somebody must have thought the house deserted and come in from the roof."

Bang! Bang! Bang! The intruder wasn't submitting to the caresses of the crook-trap without a struggle. Also, from the volume and vigor of the racket, it was painfully clear that the intruder was a robust individual.

"Well?" said Hawkins, still staring at me with a rigid smile.

"Well?"

"Well, we've got to go up there and capture him," announced the inventor, gathering himself for the task. "Come on."

"Not just yet, thank you. We'll let the chloroform get in its work first."

"But don't you want to see the thing in actual operation?"

"Hawkins, if any one could have less curiosity about anything than I have about seeing your crook-trap in operation—"

"All right, stay down here if you like. I'm going up."

"Suppose your burglar gets loose?" I argued. "Suppose he has a big, wicked revolver, and learns that you're responsible for the way he's been handled?"

Hawkins walked resolutely and silently toward the stairs. As for me, curiosity as to his fate bested my judgment. I followed.

As we neared the top of the house, the thumping and hammering grew louder and more vicious; and when we finally stood outside the door, the din was actually deafening.

"That's—that's either William's room or the cook's," said Hawkins, with a slight quaver in his tones. "He's going it, isn't he?"

"He certainly is. Let's stay here, Hawkins."

"No, sir. I'm going in to watch it. He's not loose, that's sure."

Hawkins opened the door very gently.

Inside, the room was dark—not pitch dark, but that semi-gloom of a city room whose only light comes from an arc lamp half a block away.

The air was heavy and sickening with the fumes of chloroform. They fairly sent my head a-reeling, but their effect upon the burglar seemed to have been nil.

Over by the window a huge form was hurling itself to and fro, from wall to wall and back again, in the frantic endeavor to gain freedom. The bag enveloped his head and shoulders, but a mighty pair of arms within the bag were straining and tearing at the fabric, and a couple of long, muscular legs kicked madly at everything within reach.

Every few seconds, too, a puffed oath added spice to the excitement, as the captive wrenched and strained.

On the whole, the scene was a bit too gruesome to be humorous. As a rule I can see the funny side of Hawkins' doings; but the fun departed from this particular mess at the thought of what would happen when the colossus finally emerged from the bag and commenced operations upon Hawkins and myself—neither of us athletes.

"He's caught, isn't he, Griggs?" stuttered Hawkins, clutching my arm.

"For the moment," I replied. "But come—let's get an officer. If that canvas gives—"

"Gives!" sneered the inventor. "Why that canvas—"

"Gawd! If I gets yer!" screamed the man in the bag.

"Oh, great Caesar!" gulped Hawkins. "It's—it's getting horrible, isn't it?"

"Aha! I heard yer then, ye cur!" roared the captive.

Hawkins' hand on my arm shook violently.

"We—we'll have to do something with him," he whispered. "What shall it be? We've got to subdue him, somehow or other."

"Why not let the chloroform work while we go out and get a couple of policemen?"

"Well, you see, it doesn't seem to be working, Griggs. Don't know why, but—pew! Did you hear that rip?"

I had heard it. I had also seen the silhouette of a long arm appear against the dim light of the window.

"Oh, Lord!" gasped Hawkins. "It's given somewhere! We'll have to squelch him now inside of ten seconds or—what the deuce shall I do, Griggs?"

"Take a chair and stun him," I replied. "That's all I can suggest. And personally I don't care for the job."

"Well—somebody's got to do something," groaned the inventor, seizing one of the bedroom chairs. "If ever he gets loose—say, where are you going, Griggs?"

"Just into the hall," I said. "I'm going to light the gas and watch the battle from a safe distance."

Hawkins clutched his chair and stared at me like a man in a nightmare. His expression reminded me of the day when, as a boy on the farm, I took the hatchet and started out to kill my first chicken. I felt just as Hawkins looked that evening in the dark doorway of the bedroom.

"D'ye suppose it'll kill him?" he choked. "Griggs, do you think—"

A long rip resounded from the darkness. A triumphant shout followed.

Hawkins turned swiftly, raised his chair, and darted toward the man in the bag.

There was a crash, a shout, a dull blow, and a heavy fall—and just then I managed to light the gas.

Literally, I caught my breath and rubbed my eyes. For a few seconds the scene dumfounded me past action; but shortly I hurried into the apartment and struck another light.

Hawkins was stretched upon the floor groaning. His entire face seemed to have suffered violent impact with some unyielding body, and both hands covered his nose, from which the life-blood flowed freely.

And across the room, sitting against the wall, his large person decorated by sundry steel hoops and shreds of canvas, sat—William, the Hawkins' butler, staring dazedly into space!

Between them lay the chair.

"Oh, Griggs, Griggs, Griggs!" moaned the inventor. "Come quick! Get my wife! I'm done for this time! He's finished me!"

"Hawkins!" I cried, shaking him. "Did he—"

"Never mind him—let him escape," replied Hawkins, faintly. "Just get my wife before I go. Good-by, old friend, good-by."

"Mr.—'Awkins!" gasped the butler, his senses returning.

"What!" shrilled the inventor, sitting bolt upright, black eyes, swelled face, and all completely forgotten. "Is that you, William?"

"Yes, sir," stammered the man. "Was—was it you I hit, sir?"

"Was it!" yelled Hawkins, struggling to his feet. "Look at this face! What the deuce did you mean by it?"

"Beg—beg pardon, sir, but did you—did you sorter strike me with a chair, sir?"

"I—well, yes, William, I did."

"Well, I, not knowing of course as it was you, sir, I sorter hit back. But have you got the thief, sir?"

"The what?"

"Indeed, yes, sir. There's one in the house. I was attacked here—right in this here very room. See here, sir, this bag! Just as I opened the window, he kem behind me, sir, threw it over my head, and tried to chloroform me, sir—you can smell it, sir."

"Yes. All right," said Hawkins, briefly, with what must have seemed to the man a strange lack of interest.

"You see, sir, whoever the rascal was, he must 'a' known as I intended going out this evening, sir, and that the house would be empty like. So in he sneaks from the roof, bag and all, and waits. And when I kem up the stairs, instead of going out, sir—"

"All right. That'll do. I understand," muttered Hawkins. "No one threw a bag over you. It was a new-er-sort of burglar alarm—just had it put up to-day."

"Burglar alarm!" cried the butler, staring at the remnants from which he was slowly extricating himself.

"Yes!" snapped Hawkins. "And don't stand there mumbling over it, William!"

"Yes, sir."

"Here," said the inventor, "is a-er-twenty-dollar note. You will immediately forget everything that has happened within the last half hour."

"Yes, sir," responded the butler, with a wide smile.

Hawkins led the way down-stairs. In the bathroom he paused to lave his much abused features; and by the time he had finished, my own features had had a chance to regain something like composure.

Once more in the library, which we had deserted some twenty minutes before, Hawkins threw himself rather limply into a chair.

"Well, well, well!" he muttered. "Now, who under the sun could have foreseen that?"

I forebore remarks.

"William ought to be in the prize-ring," continued the inventor sadly. "But he's a bright chap. He'll keep his mouth shut. Lucky-er-nobody else was in the house, wasn't it?"

"How are you going to account to Mrs. Hawkins for those black eyes?"

"Oh—we can say that we were boxing and you hit me. That's easy."

"She'll believe that, too, Hawkins," I said, gazing at the battered countenance. "You look more as if you'd had a collision with an express train."

"Oh, she'll believe it, all right," said the inventor cheerily. "For once—just for once, Griggs—something has happened which my better half won't be on to. You'll see I'm right. There isn't a clue."

"Well, perhaps," I sighed.

"And now let's have some of that old Scotch. I feel a little weak."

We loitered into the next apartment—the dining-room. We turned our footsteps toward the sideboard. We stopped—both of us—as if transformed to stone.

The door was off the silver-safe. The drawers lay about the floor. And the little safe itself was as empty as the day it left the cabinet-maker!

"D-d-d'you see it, too?" cried Hawkins in a scared, husky voice.

"Yes," I replied, stooping to look into the safe. "It must have been a sneak-thief, Hawkins. Every vestige of your beautiful service is gone!"

The inventor glared long at the wreck.

"And now that's got to be explained," he muttered at last, continuing his journey to the sideboard. "How can I get around it?"

He poured out a generous dose of the Scotch, imbibed it at a swallow, and shuffled drearily back to the library, where he dropped once more into a chair and stared through fast-swelling eyes at the glazed tile fire-place.

And I? Well, just then I heard Mrs. Hawkins' step on the vestibule flooring without; she had returned for the minutes of the last meeting.

The bell rang. I walked quickly upstairs to call up the police and notify them. It wasn't my place to answer that bell, with William in the house.

CHAPTER IX.

The gathering at the Hawkins' home that night was, I suppose, in the nature of a house-warming.

The Blossoms, the Ridgeways, the Eldridges, the Gordons were there, in addition to perhaps a dozen and a half other people whom I had never

met. Also, Mr. Blodgett was there.

Old Mr. Blodgett is Hawkins' father-in-law. There is a Mrs. Blodgett, too, but she is really too sweet an old lady to be placed in the mother-in-law category.

Blodgett, however, makes up for any deficiencies on his wife's part in the traditional traits. He seems to have analyzed Hawkins with expert care and precision—to have appraised and classified his character and attainments to a nicety.

Consequently, Hawkins and Mr. Blodgett are rarely to be observed wandering hither and thither with their arms about each other's waists.

Finally, I was there myself with my wife.

It seems almost superfluous to mention my presence. Whenever Hawkins is on the verge of trouble with one of his contrivances, some esoteric force seems to sweep me along in his direction with resistless energy.

Sometimes I wonder what Hawkins did for a victim before we met—but let that be.

Dinner had been lively, for the guests were mainly young, and the wines such as Hawkins can afford; but when we had assembled in the drawing-room, conversation seemed to slow down somewhat, and to pass over to a languid discussion of the house as a sort of relaxation.

Then it was that a pert miss from one of the Oranges remarked:

"Yes, the frescoing is lovely—almost all of it. But—whoever could have designed that frieze, Mr. Hawkins?"

"Er—that frieze?" repeated the inventor, a little uncomfortably, indicating the insane-looking strip of painting a foot or so wide which ran along under the ceiling.

"Yes, it's so funny. Nothing but dots and dots and dots. Whoever could have conceived such an idea?"

"Well, I did, Miss Mather," Hawkins replied. "I designed that myself."

"Oh, did you?" murmured the inquisitive one, going red.

Hawkins turned to me, and the girl subsided; but old Mr. Blodgett had overheard. He felt constrained to put in, with his usual tactful thought and grating, nasal voice:

"It's hideous—simply hideous. I don't see—I can't see the sense in spending that amount of money in plastering painted roses and undressed young ones all over the ceiling, Herbert."

"No?" said Hawkins between his teeth.

"Folly—pure folly," grunted the old gentleman. "No reason for it—no reason under the sun."

Hawkins at least reserves family dissensions for family occasions. He held his peace and his tongue.

"Yes, sir," persisted Blodgett, "everything else out of the question, the house might catch fire to-night, and your entire stock of painted babies go up in smoke. Then where'd they be? Eh?"

"See here," said Hawkins, goaded into speech, "you just keep your mind easy on that score at least, will you, papa, dear?"

"What's that? What's that?"

"This house isn't going up in smoke," went on the inventor tartly. "You can take my word for it."

"Isn't, eh?" jeered the elderly Blodgett with his nasty sneering little chuckle. "And how do you know it's not? Eh? Smarter men than you, my boy, and in better built houses have—"

"Look here! This particular place isn't going to burn, because—"

Hawkins rapped out.

"What isn't going to burn, Herbert?" inquired Mrs. Hawkins, with a cold, warning glance at her husband as she perceived that hostilities were in progress. "Is he teasing you again, papa?"

"Teasing me!" sniffed Blodgett with an unpleasant leer at Hawkins.

"Teasing that antiquity!" Hawkins growled in my ear. "Say, isn't that enough to—"

"Don't whisper, Herbert—it isn't polite," continued Mrs. Hawkins, the playfulness of her manner somewhat belied by the glitter in her eye. "Let us all into the secret."

"Oh, there's no secret," said the inventor shortly.

"No dance, either," pouted the girl from Jersey, who was an intimate of the family.

It was the signal for the light fantastic business to begin. Hawkins is notoriously out of sympathy with dancing. He took my arm and guided me stealthily from the drawing-room.

"Phew!" remarked the inventor when we had settled ourselves up-stairs with a couple of cigars. "Say, Griggs, do you still wonder at crime?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning dear papa Blodgett," snapped Hawkins. "Honestly, do you believe it would be really wicked to lure that old human pussy-cat down cellar and sort of lose him through the furnace-door?"

"Don't talk nonsense, Hawkins," I laughed.

"It isn't nonsense. It's the way I feel. But I'll get square on that spiteful tongue of his some day—and when I do! There isn't anything sweeter waiting for me in Heaven than to feel myself emptying a pan of dishwater on that old reprobate from one of the upper windows.

"Why, Griggs, sometimes in the night I dream I have him on the floor, that I'm just getting even for some of the things he's said to me and about me, and I wake up in a dripping perspiration and—"

"Stop, Hawkins!" I guffawed.

"Strikes you funny, too, does it?" the inventor cried angrily. "I suppose you think it's all right for him to talk as he does? Criticise my decorations, tell me they'll all burn up some day, and all that?"

"Well, but they might."

"They might not!" shouted Hawkins in a fury. "You don't know any more about it than he does. You couldn't burn up this house if you soaked every carpet in it with oil!"

"Why not?"

"Aha! Why not? That's just the point. Why not, to be sure? Because it's all prepared for ahead of time."

"Private wire to the engine-house?" I queried.

"Private wire to Halifax! There's no private wire about it. See here, Griggs, do you suppose that poor little brain of yours could comprehend a truly great idea?"

"It could try," I said meekly.

"Then listen. You remember those dots on the frieze all through the house? You do? All right. Just close your eyes and conceive a little metal tube running back into the wall. Imagine the little tube opening into a large supply pipe in the wall.

"Is that clear? Then conceive that the supply pipe in each room connects with a supply pipe in the rear of the house, and that the big pipe terminates—or rather begins—in a big tank on the top floor!"

"But what on earth is it all?"

"It's the Hawkins Chemico-Sprinkler System!" announced the inventor.

"For the Lord's sake!" I gasped.

"Yes, sir! It's something like the sprinkling system you see in factories, but all concealed—perfectly adapted to private house purposes! Every one of those dots is simply a little hole in the wall through which, in case of fire, will flow quart after quart of my chemical fire-extinguisher? How's that?"

"Er—is the tank full?" I asked, gliding hurriedly away from the wall.

"Of course it is. Oh, sit where you were, Griggs, don't drag in that asinine clownishness of yours. Or, better still, come up with me and see the business end of the thing—the tank and all that."

"The stuff isn't inflammable, is it? We're smoking, you know."

"An inflammable fire-extinguishing liquid!" cried Hawkins. "Why, can't you understand that—bah!"

He laid a course to the upper regions and I followed.

"Out here in the extension," he explained, when we reached the top floor. "There!"

We stood in a bare room, whose emptiness was accentuated by the cold, electric light.

Furnishings it had none, save for the big tank in the center. This was a wooden affair, lined with lead.

Over the top, and some two feet above the tank proper, the heavy cover was suspended by a weird system of pulleys and electric wires. To the under side of the cover was fastened a big glass sphere filled with white stuff.

It was a remarkable contrivance.

"There—that's simple, isn't it?" said Hawkins, with a happy smile.

"It may be if you understand it."

"Why, just look here. See that big glass ball? That's full of marble dust—carbonate of lime, you know. The tank is filled with weak sulphuric acid. When the ball drops into the acid—what happens?"

"You have a nasty job fishing it out again?"

"Not at all. It smashes into flinders, the marble dust combines with the sulphuric acid, and forms a neutral liquid, bubbling with carbonic acid. Even you, Griggs, must know that carbonic acid gas will put out any fire, without damaging anything. There you are."

"I see. You smell fire, rush up here and knock that ball into the tank, and the house is flooded through the dots in your frieze. Remarkable!"

"Oh, I don't even have to come up here," smiled Hawkins. "See that?"

"That" was a little strand of platinum wire in a niche in the wall.

"That's just a test fuse, so that I can see that she's all in working order," pursued the inventor, leaning his cigar against it. "There's half a dozen of them in every room in the house. As soon as the heat touches them, they melt and set off my electric release—and down drops the cover of the tank—ball and all. The ball breaks, the valve at the bottom opens automatically—and down goes the tank, full of extinguisher."

"Well, I must say it looks practical."

"It is!" asserted Hawkins. "Some night—if the night ever comes—when you see a roaring blaze in one of these rooms subdued in ten seconds by the gentle drizzle that comes out of that frieze, you will—"

"Mr. Hawkins, sir," interrupted Hawkins' butler at the door.

"Well, William?"

"Mrs. Hawkins, sir, she says as how your presence is desired down-stairs."

"Oh, all right," said the inventor wearily. "I'll be down directly."

"No rest for the wicked," he commented to me. "Come on, Griggs, we'll have to dance."

The festivity was in full swing when we descended.

Mrs. Hawkins came over to us and remarked in low tones to her spouse:

"Now just try to make yourself agreeable, Herbert. It's not nice for you to steal away and smoke."

"I'm not smoking."

"Mr. Griggs is."

"So I am," I said, suddenly realizing the fact. "William, will you dispose of this, please?"

"Now go right in, both of you," Mrs. Hawkins began. Then she was called away.

"Griggs!" muttered Hawkins, thoughtfully tapping his forehead.

"Yes?"

"What—what the deuce did I do with my cigar?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"But I had it up-stairs. We were both smoking."

"So you did," I said. "The last I saw of it you leaned it against that fuse thing—"

"Great Scott! That's what I did!" gasped the inventor, turning white.

"Well, what of it?"

"Why, suppose the infernal thing has burned down to the fuse!" cried Hawkins hoarsely. "Suppose it melts through the wire and sends down that top!"

"Will it start the stuff running?"

"Start it! Of course it'll start it. Gee whizz! I'm going up there now, Griggs!"

Hawkins made for the stairs. I smiled after him, for he seemed rather worked up.

I turned back to the dancers. It was a pretty scene. To the rhythm of a particularly seductive waltz, the guests were gliding about the floor. I noted the gay colors of the ladies' gowns, the flowers, the

sparkling diamonds.

And then—then I noted the frieze!

My eyes seemed instinctively to travel to that stretch of ugliness—they fastened upon the dots with a kind of fascination. And none too soon.

From one of the dots spurted forth what looked like a tiny stream of water. Another followed and another and yet another. The whole multitude of dots were raining liquid upon the dancers from all sides of the room!

The streams came from north, east, south, and west. They came from the hallway behind me—a hundred of them seemed to converge upon my devoted back. I was fairly soaked through in a second.

The panic can hardly be fancied. Men and women shrieked together in the utter amazement of the thing. They laughed aloud, some of them. Others cried out in terror.

They leaped and sprang back and forth, to this side and that, in the vain endeavor to dodge the innumerable streams. Some slipped and almost fell, carrying down others with them. And all were doused.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the flood ceased.

"Well, God bless my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Blodgett, putting up a hand to wring his collar. "What in Heaven's name happened?"

"Great Caesar's ghost!" said Hawkins' voice behind me.

He had returned from his trip to the top floor extension.

"It's all right," he called with cheery indifference to the contrary sentiments of two dozen people. "There's no danger. It won't hurt you."

"But it does. It bites!" cried the girl from Jersey. "What is it? Where did it come from?"

"Yes, it does bite! It smarts awfully! By Jove! The stuff's eating me! What is it, Hawkins? Oh, Mr. Hawkins, wherever did it come from? Why, it ran out of those dots—I saw it! What is it?" echoed from different parts of the room.

"It's only my sprinkler—my fire-extinguisher," Hawkins explained. "It went off by accident, you see. There's nothing in it to hurt you. It's perfectly neutral. It can't bite—that's imagination."

"But it does!" cried Mrs. Gordon. "It stings like acid. It actually seems to be eating my skin!"

"Bite! I should say it did!" growled Mr. Blodgett. "It's chewing my hands off—I believe it's carbolic acid. I do—I'll swear I do. No smell—but it's been deodorized. That's it—carbolic acid!"

"Carbolic fiddlesticks!" said Hawkins.

Then a puzzled expression came into his eyes. He raised one of his wet hands and tasted it—and spat violently.

"Say! Hold on! Wait a minute!" he cried.

Hawkins darted off up-stairs. I could hear him bounding along, two steps at a time, until he reached the top.

Silence ensued for a few seconds, save for an exclamation here and there, as one or another of the guests discovered that his or her neck or ear or arm was smarting.

Then the servants piled up from below. They, too, were wet and frightened. They, too, had discovered that the liquid emitted by the Hawkins Chemic-Sprinkler System bit into the human epidermis like fire.

"Phat is it? Phat is it?" the cook was drearily intoning, when hurrying footsteps turned my attention once more to the stairs.

Hawkins was coming down at a gallop. In his arms he carried a keg, which dribbled white powder over the beautiful carpet.

"Say," he shouted to me. "That ball didn't bust!"

"It didn't?" I cried.

"No! There's no marble dust in the stuff!" said the inventor, landing on the floor with a final jump and tearing into the parlor. "It's pure, diluted sulphuric acid!"

"Acid!" shrieked a dozen ladies.

"Yes!" groaned Hawkins, depositing his keg on the floor. "But we'll get the best of it. William, bring up a wash-tub full of water! Mary, go get all the washrags in the house! Quick!"

The homely household articles arrived within a minute or two.

"Now," continued Hawkins, dumping half the keg into the tub. "That's baking soda. It'll neutralize the acid. Here, everybody. Dip a rag in

here and wash off the acid.

"Oh, hang propriety and decency and conventionality and all the rest of it!" he vociferated as some of the ladies, quite warrantably hung back. "Get at the acid before it gets at you! Don't you—can't you understand? It'll burn into your skin in a little while! Come on!"

There was no hesitation after that. Men and women alike made frantically for the tub, dipped cloths in the liquid, and laved industriously hands and arms and cheeks that were already sore and burning.

Picture the scene: a dozen women in evening dress, a dozen men in "swallow-tails," clustered around a wash-tub there in Hawkins' parlor, working for dear life with the soaking cloths.

[Illustration: "It was just the sort of thing that could happen under Hawkins' roof, and nowhere else.."]

Ludicrous, impossible, it was just the sort of thing that could happen under Hawkins' roof and nowhere else—barring perhaps a retreat for the insane.

Later the excitement subsided. The ladies, disheveled as to hair, carrying costumes whose glory had departed forever, retired to the chambers above for such further repairs as might be possible. The men, too, under William's guidance, went to draw upon Hawkins' wardrobe for clothes in which to return home.

The inventor, Mr. Blodgett, and myself were left together in the drawing-room.

That amiable old gentleman's coat—he is bitterly averse to undue expenditure for clothes—had turned to a pale, rotting green.

"Well, it's a good thing that was diluted acid instead of strong, isn't it, Griggs?" remarked Hawkins. "Originally I had intended using the strong acid, you know, for the reason—"

"Aaaah!" cried Mr. Blodgett. "So that was more of your imbecile inventing, was it? Fire-extinguisher! Bah! I thought nobody but you could have conceived the idea like that! What under the sun did you let off your infernal contrivance for?"

"Oh, I just did it to spite you, papa," said Hawkins, with weary sarcasm.

"By George, sir, I believe you did!" snapped the old gentleman. "It's like you! Look at my coat, sir! Look at—"

I was edging away when Mrs. Hawkins entered. She was clad in somber black now, and her cheeks flamed scarlet with mortification.

"Well!" she exclaimed.

"Well, my dear?" said Hawkins, bracing himself.

"A pretty mess you've made of our house-warming, haven't you? You and your idiotic fire-extinguisher!"

"Madam, my Chemic-Sprinkler System is one—"

"And not only the evening spoiled, and half our friends so enraged at you that they'll never enter the house again, but do you know what you'll have to pay for? Miss Mather's dress alone, I happen to know, cost two hundred dollars! And Mrs. Gordon's gown came from Paris last week—four hundred and fifty! And I was with Nellie Ridgeway the day she bought that white satin dress she had on. It cost—"

"Glad of it!" interposed Blodgett, with a fiendish chuckle. "Serves him jolly well right! If you'd listened to me fifteen years ago, Edith, when I told you not to marry that fool—"

"Griggs! W-w-w-where are you going?" Hawkins called weakly.

"Home!" I said decidedly, making for the hall. "I think my wife's ready. And I'm afraid my hair's loosening up, too, where your fire-extinguisher wet it. Good-night!"

CHAPTER X.

"It's a good while since you've invented anything, isn't it, Hawkins?" I had said the night before.

"Um-um," Hawkins had murmured.

"Must be two months?"

"Ah?" Hawkins had smiled.

"What is it? Life insurance companies on to you?"

"Um-ah," Hawkins had replied.

"Or have you really given it up for good? It can't be, can it?"

"Oh-ho," Hawkins had yawned, and there I stopped questioning him.

Satan himself must have concocted the business which sent me—or started me—toward Philadelphia next morning. Perhaps, though, the railroad company was as much to blame; they should have known better.

The man in the moon was no further from my thoughts than Hawkins as I stepped ashore on the Jersey side of the ferry to take the train. Yet there stood Hawkins in the station.

He seemed to be fussing violently as he lingered by the door of one of the offices. Unperceived, I came close enough to hear him murmur thrice in succession something about "blamed nonsense—devilish red-tape."

Surely something had worked him up. I wondered what it was.

As I watched, an apologetic-looking youth appeared in the door of the office and handed Hawkins an official-appearing slip of paper.

The inventor snatched it impolitely and turned his back, while the youth gazed after him for a moment and then returned to the office.

"Set of confounded idiots!" Hawkins remarked wrathfully.

Then, ere I could disappear, he spied me.

"Aha, Griggs, you here?"

"No, I'm not," I said flatly. "If there's any trouble brewing, Hawkins, consider me back in New York. What has excited you?"

"Excited me? Those fool railroad officials are enough to drive a man to the asylum. Did you see how they kept me standing outside that door?"

"Well, did you want to stand inside the door, Hawkins?"

"I didn't want to stand anywhere in the neighborhood of their infernal door! The idea of making me get a permit to ride on an engine! Me!"

"I don't know how else you'd manage it, Hawkins, unless you applied for a job as fireman. Why on earth do you want to ride on a locomotive?"

"Oh, it's not a locomotive, Griggs. You don't understand. Where are you bound for?"

"Philadelphia."

"Ten:ten?" Hawkins cried eagerly.

"Ten:ten," I said.

"Then, by George, you'll be with us! You'll see the whole show!"

Hawkins caught my coat-sleeve and dragged me toward the train-gates.

"See, here," I said, detaining him, "what whole show?"

"The—oh, come and see it before we start."

"No, sir!" I said firmly. "Not until I know what it is. Are you going to play any monkey-shines with the locomotive, Hawkins? What is it?"

"But why don't you come and see for yourself?" the inventor cried impatiently. "It's—it's—"

He paused for a moment.

"Why, it's the Hawkins Alcomotive!" he added.

"And what under heavens is the Hawkins—"

"Well, you don't suppose I'm carrying scale drawings of the thing on me, do you? You don't suppose that I'm prepared to give a demonstration with magic lantern pictures on the spot? If you want to see it, come and see it. If not, you'd better get into your train. It's ten:three now."

I knew no way of better utilizing the remaining seven minutes. I walked or rather trotted—after Hawkins, through the gates, down the platform, and along by the train until we reached the locomotive—or the place where a decent, God-fearing locomotive should have been standing.

The customary huge iron horse was not in sight.

In its place stood what resembled a small flat-car. On the car I observed an affair which resembled something an enthusiastic automobilist might have conceived in a lobster salad nightmare.

It was, I presume, merely an abnormally large automobile engine; and along each side of it ran a big cylindrical tank.

"There, Griggs!" said Hawkins. "That doesn't look much like the old-fashioned, clumsy locomotive, does it?"

"I should say it didn't."

"Of course it's a little rough in finish—just a trial Alcomotive, you know—but it's going to do one thing to-day."

"And that is?"

"It's going to sound the solemn death-knell of the old steam locomotive," said Hawkins, evidently feeling some compassion for the time-honored engine.

"But will that thing pull a train? Is that the notion?"

"Notion! It's no notion—it's a simple, mathematical certainty, my dear Griggs. In that Alcomotive—it's run by vapors of alcohol, you know—we have sufficient power to pull fifteen parlor cars, twelve loaded day-coaches, twenty ordinary flat-cars, eighteen box-cars, or twenty-seven—"

"'Board for Newark, Elizabeth, Trenton, Philadelphia, and all points south," sang out the man at the gates.

He was lying, but he didn't know it.

"Well, I guess it's—it's time to start," Hawkins concluded rather nervously.

"Well, may the Lord have mercy on your soul, Hawkins," I said feelingly. "Good-by. I'll be along on the next train—whenever that is."

"What! You're coming on the Alcomotive with me!"

"Not on your life, Hawkins!" I cried energetically. "If this railroad wishes to trust its passengers and rolling-stock and road-bed to your alcohol machine, that's their business. But they've got a hanged sight more confidence in you than I have."

"Well, you'll have confidence enough before the day's over," said the inventor, grabbing me with some determination. "For once, I'll get the best of your sneers. You come along!"

"Let go!" I shouted.

"Here," said Hawkins to the mechanic who was warily eyeing the Alcomotive, "help Mr. Griggs up."

Hawkins boosted and the man grabbed me. In a second or two I stood on the car, and Hawkins clambered up beside me.

Had I but regained my breath a second or two sooner—had I but collected my senses sufficiently to jump!

But I was a little too bewildered by the suddenness of my elevation to act for the moment. As I stood there, gasping, I heard Hawkins say:

"What's that conductor waving his hands for?"

"He—he wants you to start up," tittered the engineer. "We are two minutes late as it is."

"Oh, that's it?" said Hawkins gruffly. "He needn't get so excited about it. Why, positively, that man looks as if he was swearing! If I—"

"Well, say, you better start up," put in the engineer. "I may get blamed for this."

Hawkins opened a valve—he turned a crank—he pulled back a lever or two.

The Alcomotive suddenly left the station. So, abruptly, in fact, did the train start that my last vision of the end brakeman revealed him rolling along the platform in a highly undignified fashion, while the engineer sat at my feet in amazement as I clutched the side of the car.

"Well, I guess we started enough to suit him!" observed Hawkins grimly, as we whizzed past towers and banged over switches in our exit from the yard.

We certainly were started. Whatever subsequent disadvantages may have developed in the Alcomotive, it possessed speed.

In less time than it takes to tell it, we were whirling over the marshes, swaying from side to side, tearing a long hole in the atmosphere, I fancy; and certainly almost jarring the teeth from my head.

"How's this for time?" cried the inventor.

"It's all right for t-t-t-time," I stuttered. "But—"

"Yes, that part's all right," yelled the engineer, who had been ruthlessly detailed to assist. "But say, mister, how about the time-table?"

"What about it?" demanded Hawkins.

"Why, the other trains ain't arranged to give with this ninety-mile-an-hour gait."

"They should be. I told the railroad people that I intended to break a few records."

"But I guess they didn't know—we may smash into something, mister, and—"

"Not my fault," said the inventor. "If we do by any chance have a collision, the railroad people are to blame. But we won't. I can stop this machine and the whole train in two hundred feet. That's another great point about the Alcomotive, Griggs—the Alcobrakes. You see, when I shut off the engine proper, all the power goes into the brakes. It is thus—"

"Hey, mister," the engineer shouted again, "here's Newark!"

"Why, so it is!" murmured Hawkins, with a pleased smile. "Really, I had no notion that we'd be here so soon."

I will say it for Hawkins that he managed to stop the affair at Newark in very commendable fashion. It seems so remarkable that one of his contrivances should have exhibited that much amenity to control that it is worthy of note.

Some of the passengers who alighted to be sure, exhibited signs of hard usage. There were visible bruises in several cases, due, presumably, to the slightly startling suddenness with which our trip began.

But Hawkins was blind to anything of that sort.

"Now, wasn't that fine?" he said proudly.

"Well—we're here—and alive," was about all I could say.

"I wonder how it feels to be back in the cars. Let's try it," proposed Hawkins.

"But say, mister," said the engineer, "who's going to run the darned machine, if you're not here?"

"Why, you, my man. You understand an engine of this sort, don't you? But of course you do. Here! This is the valve for the alcohol—this is the igniter—here are the brakes—this is the speed control. See? Oh, you won't find any difficulty in managing it. The Alcomotive is simplicity on wheels."

"Yes, but I've got a wife and family—" the unhappy man began.

"Well," said Hawkins, icily.

"And if the thing should balk—"

"Balk! Rats! Come, Griggs. It's time you started, my man. I'll wave my hand when we reach the car."

Frankly, I think that it was a downright contemptible trick to play on the defenceless engineer. Had I been able to render him any assistance, I should have stayed with him.

But Hawkins was already trotting back to the cars, and, with a murmured benediction for the hapless mechanic who stood and trembled alone on the platform of the Alcomotive, I followed.

We took seats in one of the cars.

"Well, why doesn't he start?" muttered the inventor.

"Maybe the fright has killed him," I suggested. "It's enough—"

Bang!

The Alcomotive had sprung into action once more. People slid out of their seats with the shock, others toppled head over heels into the aisle, the porter went down unceremoniously upon his sable countenance and crushed into pulp the plate of tongue sandwich he had been carrying.

But the Alcomotive was going—that was enough for Hawkins. He sat back and watched the scenery slide by kinoscope fashion.

"Lord, Lord, where's the old locomotive now?" he laughed pityingly.

"Don't shout till you're out of the wood, Hawkins," I cautioned him. "We haven't reached Philadelphia yet."

"But can't you see that we're going to? Won't that poor little mind of yours grapple with the fact that the Hawkins Alcomotive is a success—a success?— Can't you feel the train shooting along—"

"I can feel that well enough," I said dubiously; "but suppose—"

"Suppose nothing! What have you to croak about now, Griggs? Actually, there are times when you really make me physically weary. See here! The Alcomotive supersedes the locomotive first, in point of weight; second, in point of speed; third, in economy of operation; fourth, it is absolutely safe and easy to manage.

"No complicated machinery—nothing to slip and smash at critical moments—perfect ease of control. Why, if that fellow really wished to

stop—here, now, at this minute—”

Whether the fellow wished it or not, he stopped—there, then, at that minute!

We stopped with such an almighty thud that it seemed as if the cars must fly into splinters. They rattled and shook and cracked. The passengers executed further acrobatic feats upon the floor; they clutched at things and fell over things and swore and gurgled.

”Well, by thunder!” ejaculated Hawkins. That was about the mildest remark I heard at the time. ”What do you suppose he did?”

”Give it up,” I said, caressing the egg-like eminence that had appeared upon my brow as if by magic. ”Probably he fell into the infernal thing, and it has stopped to show him up.”

”Nonsense! We’ll have to see what’s happened. Come, we’ll go through the cars. It’s quicker.”

We ran through the coaches until we had reached the front of the train. Hawkins went out upon the platform.

The Alcomotive was apparently intact. The engineer stood over the machinery, white as chalk, and his lips mumbled incoherently.

”What is it?” cried Hawkins.

”How’n blazes do I know?” demanded the engineer.

”But didn’t you stop her?”

”Certainly not. She—she stopped herself.”

”What perfect idiocy!” cried the inventor ”You must have done something!”

”I did not!” retorted the engineer. ”The blamed thing just stood stock-still and near bumped the life out of me! Say, mister, you come up here and see what—”

”Oh, it’s nothing serious, my man. Now, let me think. What could have happened? Er—just try that lever at your right hand.”

”This one?”

”Yes; pull it gently.”

”Hadn’t we better git them people out o’ the train first?” asked the engineer. ”You know, if anything happens, people just love to sue a

railroad company for damages, and—”

”Pull that lever!” Hawkins cried angrily.

The man took a good grip, murmured something which sounded like a prayer, and pulled.

Nothing happened.

”Well, that’s queer!” muttered Hawkins. ”Doesn’t it seem to have any effect?”

”Nope.”

”Well, then, try that small one at your left. Pull it back half way.”

The man obeyed.

For a second or two the Alcomotive emitted a string of consumptive coughs. One or two parts moved spasmodically and seemed to be reaching for the engineer. The man dodged.

Then the Alcomotive began to back!

”Here! Here! Something’s wrong!” cried Hawkins, as the accursed thing gathered speed. ”Push that back where it was.”

”Nit!” yelled the engineer, picking up his coat and running to the side of the car. ”I ain’t going to make my wife a widow for no darned invention or no darned job! See?”

”You’re not going to jump?” squealed the inventor.

”You bet I am!” replied the mechanic, making a flying leap.

He was gone.

The Alcomotive was now without any semblance of a controlling hand.

There was no way for Hawkins to reach the contrivance, for the car was four or five feet distant from the train proper, and to attempt a leap or a climb to the Alcomotive, with the whole affair rocking and swaying as it was, would simply have been to pave the way for a neat ”Herbert Hawkins” on the marble block of their plot in Greenwood Cemetery.

”Well, what under the sun—” began Hawkins.

”Good heavens! This train! The people!” I gasped.

"Well—well—well—let us find the conductor. He'll know what to do!"

"Yes, but he can't stop the machine—and we're backing along at certainly fifty miles an hour; and any minute we may run into the next train behind."

"Come! Come! Find the conductor!"

We found him very easily.

The conductor was running through the train toward us as we reached the second car, and his face was the face of a fear-racked maniac.

"What's happened?" he shrieked. "Why on earth are we backing?"

"Why, you see—" Hawkins began.

"For God's sake, stop your machine! You're the man who owns it, aren't you?"

"Certainly, certainly. But you see, the mechanism has—er—slipped somewhere—nothing serious, of course—and—"

"Serious!" roared the railroad man. "You call it nothing serious for us to be flying along backwards and the Washington express coming up behind at a mile a minute!"

"Oh! oh! Is it?" Hawkins faltered.

"Yes! Can't you stop her—anyway?"

"Well, not that I know—why, see here!" A smile of relief illumined Hawkins' face.

"Well? Quick, man!"

"We can have a brakeman detach the Alcomotive!"

"And what good'll that do, when she's pushing the train?"

"True, true!" groaned the inventor. "I didn't think of that!"

"I'm going to bring every one into these forward cars," announced the conductor. "It's the only chance of saving a few lives when the crash comes."

"Lives," moaned Hawkins dazedly. "Is there really any danger of—"

The conductor was gone. Hawkins sank upon a seat and gasped and gasped.

"Oh, Griggs, Griggs!" he sobbed. "If I had only known! If I could have foreseen this!"

"If you ever could foresee anything!" I said bitterly.

"But it's partly—yes, it's all that cursed engineer's fault!"

People began to troop into the car. They came crushing along in droves, frightened to death, some weeping, some half-mad with terror.

Hawkins surveyed them with much the expression of Napoleon arriving in Hades. The conductor approached once more.

"They're all in here," he said resignedly. "Thank Heaven, there are two freight cars on the rear of the train! That may do a little good! But that express! Man, man! What have you done!"

"Did he do it? Is it his fault?" cried a dozen voices.

"No, no, no, no!" shrieked the inventor. "He's lying!"

"You'd better tell the truth now, man," said the conductor sadly. "You may not have much longer to tell it."

"Lynch him!" yelled some one.

There was a move toward Hawkins. I don't know where it might have ended. Very likely they would have suspended Hawkins from one of the ventilators and pelted him with hand satchels—and very small blame to them had there been time.

But just as the crowd moved—well, then I fancied that the world had come to an end.

There was a shock, terrific beyond description—window panes clattered into the car—the whole coach was hurled from the tracks and slid sideways for several seconds.

Above us the roof split wide open and let in the sunlight. Passengers were on the seats, the floor, on their heads!

Then, with a final series of creaks and groans, all was still.

Hawkins and I were near the ragged opening which had once been a door. We climbed out to the ground and looked about us.

Providence had been very kind to Hawkins. The Washington express was standing, unexpectedly, at a water tank—part of it, at least. Her

huge locomotive lay on its side.

Our two freight cars and two more passenger cars with them were piled up in kindling wood. Even the next car was derailed and badly smashed.

The Alcomotive, too, reclined upon one side and blazed merrily, a fitting tailpiece to the scene.

But not a soul had been killed—we learned that from one of the groups which swarmed from the express, after a muster had been taken of our own passengers. It was a marvel—but a fact.

Hawkins and I edged away slowly.

"Let's get out o' this!" he whispered hoarsely. "There's that infernal conductor. He seems to be looking for some one."

We did get out of it. In the excitement we sneaked down by the express, past it, and struck into the hills.

Eventually we came out upon the trolley tracks and waited for the car which took us back to Jersey City.

Now, there is really more of this narrative.

The pursuit of Hawkins by the railroad people—their discovery of him at his home that night—the painful transaction by which he was compelled to surrender to them all his holdings in that particular road—the commentary of Mrs. Hawkins.

There is, as I say, more of it. But, on the whole, it is better left untold.

CHAPTER XI.

I may have mentioned that it was customary for Hawkins and myself to travel down-town together on the elevated six days in the week.

So far as that goes, we still do so; for it has come over me recently that any attempt to dodge the demoniac inventions of Hawkins is about as thankless and hopeless a task as seeking to avoid the setting of the sun.

For two or three mornings, however, I had been leaving the house some ten or fifteen minutes earlier than usual.

There had lately appeared the old, uncanny light in Hawkins' eye; and if trouble were impending, it was my fond, foolish hope to be out of its way—until such time, at least, as the police or the coroner should call me up on the telephone to identify all that was mortal of Hawkins.

Three days, then, my strategy had been crowned with success. I had eluded Hawkins and ridden down alone, the serene enjoyment of my paper unpunctuated by dissertations upon the practicability of condensing the clouds for commercial purposes, or the utilization of atmospheric nitrogen in the manufacture of predigested breakfast food.

But upon the fourth morning a fuse blew out under the car before we left the station; and as I sat there fussing about the delay, in walked Hawkins.

He was beaming and cheerful, but the glitter in his eye had grown more intense.

"Ah, Griggs," he exclaimed, "I've missed you lately!"

"I hope you haven't lost weight over it?"

"Well, no. I've been busy—very busy."

"Rush of business?"

"Um—ah—yes. Griggs!"

It was coming!

"Hawkins," I said hurriedly, "have you followed this matter of the Panama Canal?"

Hawkins stared hard at me for a moment; then I gave him another push, and he toppled into the canal and wallowed about in its waters until the ride was over.

Unhappily, my own place of business is located farther down upon the same street with the Blank Building, where Hawkins has—or had—offices. There was no way of avoiding it—I was forced to walk with him.

But the suppressed enthusiasm in Hawkins didn't come out, and I felt rather more easy. Whatever it was, I fancied that he had left the material part of it at home, and home lay many blocks up-town. I was safe.

"Good-by," I smiled when we reached his entrance.

"Not much," Hawkins responded. "Come in."

"But, my dear fellow—"

"You come," commanded the inventor. "There's something in here I want you to see."

He led me in and past the line of elevators.

So we were not going up to his offices! We seemed to be heading for the cigar booth, and for a moment I fancied that Hawkins had discovered a new brand and was going to treat me; but he piloted me farther, to a door, and opened it and we passed through.

Then I perceived where we were. The Blank Building people had been constructing an addition to their immense stack of offices; we stood in the freshly completed and wholly unoccupied annex.

"There, sir!" said Hawkins, extending his forefinger. "What do you see, Griggs?"

"Six empty barrels, about three wagon-loads of kindling wood, a new tiled floor, and six brand-new elevators," I replied.

"Oh, hang those things! Look—where I'm pointing!"

"Ah! somebody's left a packing-box in one of the elevator-shafts, eh?"

Certainly, more than anything else, that was what it resembled.

At the first glance it appeared to be nothing more than a crude wooden case about the size of an elevator car, standing in one of the shafts and contrasting unpleasantly with the other new, shining polished cars.

"Packing—ugh!" snapped the inventor "Do you know what that is?"

"You turned down my first guess," I suggested humbly.

"Griggs, what appears to you as a packing-box is nothing more nor less than the first and only Hawkins Hydro-Vapor Lift!"

"The which?"

"The—Hawkins—Hydro—Vapor—Lift!"

"Hydro-Vapor?" I murmured. "Whatever is that? Steam?"

"Certainly."

"And lift, I presume, is English for elevator?"

"The words are synonymous," said Hawkins coldly.

"Then why the dickens didn't you call it a steam elevator and be done with it? Wasn't that sufficiently complicated?"

"Oh, Griggs, you never seem able to understand! Now, a steam elevator—so called—is an old proposition. A Hydro-Vapor Lift is entirely new and sounds distinctive!"

"Yes, it sounds queer enough," I admitted.

"Just examine it," said the inventor joyously, leading me to the box.

There was not much to be examined. Four walls, a ceiling and a floor—all of undressed wood—that was about the extent of the affair; but in the center of the floor lay a great circular iron plate, some two feet across and festooned near the edge with a circle of highly unornamental iron bolt heads.

Beside the plate, a lever rising perpendicularly from the floor constituted the sole furnishing of the car.

"Now, you've seen a hydraulic elevator?" Hawkins began. "You know how they work—a big steel shaft pushed up the car from underneath, so that when it is in operation the car is simply a box standing on the end of a pole, which rises or sinks, as the operator wills."

"I believe so," I assented. "I think it's time now for me to be go—"

"That principle is fallacious!" the inventor exclaimed. "Consider what it would mean here—a steel shaft sixteen stories high, weighing tons and tons!"

"Well?"

"Well, sir, I have reversed that idiotic idea!" Hawkins announced triumphantly. "I have had a hole dug sixteen stories deep, and put the steel shaft down into it."

It was about what one might have expected from Hawkins; but despite my long acquaintance with his bizarre mental machinery, I stood and gasped in sheer amazement.

"Now, then," pursued the inventor. "I have had a steel tube made, a little longer than the shaft, you understand."

"What! Even longer than sixteen stories?"

"Of course. The tube fits the shaft exactly, just as an engine cylinder fits the plunger. The elevator stands upon the upper end of the tube. We let steam into the tube by operating this lever, which controls my patent, reversible steam-release. What happens? Why, the tube is forced upward and the elevator rises. I let out some of the steam—and the tube sinks down into the ground! That iron plate which you see is the manhole cover of the tube, as it were—it corresponds, of course, to the cylinder-head on an engine."

As the novelist puts it, I stood aghast.

It overwhelmed me utterly—the idea that in a great, sane city like New York an irresponsible maniac could be permitted to dig a hole sixteen stories deep under a new office building and then fill up that hole with a shaft and a tube such as Hawkins had just described.

"And the people who own this place—did they allow you to do it, or have you been chloroforming the watchman and working at night?" I inquired.

"Don't be absurd, Griggs," said Hawkins. "I pay a big rent here. The owners were very nice about it."

They must have been—exceedingly so, I thought; nice to the point of imbecility. Had they known Hawkins as I know him, they would joyfully have handed him back his lease, given him a substantial cash bonus to boot, and even have thrown in a non-transferable Cook's Tour ticket to Timbuctoo before they allowed him to embark on the project.

It would have been a low sort of trick upon Timbuctoo, but it would have saved them money and trouble.

"Well," Hawkins said sharply, breaking in upon my reverie. "Don't stand there mooning. Did you ever see anything like it before?"

"Once, when I was a child," I confessed, "I fell while climbing a flagpole, and that night I dreamed—"

"Bah! Come along and watch her work."

"No!" I protested. "Oh, no!"

"Good Lord, why not?" cried Hawkins.

"My wife," I murmured. "She cannot spare me, Hawkins, you know—not yet."

"Why, there isn't the slightest element of danger," the inventor argued. "Surely, Griggs, even you must be able to grasp that. Can't you see that that is the chief beauty of the Hydro-Vapor Lift? There are no cables to break! That's the great feature. This car may be loaded with ton after ton; but if she's overloaded, she simply stops. There are no risky wire-ropes to snap and let down the whole affair."

"I know, but there are no wire-ropes to hold her up, either, and—"

Hawkins snorted angrily. Then he grabbed me bodily and forced me along toward the door of his Hydro-Vapor Lift.

"Actually, you do make me tired," he said. "You seem to think that everybody is conspiring to take your wretched little life!"

"But what have you against me?" I asked mournfully. "Why not let me out and do your experimenting alone?"

"Because—Lord knows why I'm doing it, you're not important enough to warrant it—I'm bound to convince you that this contrivance is all that I claim!"

Oh, had I but spent the days of my youth in a strenuous gymnasium! Had I but been endowed with muscle beyond the dreams of Eugene Sandow, and been expert in boxing and wrestling and in the breaking of bones, as are the Japanese!

Then I could have fallen upon Hawkins from the rear and tied him into knots, and even dismembered him if necessary—and escaped.

But things are what they are, and Hawkins is more than a match for me; so he banged the door angrily and grasped the lever.

"Now, observe with great care the superbly gentle motion with which she rises," he instructed me.

I prepared for that familiar head-going-up-and-the-rest-of-you-staying-below sensation and gritted my teeth.

Hawkins pulled at the lever. The Hydro-Vapor Lift quivered for an instant. Then it ascended the shaft—and very gently and pleasantly.

"There! I suppose you've trembled until your collar-buttons have worked loose?" Hawkins said contemptuously, turning on me.

"Not quite that," I murmured.

"Well, you may as well stop. In a moment or two we shall have reached the top floor; and there, if you like, you can get out and climb down

sixteen flights of stairs.”

”Thank you,” I said sincerely.

”This, of course, is only the slow speed,” Hawkins continued. ”We can increase it with the merest touch. Watch.”

”Wait! I like it better slow!” I protested.

”Oh, I’ll slacken down again in a moment.”

Hawkins gave a mighty push to the controlling apparatus. A charge of dynamite seemed to have been exploded beneath the Hydro-Vapor Lift!

Up we shot! I watched the freshly painted numbers between floors as they whizzed by us with shuddering apprehension: 9–10–11–12—

”We’re going too fast!” I cried.

Hawkins, I think, was about to laugh derisively. His head had turned to me, and his lips had curled slightly—when the Hydro-Vapor Lift stopped with such tremendous suddenness that we almost flew up against the roof of the car.

That was the law of inertia at work. Then we descended to the floor with a crash that seemed calculated to loosen it. That was the law of gravitation.

I presume that Hawkins figured without them.

I was the first to sit up. For a time my head revolved too rapidly for anything like coherent perception. Then, as the stars began to fade away, I saw that we were stuck fast between floors; and before my eyes—large and prominent in the newness of its paint—loomed up the number 13.

It looked ominous.

”We—we seem to have stopped,” I said.

”Yes,” snapped Hawkins.

”What was it? Do you suppose anything was sticking out into the shaft? Has—can it be possible that there is anything like a mechanical error in your Hydro-Vapor Lift?”

”No! It’s that blamed fool of an engineer!”

”What!” I exclaimed. ”Do you blame him?”

"Certainly."

"But how was it his fault?"

"Oh—you see—bah!" said the inventor, turning rather red. "You wouldn't understand if I were to explain the whole thing, Griggs."

"But I should like to know, Hawkins."

"Why?"

"I want to write a little account of the why and the wherefore, so that they can find it in case—anything happens to us."

Hawkins turned away loftily.

"We'll have to get out of this," he said.

He pulled at his lever with a confident smile. The Hydro-Vapor Lift did not budge the fraction of an inch.

Then he pushed it back—and forward again. And still the inexorable 13 stood before us.

"Confound that—er—engineer!" growled the inventor.

Just then the Hydro-Vapor Lift indulged in a series of convulsive shudders.

It was too much for my nerves. I felt certain that in another second we were to drop, and I shouted lustily:

"Help! Help! Help!"

"Shut up!" cried Hawkins. "Do you want to get the workmen here and have them see that something's wrong?"

I affirmed that intention with unprintable force.

"Well, I don't!" said the inventor. "Why, Griggs, I'm figuring on equipping this building with my lift in a couple of months!"

"Are—are they going to allow that?" I gasped.

"Why, nothing's settled as yet; but it is understood that if this experimental model proves a success—"

But my cry had summoned aid. Above us, and hidden by the roof of the car, some one shouted:

"Hallo! Phat is it?"

"Hallo!" I returned.

"Air ye in the box?" said the voice, its owner evidently astonished.

"Yes! Get an ax!"

"Phat?"

"An ax!" I repeated. "Get an ax and chop out the roof of this beastly thing so that we can climb out, and—"

Hawkins clapped a hand over my mouth, and his scowl was sinister.

"Haven't you a grain of sense left?" he hissed.

"Yes, of course, I have. That's why I want an ax to—"

"Tell that crazy engineer I want more steam!" bawled Hawkins, drowning my voice.

"More steam?" said the person above. "More steam an' an ax, is it?"

"No—no ax. Tell him I want more steam, and I want it quick! He's got so little pressure that we're stuck!"

We heard the echo of departing footsteps.

"Now, you'd have made a nice muddle, wouldn't you?" snarled the inventor. "We'd have made a nice sight clambering out through a hole in the top of this car!"

"There are times," I said, "when appearance don't count for much."

"Well, this isn't one of them," rejoined the inventor sourly.

I did not reply. There was nothing that occurred to me that wouldn't have offended Hawkins, so I kept silence.

We stood there for a period of minutes, but the Hydro-Vapor Lift seemed disinclined to move either up or down.

Once or twice Hawkins gave a push at his lever; but that part of the apparatus seemed permanently to have retired from active business.

"Shall we move soon?" I inquired, when the stillness became oppressive.

"Presently," growled Hawkins.

Another long pause, and I hazarded again:

"Isn't it growing warm?"

"I don't feel it."

"Well, it is! Ah! The heat is coming from that plate!" I exclaimed, as it dawned upon me that the big iron thing was radiating warm waves through the stuffy little car. "Your Hydro-Vapor Lift will be pleasant to ride in when the thermometer runs up in August, won't it?"

Hawkins did not deign to reply, and I fell to examining the plate.

"Look," I said, "isn't that steam?"

"Isn't what steam?"

"Down there," I replied, pointing to the plate.

A fine jet of vapor was curling from one point at its edge—a thin spout of hot steam!

"That's nothing," said Hawkins. "Little leak—nothing more."

"But there's another now!"

"Positively, Griggs, I think you have the most active imagination I ever knew in an otherwise—"

"Use your eyes," I said uneasily. "There's another—and still another!"

Hawkins bent over the plate—as much to hide the concern which appeared upon his face as for any other reason, I think.

He arose rather suddenly, for a cloud of steam saluted him from a new spot.

"Well," he said, "she's leaking a trifle."

"But why?"

"The plate isn't steam-tight, of course; and the engineer's sending us more pressure."

His composure had returned by this time, and he regarded me with such contemptuous eyes that I could find no answer.

But Hawkins' contempt couldn't shut off the steam. It blew out harder and harder from the leaky spots. The little car began to fill, and the temperature rose steadily.

From a comfortable warmth it increased to an uncomfortable warmth; then to a positively intolerable, reeking wet heat.

I removed my coat, and a little later my vest. Hawkins did likewise. We both found some difficulty in breathing.

The steam grew thicker, the car hotter and hotter. Perspiration was oozing from every pore in my body. Sparkling little rivulets coursed down Hawkins' countenance.

"Hawkins," I said, "if you'd called this thing the Hydro-Vapor Bath instead of Lift—"

"Don't be witty," Hawkins said coldly.

"Never mind. It may be a bit unreliable as an elevator, but you can let it out for steam-baths—fifty cents a ticket, you know, until you've made up whatever the thing cost."

Bzzzzzzzzzz! said the steam.

"I'm going to shout for that ax again," I said determinedly. "Ten minutes more of this and we'll be cooked alive!"

"Now—" began the inventor.

"Hawkins, I decline to be converted into stew simply to save your vanity. He—"

"Hey!" shouted Hawkins, dancing away from his lever into a corner of the car and regarding the iron plate with round eyes.

"What is it, now?" I asked breathlessly.

A queer, roaring noise was coming from somewhere. The Hydro-Vapor affair executed a series of blood-curdling shakes. From the edges of the plate the steam hissed spitefully and with new vigor.

"That—that jackass of an engineer!" Hawkins sputtered. "He's sending too much steam!"

For a moment I didn't quite catch the significance; then I faltered with sudden weakness:

"Hawkins, you said that this plate corresponded to the cylinder-head of an engine? Then the tube beneath us is full of steam?"

"Yes, yes!"

"And if we get too much steam—as we seem to be getting it—will the plate blow off?"

"Yes—no—yes—no, of course not," answered Hawkins faintly. "It's bolted down with—"

"But if it should," I said, dashing the streaming perspiration from my eyes for another look at the accursed plate.

"If it should," the inventor admitted, "we'd either go up to Heaven on it, or we'd stay here and drop!"

"Help!" I screamed.

"Look out! Look out! Hug the wall!" Hawkins shrieked.

A mighty spasm shook the Hydro-Vapor Lift. I fell flat and rolled instinctively to one side. Then, ere my bewildered senses could grasp what was occurring, my ears were split by a terrific roar.

The roof of the car disappeared as if by magic, and through the opening shot that huge, round plate of iron, seemingly wafted upon a cloud of dense white vapor. Then the steam obscured all else, and I felt that we were falling.

Yes, for an instant the car seemed to shudder uncertainly—then she dropped!

I can hardly say more of our descent from the fatal thirteenth story. In one second—not more, I am certain—twelve spots of light, representing twelve floors, whizzed past us.

I recall a very definite impression that the Blank Building was making an outrageous trip straight upward from New York; and I wondered how the occupants were going to return and whether they would sue the building people for detention from business.

But just as I was debating this interesting point, earthly concerns seemed to cease.

In the cellar of the Blank Building annex a pile of excelsior and bagging and other refuse packing materials protruded into the shaft where once had been the Hawkins Hydro-Vapor Lift. That fact, I suppose, saved us from eternal smash.

At any rate, I realized after a time that my life had been spared, and sat up on the cement flooring of the cellar.

Hawkins was standing by a steel pillar, smiling blankly. Steam, by the cubic mile, I think, was pouring from the flooring of the Hydro-Vapor Lift and whirling up the shaft.

I struggled to my feet and tried to walk—and succeeded, very much to my own astonishment. Shaken and bruised and half dead from the shock I certainly was, but I could still travel.

I picked up my coat and turned to Hawkins.

"I—I think I'll go home," he said weakly. "I'm not well, Griggs."

We ascended a winding stair and passed through a door at the top, and instead of reaching the annex we stepped into the lower hall of the Blank Building itself.

The place was full of steam. People were tearing around and yelling "Fire!" at the top of their lungs. Women were screaming. Clerks were racing back and forth with big books.

Older men appeared here and there, hurriedly making their exit with cash boxes and bundles of documents. There was an exodus to jig-time going on in the Blank Building.

Above it all, a certain man, his face convulsed with anger, shouted at the crowd that there was no danger—no fire. Hawkins shrank as his eyes fell upon this personage.

"Lord! That's one of the owners!" he said. "I'm going!"

We, too, made for the door, and had almost attained it when a heavy hand fell upon the shoulder of Hawkins.

"You're the man I'm looking for!" said the hard, angry tones of the proprietor. "You come back with me! D'ye know what you've done? Hey? D'ye know that you've ruined that elevator shaft? D'ye know that a thousand-pound casting dropped on our roof and smashed it and wrecked two offices? Oh, you won't slip out like that." He tightened his grip on Hawkins' shoulder. "You've got a little settling to do with me, Mr. Hawkins. And I want that man who was with you, too, for—"

That meant me! A sudden swirl of steam enveloped my person. When it had lifted, I was invisible.

For my only course had seemed to fold my tents like the Arabs and as silently steal away; only I am certain that no Arab ever did it with greater expedition and less ostentation than I used on that particular occasion.

CHAPTER XII.

I had intended it for a peaceful, solitary walk up-town after business on that beautiful Saturday afternoon; and had in fact accomplished the better part of it. I was inhaling huge quantities of the balmy air and reveling in the exhilaration of the exercise.

But passing the picture store, I experienced a queer sensation—perhaps "that feeling of impending evil" we read about in the patent medicine advertisements.

It may have been because I recalled that in that very shop Hawkins had demonstrated the virtues of his infallible Lightning Canvas-Stretcher, and thereby ruined somebody's priceless and unpurchasable Corot.

At any rate my eyes were drawn to the place as I passed; and like a cuckoo-bird emerging from the clock, out popped Hawkins.

"Ah, Griggs," he exclaimed. "Out for a walk?"

"What were you doing in there?"

"Going to walk home?"

"Settling for that painting, eh?"

"Because if you are, I'll go with you," pursued Hawkins, falling into step beside me and ignoring my remarks.

I told Hawkins that I should be tickled to death to have his company, which was a lie and intended for biting sarcasm; but Hawkins took it in good faith and was pleased.

"I tell you, Griggs," he informed me, "there's nothing like this early summer air to fill a man's lungs."

"Unless it's cash to fill his pockets."

"Eh? Cash?" said the inventor. "That reminds me. I must spend some this afternoon."

"Indeed! Going to settle another damage suit?"

"I intend to order coal," replied Hawkins frigidly.

He seemed disinclined to address me further; and I had no particular yearning to hear his voice. We walked on in silence until within a few blocks of home.

Then Hawkins paused at one of the cross-streets.

"The coal-yard is down this way, Griggs," he said. "Come along. It won't take more than five or ten minutes."

Now, the idea of walking down to the coal-yard certainly seemed commonplace and harmless. To me it suggested nothing more sinister than a super-heated Irish lady perspiring over Hawkins' range in the dog days.

At least, it suggested nothing more at the time, and I turned the corner with Hawkins and walked on, unsuspecting.

Except that it belonged to a particularly large concern, the coal-yard which Hawkins honored by his patronage was much like other coal-yards. The high walls of the storage bins rose from the sidewalk, and there was the conventional arch for the wagons, and the little, dingy office beside it.

Into the latter Hawkins made his way, while I loitered without.

Hawkins seemed to be upon good terms with the coal people. He and the men in the office were laughing genially.

Through the open window I heard Hawkins file his order for four tons of coal. Later some one said: "Splendid, Mr. Hawkins, splendid."

Then somebody else said: "No, there seems to be no flaw in any particular."

And still later, the first voice announced that they would make the first payment one week from to-day, at which Hawkins' voice rose with a sort of pompous joy.

I paid very little heed to the scraps of conversation; but presently I paid considerable attention to Hawkins, for while he had entered the coal office a well-developed man, he emerged apparently deformed.

His chest seemed to have expanded something over a foot, and his nose had attained an elevation that pointed his gaze straight to the skies.

"Good gracious, Hawkins, what is it?" I asked. "Have they been inflating you with gas in there?"

"I beg pardon?"

"What has happened to swell your bosom? Is it the first payment?"

"Oh, you heard that, did you?" said the inventor, with a condescending smile. "Yes, Griggs, I may confess to some slight satisfaction in that payment. It is a matter of one thousand dollars—from the coal people, you know."

"But what for? Have you threatened to invent something for them, and now are exacting blackmail to desist?"

"Tush, Griggs, tush!" responded Hawkins. "Do make some attempt to subdue that inane wit. I fancy you'll feel rather cheap hearing that that thousand dollars is the first payment on something I have invented!"

"What!"

"Certainly. I am selling the patent to these people. It is the Hawkins Crano-Scale!"

"Crano-Scale?" I reflected. "What is it? A hair tonic?"

"Now, that is about the deduction your mental apparatus would make!" sneered the inventor.

"But can it be possible that you have constructed something that actually works?" I cried. "And you've sold it—actually sold it?"

"I have sold it, and there's no 'actually' about it!"

And Hawkins stalked majestically away through the arch and into the yard beyond.

The idea of one of Hawkins' inventions actually in practical operation was almost too weird for conception. He must be heading for it; and if it existed I must see it.

I followed.

Hawkins strode to the rear of the yard without turning. About us on every side were high wooden walls, the storage bins of the company.

Up the side of one wall ran a ladder, and Hawkins commenced the perpendicular ascent with the same matter-of-fact air that one would wear in walking up-stairs.

"What are you doing that for? Exercise?" I called, when he paused some twenty-five feet in the air.

"If you wish to see the Crano-Scale at work, follow me. If not, stay where you are," replied Hawkins.

Then he resumed his upward course; and having put something like thirty-five feet between his person and the solid earth, he vanished through a black doorway.

Climbing a straight ladder usually sets my hair on end; but this one I tackled without hesitation, and in a very few seconds stood before the door.

In the semi-darkness, I perceived that a wide ledge ran around the wall inside, and that Hawkins was standing upon it, gazing upon the hundreds of tons of coal below, and having something the effect of the Old Nick himself glaring down into the pit.

"There she is!" said the inventor laconically, pointing across the gulf.

I made my way to his side and stared through the gloom.

Something seemed to loom up over there.

Presently, as my eyes grew accustomed to the change, I perceived the arm of a huge crane, from which was suspended an enormous scoop.

"You mean that mastodonic coal-scuttle?" I inquired.

"Precisely. That's the Hawkins Crano-Scale."

"And what does she do when she—er—crano-scales things, as it were?"

"You'll be able to understand in a moment. That coal-scuttle, as you call it, is large enough to hold four tons. See? Well, the people in the yard are going to want two tons of coal very shortly. What do they do?"

"Take it out, weigh it, and send it," I hazarded.

"Not at all. They simply adjust the controlling apparatus to the two-ton point, and set the Crano-Scale going. The scoop dips down, picks up exactly two tons of coal, and rises automatically as soon as the two tons are in. After that the crane swings outward, dumps the coal in the wagon, and there you have it—weighed and all! It has been in operation here for one month," Hawkins concluded complacently.

"And no one killed or maimed? No Crano-Scale widows or orphans?"

"Oh, Griggs, you are—Ha! She's starting!"

The Crano-Scale emitted an ear-piercing shriek. The big steel crane was in motion.

I watched the thing. Gracefully the coal-scuttle dipped into the pile of coal, dug for a minute, swung upward again. It turned, passed through a big doorway in the side, and we could hear the coal rattling into the wagon.

The Crano-Scale returned and swung ponderously in the twilight.

"There!" cried Hawkins triumphantly.

"It works!" I gasped.

"You bet it works!"

"But it must cost something to run the thing," I suggested.

"Well—er—I'm paying for that part," Hawkins acknowledged, "until I've finished perfecting a motor particularly adapted for the Crano-Scale, you see."

I smiled audibly. I think that Hawkins was about to take exception to the smile, but a voice from without bawled loudly:

"Two-tons-nut!"

"Ah, there she goes again!" said the inventor rapturously.

This time the Crano-Scale executed a sudden detour before descending. Indeed, the thing came so painfully near to our perch that the wind was perceptible, and when the giant coal-scuttle had passed and dropped, my heart was hammering out a tattoo.

"I don't believe this ledge is safe, Hawkins," I said.

"Nonsense."

"But that thing came pretty close."

"Oh, it won't act that way again. Watch! She's dumping into the wagon now! Hear it?"

"Yes, I hear it. I see just what a beautiful success it is, Hawkins—really. Let's go."

"And now she's coming back!" cried the inventor, his eyes glued to the remarkable contrivance. "Observe the ease—the grace—the mechanical poise—the resistless quality of the Crano-Scale's motion! See, Griggs, how she swings!"

I did see how she was swinging. It was precisely that which sent me nearer to the ladder.

The Crano-Scale was returning to position, but with a series of erratic swoops that seemed to close my throat.

The coal-scuttle whirled joyously about in the air—it was receding—no, it was coming nearer! It paused for a second. Then, making a bee-line for our little ledge, it dived through the air toward us.

”Look out, there, Hawkins!” I cried, hastily.

”It’s all right,” said the inventor.

”But the cursed thing will smash us flat against the wall!”

”Tush! The automatic reacting clutch will—”

The Crano-Scale was upon us! For the merest fraction of a second it paused and seemed to hesitate; then it struck the wall with a heavy bang; then started to scrape its way along our ledge.

The wretched contraption was bent on shoving us off!

”What will we do?” I managed to shout.

”Why—why—why—why—why—” Hawkins cried breathlessly.

But, my course of action had been settled for me. The scoop of the Crano-Scale caught me amidships, and I plunged downward into the coal.

That there was a considerable degree of shock attached to my landing may easily be imagined.

But small coal, as I had not known before, is a reasonably soft thing to fall on; and within a few seconds I sat up, perceived that I was soon to order a new suit of clothes, and then looked about for Hawkins.

He was nowhere in the neighborhood, and I called aloud.

”We-ll?” came a voice from far above.

”Where are you?”

”Hanging-to-the-scoop!” sang out the inventor.

And there, up near the roof, I located him, dangling from the Crano-Scale coal-scuttle!

”What are you going to do next?” I asked, with some interest.

"I-I-I can't-can't hang on long here!"

"I should say not."

"Well, climb out and tell them to lower the crane!" screamed Hawkins.

I looked around. Right and left, before and behind, rose a mountain of loose coal. I essayed to climb nimbly toward the door which the Crano-Scale had used, and suddenly landed on my hands and knees.

"Are-you-out?" shrieked Hawkins. "I can't stick here!"

"And I can't get out!" I replied.

"Well, you-ouch!"

There was a dull, rattling whack beside me; bits of coal flew in all directions. Hawkins had landed.

"Well!" he exclaimed, sitting up. "I honestly believe, Griggs, that no man was ever born on this earth with less resourcefulness than yourself!"

"Which means that I should have climbed out and informed the people of your plight?"

"Certainly."

"Well, you try it yourself, Hawkins."

The inventor arose and started for the door with a very convincing and elaborate display of indomitable energy. He planted his left foot firmly on the side of the coal pile-and found that his left leg had disappeared in the coal in a highly astonishing and undignified fashion.

"Humph!" he remarked disgustedly, struggling free and shaking something like a pound of coal dust from his person. "Perhaps-perhaps it's more solid on the other side."

"Try it."

"Well, it is better to try it and fail than to stand there like a cigar-store Indian and offer fool suggestions!" snapped the inventor, making a vicious attack at the opposite side of the pile.

It really did seem more substantial. Hawkins, by the aid of both hands, both feet, his elbows, his knees, and possibly his teeth as well, managed to scramble upward for a dozen feet or so.

But just as he was about to turn and gloat over his success, the treacherous coal gave way once more. Hawkins went flat upon his face and slid back to me, feet first.

When he arose he presented a remarkable appearance.

Light overcoat, pearl trousers, fancy vest—all were black as ink. Hawkins' classic countenance had fared no better. His lips showed some slight resemblance of redness, and his eyes glared wonderfully white; but the rest of his face might have been made up for a minstrel show.

"Yes, it's devilish funny, isn't it?" he roared, sitting down again rather suddenly as the coal slid again beneath his feet.

"Funny isn't the word. What's our next move to be?"

"Climb out, of course. There must be some place where we can get a foothold."

"Why not shout for help?"

"No use. Nobody could hear us down here. Go on, Griggs. Make your attempt. I've done my part."

"And you wish to see me repeat the performance? Thank you. No."

"But it's the only way out."

"Then," I said, "I'm afraid we're slated to spend the night here."

"Good Lord! We can't do that!"

"I have a notion, Hawkins," I went on, "that we not only can, but shall. You say we can't attract any one's attention, and I guess you're right. Hence, as there is no one to pull us out, and we can't pull ourselves out, we shall remain here. That's logic, isn't it?"

"It's awful!" exclaimed the inventor. "Why, we may not get out to-morrow—"

"Nor the next day, nor the one after that. Exactly. We shall have to wait until this wretched place is emptied, when they will find our bleaching skeletons—if skeletons can bleach in a coal bin."

Hawkins blinked his sable eyelids at me.

"Or we might go to work and pile all the coal on one side of the bin," I continued. "It wouldn't take more than a week or so, throwing it over by handfuls; and when at last they found that your crano-engine

wouldn't bring up any more from this side—"

"Aha!" cried the inventor, with sudden animation. "That's it! The Crano-Scale!"

"Yes, that's it," I assented. "Away up near the roof. What about it?"

"Why, it solves the whole problem," said Hawkins. "Don't you see, the next time they need nut-coal, they'll set the engine going and the scoop—"

"Four-tons-nut, Bill!" said a faraway voice. "Yep! Four ton. Start up that blamed machine!"

"What? What did he say?" cried the inventor.

"Something about starting the engine."

"That's what I thought. They're going to use the Crano-Scale, Griggs! We're saved! We're saved!"

"I fail to see it."

"Why, when the thing comes down, be ready. Ah—it's coming now! Get ready, Griggs! Get ready! Be prepared to make a dash for it!"

"And then?"

"And then climb in, of course. There won't be much room, for they're going to take on four tons, and the thing will be full; but we can manage it. We can do it, Griggs, and be home in time for dinner."

"And you're a fine looking object to go to dinner," I added.

Hawkins' countenance fell somewhat, but there was no time for a reply. The coal-scuttle of the Crano-Scale was hovering above us, evidently selecting a spot for its operations.

"Here! We're right under it!" Hawkins shouted. "This way, Griggs! Quick! Lord! It's coming down—it'll hit you! Quick!"

And I dived toward Hawkins as he was struggling for a foothold, and then—

A line of asterisks is the only way of putting into print my state of mind—or absence of any state of mind—for the ensuing quarter of an hour.

My first idea was that some absent-minded person had built a three-story house upon my unhappy body; but I was juggling and bouncing up and down, so that that hypothesis was manifestly untenable.

The weight of the house was there, though, and all about was stifling blackness.

I tried to turn. It was useless. I couldn't move.

The house had me pinned down hard and fast.

Then I wriggled frantically, and something near me wriggled frantically as well. Then one of my hands struck something that yielded, and there came a muffled voice from somewhere in the neighborhood.

"Griggs!" it said.

"Yes?"

"W-w-w-where are we? This isn't the coal bin. Are you hurt?"

"I give it up. Are you?"

"I think not. Why, Griggs, this must be one of the big coal carts!"

"I shouldn't wonder," I assented vaguely.

"But-how—"

"Your miserable coal-scuttle must have stunned us, picked us up and dumped us in with the coal!" I exclaimed, suddenly enlightened.

"Do-you-think," came through the blackness. "Huh! It's stopped!"

For a long, long time, as it seemed, there was silence. The weight of coal pressed down until I was near to madness. Hawkins was grunting painfully.

I was speculating as to whether he was actually succumbing—whether I could stand the strain myself for another minute—when everything began to slide. The coal slid, I slid, Hawkins slid—the world seemed to be sliding!

We landed upon the sidewalk. We struggled and beat and threshed at the coal, and finally managed to rise out of it—pitch black, dazed and battered.

And the first object which confronted us was the home of Hawkins! We had been delivered at his door, with the four tons of nut-coal.

"They'll have to sign for us on the driver's slip," I remember saying.

That person let off one shriek and vanished down the street. Then the door of the Hawkins home opened, and Mrs. Hawkins emerged, followed by my wife.

That numerous things were said need not be stated. Mrs. Hawkins said most of them, and they were luminous.

Mrs. Griggs limited herself to ruining a fifty-dollar gown by weeping on my coal-soiled shoulder as she implored me never again to tread the same street with Hawkins.

It was a solemn moment, that; for I saw the light. I realized how many bumps and bruises and pains and duckings and scorchings might have been spared me, had I taken the step earlier.

But it is never too late to mend. Probably I had still a few years in which to enjoy life.

I turned to Hawkins—a chopfallen, cowering huddle of filth, standing upon two pearl-and-black legs—and said:

"Hawkins, when in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one man to sever those friendly bands which have connected him with another, and to assume a station apart, a decent respect for the opinions of the latter usually make it necessary to declare the cause of that separation. It is not so in this case. You know mighty well what you've put me through in the past. There's no need of going into it.

"But this Crano-Scale business is my limit—my outside limit," I went on, "and you've passed it. If you ever attempt to address another word to me, or ride in the same elevated train, or even sit in the same theatre, I'll have you arrested as a suspicious person—and locked up for life, if money'll do it! Hawkins, henceforth we meet as strangers!"

And Hawkins, piloted by the unhappy woman who bears his name, walked up the steps, turned and stared stupidly at me, and then stumbled into the house and out of my life—forever.