

The TOUCH of OBLIVION

By THEODORE WATERS

THE Junior medical staff of the Randall's Island hospital sat in Swainley's room discussing the eccentricities of Peterman. Peterman was a thick nosed, intense-eyed student in whom men saw much or nothing, according to the point of view. He possessed little of that sense of offhand comradeship which counts for so much in government institutions. His companions always treated him with consideration in a certain expectant way. They were constantly on the lookout for his latest singularities, and they talked much of him behind his back.

"He was always so," said Jameson. "I know him in college. He used to sit on the lowest bench at night, staring into the demonstrator's face in that cocksure way of his. He fairly queered the junior instructors."

"Peterman has the faculty of getting himself talked about at any rate," said Swainley. "Why, some of those ethical issues he brought up in the medical journals caused more talk than a cholera scare."

"He has a new fad now," said Swainley, who once had roomed with Peterman. "What is it?"

"Idiotism. Talks of ameliorating their condition and all that sort of thing."

"How can you ameliorate an idiot?" asked Renley.

"I know of one way that would benefit science, but I am afraid the public wouldn't stand for it. Now, in Berlin—"

"Good heavens, man!" exclaimed Jameson, with horrified stare. "You do not really mean—"

"Well," replied Swainley, with a shrug. "The idiots couldn't be worse off than they are now. I notice you don't seem vividly glad to have your 'attendants' work more perfectly, especially when there is a quarantine on. That time Central Park and Eddie Apple had scarlet fever, and you thought you had it, and we bundled you off together for a while, I guess."

"Curious idea of the superintendent of charity nursing them for the places where they are found," observed Renley.

"Oh, well," said Baxter, who was gazing thoughtfully at a window at the twinkling lights of a sound steamer coming out of Hell Gate, "it sometimes leads to identification when the sponsors want to identify. But let's change the subject. Hanged if it doesn't sicken me! I hate that street, especially when there is a quarantine on. That time Central Park and Eddie Apple had scarlet fever, and you thought you had it, and we bundled you off together for a while, I guess."

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"Why, the steamer doesn't run at night!"

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A jumble of exclamations and whistling broke forth from the group, swainley was the most agitated.

"Of all the crazy fools!" he exclaimed. And to implicate me in the business in as distinctly as possible. But we must top it. And he dashed from the room, pursued down the long stairs by the eyes of Jameson, who called sweetly as they all followed.

"I say, Swainley, old man, Peter seems a fine fellow for your ideas perfectly, doesn't he?"

"The idiot man's dormitory, known only as Pavilion F, looked dark and sinister against the half light of the uly evening. It was an oblong, super-structured shed, with gallery piazzas leading around it at every floor and inside stairways leading up to the roof. The floors are unadorned. Peter is not necessary to the inmates, why would not appreciate it. A new dining bench extends completely under the walls of the ground floor on beneath the half windows. Two heavy stoves, encircled by a wire mesh, stand near each end of the room. These great stoves even in summer are usually surrounded, almost inevitably, by a mass of swarming live, but when Swainley burst through the door of the room he saw only a few men sitting on the benches and men—sitting on the benches and grouped about the stoves. An attendant was in sight. He ran to again and over to the neighboring dining to the female wards and found it relieved the usual complement of men. The women attendants were not too. Evidently Peterman had run away only the male patients.

"Well," said Renley as Swainley came up, "he got away with all but the stoves and benches, took every one that did walk home."

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The New Yorker hailed the Wanderer and advised a series of zigzags as the channels would permit, the two boats to work down the Narrows. The Romer Shout light was reached. But the arrival of a new ally made it unnecessary. Soon after the boats left the Battery the Patrol, the steamer of the police department, returned from her raid and, with all the excitement she could muster, started to help in the work of rescue. She is a very fast boat, and she went down under a foreshot draft and with a long, lean stride that got her to the Narrows almost as soon as the others, she started to head off to every boat that loomed up ahead and at last received an answering whistle from the New Yorker just as that boat and the Wanderer were about to divide the uncertainties of the search.

Then occurred a thing that was without parallel in the history of the harbor. The three captains headed their boats in the form of an ever-widening wedge, with the Wanderer in the middle, the New Yorker working toward Conoy Island and the Patrol veering toward Sandy Hook. In other words, the Wanderer made a lee line for Dumb Beason, the Patrol went down the regular ship channel, and the New Yorker went out by the east channel. There was a signal agreed upon to be given to ease the chase was lighted. They halted everything that passed, because it is so easy to mistake a boat in the night and because incoming vessels might have sighted the Refuge. No one had recognized the Refuge with its load of human irresponsibles. Once only did the captain of the Wanderer get a hail that gave an inkling of encouragement. It came from the captain of a tugboat, who leaned far out of his pilot house window to shout a cheer. And, see—here's five cents for you. Pull it. Pull that big stick. Five cents, Eddie's cents.

"For God's sake, Peter, old man, don't do it! It won't help any," called Swainley, but the Wanderer's eyes showed that nothing short of physical restraint would keep him from his purpose. He was there to ameliorate the condition of those idiots. He called repeatedly.

"Five cents," muttered Eddie dubiously. He had been asking for "five cents" all of his life, and he had received many promises. Now, for the first time, he hesitated between an order and the impulse to obey. Peterman actually buried a coin at him, but the coin was short, and it fell into the water. "Five cents" was not his only name. He never had seen a coin in his life.

"The proof of the police boat moved in beside the Refuge, and its captain, evidently a man of the world, though in uniform if he was not instantly silent. But the proof of the situation was now centered in Peterman, but in Eddie, who had passed the period of promises and on whose slow rolling head the meaning of Peterman's request was beginning to dawn. He gazed blankly at the lever. He even fingered it cautiously. He might suddenly draw it forward at any moment. Back of him the idiots tramped or stood in groups, pointing and leaning at the lighted boats drawing nearer and nearer.

It seemed to the anxious men on the Wanderer that the black net between the boats would never be closed. Only one thing in all the world seemed to be being slowly overhauled by a big coast line steamer, and when they showed oars to speak the tug this liner, brilliant with electric lights and gay parties of tourists on their way to southern resorts, surged past them heavily. When, however, the coaster regained her former speed, the coaster drew away less swiftly, and the Wanderer lunged on to her port quarter and tossed about in the mass of her screws for fully fifteen minutes. An orchestra was playing on the big boat, and the searchlight dived into the water about the boat. The light was only for the men in the pilot house of the hospital boat. It was so different from that of which they were in pursuit.

When they were looking at each other after the liner, Swainley in particular, making some invidious comparisons, they heard off to the right a peculiar spire racking sound which brought them up standing with excitement. It began with one of the lower notes in the musical scale, the wonder of which was beginning to dawn. He fingered it cautiously. He might suddenly draw it forward at any moment. Back of him the idiots tramped or stood in groups, pointing and leaning at the lighted boats drawing nearer and nearer.

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THE GRAVE IN THE CELLAR

(Original.)

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One night after Tom and his family had gone to bed there came a rap at his door. On opening it he saw a man who looked more like a rag picker than anything else standing at the door. He asked Tom if he was not a miser. When Tom replied that he was, the man asked him if he would like a job to do for him that night. Since there was nothing in the house for breakfast and the stranger agreed to pay him \$2 if he would work up till morning, Tom agreed, whereupon, taking his tools, he went out with the man, who after introducing him led him about in a tortuous course and in a small cellar, where he removed the handgrip. The place was lighted by a candle.

"I want you to take up a portion of the cement floor and dig a grave," said the man.

Tom set to work, took up an oblong portion of the floor and dug a grave, 6 feet by 2. Then the rag picker mounted a flight of steps, opened a door and showed the end of a pipe, which he carried through the opening. Tom took hold, and the two carried the box and lowered it into the grave.

A barrel of cement stood ready, with everything needed for mixing it. Tom was directed to lay the floor, something it so that when the cement had become old no one would notice that the floor had been disturbed. Tom, who was suspicious that a murder had been committed, looked about him to discover something by which he might identify the cellar, though there was no probability of his ever coming to it again. There was absolutely nothing unusual in the place, and all Tom could do when the rag picker's box was turned was to make a cross on the newly laid cement with the sharp blade of his knife. When the job was finished the rag picker unfolded Tom again and led him out of the cellar. After taking him over a winding course finally the rag picker said:

"I am going to leave you now. Count 500, when you have done so take up the handgrip. If you remove it before you have made the count you will be a dead man. You will find on the ground something worth much more to you than the sum I agreed to pay you."

Tom counted 500, then, after considerable delay, removed his handgrip. On the ground before him was a piece of paper on which was written in pencil:

"Always get a part of a portion of your money doing work."

Ten years passed. Tom remembered the rag picker's advice and would have profited by it, but there was so little work to do that he was obliged to take his chances for pay. He was turned out of one house after another and he brought up in a deserted hotel on a lonely road. It was an autumn day when the family went there, and Jenny sat down on a stump and began to cry.

"Never mind, dear girl," said Tom cheerfully; "fools are usually cheerful under misfortune. It's darkest before the dawn. Maybe something will turn up."

"Or down," added the wife, with a fresh burst of tears.

Tom, who was never idle when there was work to do, set about gathering the fallen wood lying about, which he carried to the cellar. After carrying in the first load he came out with a singular expression on his face and asked his wife for a small hand magnifying glass that his youngest boy had used for a plaything. The glass was given him, and he returned to the cellar. Presently he went upstairs and told his wife that they were in the house where he had hoped make a burial.

Jenny was depressed anew at having to live over a corpse and declared that she would not go to bed that night. Tom had taken the horrid thing up and buried it in the wood. Tom, who was a patient fellow, first prepared a new burial place, then opened the grave in the cellar and after much difficulty got Jenny curled up and brought to her feet. She, much rattled, out of her resting place and carried it part way up the steps to the cellar door. There it slipped away from him and fell with a crash to the floor, breaking to pieces.

Tom turned round, expecting to see a ghastly corpse, but instead saw several coins rolling over the floor. Seizing an ax, he completed the destruction of the box and found that it was full of gold pieces.

"Jenny," he cried, "come here. The coffin's broken and the corpse is rolling about on the floor!"

Jenny gave a shriek, but a morbid fascination which impels people to look at awful sights led her to the cellar door, and she sunlight shooting through a small window showed her the shining gold.

Inquiry revealed to Tom that the house had once been habited by a rag picker who was suspected of being a miser. The man was dead, and no one knew who he was or whether he had any relatives.

Tom bought the house and gradually replaced and enlarged the space it occupied. His wife and children were well dressed and general prosperity reigned in the family. No one knows where Tom got his funds, and no one can find out, for he is his own banker, and his bank is a grave in his cellar.

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Jenny gave a shriek, but a morbid fascination which impels people to look at awful sights led her to the cellar door, and she sunlight shooting through a small window showed her the shining gold.

Inquiry revealed to Tom that the house had once been habited by a rag picker who was suspected of being a miser. The man was dead, and no one knew who he was or whether he had any relatives.

Tom bought the house and gradually replaced and enlarged the space it occupied. His wife and children were well dressed and general prosperity reigned in the family. No one knows where Tom got his funds, and no one can find out, for he is his own banker, and his bank is a grave in his cellar.

F. A. MITCHELL.

THE GRAVE IN THE CELLAR

(Original.)

Tom O'Neill was a fool and a miser, He had married Jenny Cane, the girl of his choice, before he had put his any ready money and since he could not always get work as he prospered. There is an old saying, "A fool and a poor man for children," and Tom certainly illustrated the last part of the adage.

One night after Tom and his family had gone to bed there came a rap at his door. On opening it he saw a man who looked more like a rag picker than anything else standing at the door. He asked Tom if he was not a miser. When Tom replied that he was, the man asked him if he would like a job to do for him that night. Since there was nothing in the house for breakfast and the stranger agreed to pay him \$2 if he would work up till morning, Tom agreed, whereupon, taking his tools, he went out with the man, who after introducing him led him about in a tortuous course and in a small cellar, where he removed the handgrip. The place was lighted by a candle.

"I want you to take up a portion of the cement floor and dig a grave," said the man.

Tom set to work, took up an oblong portion of the floor and dug a grave, 6 feet by 2. Then the rag picker mounted a flight of steps, opened a door and showed the end of a pipe, which he carried through the opening. Tom took hold, and the two carried the box and lowered it into the grave.

A barrel of cement stood ready, with everything needed for mixing it. Tom was directed to lay the floor, something it so that when the cement had become old no one would notice that the floor had been disturbed. Tom, who was suspicious that a murder had been committed, looked about him to discover something by which he might identify the cellar, though there was no probability of his ever coming to it again. There was absolutely nothing unusual in the place, and all Tom could do when the rag picker's box was turned was to make a cross on the newly laid cement with the sharp blade of his knife. When the job was finished the rag picker unfolded Tom again and led him out of the cellar. After taking him over a winding course finally the rag picker said:

"I am going to leave you now. Count 500, when you have done so take up the handgrip. If you remove it before you have made the count you will be a dead man. You will find on the ground something worth much more to you than the sum I agreed to pay you."

Tom counted 500, then, after considerable delay, removed his handgrip. On the ground before him was a piece of paper on which was written in pencil:

"Always get a part of a portion of your money doing work."

Ten years passed. Tom remembered the rag picker's advice and would have profited by it, but there was so little work to do that he was obliged to take his chances for pay. He was turned out of one house after another and he brought up in a deserted hotel on a lonely road. It was an autumn day when the family went there, and Jenny sat down on a stump and began to cry.

"Never mind, dear girl," said Tom cheerfully; "fools are usually cheerful under misfortune. It's darkest before the dawn. Maybe something will turn up."

"Or down," added the wife, with a fresh burst of tears.

Tom, who was never idle when there was work to do, set about gathering the fallen wood lying about, which he carried to the cellar. After carrying in the first load he came out with a singular expression on his face and asked his wife for a small hand magnifying glass that his youngest boy had used for a plaything. The glass was given him, and he returned to the cellar. Presently he went upstairs and told his wife that they were in the house where he had hoped make a burial.

Jenny was depressed anew at having to live over a corpse and declared that she would not go to bed that night. Tom had taken the horrid thing up and buried it in the wood. Tom, who was a patient fellow, first prepared a new burial place, then opened the grave in the cellar and after much difficulty got Jenny curled up and brought to her feet. She, much rattled, out of her resting place and carried it part way up the steps to the cellar door. There it slipped away from him and fell with a crash to the floor, breaking to pieces.

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