

The Hidden Fire

DYKE WHITTEMORE, broker, also judge and critic of show-girls along the Nightless Lane, likewise member of the "Little brothers of the rich," dodged in between the two granite posts of the Keldon Club and with a leap mounted the stone steps three at a time. He looked belligerently at the liveried butler who performed his humble duty somewhat tardily, incensed the elevator-boy by his abusive language, and threatened incarceration to every flunky on the club's staff as he stood in the receiving room of his lavishly furnished suite. It had been raining hard and the water which ran from his coat in rivulets, formed a little pool around him on the plush carpeted floor. No one was in sight. It was then whatever reserve he had carefully fostered collapsed; and he anathematized everything and everybody from the flagrant weather to his dilatory valet. The old valet, weighed down with years and service, at length presented himself. A casual glance at his master's face sufficed to impress him with the idea that he was not in an ultra-humorous mood, and the usual felicitious remarks were abandoned. Straightway the malignant Whittemore was disenrobed and ushered to his bath.

The new Whittemore reappeared on the stairs, smiling and speaking to those who an hour ago accused themselves of being his mortal enemies. With the air of London assurance and Parisian scorn, he strolled leisurely into the cafe, looked thoughtfully at the diners and abruptly directed his steps towards a young gentleman who sat alone in the farther end of the hall, idly perusing an evening paper. Unnoticed Whittemore sank into a chair gently pushed under him by a "sidewhisker" and smiled amiably at the gentleman across the shining linen.

"Something interesting Burton?" he asked as he slipped the paper from under the preoccupied gentleman's nose. After a quick survey of the glaring headlines he added with affected brusqueness, "Not regarding formalities, yon know."

"Always like to see you amused Brainstomer, and General Manager of other Peoples' Affairs," responded Burton—Stanley Clayton Burton. "The usual robberies, panics, grafts, murders and divorces are carefully recorded tonight, that is all. Put it away Dyke and pick up that menu for I can see in the waiter-cap's evil eye a firm determination to serve us that new fangled French mixture that originally found birth in a Bowery *"cuisine."*

The waiter-captain was presently summoned, and Burton's accusations brought forth many careful protests emphasied with obsequious nods of his head; withal he still maintained with the preciseness of his polished art, the superior quality and flavor of the new French dish which had taken New York by storm.

"Saw you waddling in the front door like a water buffalo an hour ago," said Burton when the waiter retired, and he laughed aloud as a scowl came over Whittemore's face.

"Confound the luck," he grumbled. "It is my opinion that the taxies go away and hide when they see a rainstorm coming up."

"You're a congenial sort of a person Dyke, but your damning vocabulary is too extensive for me."

"No doubt", replied Whittemore absently. His glance passed Burton and his brow knitted as he sullenly watched the rain tumble from the overflowing gutters and fall over the windows in miniature rivers. "What have you been doing lately Stan?" he asked reverting his gaze. There was a new note, a touch of extreme friendliness and frankness in his tone.

"Oh, enjoying myself as usual" was the reply in a nonchalant air. "Had a few jolts lately but the slide wasn't greased enough. Everything now is running smooth."

At this juncture the waiter neared the table weighed under by a massive tray, laden with two plates of *consomme* which he sedulously placed before them, flanking each with silverware.

"In your estimation what constitutes a good time?" asked Whittemore.

"Plenty of friends, both sexes of course; copious

checks from the domicile ; social standing and a club." The waiter caught an ill-omened eye from Whittemore and instinctively he retired with alacrity.

"Well you seem to be forever enjoying yourself," commented Whittemore regarding Burton intently. He had noticed a sudden change coming over him during the last few days and now two telltale hollows lurked under each inflamed eyeball and his sallow betrayed recent dissipation.

"Yes," assented Burton, "things have always come my way, but they are bound to change some day. I have been hitting the pace a little hard lately, but pshaw, I will recover in time." He waved his hand as if to dismiss the subject and drained his appetizer.

The dinner now progressed in silence while Whittemore studied the expressions which played around the handsome features of his friend. He noticed the brow twitch nervously and tremble. The once gay and virile youth was now grave and sordid. What recent escapade reduced him to such? Was Burton so pervious to the lures and machinations of New York? Alas, he thought it is too true. He had met this handsome fellow new from college and, both silently and patiently, had watched his slow deterioration, a youth much younger than himself—in years, not in spirit. Had his folk placed so much confidence in their son? He had a slight acquaintance with his father, a wealthy railroad man, and could only attribute his lack of interest to his deep engrossment in business, and to the adoration of the Great God Mammon. He shuddered at the thought of the destruction of such a youth, and he looked with an experienced eye to his inevitable ruin if some potent force did not immediately intervene. He reflected his own desperate plight when first he joined the carousing highbrows of Fifth and Broadway. How the principle of "never wisin'-up a sucker" was rigidly put into practice by those who were eternally craving for his dollar. Now his eyes were opened and those 'on the make' looked elsewhere. Now, there was never any eagerness shown by professional gamblers for him to enter a game and the "stable-tips" were wisely conserved for those who had not as yet tasted the bitter experience of the mill.

Burton looked up suddenly. "What is the trouble Whittemore? You look oppressed. Any one suing you for breach of promise?—and he laughed at the idea, for Nature, reputed bounteous was strigently meagre with Whittemore and had neglected to kiss the rough features of his peaked countenance. You are everlastingly carrying those little Glooms about you", Burton continued accusingly, "why don't you exchange them for Joys? You look on life too seriously Dyke. Stoicism is dead. The Epicurean is more in Style, but Bohemianism is *La Vogue* at the present time. Pooh and pish! Likewise tush! Also Bah on your society. Don't be tied down to conventionalities. Be free to come and go when and where you please. This trash of near-society which has crept into a half decent set has converted the circle into a pond of pollywogs, all of the same breeding, color, and habits. Like the pollywogs, they swim about in one another's way and as soon as their legs sprout, which has been in some cases an interminable time, they begin to hop about the shore and find there is another world beside their stagnant pool, and invariably they set about to enjoy it. Don't be in the pool Dyke. Be outside hopping on legs like me. I have cut them. Their fines are altogether too monotonous for me.

"A hopeless case," complained Whittemore with a dismal nod of his head.

"Not on your life. I will never give myself up as hopeless when I have one little girl as a friend. Did you see her Dyke?" he asked anxiously. "She is about the best that hautilly treads Broadway."

"Who?" asked Whittemore betraying a sense of uneasiness.

"She has all the "Johns" on the run," Burton continued apparently undisturbed by Whittemore's interruption. "All crazy about her. And talk about your singing. Melba and Tetrazinni are ducks when compared with this canary. And for looks, why the best of the impeccable four hundred resemble a crate of moulting hens."

"A singer!" exclaimed Whittemore.

"Yes, she sings at the new cabaret. Sort of a feature you know. But why this anxiety?"

"Oh, nothing" answered Whittemore gloomily, "I might expect anything from you."

"Now see here Dyke, there is nothing flim-flammy about this. I am going to meet her tonight and I want you to come along. You will fall in love with her at sight. Coming?"

"Burton's popularity as a highly respectable and entertaining "John" had accumulated so fast, and the current reports of this young spendthrift's parties at which the footlight favorites of Broadway were to be seen, caused Whittemore to think deeply. He had seen many of his old friends succumb under the same company, while he himself, only through his tact and knowledge gained by costly experience, narrowly escaped a similar death. He glanced thoughtfully at Burton. Perhaps this was the first step towards that ultimate end? Could he remove this downward influence?"

"Yes," he said finally, "I will be dressed in half an hour and will meet you in the lobby."

II.

The pale, mellow moon, impotent in the brilliantly lighted street, peeped over the lofty buildings as Whittemore and Burton hailed a taxicab. They sped swiftly over the asphalt pavements and stopped at the New Tivny Cabaret. Entering, Burton stopped to talk with the proprietor, a portly bulk, while Whittemore picked out a table and was joined shortly by Burton.

Within was a painted world, where before night-fall, were already the drunk and disorderly. A world within a world utterly oblivious to the world without. A typical Roman hell. Men of all ages, from college undergraduates to bald, antiquated financiers, lolled over the tables. Women clothed in scanty apparel belittered with jewels, smiled through their cosmetics, striving their best for a semblance of gaiety, and for the most part failing even to produce a passable counterfeit. Through the din and clatter of dishes, the popping of corks, and the incoherent ravings of the early

delirium tremens, came the wretched clap-trap music of the day. An orchestra, mounted on a balcony decorated with multi-colored lights was lustily belching forth the plaintive strains of an amorous madrigal, which when changed to a popular ragtime brought immense delight to the audience who swayed to and fro even drinking their liquors in perfect rythm with the music.

Whittemore's eye swept the motley crowd in abject disgust which turned to pity on beholding some of his old acquaintances leap suddenly from their chairs. Clapsed in an awesome embrace they tangoed in and out among the tables and returned to their seats admidst a general acclamation of applause and approval. A red, flushed faced man who occupied a neighboring table and who was entertaining a lady friend whose face between paint and liquor was also of a ruddy hue, leared back in his chair and struck Whittemore on the shoulder. "Hic-twas pretty good wasn't it? What d'ye think of the crowd? Some frisky poultry here tonight." More amused than indignant at his audacity and undue liberality, Whittemore nodded approval and turned his face towards the stage on which Gillinghams's Famous Bathing Girls were bowing to the audience. The hall had now become quiet but soon the eyes that followed the winsome troupe returned to their glasses and the noise grew more uproarious than before.

"Her next act Dyke. Watch her *entre*." Burton, who was beginning to feel the effect of his frequent potations, meant to emphasize his request on Whittemore's arm but accidentally upset his own glass which rolled from the table and crumpled on the floor. A loud flourish of the orchestra, a flurry of silk and lace caused Whittemore to turn suddenly towards the stage. A girl with black lustrous hair, large black eyes sparkling with animation, and gaudily attired in a pink flimsy gown, stood smiling down upon the audience as she waited for the orchestra to conclude the opening. She raised her head and Burton layed a hand on Whittemore's arm, and trembled like an aspen when the first note was sung Higher and

higher in the tender, pleading notes of *La Belle* the girl-like soprano voice rose above the maudlin babbling of the besotted crowd. The pianist leaned lightly on on the ivory keys as the girl with a difficult run drifted idly and fancifully into the chorus.

A sudden death-like hush fell over the hall and her voice modulated to a soft whisper as if the wonderful notes had fascinated her. Not a tremor coursed through her delicately formed body and her head thrown back revealed a neck and shoulders exquisitely perfect. Glasses were suspended in the air and held by palsied hands; the waiters moved noiselessly about as if one incautious step would disturb the spell; the crowd sat motionless, they were amazed, spellbound.

The girl ceased and with a long graceful sweep, tripped lightly from the stage and disappeared. Instantly the crowd revived. The contents of the poised glasses were gulped avidly; women leaned their chins on their hands while faint sobs and heart-rending sighs escaped them and rang through the stillness like gruesome wails from a haunted tomb; men with the glaring stamp of bacchantian valor imprinted on their sunken cheeks, gazed pensively into their glasses, and nervously flicked the ashes from their cigarettes to the floor. Not a sound of appreciation arose. Nothing but the clinking of glasses and the rustling of waiters gave evidence of mortality existing within the brilliantly lighted hall. The shell of the hardened crowd was not impervious for the one song had effected them all.

"That was acting," said Whittemore half aloud to himself.

"Certainly was," assented Burton who had heard the word 'acting' and had guessed the remainder. "We are going to meet her now."

Whittemore refused the invitation and urged Burton to go without him. It was all the same to him as he intended to return to the club early. While they were arguing, the one requesting, the other refusing, a mighty clap arose and continued for some time. One drunken reveler carried it so far as to jump upon a table and demand his little fairy goddess to present her dear little self once again, just for him.

During the tumult that ensued Burton left the saturnalia and when he had disappeared in the doorway, Whittemore followed him. He had a vague sense of impending danger and meant to keep within sight of him. Reaching the entrance he sidled past Burton who stood talking to some celebrities of the cabarets and took up his position in the recess of a dark door across the street. Here he could watch Burton and could not be detected himself.

A girl in white appeared whom Whittemore judged to be the singer, and Burton, leaving his friends, joined her. After minutes of consultation which grew into a gesticulated debate, they entered a waiting taxicab and whisked away.

Whittemore hurried across the street, jumped into a taxicab and ordered the cabby to follow the rapidly disappearing car. Fifth and Broadway flew under them and they sped into a labyrinth of side-streets, lighted with dim sickly lamps and populated by large, strong but sleepy policeman.

The first taxicab came to a dead stop in front of a great brown-stone house, one of the thirty that collectively formed an immense block. Whittemore, noting the appearance of the house, flashed by as Burton helped the girl from the machine and walked slowly up the steps. The door was opened instantly and they were swallowed up in the darkness of the hall.

Thrusting a bill into the cabby's hand, Whittemore hastened back to the house. A cold chill swept over him as he mounted the stone steps and a feeling of insecurity caused him to hesitate as he layed his finger on the bell. But the present danger of his friend anaestheticized his fear and he pressed the button. The bell purred softly and almost simultaneously the door opened, but just far enough for a gloved hand to insert itself between the door and the jam. Whittemore stepped back surprised. Then the light of its significance dawned upon him and he fumbled for his card-case. He extracted a card; the hand withdrew, and the door clattered.

A light came to life within the hall and the door was opened again by a liveried butler.

Disposing of his wraps, the butler paying no heed to Whittemore's questions and demands but ushered him into an ante-room decorated with Louis Quinze furniture and costly pending chandeliers, and motioned him to a tall backed, leather cushioned chair. The butler retired and the door locked as it slammed behind him.

Whittemore took in the situation with a calm eye and laughed to himself at the complexity of his situation. "Has Burton been installed into the friendship and goodwill of the mistress of this house in the same fashion? he conjectured. "What is the next move? I may as well await results for I can get nothing out of that dressed-up, officious, mummy."

He threw himself into the tall-backed chair. The cushions sank beneath him; he heard a click, and the chandeliers went black. His lips which were parted in a smile, became tense and he made a desperate effort to rise but found himself bound around the chest by a thick strap that had swung around him when the cushions sank. Ordinarily calm in ordinary situations, fear and apprehension came over him and his heart thumped violently against his chest. Several pair of feet shuffled over the plush carpet; several pair of hands crept clamishly over him, in and out his pockets, over his hips and chest, down his pants legs.

"What do you mean?" he cried exasperated. "Get me out of here or I'll have the whole strong force down on top of you. If—and then the thought of his friend struck him, and his mouth snapped closed, for at any rate, whatever would happen he would probably be brought in close proximity with Burton, and they together could fight to their freedom.

Satisfied that he had no weapons, he was again left alone in the darkness. Of a sudden the chair beneath him rocked. "Alright. Up with him," a voice whispered from a corner, and he felt the whole room moving upwards like a giant elevator. The pictures began to swing and scrape the walls and the whole room shuddered.

He felt the bands that secured him give away and the chandeliers suddenly flamed into light. At one

end of the room two doors swung noiselessly open, revealing a large room thronged with gaily dressed people of all ages, clusted about a number of roulette machines that clicked incessantly.

Whittemore gasped as he rose from the chair. For once in his life he witnessed the feelings of a skeptic.

III

Men in full evening dress and masked women sat or stood silently around the tables watching the little ball's revolutions around the pierced bowl, and sighed audibly as it appeared to fag and come to a dead stop near their choice. The majority of the women, who from their appearance one would judge to have names on the "Social Register," were as Whittemore surmised "steerers" outside and "shillabers" within. A "steerer" is one who brings customers. More than one half the pretty show-girls with "Avenue" acquaintances are "steerers" receiving a large share of their friends losses. A "shillaber," emloyee of the house wins large stakes to encourage losers disgusted with luck, thus reviving hope and renewing play. Men like women are also "steerers" and "shillabers."

The *tailleurs* who kept the ball in constant motion ogled Whittemore in fleeting glances which often turned to Burton, and back to their tables. Whittemore breathed more easily when after a hurried survey of the crowd he discovered none of his acquaintance.

Burton at the farthest end of the room paled as he perceived Whittemore watching the gamblers, and he bent over his own game with a pretended unconsciousness of his presence. Whittemore had caught his casual glance and began to evolve a scheme by which he could induce him to leave without being noticed. He saw clearly that he himself would have to engage in a game to avoid suspicion, but only a game or two as the knowledge of his father's insatiable craze and insanity for gambling, which had not only divested him of his fortune, but had finally sent him to his grave, had never become obscure in his memory. But for his mother's carefully guarded inheritance,

Whittemore would have been a pauper instead of a highly respected and wealthy clubman.

Whittemore layed a bill on the green covered table which the *tailleur* with his long-handled wooden rake pushed back. "The maximum is ten dollars *en plan*." Whittemore placed the amount on his choice. The *tailleur* spun "*Douze, noir, pair et passe*." he said designating number, color and *douze noir*, and his money increased thirty five times. Again the *tailleur* spun. *Quinze, rouge, marque, impair* and once again the money rose in Whittemore's till. He gathered in his winnings for the second time but in a manner entirely foreign to the first. Here was luck and Whittemore realized it. The third spin went to the bank but the fourth went to Whittemore. His face became flush and he grumbled at the insignificance of his winnings. Pshaw, with his luck he could win thousands.

The gambling spirit is a curious thing. It possesses one not entirely for gain. It is a sort of religion rather, a sub-conscious belief that one has established communications with the spirit world—has been benignly favored with prophetic instinct which if persistently followed will triumphantly defeat materialism and the laws of chance. Not to follow a run of luck would be classed as foolhardiness on the fortunate person's part, and to cease while loosing means ruin. Gambling like alcoholism is inherited and instilled in the veins like a subterranean channel. Once unearthed by a winning streak it ebbs and recedes swiftly until either fortune or destruction.

"A mere piker's game," muttered Whittemore after he had pocketed his fourth winnings.

The *tailleur* motioned to the back of the room. "Your table is over there I guess. Larger pool." Whittemore gathered in his money with trembling hands. The full fever swept over him as he walked across the room and placed his money on the new table. He was now close to Burton who blanched as he understood the nervous eagerness of his friend. "He is started," he said to himself. "I have lost tonight one of my best friends on earth."

But luck did not follow him. Before, he had won consistently, but now every stake was irrevocably lost. Perhaps the change of *tailleurs* was the intimate cause of his ill-luck. He had now lost so much that his gambling sense forbade him to quit. It was impossible to give up now and loose all the previous stakes. His luck would change sooner or later if he held out long enough.

Quickly the hours passed ; quickly Whittemore's money found its way into the hands of the banker and still the luck continued against him. A small bell rang, the signal for the last roll, and at last Whittemore's luck changed. He won, and swore aloud as he left the house having lost 50,000 dollars. The disease had secured a firm hold on him.

He remained in his bed the next day and longed for the night to come.

Didn't luck come to him when the bell rang the night before? Perhaps it was still continuing with him. He would go back and win back part or all of his fortune.

That night found him again leaning over the green covered table with a fire that nearly consumed him. Once his luck changed, wavered, and then fell through never to return. He now thought no more of Burton whom he saw and passed several times each night. It was on the third night when disaster befell him and a great whole was eaten in his fortune, that he overheard two masked women conversing together.

"He is loosing heavily," said one.

"Drifting fast," said the other. "Struck the taboggan the first night and has been on the slide ever since."

"Burton's friend isn't he?"

"Yes. He is more than handing the coin to him. The steer-percent will be a cute little lump. I failed to get him, but of course I'll get my share just the same."

Whittemore layed down his stake and looked at the speakers. Behind the black mask he recognized the singer of the cabaret, and the whole plot to entice him hither dawned upon him. Burton and this singer

were "steerer" and it was Burton's plan to place him under the influence of this beautiful but tainted girl, and when thoroughly infatuated, to be led to this house. Instantly the room changed to a vivid green around him. Anger and hatred grew dark in his eyes and he was seized with an intense desire to throttle someone. Desperate, devoid of all reason, insanely mad with himself and all about him, he thrust his hand into his pocket and withdrew it clutching a roll of bills. "Take them you leaches, put them where you have stored the rest,—” and he threw the money into the face of the astonished *tailleur*, and turning abruptly, shouldered his way through the crowd who stood amazed at the uncommon performance. Usually a person so afflicted sought solace, and squaring himself with the world, had recourse to that panacea of all pain, both mental and corporal—the revolver. A few steps brought him face to face with Burton.

"It is you, you contemptable steerer," he hissed so close that the words fairly burned on Burton's face. "You! Gratitude! Manliness! there is none of it in you. I tried to help you, to rescue you from ruin, but now I see that you were ruined before that night, and you strove to drag me with you."

Burton slinked like a cur back to the wall and Whittemore followed him closely, pouring out the bitter venom of his passion. Burton made an effort to speak but the blazing eyes of Whittemore, emphasized by the pallor of his cheeks made him quake with fear.

"Dog," was his final, rasping sobriquet, "I would'nt touch you with mangy hands."

He wheeled suddenly, and walked through the swinging doors.

THOMAS H. ELLIS

Hypocrisy is a sort of homage that vice pays to virtue.

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.