

## A CHOICE OF EVILS.

"Up like a rocket, down like a stick; success, ruin, death."

As Mr. Spencer Twemlow uttered these words the clock on the mantel chimed the hour of three. He repeated the sentence again with a melancholy relish, and pushed his chair back from the secretaire.

"That sums up the situation. Three years ago, nobody; six months later, a monarch of finance, feted, petted, fawned upon; a couple of years of luxury and affluence, and then—Mona—Mona Carew. I should like to live for her sake, but I cannot face tomorrow's ruin. Twenty thousand pounds in debt, and my sole asset a life insurance policy for £30,000. Gad! it's a pity I can't die, and then come to life again and collect the insurance."

He paused in the act of lighting a cigarette. "Funny; I thought I heard a window opening. Must have been my fancy. Well, my time is getting short now, so I must finish my work. Won't Mona be delighted when she hears of my death? By George! how she hates me. She's a noble girl, sacrificing her hopes and dismissing her lover just because her fool of a father happened to place himself in my power."

He rummaged in the pigeon-holes and drew forth some papers.

"The last will and testament of Spencer Twemlow. That is where I left everything to my twin brother Claude. Poor old boy; I wonder where he is now? Ten years since I saw him. Dead, most likely, or in gaol. He was always on the crook. Well, I don't think this document will do him much good. Insurance companies repudiate liability in cases of suicide. What's that?"

An unmistakable sound of a window opening reached his ears.

"Seems to come from the dining-room. Surely not burglars. That would be too funny. Burgling the house of a ruined man who is about to shuffle off this mortal coil. I am so interested that I must really go and see."

The servants had long since retired to rest, and the house was in darkness save for the room in which Twemlow was sitting. Switching off the electric light he crept quietly down the stairs and listened at the dining-room door. Someone was moving about inside, and the rattle of plate was distinctly heard.

Twemlow opened the door and peered in. Instantly a pair of hands clasped his throat and a voice whispered in his ear:—

"Make one sound and you are a dead man."

Now, although Twemlow had made up his mind to take his own life in a few hours, he did not relish the idea of another man assisting him in the operation. He was fairly muscular, and, stretching out his arms, he clasped the assailant round the body.

The struggle that followed was very brief. They swayed to and fro for a few seconds, the burglar gave a choking gasp, his hands fell from Twemlow's throat, and he dropped to the floor.

Twemlow sprang to the switch and flooded the room with light. The burglar lay motionless, face downwards. Twemlow turned him on his back and then started back with a cry of horror.

"Claude! Good heavens! My brother!" He knelt beside the prostrate man and placed his hand on his heart. It had ceased to beat.

"Dead! dead! and I have killed him. Claude! Claude! What shall I do?"

With horror-stricken face he gazed upon the dead man, his twin brother; and even in that moment Spencer could not help marveling at the wonderful likeness between them.

And as he looked a daring thought darted through his brain. The brilliancy of the idea for a moment dazzled him.

"It can be done. No one would know; no one would suspect. By Heaven, I will do it."

He turned off the light and listened at the door; no one had been disturbed. Then, picking up the motionless form of his brother, he carried him upstairs to the study and laid him on a couch. Claude Twemlow had evidently been in low water. His clothes were dirty and ragged and his boots down at heel.

"Soap and razor; that six day's beard must come off."

Quickly he set about his gruesome task, and in a few minutes the dead man was shaved.

"A marvellous likeness; no one could distinguish between us. Now for his clothes. I have no time to lose."

In a few minutes more the dead man was arrayed in Spencer's clothes, and Spencer proceeded to don the dilapidated garments of his brother.

Carefully removing all traces of the operation, he placed the corpse on the chair in front of the secretaire with a pen resting in his nerveless fingers. The position was so natural that it was hard to realize that he was dead.

"Spencer Twemlow is dead, and tomorrow Claude Twemlow will read the account of his

death. I will place the will in front of him and the insurance policies at his left hand. The evidence of old Carew's guilt I will take with me. It will be useful when I next see Mona. Some money, and I think that is all."

Taking a penholder he fastened a piece of string round one end and inserted the other in the ring of the key on the inside of the door. Passing the string under the door he gently closed it. Then, pulling the string, the penholder acted as a lever, the key was turned, and the penholder drawn under the door.

The dead man was locked in the study, and the key was on the inside, and Spencer Twemlow left his house by the dining-room window.

In the breast-pocket of the tattered coat he found a key and a visiting-card, on the back of which was pencilled an address—16A, Little Waring Street.

He turned the card over, and the name printed thereon made him utter an exclamation of surprise.

"Lawrence Garling! Mona Carew's lover. I thought he was in Australia. What is his card doing in Claude's pocket? Anyway, I will make for 16A, Little Waring Street, and if this key fits the door that is where Claude was staying."

It was early morning when he reached the address, and the steps were being scrubbed by a stout, red-faced woman.

"Ho! yer've come back, 'ave yer, Mister, Claude Twemlow; an' 'ave yer brought the money yer owes me!"

"Money? Oh! yes; money, of course. How much is it?"

"As if yer didn't know. Three weeks at twelve shillin', it is. Not a blessed penny 'ave yer paid since yer landed."

"How careless of me! Well, here's two sovereigns. Get me some breakfast, my good soul."

He left the astonished woman and walked boldly upstairs. In a room at the back he caught sight of a label-pasted trunk, and rightly concluded that this was Claude's bedroom.

"The freshest labels seem to be ss. *Oomra*, Melbourne to London—Tilbury—St. Pancras. Yes, Claude has come from Australia. Did he meet Lawrence Garling on the vessel or in the land of rabbits? Bah! what matters? Mona dismissed Garling, and I am going to see that she doesn't take him back again."

A couple of hours later a special edition of the 'Evening Moon' carried the news through the City in sensational headlines:—

"Sudden death of Spencer Twemlow, the financier."

Yes, it was all as Spencer had arranged. The financier had been found dead with the door locked on the inside, and a hastily summoned doctor had pronounced his opinion that death was due to heart disease.

Spencer passed the next two days in the dingy parlour of 16A, Little Waring Street. On the third day an advertisement appeared in the personal columns of the daily papers:

"Any person giving information as to the whereabouts of Claude Twemlow will be substantially rewarded. Barber, Denn, and Barber, New Jewry, E. C."

"The time has come," the walrus said; 'my close season is over.' I will now make my way to the lawyers of the late Spencer Twemlow."

Shabby and almost dirty he presented himself to Messrs Barber, Denn, and Barber, where he was put in possession of the facts that Spencer was dead and buried and Claude Twemlow was sole legatee under the will.

"Your late brother's affairs are very much involved; in fact he was practically ruined, but his life was insured for £30,000, and after paying all just debts there will be, perhaps, a surplus of £12,000 in round figures."

Upon these prospects he obtained an advance from the lawyers, and a few hours later he took up his abode in his own house, almost terrifying the servants by his marvellous likeness to their late master.

Once back in his old study with the door locked, he sank down on the couch and gave way to silent laughter.

"So easy, so very easy. It worked like a charm. Twelve thousand pounds is not a bad sum to start with. I must now pay my attention to Mona—sweet Mona."

A knock at the door cut short his soliloquy and he admitted a servant bearing a card upon a silver tray.

"Miss Mona Carew wishes to know of Mr. Claude Twemlow will grant her a few minutes."

"Certainly; show her up. Ha, ha! at last. I think I can imagine her errand."

A beautiful girl of some twenty-three years of age entered the room and started back with an exclamation as she caught sight of him.

"Spencer!"

"No, my name is Claude; Spencer was my twin brother. Won't you be seated, Miss Carew?"

"I—I can hardly believe that you are not—not—Spencer."

"My brother is dead, madam, as doubtless you are aware. In what way can I serve you?"

"I have come upon a matter of some deli-

cacy. Perhaps you don't know, Mr. Twemlow, that—that—your brother—wished to make me his wife."

"Ah! Spencer always had good taste. And so, by his untimely end, your dream of love has vanished into thin air?"

"My dream of love? I do not wish to speak ill of the dead, but if I ever hated a man in this world that man was Spencer Twemlow."

"And yet you were going to marry him?"

"He forced my consent by threats. He knew that I loved another, but he cared not, and to save one whom I hold dear I had to agree to his terms."

"Very interesting, Miss Carew; but may I inquire how this affects me?"

"Among Spencer Twemlow's paper there is a document signed by my father. I have come to ask you to destroy it and relieve me of the burden of doubt which fills my days with terror."

"I cannot deny that I have found such a paper."

"And you will destroy it?"

"My dear young lady, do you know that you are asking me to compound a felony? In this document your father confesses to misappropriating certain trust moneys and acknowledges that my brother advanced him £5,000 to keep him out of a felon's cell."

"Spencer Twemlow induced my father to speculate in one of his company promotions, and by his cleverness got him so involved that we were brought face to face with ruin. You brother offered to avert the catastrophe if my father would sign that document. In a fit of desperation he did so, and Spencer made use of the confession to force me into a hateful engagement, knowing that my affections were already pledged to Mr. Garling."

"Mr. Lawrence Garling?"

"Yes; do you know him?"

"I met him some months ago in Australia. You need not worry about his broken heart. If he ever suffered from the complaint he is now convalescent and on the high road to complete recovery."

"What do you mean?"

"When I saw him he was engaged in a very pleasant pastime of honeymooning with a very charming and altogether delightful brunette."

"It is not true; I will not believe it."

"My dear young lady, then here our interview ends. As regards this precious document I must take time to consider. With your permission I will call upon you tomorrow or the next day and give you my decision."

"You will destroy it? Ah! say you will?"

"When I look at you, Miss Carew, I almost think that my brother was justified in the means by which he almost possessed you."

"What do you mean? You frighten me."

"They say that twins think alike and feel alike. Would you condemn me very much if I emulated Spencer's ambition?"

"You mean—"

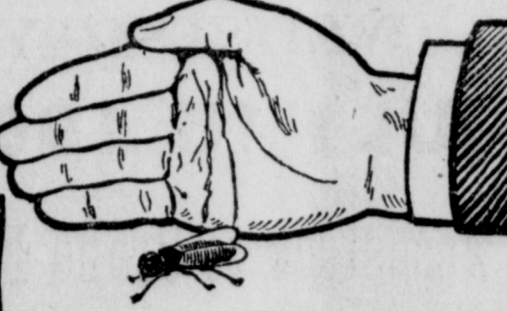
"That perhaps Spencer's conditions may be mine. Think it over. No don't decide now. Tomorrow at three."

Without permitting her to say a word he bowed her out and returned to his study, rubbing his hands with satisfaction.

"I win all along the line. That was a splendid bit about Garling. She will let that rattle in her mind, and tomorrow I will be a lucky man. Then a speedy marriage and a prolonged wedding tour."

When he paid his visit on the following day events turned out almost as he had foretold. As soon as she heard of Spencer Twemlow's death Mona Carew had written to her lover in Australia and bidden him return. The news of Lawrence Garling's marriage threw her into a state of despair and grief, and this, combined with the precarious state of her father's health, made her an easy prey to the snares of a villain.

(Concluded on sixth page.)



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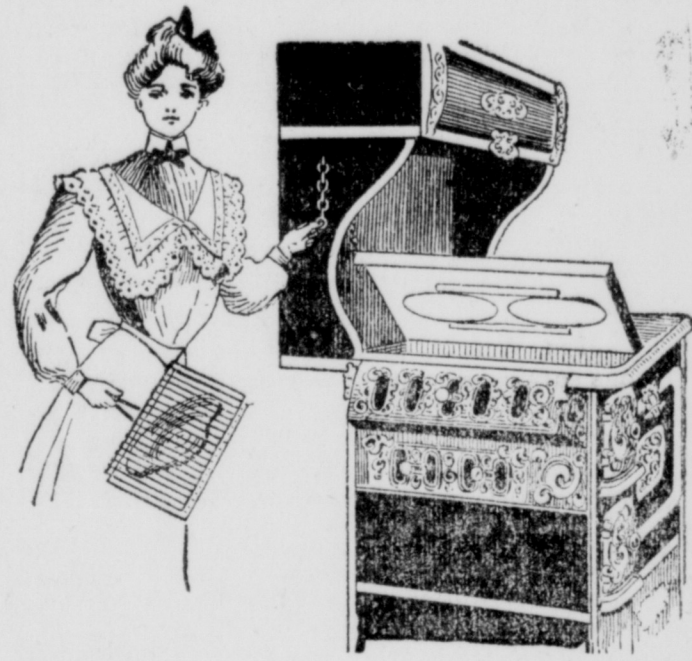
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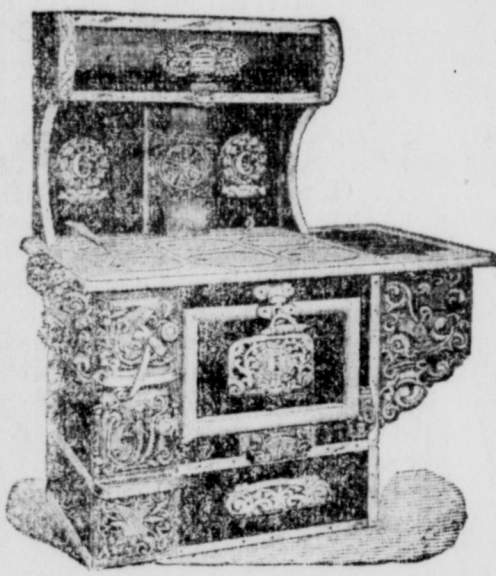


balanced and is nickel plated, and when open forms a shelf.

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