

The Ingenious Mr. Spinola

Ernest Bramah

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June 22, 2002

"You seem troubled, Parkinson. Have you been reading the Money Article again?"

Parkinson, who had been lingering a little aimlessly about the room, exhibited symptoms of embarrassed guilt. Since an unfortunate day, when it had been convincingly shown to the excellent fellow that to leave his accumulated savings on deposit at the bank was merely an uninviting mode of throwing money away, it is not too much to say that his few hundreds had led Parkinson a sorry life. Inspired by a natural patriotism and an appreciation of the advantage of 4 1/2 over 1 1/4 per cent., he had at once invested in consols. A very short time later a terrible line in a financial daily—"Consols weak"—caught his agitated eye. Consols were precipitately abandoned and a "sound industrial" took their place. Then came the rumours of an impending strike and the Conservative press voiced gloomy forebodings for the future of industrial capital. An urgent selling order, bearing Mr. Parkinson's signature, was the immediate outcome.

In the next twelve months Parkinson's few hundreds wandered through many lands and in a modest way went to support monarchies and republics, to carry on municipal enterprise and to spread the benefits of commerce. And, through all, they contrived to exist. They even assisted in establishing a rubber plantation in Madagascar and exploiting an oil discovery in Peru and yet survived. If everything could have been lost by one dire reverse Parkinson would have been content—even relieved; but with her proverbial inconsequence Fortune began by smiling and continued to smile— faintly, it is true, but appreciably—on her timorous votary. In spite of his profound ignorance of finance each of Parkinson's qualms and tremors resulted in a slight pecuniary margin to his credit. At the end of twelve months he had drawn a respectable interest, was somewhat to the good in capital, and as a waste product had acquired an abiding reputation among a small but choice coterie as a very "knowing one."

"Thank you, sir, but I am sorry if I seemed engrossed in my own affairs," he apologised in answer to Mr. Carrados's inquiry. "As a matter of fact," he added, "I hoped that I had finished with Stock Exchange transactions for the future."

"Ah, to be sure," assented Carrados. "A block of cottages Acton way, wasn't it to be?"

"I did at one time consider the investment, but on reflection I decided against property of that description. The association with houses occupied by the artisan class would not have been congenial, sir.

"Still, it might have been profitable."

"Possibly, sir. I have, however, taken up a mortgage on a detached house standing in its own grounds at Highgate. It was strongly recommended by your own estate agents—by Mr. Lethbridge himself, sir."

"I hope it will prove satisfactory, Parkinson."

"I hope so, sir, but I do not feel altogether reassured now, after seeing it."

"After seeing it? But you saw it before you took it up, surely?"

"As a matter of fact, no, sir. It was pointed out to me that the security was ample, and as I had no practical knowledge of house— valuing there was nothing to be gained by inspecting it. At the same time I was given the opportunity, I must admit; but as we were rather busy then—it was just before we went to Rome, sir— I never went there."

"Well, after all," admitted Carrados, "I hold a fair number of mortgage securities on railways and other property that I have never been within a thousand miles of. I am not in a position to criticise you, Parkinson. And this house—I suppose that it does really exist?"

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"Oh yes, sir. I spent yesterday afternoon in the neighbourhood. Now that the trees are out there is not a great deal that can be actually seen from the road, but I satisfied myself that in the winter the house must be distinctly visible from several points."

"That is very satisfactory," said Carrados with equal seriousness. "But, after all, the title is the chief thing."

"So I am given to understand. Doubtless it would not be sound business, sir, but I think that if the title had been a little worse, and the appearance of the grounds a little better, I should have felt more secure. But what really concerned me is that the house is being talked about."

"Talked about?"

"Yes. It is in a secluded position, but there are some old-fashioned cottages near and these people notice things, sir. It is not difficult to induce them to talk. Refreshments are procurable at one of the cottages and I had tea there. I have since thought, from a remark made to me on leaving, that the idea may have got about that I was connected with the Scotland Yard authorities. I had no apprehension at the time of creating such an impression, sir, but I wished to make a few casual inquiries."

Carrados nodded. "Quite so," he murmured encouragingly.

"It was then that I discovered what I have alluded to. These people, having become suspicious, watch all that is to be seen at Strathblane Lodge—as it is called—and talk. They do not know what goes on there."

"That must be very disheartening for them."

"Well, sir, they find it trying. Up to less than a year ago the house was occupied by a commercial gentleman and everything was quite regular. But with the new people they don't know which are the family and who are the servants. Two or three men having the appearance of mechanics seem to be there continually, and sometimes, generally in the evening, there are visitors of a class whom one would not associate with the unpretentious nature of the establishment. Gentlemen for the most part, but occasionally ladies, I was told, coming in taxis or private motor cars and generally in evening dress."

"That ought to reassure these neighbours—the private cars and evening dress."

"I cannot say that it does, sir. And what I heard made me a little nervous also."

Something was evidently on the ingenuous creature's mind. The blind man's face wore a faintly amused smile, but he gauged the real measure of his servant's apprehension.

"Nervous of what, Parkinson?" he inquired kindly.

"Some thought that it might be a gambling-house, but others said it looked as if a worse business was carried on there. I should not like there to be any scandal or exposure, sir, and perhaps the mortgage forfeited in consequence."

"But, good heavens, man! you don't imagine that a mortgage is like a public-house licence, to be revoked in consequence of a rowdy tenant, surely?"

Parkinson's dubious silence made it increasingly plain that he had, indeed, associated his security with some such contingency, a conviction based, it appeared, when he admitted his fears, on a settled belief in the predatory intentions of a Government with whom he was not in sympathy.

"Don't give the thing another thought," counselled his employer. "If Lethbridge recommended the investment you may be sure that it is all right. As for what goes on there—that doesn't matter two straws to you, and in any case it is probably idle chatter."

"Thank you, sir. It is a relief to have your assurance. I see now that I ought to have paid no attention to such conversation, but being anxious—and seeing Sir Fergus Copling go there "Sir Fergus Copling? You saw him there?"

"Yes, sir. I thought that I remembered a car that was waiting for the gate to be opened. Then I recognised Sir Fergus: it was the small dark blue car that he has come here in. And just after what I had been hearing—"

"But Sir Fergus Copling! He's a testimonial of propriety. Do you know what you are talking about, Parkinson?"

The excellent man looked even more deeply troubled than he had been about his money.

"Not in that sense, sir," he protested. "I only understood that he was a gentleman of position and a very large income, and after just listening to what was being said Carrados's scepticism was intelligible. Copling was the last man to be associated with a scandal of fast life. He had come into his baronetcy quite unexpectedly a few years previously while engaged in the drab but apparently congenial business of teaching arithmetic at a public school."

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The chief advantage of the change of fortune, as it appeared to the recipient, was that it enabled him to transfer his attention from the lower to the higher mathematics. Without going out of his way to flout the conventions, he set himself a comparatively simple standard of living. He was too old and fixed, he said, to change much—forty and a bachelor—and the most optimistic spinster in town had reluctantly come to acquiesce.

Carrados had not forgotten this conversation when next he encountered Sir Fergus a week or so later. He knew the man well enough to be able to lead up to the subject and when an identifiable footstep fell on his ear in the hall of the Metaphysical (the dullest club in Europe, it was generally admitted) he called across to the baronet, who, as a matter of fact, had been too abstracted to notice him or anyone else.

"You aren't a member, are you?" asked Copling when they had shaken hands. "I didn't know that you went in for this sort of thing." The motion of his head indicated the monumental library which he had just quitted, but it might possibly be taken as indicating the general atmosphere of profound somnolence that enveloped the Metaphysical.

"I am not a member," admitted Carrados. "I only came to gather some material."

"Statistics?" queried Copling with interest. "We have a very useful range of works." He suddenly remembered his acquaintance's affliction. "By the way, can I be of any use to you?"

"Yes, if you will," said Carrados. "Let me go to lunch with you. There is an appalling bore hanging about and he'll nab me if I don't get past under protection."

Copling assented readily enough and took the blind man's arm.

"Where, though?" he asked at the door. "I generally"—he hesitated, with a shy laugh—"I generally go to an A.B.C. tea-shop myself. It doesn't waste so much time. But, of course—"

"Of course, a tea-shop by all means," assented Carrados.

"You are sure that you don't mind?" persisted the baronet anxiously.

"Mind? Why, I'm a shareholder!" chuckled Carrados.

"This suits me very well," remarked the ex-schoolmaster when they were seated in a remote corner of a seething general room. "Fellows used to do their best to get me into the way of going to swell places, but I always seem to drift back here. I don't mind the prices, Carrados, but hang me if I like to pay the prices simply to be inconvenienced. Yes, hot milk, please."

Carrados endorsed this reasonable philosophy. Carlton or Coffeehouse, the Ritz or the tea-shop, it was all the same to him—life, and very enjoyable life at that. He sat and, like the spider, drew from within himself the fabric of the universe by which he was surrounded. In that inexhaustible faculty he found perfect content: he never required "to be amused."

"No, not statistics," he said presently, returning to the unfinished conversation of the club hall. "Scarcely that. More in the nature of topography, perhaps. Have you considered, Copling, how everything is specialised nowadays? Does anyone read the old-fashioned unpretentious Guide-book to London still? One would hardly think so to see how the subject is cut up. We have 'Famous London Blind-alleys,' 'Historical West-Central Door-Knockers,' 'Footsteps of Dr. Johnson between Gough Square and John Street, Adelphi,' 'The Thames from Hungerford Bridge to Charing Cross Pier,' 'Oxford Street Paving Stones on which De Quincey sat,' and so on."

"They are not familiar to me," said Sir Fergus simply.

"Nor to me; yet they sound familiar. Well, I touched journalism myself once, years ago. What do you say to 'Mysterious Double-fronted Houses of the outer Northern Suburbs'? Too comprehensive?"

"I don't know. The subject must be limited. But do you seriously contemplate such a work?"

"If I did," replied Carrados, "what could you tell me about Strathblane Lodge, Highgate?"

"Oh!" A slow smile broke on Copling's face. "That is rather extraordinary, isn't it? Do you know old Spinola? Have you been there?"

"So far I don't know the venerable Mr. Spinola and I have not been there. What is the peculiarity?"

"But you know of the automatic card-player?"

The words brought a certain amount of enlightenment. Carrados had heard more than once casual allusions to a wonderful mechanical contrivance that played cards with discrimination. He had not thought anything more of it, classing it with Kempelen's famous imposture which had for a time mystified and duped the chess world more than a century ago. So far, also, some reticence appeared to be observed about the modern contrivance, as though its inventor had no desire to have it turned into a popular show: at all events not a word about it had appeared in

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the Press.

"I have heard something, but not much, and I certainly have not seen it. What is it—a fraud, surely?"

Copling replied with measured consideration between the process of investigating his lightly boiled egg. It was plain that the automaton had impressed him.

"I naturally approached the subject with scepticism," he admitted, "but at the end of several demonstrations I am converted to a position of passive acquiescence. Spinola, at all events, is no charlatan. His knowledge of mathematics is profound. As you know, Carrados, the subject is my own and I am not likely to be imposed on in that particular. It was purely the scientific aspect of the invention that attracted me, for I am not a gambler in the ordinary sense. Spinola's explanation of the principles of the contrivance, when he found that I was capable of following them, was lucid and convincing. Of course he does not disclose all the details of the mechanism, but he shows enough."

"It is a gamble, then, not a mere demonstration?"

"He has spent many years on the automaton, and it must have cost thousands of pounds in experiment and construction. He makes no secret of hoping to reimburse his outlay."

"What do you play?"

"Piquet—rubicon piquet. The figure could, he claims, be set to play any game by changing or elaborating the mechanism. He had to construct it for one definite set of chances and he selected piquet as a suitable medium."

"It wins?"

"Against me invariably in the end."

"Why should it win, Copling? In a game that is nine-tenths chance, why should it win?"

"I am an indifferent player. If the tactics of the game have been reduced to machinery and the combinations are controlled by a dispassionate automaton, the one-tenth would constitute a winning factor."

"And against expert players?"

Sir Fergus admitted that to the best of his knowledge the figure still had the advantage. In answer to Carrados's further inquiry he estimated his losses at two or three hundred pounds. The stakes were whatever the visitor suggested—Spinola was something of a grandee, one inferred—and at half-crown points Sir Fergus had found the game quite expensive enough.

"Why do people go if they invariably lose?" asked the blind man. "My dear fellow, why do they go to Monte Carlo?" was the retort, accompanied by a tolerant shrug. "Besides, I don't positively say that they always lose. One hears of people winning, though I have never seen it happen. Then I fancy that the novelty has taken with a certain set. It is a thing at the moment to go up there and have the rather bizarre experience. There is an element of the creep in it, you know — sitting and playing against that serene and unimpressionable contrivance."

"What do the others do? There is quite a company, I gather."

"Oh yes, sometimes. Occasionally one may find oneself alone. Well, the others often watch the play. Sometimes sets play bridge on their own. Then there is coffee and wine. Nothing formal, I assure you."

"Rowdy ever?"

"Oh no. The old man has a presence; I doubt if anyone would feel encouraged to go too far under Spinola's eye. Yet practically nothing seems to be known of him, not even his nationality. I have heard half-a-dozen different tales from as many cocksure men— he is a South American Spaniard ruined by a revolution; a Jesuit expelled from France through politics; an Irishman of good family settled in Warsaw, where he stole the plans from a broken-down Polish inventor; a Virginia military man, who suddenly found that he was dying from cancer and is doing this to provide a fortune for an only and beautiful daughter, and so on."

"Is there a beautiful daughter?"

"Not that I have ever seen. No, the man just cropped up, as odd people do in great capitals. Nobody really knows anything about him, but his queer salon has caught on to a certain extent."

Now any novel phase of life attracted Carrados. The mixed company that Spinola's enterprise was able to draw to an out-of-the-way suburb—the peculiar blend of science and society—was not much in itself. The various constituents could be met elsewhere to more advantage, but the assemblage might engender piquancy. And the man himself and his machine? In any case they should repay attention.

"How does one procure the entree?" he inquired.

Copling raised a quizzical eyebrow.

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"You also?" he replied. "Oh, I see; you think—Well, if you are going to discover any sleight-of-hand about the business I don't mind — "

"Yes?" prompted Carrados, for Sir Fergus had pulled up on an obvious afterthought.

"I did not intend going up again," said Copling slowly. "As a matter of fact, I have seen all that interests me. And—I suppose I may as well tell you, Carrados—I made someone a sort of promise to have nothing to do with gambling. She feels very strongly on the subject."

"She is very wise," commented the blind man.

Elation mingled with something faintly apologetic in the abrupt bestowal of the baronet's unexpected confidence.

"It was really quite a sudden and romantic happening," he continued, led on by the imperceptible encouragement of his companion's attitude. "She is called Mercia. She does not know who I am—not that that's anything," he added modestly. "She is an orphan and earns her own living. I was able to be of some slight service to her in the science galleries at South Kensington, where she was collecting material for her employer. Then we met there again and had lunch together, and so on."

"At tea-shops?"

"Oh yes. Her tastes are very simple. She doesn't like shows and society and all that."

"I congratulate you. When is it to be?"

"It? Oh! Well, we haven't settled anything like that yet. Of course this is all in confidence, Carrados."

"Absolutely—though the lady has done me rather an ill turn."

"How?"

"Well, weren't you going to introduce me to Mr. Spinola?"

"True," assented Sir Fergus. "And I don't see why I shouldn't," he added valiantly. "I need not play, and if there is any bunkum about the thing I should certainly like to see how it is done. What evening will suit you?"

An early date had suited both, and shortly after eight o'clock— an hour at which they were likely to find few guests before them— Carrados's car drew up at Strathbane Lodge. By arrangement he had picked up Copling, who lived—"of all places in the world," as people had said when they heard of it—in an unknown street near Euston. Parkinson, out of regard for the worthy man's feelings, had been left behind on the occasion and in ignorance of his master's destination.

The appearance of the place was certainly not calculated to reassure a nervous investor. The entirely neglected garden seemed to convey a hint that the tenant might be contemplating a short occupation and a hasty flight. Nor did the exterior of the house do much to remove the unfortunate impression. Only a philosopher or an habitual defaulter would live in such a state.

The venerable Mr. Spinola received them in the salon set apart for the display of the automaton and for cards in general. It was a room of fair proportions—doubtless the largest in the house—and quite passably furnished, though in a rather odd and incongruous style. But probably any furniture on earth would have seemed incongruous to the strange, idol-like presence which the inventor had thought fit to adapt to the uses of his mechanism. The figure was placed on a low pedestal, sufficiently raised from the carpet on four plain wooden legs for all the space underneath to be clearly visible. The body was a squat, cross-legged conception, typical of an Indian deity, the head singularly life-like through the heavy gilding with which the face was covered, and behind the merely contemplative expression that dominated the golden mask the carver had by chance or intention lined a faint suggestion of cynical contempt.

"You have come to see my little figure—Aurelius, as we call him among ourselves?" said the bland old gentleman benignly. "That is right; that is right." He shook hands with them both, and received Mr. Carrados, on Sir Fergus's introduction, as though he was a very dear friend from whom he had long been parted. It was difficult indeed for Max to disengage himself from the effusive Spinola's affection without a wrench.

"Mr. Carrados happens to be blind, Mr. Spinola," interposed Copling, seeing that their host was so far in ignorance of the fact.

"Impossible! Impossible!" exclaimed Spinola, riveting his own very bright eyes on his guest's insentient ones. "Yet," he added, "one would not jest "It is quite true," was the matter-of-fact corroboration. "My hands must be my eyes, Mr. Spinola. In place of seeing, will you permit me to touch your wonderful creation?"

The old man's assent was immediate and cordial. They moved across the room towards the figure, the inventor

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modestly protesting:

"You flatter me, my dear sir. After all, it is but a toy in large; nothing but a toy."

A weary-looking youth, the only other occupant of the room, threw down the illustrated weekly that he had picked up on the new arrivals' entrance and detained Copling.

"Yes, I had been toying a little before you arrived," he remarked flippantly. "I came early to cut Dora Lascelle off from the idle crowd and the silly little rabbit isn't coming, it appears. I didn't want to play, because, for a fact, I have no money, but the old thing bored me to hysterics. Good God! how he can talk so little on anything really entertaining, like The Giddy Flappers or Trixie Fluffs divorce, and so much about strange, unearthly things that no other living creature has ever seen even in a dream, baffles my imagination. What's an 'integral calculus,' Copling? No, don't tell me, after all. Let me forget the benumbing episode as soon as possible."

"Do you wish for a game, Sir Fergus?" broke in Spinola's soft voice from across the room. "Doubtless Mr. Carrados might like to follow someone else's play before he makes the experiment."

Copling hesitated. He had not come to play, as he had already told his friend, but Max gave no sign of coming to his assistance.

"Perhaps you, Crediton?" said the mathematician; but young Crediton shook his head and smiled wisely. Copling was too easygoing to stand out. He crossed the room and sat down at the automaton's table.

"And the stake?"

"Suppose we merely have a guinea on the game?" suggested the visitor.

Spinola acquiesced with the air of one to whom a three-penny bit or a kingdom would have been equally indifferent. The deal fell to Copling and the automaton therefore had the first "elder hand," with the advantage of a discard of five cards against its opponent's three.

Carrados had already been shown the theory of the contrivance. He now followed Spinola's operations as the game proceeded. The old man picked up the twelve cards dealt to the automaton and carefully arranged them in their proper places on a square shield that was connected with the front of the figure. As each fell into its slot it registered its presence on the delicate mechanism that the figure contained.

"The discard," remarked Spinola, and moved a small lever. The left hand of the automaton was raised, came over the shield which hid its cards from the opponent, touched one with an extended finger, and affixing it by suction, lifted the selected card from the slot and dropped it face downwards on the table.

"A little slow, a little cumbersome," apologised the inventor as the motions were repeated until five cards had been thrown out. "The left hand is used for the discard alone, as a different movement is necessary." He picked up the five new cards from the stock and arranged them as he had done the hand. "Now we proceed to the play."

Crediton strolled across to watch the game. He stood behind.

Copling, while Carrados remained near the automaton. Spinola opened the movements.

"Aurelius has no voice, of course," he said, studying the display of cards, "so I—point of five."

"Good," conceded the opponent.

Spinola registered the detail on one of an elaborate set of dials that produced a further development in the machinery.

"Spades," he announced, declaring the suit that he had won the "points" on. "Tierce major."

"Quart to the queen—hearts," claimed Copling, and Spinola moved another dial to register the opponent's advantage.

"Three kings."

"Good," was the reply.

"Three tens," added the senior player, as his three kings, being good against the other hand, enabled him to count the lower trio also. "Five for the point and two trios—eleven." Every detail of the scoring and of the ensuing play was registered as the other things had been.

This finished the preliminaries and the play of the hands began. The automaton, in response to the release of the machinery, moved its right arm with the same deliberation that had marked its former action and laid a card face upwards on the table. For the blind man's benefit each card was named as it was played. At the end of the hand Copling had won "the cards"—a matter of ten extra points with seven tricks to five and the score stood to his advantage at 27–17.

"Not bad for the junior hand," commented Crediton. "Do you know"—he addressed the inventor—"there is a

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sort of 'average,' as they call it, that you are supposed to play up to? I forget how it goes, but 27 is jolly high for the minor hand, I know."

"I have heard of it," replied Spinola politely. Crediton could not make out why the other two men smiled broadly.

The succeeding hands developed no particular points of interest. The scoring ruled low and in the end Copling won by 129 to 87. Spinola purred congratulation.

"I am always delighted to see Aurelius lose," he declared, paying out his guinea with a princely air.

"Why?" demanded Crediton.

"Because it shows that I have succeeded beyond expectation, my dear young sir: I have made him almost human. Now, Mr. Carrados."

"With pleasure," assented the blind man. "Though I am afraid that I shall not afford you the delight of losing, Mr. Spinola."

"One never knows, one never knows," beamed the old man. "Shall we say "Half-crown points for variety?"

"Very good. Ah, our deal." He dealt the hands and proceeded to dispose the twelve that fell to the automaton on the shield. There was a moment of indecision. "Pray, Mr. Carrados, do you not arrange your cards?"

"I have done so." He had, in fact, merely spread out his hand in the usual fan formation and run an identifying finger once round the upper edges. The cards remained as they had been dealt, face downwards.

"Wonderful! And that enables you to distinguish them?"

"The ink and the impression on a plain surface—oh yes." He threw out the full discard as he spoke and took in the upper five of the stock.

"You overwhelm us; you accentuate the tiresome deliberation of poor Aurelius." Spinola was hovering about the external fittings of the figure with unusual fussiness. When at length he released the left hand it seemed for an almost perceptible moment that the action hung. Then the arm descended and carried out the discard.

"Point of five," said Carrados.

"Good."

"In spades. Quint major in spades also, tierce to the knave in clubs, fourteen aces"—i.e. four aces; "fourteen" in the language of piquet as they score that number. He did not wait for his opponent to assent to each count, knowing, after the point had passed, that the other calls were good against anything that could possibly be held. "Five, twenty, twenty-three, ninety-seven." Having reached thirty before his opponent scored, and without a card having so far been played, his score automatically advanced by sixty. That is the "repique."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Crediton, "that's the first time I've ever known Aurelius repiqued."

"Oh, it has happened," retorted Spinola almost testily.

The play of the hand was bound to go in Carrados's favour—he held eight certain tricks. He won "the cards" with two tricks to spare and the round closed at 119—5.

"You look like being delighted again, Mr. Spinola," remarked Crediton a little critically.

"Suppose you make yourself useful by dealing for me," interposed Carrados. "Of course," he reminded his host, "it does not do for me to handle any cards but my own."

"I had not thought of that," replied Spinola, looking at him shrewdly. "If you had no conscience you would be a dangerous opponent, Mr. Carrados."

"The same might be said of any man," was the reply. "That is why it is so satisfactory to play an automaton."

"Oh, Aurelius has no conscience, you know," chimed in Crediton sapiently. "Mr. Spinola couldn't find room for it among the wheels."

The second hand was not eventful. Each player had to be content to make about the "average" which Crediton had ingenuously discovered. It raised the scores to 33—130. Two hands followed in the same prudent spirit; the fifth—Carrados's "elder"—found the position 169—67.

"Only two this time," remarked Carrados, taking in.

"Jupiter!" murmured Crediton. It is unusual for the senior hand to leave even one of the five cards to which he is entitled. It indicated an unusually strong hand. The automaton evidently thought so too. It availed itself of all the six alternative cards and, as the play disclosed, completely cut up its own hand to save the repique by beating Carrados on the point. It won the point, to find that its opponent only held a low quart, a tierce and three kings. As a result Carrados won "the cards" and the score stood 199—79. The discard was, in fact, an experiment in bluff.

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Carrados might have held a quint and fourteen kings for all the opposing hand disclosed.

"What on earth did you do that for?" demanded Copling. He himself played an eminently straightforward game—and generally lost.

"I'll bet I know," put in Crediton. "You are getting rather close, Mr. Spinola—the last hand and you need twenty—one to save the rubicon." The "rubicon" means that instead of the loser's score being deducted from the winner's in arriving at the latter's total, it is added to it—a possible difference of nearly 200 points.

"We shall see; we shall see," muttered Spinola with a little less than his usual suavity.

Whatever concern he had, however, was groundless, for the game ended tamely enough. Carrados ought to have won the point and divided tricks, leaving his opponent a minor quart and a solitary trio—about 15 on the hand. By a careless discard he threw away both chances and the final score stood at 205–112. Copling, who had come to regard his friend's play as rather excellent, was silent. Crediton almost shrieked his disapproval and seizing the cards demonstrated to his heart's content.

"Ninety–three and the hundred for the game—twenty–four pounds and one half–crown," said the loser, counting out notes and coin to the amount. "It has been an experience for both of us—Aurelius and myself."

"And certainly for me," added Carrados.

"Look here," interposed Crediton, "Aurelius seems off his play. If you don't mind taking my paper, Mr. Spinola, I should like another go."

"As you please," assented the old man. "Your undertaking is, of course—" The gesture suggested "quite equal to that of the cashier of the Bank of England." The venerable person had, in fact, regained his lofty pecuniary indifference. "The same point?"

"Right—o," cheerfully assented the youth.

"I will go and think over my shortcomings," said Carrados. He started to cross the room to a seat and ran into a couch. With a gasp Copling hastened to his assistance. Then he found his arm detained and heard the whisper. "Sit down with me."

Across the room the play had begun again and with a little care they could converse without the possibility of a word being overheard.

"What is it?" asked Sir Fergus.

"The golden one will win. It is only when the cards are not exposed that you play on equal terms."

"But I won?"

"Because it is well to lose sometimes and, by choice, when the stake is low. That witless youth will have to pay for both of us."

"But how—how on earth do you suggest that it is done?"

"Look round cautiously. What eyes overlook Crediton's hand as he sits there?"

"What eyes? Good gracious! is there anything in that?"

"What is it?"

"There is a trophy of Japanese arms high up on the wall. An iron mask surmounts it. It has glass eyes. I have never seen anything like that before."

"Any others round the walls?"

"There is a stuffed tiger's head on our right and a puma's or something of that sort on the left."

"In case a suspicious player asks to have the places changed or holds his cards awkwardly. Working the automaton from other positions is probably also arranged for."

"But how can a knowledge of the opponent's cards affect the automaton? The dials—"

"The dials are all bunkum. While you were playing I took the liberty of altering them and for a whole hand the dials indicated that you must inevitably be holding eight clubs and four spades. All the time you were leading out hearts and diamonds and the automaton serenely followed suit. The only effective machinery is that indicating the display of cards on the shield and controlling the hands, and that is worked by a keyboard and electric current from the room below. The watcher behind the mask telephones the opposing hand, the discard and the take–in. The automaton's hand has already been indicated below. You see the enormous advantage the hidden player has? When he is the minor hand he knows everything that is to be known before he discards. When he is the elder he knows almost everything. By concentrating on one detail he can practically always balk the pique, the repique and the kapot, if it is necessary to play for safety. You remember what Crediton said—that he had never known

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Aurelius repiqued before. The leisurely manipulation of the dials gives plenty of time. An even ordinary player in that position can do the rest."

Copling scarcely knew whether to believe or not. It sounded plausible, but it reflected monstrously.

"You speak of a telephone," he said. "How can you definitely say that such a thing is being used? You have never been in the room before and we've scarcely been here an hour. It—it may be awfully serious, you know."

Carrados smiled.

"Can you hear the kitchen door being opened at this moment or detect the exact aroma of our host's mocha?" he demanded.

"Not in the least," admitted Copling.

"Then of course it is hopeless to expect you to pick up the whisper of a man behind a mask a score of feet away. How fearfully in the dark you seeing folk must be!"

"Can you possibly do that?" Even as he was speaking the door opened and a servant entered, bringing coffee and an assortment of viands sufficiently exotic to maintain the rather Oriental nature of entertainment.

"Stroll across and see how the game is going," suggested Carrados. "Have a look at Crediton's discard and then come back."

Sir Fergus did not quite follow the purpose, but he nodded and proceeded to comply with his usual amiable spirit.

"It stands at 137 to 75 against Crediton and they are playing the last hand. Our young friend looks like losing thirty or forty pounds."

"And his discard?"

"Oh—seven and nine of clubs and the knave of hearts."

Carrados held out a slip of paper on which he had already pencilled a few words. The baronet took it, looked and whistled softly. He had read: "Clubs, seven, nine. Hearts, knave."

"Conjuring?" he interrogated.

"Quite as simple—listening."

"I suppose I must accept it. What staggers me is that you can pick out a whisper when the room is full of other louder sounds. Now if there had been absolute stillness—"

"Merely use. There's nothing more in it than in seeing a mouse and a mountain, or a candle and the sun, at the same time. Well, what are we going to do about it?"

Copling began to look acutely unhappy.

"I suppose we must do something," he ruminated, "but I must say that I wish we needn't. I mean, I wish we hadn't dropped on this. You know, Carrados, whatever is going on, Spinola is no charlatan. He does understand mathematics."

"That makes him all the more dangerous. But I should like to produce more definite proof before we do anything. . . . Does he ever leave us in the room?"

"I have never known it. No, he hovers round his Aurelius."

"Never mind. Ah, the game is finished."

The game was finished and it needed no inquiry to learn how it had gone. Mr. Crediton was handing the venerable Spinola a memorandum of indebtedness. His words and attitude did not convey the impression of a graceful loser.

"I wish you two men would give me the tip for beating this purgatorial image," he grumbled as they came up. "I thought that he'd struck a losing line after your experience and this is the result." He indicated the spectacle of their amiable host folding up his I.O.U. preparatory to dropping it carelessly into a letter-rack, and shrugged his shoulders with keen disgust.

"I'll tell you if you like," suggested Sir Fergus. "Hold the better cards."

"And play them better," added Carrados. "Good heavens !"

A very untoward thing had happened. They had all been standing together round the table, Spinola purring appreciatively, Crediton fuming his ill-restrained annoyance, and the other two mildly satirical at his expense. Carrados held a cup of coffee in his hand. He reached towards the table with it, seemed to imagine that he was a full foot nearer than he was, and before anyone had divined his mistake, cup, saucer and the entire contents had dropped neatly upon Mr. Spinola's startled feet, saturating his lower extremities to the skin.

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"Good heavens! What on earth have I done?"

Crediton shrieked out his ill-humour in gratified amusement; Sir Fergus reddened deeply with embarrassment at his friend's mishap. Victim and culprit stood the ordeal best.

"My unfortunate defect!" murmured Carrados with feeling. "How ever can I—"

"I who have eyes ought to have looked after my guest better," replied Spinola with antique courtliness. He reduced Crediton with a glance of quiet dignity and declined Carrados's handkerchief with a reassuring touch on the blind man's arm. "No, no, my dear sir, if you will excuse me for a few minutes. It is really nothing, really nothing, I do assure you."

He withdrew from the room to change. Copling began to prepare a reassuring phrase to meet Carrados's self-reproaches when they should break forth again. But the blind man's tone had altered; he was no longer apologetic.

"Play them better," he repeated to Crediton, as if there had been no interruption, "and play under conditions that are equal. For instance, it might be worth while making sure that a Japanese mask does not conceal a pair of human eyes. If I were a loser I should be inclined to have a look."

Not until then did it occur to Sir Fergus that his friend's clumsiness had been a calculated ruse to force Spinola to withdraw for a few minutes. Later on he might be able to admire the simple ingenuity of the trick, but at that moment he almost hated Carrados for the cool effrontery with which he had duped all their feelings.

No such subtleties, however, concerned Crediton. He stared at the blind man, followed the indication of his gesture and all at once grasped the significance of the hint.

"By George, I shouldn't wonder if you aren't right!" he exclaimed. "There are one or two things " Without further consideration he rushed a table against the wall, swung up a chair on to it, and mounting the structure began to wrench the details of the trophy from side to side and up and down in his excited efforts to displace them.

"Hurry up," urged Copling, more nervous than excited. "He won't be long."

"Hurry up?" Crediton paused, panting from his furious efforts, and found time to look down upon his accomplices. "I don't think that it's for us to concern ourselves, by George!" he retorted. "Spinola had better hurry up and bolt for it, I should say. There's light behind here—a hole through the wall. I believe the place is a regular swindling hell."

His eyes went to the group of weapons again and the sight gave him a new idea.

"Aha, what price this?" he cried, and pulling a short sword out of its sheath he drove it in between mask and wall and levered the shell away, nails and all. "By God, if the eyes aren't a pair of opera-glasses! And there's a regular paraphernalia here—"

"So," interrupted a quiet voice behind them, "you have been too clever for an old man, Mr. Carrados?"

Spinola had returned unheard and was regarding the work of detection with the utmost benignness. Copling looked and felt ridiculously guilty; the blind man betrayed no emotion at all and both were momentarily silent. It fell to Crediton to voice retort.

"My I.O.U., if you don't mind, Mr. Spinola," he demanded, tumbling down from his perch and holding out an insistent hand.

"With great pleasure," replied Spinola, picking it out from the contents of the letter-rack. "Also," he continued, referring to the contents of his pocket-book, while his guest tore up the memorandum into very small pieces and strewed them about the carpet, "also the sum of fifty-seven pounds, thirteen shillings which I feel myself compelled to return to you in spite of your invariable grace in losing. I have already rung; you will find the front door waiting open for you, Mr. Crediton."

"Compelled' is good," sneered Crediton. "You will probably find a train waiting for you at Charing Cross, Mr. Spinola. I advise you to catch it before the police arrive." He nodded to the other two men and departed, to spread the astounding news in the most interested quarters.

Spinola continued to beam irrepressible benevolence.

"You are equally censorious, if more polite than Mr. Crediton in expressing it, eh, my dear young friends?" he said.

"I thought that you were a genuine mathematician—I vouched for it," replied Sir Fergus with more regret than anything else. "And the extent of your achievement has been to contrive a vulgar imposture— in the guise of an

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ingenious inventor to swindle society by a sham automaton that doesn't even work."

"You thought that—you still think that?"

"What else is there to think? We have seen with our own eyes."

"And"—turning to his other guest—"Mr. Carrados, who does not see?"

"I am waiting to hear," replied the blind man.

"But you, Sir Fergus, you who are also—in an elementary way—a mathematician, and one with whom I have conversed freely, you regard me as a common swindler and think that this—this tawdry piece of buffoonery that is only designed to appeal to the vapid craze for novelty of your foolish friends—this is, as you say, the extent of my achievement?"

Copling gave a warning cry and sprang forward, but it was too late to avert what he saw coming. In his petulant annoyance at the comparison Spinola had laid an emphasising hand upon Aurelius and half unconsciously had given the figure a contemptuous push. It swayed, seemed to poise for a second, and then toppling irretnevably forward crashed to the floor with an impact that snapped the golden head from off its shoulders and shook the room and the very house itself.

"There, there," muttered the old man, as though he was doing no more than regretting a broken tea-cup; "let it lie, let it lie. We have finished our work together, Aurelius and I. Now let the whole world—"

It would have been too much to expect the remainder of the mysterious household, whoever its members were, to ignore the tempestuous course of events taking place within their midst. The door was opened suddenly and a young lady, with consternation charged on every feature of her attractive face, burst into the room. For the moment her eyes took in only two figures of the curious group the aged Spinola and his fallen handiwork.

"Granda!" she cried, "whatever's happened? What is it all? Oh, are you hurt?"

"It is nothing, nothing at all; a mere contretemps of no importance," he reassured her quickly. Then, with a recurrence of his most grandiloquent manner, he recalled her to the situation. "Mercia, our guests—Sir Fergus Copling, Mr. Carrados. Sir Fergus, Mr. Carrados—Miss Dugard."

"Then it is Mercia!" articulated the bewildered baronet. "Mercia, you here! What does it mean? What are you doing?"

"What are you doing, Sir Fergus?" retorted the girl in cold reproach. "Is this the way you generally keep your promises? Gambling!"

"Well, really," stammered the abashed gentleman, "I—I only—"

"Sir Fergus only played a game for a mere nominal stake, to demonstrate the working to his friend," interposed Spinola with a shrewd glance—a curious blend of serpentine innocence and dove—like cunning—at the estranged young people.

"And won," added Sir Fergus *sotto voce*, as if that fact condoned his offence.

"Won indeed!" flashed out Miss Dugard. "Of course you won—I let you. Do you think that we wished to take money from you now?"

"You—you let me!" muttered Sir Fergus helplessly. "Good heavens!"

"I am grateful that your consideration also extends to your friend's friend," put in Carrados pleasantly.

Miss Dugard smiled darkly at the suavely-given thrust and showed her pretty little teeth almost as though she would like to use them.

"There, there, that will do, my child," said the old man indulgently. "Sir Fergus and Mr. Carrados are entitled to an explanation and they shall have it. The moment is opportune; the work of a lifetime is complete. You have seen, Sir Fergus, the sums that Aurelius—assisted, as we will now admit, by a little external manipulation—has gathered into our domestic exchequer. Where have they gone, these hundreds and thousands that you may estimate? In lavish living and a costly establishment? Observe this very ordinary apartment—the best the house possesses. Recall the grounds through which you entered. Sum up the simple hospitality of which you have partaken. In expensive personal tastes and habits? I assure you, Sir Fergus, that I am a man of the most frugal life; my granddaughter inherits the propensity. In what, then? In advancing science, in benefitting humanity, in furthering human progress. I am going to prove to you that I have perfected one of the greatest mechanical inventions of all ages, and I ask you to credit the plain statement that all my private fortune and all the winnings that you have seen upon this table—with the exception of a bare margin for the necessities of life have been Spent in perfecting it."

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He paused with a senile air of triumph and seemed to challenge comment.

"But surely," ventured Copling, "surely on the strength of this you would have had no difficulty in obtaining direct financial support. Well, I myself—"

Spinola smiled a peculiar smile, shaking his head sagely.

"Take care, my generous young friend, take care. You may not quite comprehend what you are saying."

"Why?"

Still swayed by his own gentle amusement, the old man crossed the room to a desk, selected a letter from a bulky pile and handed it to his guest without a word.

Copling glanced at the heading and signature, then read the contents and frowned annoyance.

"This is from my secretary," he commented lamely.

"That is what a secretary is for, is it not—to save his employer trouble?" insinuated Spinola. "He took me for a crank or a begging-letter imposter, of course." Then came the pathetic whisper. "They all took me for that."

Sir Fergus folded the letter and handed it back again.

"I am very Sorry," he said simply.

"It was natural, perhaps. Still, something had to be done. My work was all arrested. I could no longer pay my two skilled mechanics. Time was pressing. I am a very old man—I am more than a hundred years old—"

The girl shot a sudden, half-frightened, pleading glance at her lover, then at Mr. Carrados. It checked the exclamation that would have come from Copling; the blind man passed the monstrous claim without betraying astonishment.

"—a very old man and my work was yet incomplete. So I contrived Aurelius. I could, of course, have perfected a model that would have done all that has been claimed for this—mere child's play to me— but what would have been the good? Such a mechanical player would have lost as often as he would have won. Hence our little subterfuge, a means amply justified by so glorious an end."

He was smiling happily—the weeks of elaborate deception were, at the worst, an innocent ruse to him—and concluded with an emphasising nod to each in turn, to Mercia, who regarded him with implicit faith and veneration, to Copling, who at that moment surely had ample justification for declaring to himself that he was dashed if he knew what to think, and to Carrados, whose sightless look agreed to everything and gave nothing in reply. Then the old man stood up and produced his keys.

"Come, my friends," he continued; "the moment has arrived. I am going to show you now what no other eye has yet been privileged to see. My mechanics worked on the parts under my instruction, but in ignorance of the end. Even Mercia—a good girl, a very clever girl — has never yet passed this door." He had led them through the house and brought them to a brick-built, windowless shed, isolated in the garden at the back. "I little thought that the first demonstration But things have fallen so, things have fallen, and one never knows. Perhaps it is for the best." An iron door had yielded to his patent key. He entered, turned on a bunch of electric lights and stood aside. "Behold!"

The room was a workshop, fitted with the highly finished devices of metal-working and littered with the scraps and debris of their use. In the middle stood a more elaborate contrivance—the finished product of brass and steel—a cube scarcely larger than a packing-case, but seemingly filled with wheels and rods, relay upon relay, and row after row, all giving the impression of exquisite precision in workmanship and astonishing intricacy of detail.

"Why, it's a calculating machine," exclaimed Sir Fergus, going forward with immense interest.

"It is an analytical engine, or, to use the more common term, a calculating machine, as you say," assented the inventor. "I need hardly remind you, of course, that one does not spend a lifetime and a fortune in contriving a machine to do single calculations, however involved, but for the more useful and practical purpose of working out involved series with absolute precision. Still, for the purpose of a trial demonstration we will begin with an ordinary proposition, if you, Sir Fergus, will kindly set one. My engine now is constructed to work to fifty places of figures and twelve orders of difference."

"If you have accomplished that," remarked Copling, accepting the pencil and the slip of paper offered him, "you have surpassed the dreams of Babbage, Mr. Spinola."

There was a sudden gasp from Mercia, but it passed unheeded in the keen excitement of the great occasion. Spinola received the paper with its row of signs and figures and turned to operate his engine. He paused to look

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back gleefully.

"So you never guessed, Sir Fergus?" he chuckled cunningly. "We kept the secret well, but it doesn't matter now. I am Charles Babbage!"

The noise of wheel and connecting-rod cut off the chance of a reply, even if anyone had been prepared to make one. But no one, in that bewildering moment, was.

"The solution," announced Spinola with a flourish, and he passed a little slip of metal stamped with a row of figures into Sir Fergus's hand. Then, with a curious indifference to their verdict, he turned away from the group and applied himself to the machine again.

"What is it? Is it not correct?" demanded Mercia in an agonised whisper. She had not looked at the solution, but at her lover's face, and her hand suddenly gripped his arm.

"It is incomprehensible," replied Sir Fergus, dropping his voice so that the old man could not overhear. "It isn't a matter of right or wrong—it is a mere farrago of nonsense."

"But harmless nonsense—quite harmless," interposed Carrados softly from behind them. "Come, we can safely leave him here; you will always be able to leave him safely here. Help Miss Dugard out Copling. It is better, believe me, to leave him now."

Spinola did not turn. He was bending over the machine to which he had given life, brain and fortune, touching its wheels and sliding rods with loving fingers. They passed silently from his presence and crept back to the deserted salon, where the deposed head of Aurelius leered cynically at them from the floor.