# The Marionettes

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The policeman was standing at the corner of Twenty-fourth Street and a prodigiously dark alley near where the elevated railroad crosses the street. The time was two o’clock in the morning; the outlook a stretch of cold, drizzling, unsociable blackness until the dawn.

A man, wearing a long overcoat, with his hat tilted down in front, and carrying something in one hand, walked softly but rapidly out of the black alley. The policeman accosted him civilly, but with the assured air that is linked with conscious authority. The hour, the alley’s musty reputation, the pedestrian’s haste, the burden he carried—these easily combined into the “suspicious circumstances” that required illumination at the officer’s hands.

The “suspect” halted readily and tilted back his hat, exposing, in the flicker of the electric lights, an emotionless, smooth countenance with a rather long nose and steady dark eyes. Thrusting his gloved hand into a side pocket of his overcoat, he drew out a card and handed it to the policeman. Holding it to catch the uncertain light, the officer read the name “Charles Spencer James, M. D.” The street and number of the address were of a neighborhood so solid and respectable as to subdue even curiosity. The policeman’s downward glance at the article carried in the doctor’s hand—a handsome medicine case of black leather, with small silver mountings—further endorsed the guarantee of the card.

“All right, doctor,” said the officer, stepping aside, with an air of bulky affability. “Orders are to be extra careful. Good many burglars and hold-ups lately. Bad night to be out. Not so cold, but—clammy.”

With a formal inclination of his head, and a word or two corroborative of the officer’s estimate of the weather, Doctor James continued his somewhat rapid progress. Three times that night had a patrolman accepted his professional card and the sight of his paragon of a medicine case as vouchers for his honesty of person and purpose. Had any one of those officers seen fit, on the morrow, to test the evidence of that card he would have found it borne out by the doctor’s name on a handsome doorplate, his presence, calm and well dressed, in his well-equipped office—provided it were not too early, Doctor James being a late riser—and the testimony of the neighborhood to his good citizenship, his devotion to his family, and his success as a practitioner the two years he had lived among them.

Therefore, it would have much surprised any one of those zealous guardians of the peace could they have taken a peep into that immaculate medicine case Upon opening it, the first article to be seen would have been an elegant set of the latest conceived tools used by the “box man,” as the ingenious safe burglar now denominates himself. Specially designed and constructed were the implements—the short but powerful “jimmy,” the collection of curiously fashioned keys, the blued drills and punches of the finest temper—capable of eating their way into chilled steel as a mouse eats into a cheese, and the clamps that fasten like a leech to the polished door of a safe and pull out the combination knob as a dentist extracts a tooth. In a little pouch in the inner side of the “medicine” case was a four-ounce vial of nitroglycerine, now half empty. Underneath the tools was a mass of crumpled banknotes and a few handfuls of gold coin, the money, altogether, amounting to eight hundred and thirty dollars.

To a very limited circle of friends Doctor James was known as “The Swell ‘Greek.’” Half of the mysterious term was a tribute to his cool and gentlemanlike manners; the other half denoted, in the argot of the brotherhood, the leader, the planner, the one who, by the power and prestige of his address and position, secured the information upon which they based their plans and desperate enterprises.

Of this elect circle the other members were Skitsie Morgan and Gum Decker, expert “box men,” and Leopold Pretzfelder, a jeweller downtown, who manipulated the “sparklers” and other ornaments collected by the working trio. All good and loyal men, as loose-tongued as Memnon and as fickle as the North Star.

That night’s work had not been considered by the firm to have yielded more than a moderate repayal for their pains. An old-style two-story side-bolt safe in the dingy office of a very wealthy old-style dry-goods firm on a Saturday night should have excreted more than twenty-five hundred dollars. But that was all they found, and they had divided it, the three of them, into equal shares upon the spot, as was their custom. Ten or twelve thousand was what they expected. But one of the proprietors had proved to be just a trifle too old-style. Just after dark he had carried home in a shirt box most of the funds on hand.

Doctor James proceeded up Twenty-fourth Street, which was, to all appearance, depopulated. Even the theatrical folk, who affect this district as a place of residence, were long since abed. The drizzle had accumulated upon the street; puddles of it among the stones received the fire of the arc lights, and returned it, shattered into a myriad liquid spangles. A captious wind, shower-soaked and chilling, coughed from the laryngeal flues between the houses.

As the practitioner’s foot struck even with the corner of a tall brick residence of more pretension than its fellows the front door popped open, and a bawling negress clattered down the steps to the pavement. Some medley of words came from her mouth, addressed, like as not, to herself—the recourse of her race when alone and beset by evil. She looked to be one of that old vassal class of the South—voluble, familiar, loyal, irrepressible; her person pictured it—fat, neat, aproned, kerchiefed.

This sudden apparition, spewed from the silent house, reached the bottom of the steps as Doctor James came opposite. Her brain transferring its energies from sound to sight, she ceased her clamor and fixed her pop-eyes upon the case the doctor carried.

“Bress de Lawd!” was the benison the sight drew from her. “Is you a doctor, suh?”

“Yes, I am a physician,” said Doctor James, pausing.

“Den fo’ God’s sake come and see Mister Chandler, suh. He done had a fit or sump’n. He layin’ jist like he wuz dead. Miss Amy sont me to git a doctor. Lawd knows whar old Cindy’d a skeared one up from, if you, suh, hadn’t come along. Ef old Mars’ knowed one ten-hundredth part of dese doin’s dey’d be shootin’ gwine on, suh—pistol shootin’—leb’m feet marked off on de ground, and ev’ybody a-duellin’. And dat po’ lamb, Miss Amy–-”

“Lead the way,” said Doctor James, setting his foot upon the step, “if you want me as a doctor. As an auditor I’m not open to engagements.”

The negress preceded him into the house and up a flight of thickly carpeted stairs. Twice they came to dimly lighted branching hallways. At the second one the now panting conductress turned down a hall, stopping at a door and opening it.

“I done brought de doctor, Miss Amy.”

Doctor James entered the room, and bowed slightly to a young lady standing by the side of a bed. He set his medicine case upon a chair, removed his overcoat, throwing it over the case and the back of the chair, an advanced with quiet self-possession to the bedside.

There lay a man, sprawling as he had fallen—a man dressed richly in the prevailing mode, with only his shoe removed; lying relaxed, and as still as the dead.

There emanated from Doctor James an aura of calm force and reserve strength that was as manna in the desert to the weak and desolate among his patrons. Always had women, especially, been attracted by something in his sick-room manner. It was not the indulgent suavity of the fashionable healer, but a manner of poise, of sureness, of ability to overcome fate, of deference and protection and devotion. There was an exploring magnetism in his steadfast, luminous brown eves; a latent authority in the impassive, even priestly, tranquillity of his smooth countenance that outwardly fitted him for the part of confidant and consoler. Sometimes, at his first professional visit, women would tell him where they hid their diamonds at night from the burglars.

With the ease of much practice, Doctor James’s unroving eyes estimated the order and quality of the room’s furnishings. The appointments were rich and costly. The same glance had secured cognizance of the lady’s appearance. She was small and scarcely past twenty. Her face possessed the title to a winsome prettiness, now obscured by (you would say) rather a fixed melancholy than the more violent imprint of a sudden sorrow. Upon her forehead, above one eyebrow, was a livid bruise, suffered, the physician’s eye told him, within the past six hours.

Doctor James’s fingers went to the man’s wrist. His almost vocal eyes questioned the lady.

“I am Mrs. Chandler,” she responded, speaking with the plaintive Southern slur and intonation. “My husband was taken suddenly ill about ten minutes before you came. He has had attacks of heart trouble before—some of them were very bad.” His clothed state and the late hour seemed to prompt her to further explanation. “He had been out late; to—a supper, I believe.”

Doctor James now turned his attention to his patient. In whichever of his “professions” he happened to be engaged he was wont to honor the “case” or the “job” with his whole interest.

The sick man appeared to be about thirty. His countenance bore a look of boldness and dissipation, but was not without a symmetry of feature and the fine lines drawn by a taste and indulgence in humor that gave the redeeming touch. There was an odor of spilled wine about his clothes.

The physician laid back his outer garments, and then, with a penknife, slit the shirt-front from collar to waist. The obstacles cleared, he laid his ear to the heart and listened intently.

“Mitral regurgitation?” he said, softly, when he rose. The words ended with the rising inflection of uncertainty. Again he listened long; and this time he said, “Mitral insufficiency,” with the accent of an assured diagnosis.

“Madam,” he began, in the reassuring tones that had so often allayed anxiety, “there is a probability—” As he slowly turned his head to face the lady, he saw her fall, white and swooning, into the arms of the old negress.

“Po’ lamb! po’ lamb! Has dey done killed Aunt Cindy’s own blessed child? May de Lawd’stroy wid his wrath dem what stole her away; what break dat angel heart; what left—”

“Lift her feet,” said Doctor James, assisting to support the drooping form. “Where is her room? She must be put to bed.”

“In here, suh.” The woman nodded her kerchiefed head toward a door. “Dat’s Miss Amy’s room.”

They carried her in there, and laid her on the bed. Her pulse was faint, but regular. She passed from the swoon, without recovering consciousness, into a profound slumber.

“She is quite exhausted,” said the physician. “Sleep is a good remedy. When she wakes, give her a toddy—with an egg in it, if she can take it. How did she get that bruise upon her forehead?”

“She done got a lick there, suh. De po’ lamb fell—No, suh”—the old woman’s racial mutability swept her into a sudden flare of indignation —“old Cindy ain’t gwineter lie for dat debble. He done it, suh. May de Lawd wither de hand what—dar now! Cindy promise her sweet lamb she ain’t gwine tell. Miss Amy got hurt, suh, on de head.”

Doctor James stepped to a stand where a handsome lamp burned, and turned the flame low.

“Stay here with your mistress,” he ordered, “and keep quiet so she will sleep. If she wakes, give her the toddy. If she grows any weaker, let me know. There is something strange about it.”

“Dar’s mo’ strange t’ings dan dat ‘round here,” began the negress, but the physician hushed her in a seldom employed peremptory, concentrated voice with which he had often allayed hysteria itself. He returned to the other room, closing the door softly behind him. The man on the bed had not moved, but his eyes were open. His lips seemed to form words. Doctor James bent his head to listen. “The money! the money!” was what they were whispering.

“Can you understand what I say?” asked the doctor, speaking low, but distinctly.

The head nodded slightly.

“I am a physician, sent for by your wife. You are Mr. Chandler, I am told. You are quite ill. You must not excite or distress yourself at all.”

The patient’s eyes seemed to beckon to him. The doctor stooped to catch the same faint words.

“The money—the twenty thousand dollars.”

“Where is this money?—in the bank?”

The eyes expressed a negative. “Tell her”—the whisper was growing fainter—“the twenty thousand dollars—her money”—his eyes wandered about the room.

“You have placed this money somewhere?”—Doctor James’s voice was toiling like a siren’s to conjure the secret from the man’s failing intelligence—“Is it in this room?”

He thought he saw a fluttering assent in the dimming eyes. The pulse under his fingers was as fine and small as a silk thread.

There arose in Doctor James’s brain and heart the instincts of his other profession. Promptly, as he acted in everything, he decided to learn the whereabouts of this money, and at the calculated and certain cost of a human life.

Drawing from his pocket a little pad of prescription blanks, he scribbled upon one of them a formula suited, according to the best practice, to the needs of the sufferer. Going to the door of the inner room, he softly called the old woman, gave her the prescription, and bade her take it to some drug store and fetch the medicine.

When she had gone, muttering to herself, the doctor stepped to the bedside of the lady. She still slept soundly; her pulse was a little stronger; her forehead was cool, save where the inflammation of the bruise extended, and a slight moisture covered it. Unless disturbed, she would yet sleep for hours. He found the key in the door, and locked it after him when he returned.

Doctor James looked at his watch. He could call half an hour his own, since before that time the old woman could scarcely return from her mission. Then he sought and found water in a pitcher and a glass tumbler. Opening his medicine case he took out the vial containing the nitroglycerine—“the oil,” as his brethren of the brace-and-bit term it.

One drop of the faint yellow, thickish liquid he let fall in the tumbler. He took out his silver hypodermic syringe case, and screwed the needle into its place, Carefully measuring each modicum of water in the graduated glass barrel of the syringe, he diluted the one drop with nearly half a tumbler of water.

Two hours earlier that night Doctor James had, with that syringe, injected the undiluted liquid into a hole drilled in the lock of a safe, and had destroyed, with one dull explosion, the machinery that controlled the movement of the bolts. He now purposed, with the same means, to shiver the prime machinery of a human being—to rend its heart—and each shock was for the sake of the money to follow.

The same means, but in a different guise. Whereas, that was the giant in its rude, primary dynamic strength, this was the courtier, whose no less deadly arms were concealed by velvet and lace. For the liquid in the tumbler and in the syringe that the physician carefully filled was now a solution of glonoin, the most powerful heart stimulant known to medical science. Two ounces had riven the solid door of the iron safe; with one fiftieth part of a minim he was now about to still forever the intricate mechanism of a human life.

But not immediately. It was not so intended. First there would be a quick increase of vitality; a powerful impetus given to every organ and faculty. The heart would respond bravely to the fatal spur; the blood in the veins return more rapidly to its source.

But, as Doctor James well knew, over-stimulation in this form of heart disease means death, as sure as by a rifle shot. When the clogged arteries should suffer congestion from the increased flow of blood pumped into them by the power of the burglar’s “oil,” they would rapidly become “no thoroughfare,” and the fountain of life would cease to flow.

The physician bared the chest of the unconscious Chandler. Easily and skilfully he injected, subcutaneously, the contents of the syringe into the muscles of the region over the heart. True to his neat habits in both professions, he next carefully dried his needle and re-inserted the fine wire that threaded it when not in use.

In three minutes Chandler opened his eyes, and spoke, in a voice faint but audible, inquiring who attended upon him. Doctor James again explained his presence there.

“Where is my wife?” asked the patient.

“She is asleep—from exhaustion and worry,” said the doctor. “I would not awaken her, unless—”

“It isn’t—necessary.” Chandler spoke with spaces between his words caused by his short breath that some demon was driving too fast. “She wouldn’t—thank you to disturb her—on my—account.”

Doctor James drew a chair to the bedside. Conversation must not be squandered.

“A few minutes ago,” he began, in the grave, candid tones of his other profession, “you were trying to tell me something regarding some money. I do not seek your confidence, but it is my duty to advise you that anxiety and worry will work against your recovery. If you have any communication to make about this—to relieve your mind about this—twenty thousand dollars, I think was the amount you mentioned—you would better do so.”

Chandler could not turn his head, but he rolled his eyes in the direction of the speaker.

“Did I—say where this—money is?”

“No,” answered the physician. “I only inferred, from your scarcely intelligible words, that you felt a solicitude concerning its safety. If it is in this room—”

Doctor James paused. Did he only seem to perceive a flicker of understanding, a gleam of suspicion upon the ironical features of his patient? Had he seemed too eager? Had he said too much? Chandler’s next words restored his confidence.

“Where—should it be,” he gasped, “but in—the safe—there?”

With his eyes he indicated a corner of the room, where now, for the first time, the doctor perceived a small iron safe, half-concealed by the trailing end of a window curtain.

Rising, he took the sick man’s wrist. His pulse was beating in great throbs, with ominous intervals between.

“Lift your arm,” said Doctor James.

“You know—I can’t move, Doctor.”

The physician stepped swiftly to the hall door, opened it, and listened. All was still. Without further circumvention he went to the safe, and examined it. Of a primitive make and simple design, it afforded little more security than protection against light-fingered servants. To his skill it was a mere toy, a thing of straw and pasteboard. The money was as good as in his hands. With his clamps he could draw the knob, punch the tumblers and open the door in two minutes. Perhaps, in another way, he might open it in one.

Kneeling upon the floor, he laid his ear to the combination plate, and slowly turned the knob. As he had surmised, it was locked at only a “day com.”—upon one number. His keen ear caught the faint warning click as the tumbler was disturbed; he used the clue—the handle turned. He swung the door wide open.

The interior of the safe was bare—not even a scrap of paper rested within the hollow iron cube.

Doctor James rose to his feet and walked back to the bed.

A thick dew had formed upon the dying man’s brow, but there was a mocking, grim smile on his lips and in his eyes.

“I never—saw it before,” he said, painfully, “medicine and—burglary wedded! Do you—make the—combination pay—dear Doctor?”

Than that situation afforded, there was never a more rigorous test of Doctor James’s greatness. Trapped by the diabolic humor of his victim into a position both ridiculous and unsafe, he maintained his dignity as well as his presence of mind. Taking out his watch, he waited for the man to die.

“You were—just a shade—too—anxious—about that money. But it never was—in any danger—from you, dear Doctor. It’s safe. Perfectly safe. It’s all—in the hands—of the bookmakers. Twenty—thousand—Amy’s money. I played it at the races—lost every—cent of it. I’ve been a pretty bad boy, Burglar—excuse me—Doctor, but I’ve been a square sport. I don’t think—I ever met—such an—eighteen-carat rascal as you are, Doctor—excuse me—Burglar, in all my rounds. Is it contrary—to the ethics—of your—gang, Burglar, to give a victim—excuse me—patient, a drink of water?”

Doctor James brought him a drink. He could scarcely swallow it. The reaction from the powerful drug was coming in regular, intensifying waves. But his moribund fancy must have one more grating fling.

“Gambler—drunkard—spendthrift—I’ve been those, but—a doctor-burglar!”

The physician indulged himself to but one reply to the other’s caustic taunts. Bending low to catch Chandler’s fast crystallizing gaze, he pointed to the sleeping lady’s door with a gesture so stern and significant that the prostrate man half-lifted his head, with his remaining strength, to see. He saw nothing; but he caught the cold words of the doctor—the last sounds hie was to hear:

“I never yet—struck a woman.”

It were vain to attempt to con such men. There is no curriculum that can reckon with them in its ken. Thev are offshoots from the types whereof men say, “He will do this,” or “He will do that.” We only know that they exist; and that we can observe them, and tell one another of their bare performances, as children watch and speak of the marionettes.

Yet it were a droll study in egoism to consider these two—one an assassin and a robber, standing above his victim; the other baser in his offences, if a lesser law-breaker, lying, abhorred, in the house of the wife he had persecuted, spoiled, and smitten, one a tiger, the other a dog-wolf—to consider each of them sickening at the foulness of the other; and each flourishing out of the mire of his manifest guilt his own immaculate standard—of conduct, if not of honor.

The one retort of Doctor James must have struck home to the other’s remaining shreds of shame and manhood, for it proved the coup de grace. A deep blush suffused his face-an ignominous rosa mortis; the respiration ceased, and, with scarcely a tremor, Chandler expired.

Close following upon his last breath came the negress, bringing the medicine. With a hand gently pressing upon the closed eyelids, Doctor James told her of the end. Not grief, but a hereditary rapprochement with death in the abstract, moved her to a dismal, watery snuffling, accompanied by her usual jeremiad.

“Dar now! It’s in de Lawd’s hands. He am de jedge ob de transgressor, and de suppo’t of dem in distress. He gwine hab suppo’t us now. Cindy done paid out de last quarter fer dis bottle of physic, and it nebber come to no use.”

“Do I understand,” asked Doctor James, “that Mrs. Chandler has no money?”

“Money, suh? You know what make Miss Amy fall down and so weak? Stahvation, sub. Nothin’ to eat in dis house but some crumbly crackers in three days. Dat angel sell her finger rings and watch mont’s ago. Dis fine house, suh, wid de red cyarpets and shiny bureaus, it’s all hired; and de man talkin’ scan’lous about de rent. Dat debble—‘scuse me, Lawd—he done in Yo’ hands fer jedgment, now—he made way wid everything.”

The physician’s silence encouraged her to continue. The history that he gleaned from Cindy’s disordered monologue was an old one, of illusion, wilfulness, disaster, cruelty and pride. Standing out from the blurred panorama of her gabble were little clear pictures—an ideal home in the far South; a quickly repented marriage; an unhappy season, full of wrongs and abuse, and, of late, an inheritance of money that promised deliverance; its seizure and waste by the dog-wolf during a two months’ absence, and his return in the midst of a scandalous carouse. Unobtruded, but visible between every line, ran a pure white thread through the smudged warp of the story—the simple, all-enduring, sublime love of the old negress, following her mistress unswervingly through everything to the end.

When at last she paused, the physician spoke, asking if the house contained whiskey or liquor of any sort. There was, the old woman informed him, half a bottle of brandy left in the sideboard by the dog-wolf.

“Prepare a toddy as I told you,” said Doctor James. “Wake your mistress; have her drink it, and tell her what has happened.”

Some ten minutes afterward, Mrs. Chandler entered, supported by old Cindy’s arm. She appeared to be a little stronger since her sleep and the stimulant she had taken. Doctor James had covered, with a sheet, the form upon the bed.

The lady turned her mournful eyes once, with a half-frightened look, toward it, and pressed closer to her loyal protector. Her eyes were dry and bright. Sorrow seemed to have done its utmost with her. The fount of tears was dried; feeling itself paralyzed.

Doctor James was standing near the table, his overcoat donned, his hat and medicine case in his hand. His face was calm and impassive—practice had inured him to the sight of human suffering. His lambent brown eyes alone expressed a discreet professional sympathy.

He spoke kindly and briefly, stating that, as the hour was late, and assistance, no doubt, difficult to procure, he would himself send the proper persons to attend to the necessary finalities.

“One matter, in conclusion,” said the doctor, pointing to the safe with its still wide-open door. “Your husband, Mrs. Chandler, toward the end, felt that he could not live; and directed me to open that safe, giving me the number upon which the combination is set. In case you may need to use it, you will remember that the number is forty-one. Turn several times to the right; then to the left once; stop at forty-one. He would not permit me to waken you, though he knew the end was near.

“In that safe he said he had placed a sum of money—not large—but enough to enable you to carry out his last request. That was that you should return to your old home, and, in after days, when time shall have made it easier, forgive his many sins against you.”

He pointed to the table, where lay an orderly pile of banknotes, surmounted by two stacks of gold coins.

“The money is there—as he described it—eight hundred and thirty dollars. I beg to leave my card with you, in case I can be of any service later on.”

So, he had thought of her—and kindly—at the last! So late! And yet the lie fanned into life one last spark of tenderness where she had thought all was turned to ashes and dust. She cried aloud “Rob! Rob!” She turned, and, upon the ready bosom of her true servitor, diluted her grief in relieving tears. It is well to think, also, that in the years to follow, the murderer’s falsehood shone like a little star above the grave of love, comforting her, and gaining the forgiveness that is good in itself, whether asked for or no.

Hushed and soothed upon the dark bosom, like a child, by a crooning, babbling sympathy, at last she raised her head—but the doctor was gone.