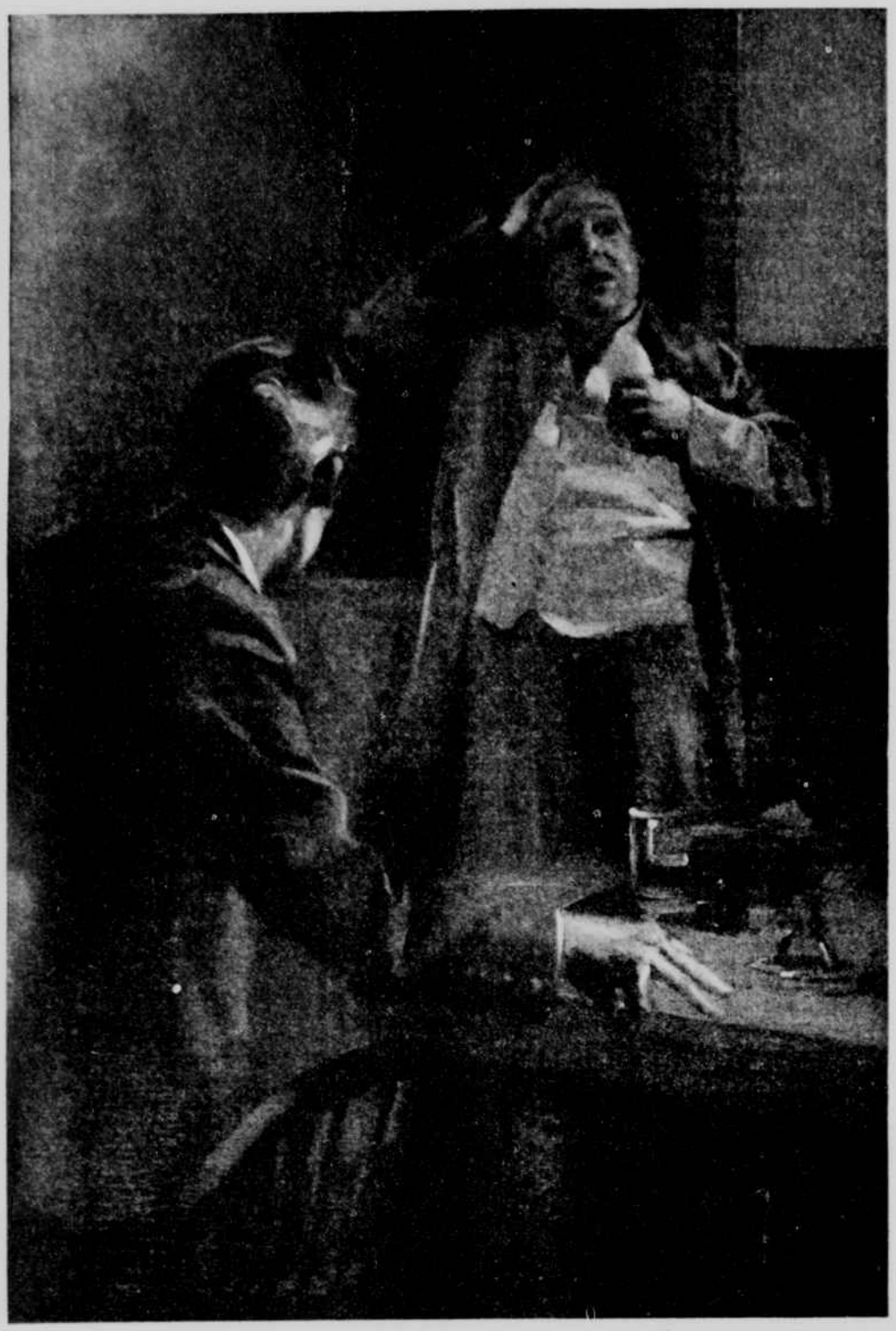

"Burmah staggered back as if to protect himself from the lash of Lester's words."

[illegible] my father reeled around the room a minute with his hands held out, and then came to his hands and knees, and when I screamed to him crawled over till he got his arms around me.

"After awhile they found us that way; but Pop was dead, and I was cryin' a little, and huggin' him, and talkin' to him, and beggin' him to answer. He didn't, though. When the Sheriff opened the door I asked him to help me. And the Sheriff stood there, and the doorway was filled with heads I could see because the smoke had cleared some, and the Sheriff said, 'Well, I'll be [illegible]!' That was all. They had the land, that is, all except six pieces of it, about three by seven each, that [illegible] other, my father, and the four others held, and [illegible]."

Lester, who had gradually leaned forward breathless, [illegible] subdued exclamation; but Burmah did not [illegible]

"I was sent to a poorhouse. The superintendent was [illegible] I always promised that when I grew up I'd [illegible] but I didn't. He beat me to it by dyin'. The [illegible] bound me out to a rancher, and he hammered into me that there was nothin' in the world worth while but money; that no human bein' was worth more than could be got out of his hide; that a man who had no sympathy for anything but the almighty dollar was a sucker. So he helped educate me that way, [illegible] books, until I got big enough to run away."

He chuckled a little as if at some recollection, and continued without looking at Lester proceeded.

"I couldn't do it now, but I got to be a pretty fair [illegible], and I was quick with my hands, and wasn't [illegible] and after awhile the cook of our outfit taught me how to work the three cards and the shells, just for the fun of it. When I got paid off, and I had learned to [illegible] share of rotten booze, and went broke, I remembered what the cook had taught me, and it seemed a heap easier than climbin' on top of a thousand pounds of livin', fightin', strikin', bitin', buckin' bronco. I didn't have anything in the way of morals, or conscience, or fear. A bad combination, Mr. Lester. Bad! There was no friend to tell me any better. The only ones I had were the saloon and gambling house keepers. The only enemies I had were the jailers—and some of them weren't so rotten, either. But after awhile I drifted East, and saw that there were bigger games, and I got into 'em.

THEN I found out, and was surprised, that there were ways of gettin' the money without goin' to jail—and I didn't like jails, nohow. I had a dangerous gift, I don't quite know what it was, but I could talk to a man, and tell him I was goin' to skin him, and laugh in his face, and get his money. Lots of 'em liked me. I've made honest money, and I got so I liked honest money better. But I didn't stop, when luck played against me, to make the other kind. And I studied a lot too, tryin' to get so I could talk to the big fish without exposin' my ignorance. I've made some big deals that were fair, and some—just some, mind you—that wasn't."

He turned again, and pulled his chair around until he faced Lester, and now he emphasized his words with one hand striking the other, and from the shadow of the lamp's bottom, and the black wainscoted walls against which his head shone firm and strong, his eyes seemed to shine with the intensity of his mind.

"Lester, there were ten years of my life when if any man had come to me, and been halfway decent, and encouraged me to do the right thing only, I'd have done it and gone to hell for him if I had to! It's true, so help me God! You came in here and sneered at an old, gray-headed, tired crook; but you never put your hand on his shoulder and said, 'Old chap, it ain't the right road to travel. I'll help you along another.' Not you, because you're young, and ignorant, and don't see the other side. You'd condemn 'em for their acts, and not try to help 'em for their future. Why, Boy,—for that's all you are,—they're all around you, men who have never had a chance, men who don't know, men who'd like to do the right thing, but can't find the way! It ain't your fault; but I'm better than you, a whole lot—because I've helped some of 'em to turn right! I've made money, lots of it, and most always I've given it away, crook that I am,—no preacher, no missionary, no humanitarian: just a man who was strugglin' along in the only way he knew, crooked if need be and without conscience, but honest if it didn't cost the game. Crook that I was, I'm better than you,—you probably never was tried out, and probably never will be,—because I've helped a few of 'em when help was needed."

Strangely enough, Lester had a feeling that he had been petty and mean, and he felt an unaccountable admiration stealing into his mind for this man whose past was confessedly devious.

Burmah sighed, rose, walked out to the bar, brought back another long glass of some light drink, and readjusted his chair.

"WELL?" questioned Lester, as if there had been but a slight pause in the conversation.

"Well, what?" asked Burmah without looking at him.

"What else?"

"Nothin', only this. You're young. I'm old. I've told you all this so that you'll stop and think, whether you want to or not, before you condemn a man without givin' him a chance. I've told it to you so's you'll think it over, and see if it isn't a heap better to have an ounce of charity than a pound of self-righteousness." He got up from his seat and stood in front of Lester and shook his finger at him.

"Look here! You don't like me! You were smart enough to size me up! But I liked you just the same, and do like you, and am goin' to tell you somethin'. I started in on this game of Port Hatch to get what I could and get away. I got to know the Colonel, and his daughter, and the boys from Chattanooga, and Hubbard, and I was hungry—yes, Sir, hungry—to have them keep on likin' me. They all did. They believed in me! They trusted me! Old Todd did too. And I'll swear to you that I've never taken a crooked cent from any of 'em since the town started, and if I could do it I'd give 'em every dollar I've got! I'd give all I've got and half the rest of my life chucked into the pot, if I could undo all I've ever done, and be just what they are,—folks with clean lives behind 'em, folks that ain't ashamed of anything they've ever done! That's where I stand!"

He banged his clenched fist on the table and stared defiance at Lester, as if challenging him to doubt the assertion. And Lester, looking at him, believed it. A strange and dazzling temptation came to him, overpowered him, and made him stand up before Burmah and look squarely down into his eyes.

"How far," he almost whispered, "how far would you go to prove this?"

"To the limit!" came the explosive response.

"What would you do if I came to you and said, 'Mr. Jones, I'll show you that the Atlantic & Oriental Railway will come to Port Hatch'? What would you do? I say!"

For a long time Burmah looked up at him, and then said with hoarse earnestness, "You make me believe that, and I'll take every dollar I've got in the banks, and buy back Port Hatch land on a busted market, and buy it back in the names of Colonel Hatch and his daughter! You make me believe that, and I'll make them, and Todd, and everyone of the boys, all that have stuck here by the game, rich—rich, I tell you!"

"But what of you, Burmah Jones?" Lester asked in that same enthralled, curious whisper that echoed hollowly round the empty clubroom in which they stood.

Burmah turned from him with a short, harsh laugh. He walked slowly to the other side of the table, then faced Lester with both hands outspread, palms upward. "What does that matter?" he asked. "What am I? Nothing! I can go ahead on the plan I laid out for myself just about three months ago, and what that is don't matter to you. There are all sorts of things a man like me can do. I can go back to New York and peddle gold bricks if I have to, until the pen furnishes me a home. I can go away, anyhow, if Port Hatch can make good, knowin' that back out here in this corner of the world is one little set of people—good people, honest ones—who believe in me, and love me, and would grieve if they heard that I had gone. That alone, Lester, would make me richer than I've ever been! By God, it would!"

LESTER came to the table and leaned over on his knuckles, and bent his head beneath the old wrought-iron lamp, and thrust his jaw forward, looking the emphatic, Napoleonic little fat man straight in the eyes.

"Do you know why the railway didn't come here?" he asked, cutting his words off with distinct precision.

Burmah's eyes opened wider, as if with curiosity, and he said, "No. Do you? If you do, tell me."

"Because on that board of directors were three men that you had practically swindled out of thousands of dollars years ago: because when the poor old Colonel, harassed by their demands, said he wanted to consult you and mentioned your name, they swore they would have nothing to do with you, or anything with which