A SHADOW BEFORE.

By A. Conan Doyle.

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THE 15th of July, 1870, found John Worlington Dodds a ruined gamester of the Stock Exchange. Upon the 17th he was a very opulent man. And yet he had effected the change without leaving the penurious little Irish townlet of Dunsloe, which could have been bought outright for a quarter of the sum which he had earned during the single day that he was within its walls.

John Worlington Dodds had many of the gifts which lead a speculator to success. He was quick in observing, just in estimating, prompt and fearless in acting. But in finance there is always the element of luck, which, however one may eliminate it, still remains, like the blank at roulette, a constantly present handicap upon the operator. And so it was that Worlington Dodds had come to grief. Everything which he had touched had gone wrong; and now, on the eve of his marriage, young, clear-headed and energetic, he was actually a bankrupt had his creditors chosen to make him one. But the Stock Exchange is an indulgent body. What is the case of one to-day may be that of another to-morrow, and every one is interested in seeing that the stricken man is given time to rise again. So the burden of Worlington Dodds was lightened for him, many shoulders helped to bear it, and he was able to go for a little summer tour into Ireland, for the doctors had ordered him rest and change of air to restore his shaken nervous system. Thus it was that upon the 15th of July, 1870, he found himself at his breakfast in the fly-blown coffee-room of the George Hotel, in the market square of Dunsloe.

It is a dull and depressing coffee-room, but on this particular day it was as crowded and noisy as that of any London hotel. Heavily booted men clattered in and out, spurs jingled, riding crops were stacked in corners and there was a general atmosphere of horse. From every side Worlington Dodds heard of yearlings, of windgalls, of roarers, of spavins, of cribsuckers, of a hundred other terms which were as unintelligible to him as his own Stock Exchange jargon would have been to the company. He asked the waiter for the reason of it all, and the waiter was an astonished man that there should be any one in the world who did not know it.

"Shure it's the Dunsloe horse fair, your Honor—the greatest horse fair in all Oireland. It lasts for a wake and the folk come from far an' near—from England an' Scotland an' iverywhere."

The waiter had a telegram in his hand and he turned the address to Worlington Dodds.

"Shure I niver heard such a name, sorr. May be you could tell me who owns it?"

Dodds looked at the envelope. Strellenhaus was the name.

"No, I don't kpow," said he. "I never heard it before. It's a foreign name. Perhaps if you were——"

But at that moment a little round-faced, ruddy-cheeked gentleman, who was breakfasting at the next table, leaned forward and interrupted him.

"Did you say a foreign name, sir?" said he.

"Strellenhaus is the name."

"I am Mr. Strellenhaus—Mr. Julius Strellenhaus of Liverpool. I was expecting a telegram. Thank you very much."

He sat so near that Dodds, without any wish to play the spy, could not help to some extent overlooking him as he opened the envelope. The message was a very long one. Mr. Strellenhaus arranged the sheets methodically upon the tablecloth in front of him so that no eye but his own could see them. Then he took out a notebook and with an anxious face he began to make entries in it, glancing first at the telegram and then at the book and writing apparently one letter or figure at a time. Dodds was interested, for he knew exactly what the man was doing. He was working out a cipher. Dodds had often done it himself. And then suddenly the little man turned very pale, as if the full purport of the message had been a shock to him. Dodds had done that also, and his sympathies were all with his neighbor. Then the stranger rose, and, leaving his breakfast untasted, he walked out of the room.

"I'm thinking that the gintleman has had bad news, sorr," said the confidential waiter.

"Looks like it," Dodds answered; and at that moment his thoughts were suddenly drawn off into another direction.

The boots had entered the room with a telegram in his hand.

"Where's Mr. Mancune?" said he to the waiter.

"Well, there are some quare names about. What was it you said?"

"Mr. Mancune," said the boots, glancing round him. "Ah, there he is!" and he handed the telegram to a gentleman who was sitting reading the paper in a corner.

Dodds' eyes had already fallen upon this man, and he had wondered vaguely what he was doing in such company. He was a tall, white haired, eagle nosed gentleman, with a waxed mustache and a carefully pointed beard—an aristocratic type which seemed out of its element among the rough, hearty, noisy dealers who surrounded him.

As he opened the telegram Dodds could perceive that it was as bulky as the first one. He observed, also, from the delay in reading it, that it was also in some sort of cipher. The gentleman did not write down any translation of it, but he sat for some time with his nervous, thin fingers twitching among the hairs of his white beard, and his shaggy brows bent in the deepest and most absorbed attention while he mastered the meaning of it. Then he sprang suddenly to his feet, his eyes flashed, his cheeks flushed and in his excitement he crumpled the message up in his hand. With an effort he mastered his emotion, put the paper into his pocket and walked out of the room.

This was enough to excite a less astute and imaginative man than Worlington Dodds. Was there any connection between these two messages, or was it merely a coincidence? Two men with strange names received two telegrams within a few minutes of each other, each of a considerable length, each in cipher, and each causing keen emotion to the man who received it. One turned pale. The other sprang excitedly to his feet. It might be a coincidence, but it was a very curious one. If it was not a coincidence, then what could it mean? He puzzled and puzzled, but could find no satisfactory solution to the problem. All breakfast he was turning it over in his mind.

When breakfast was over he sauntered out into the market square, where the horse sale was already in progress. The yearlings were being sold first. They were largely of thoroughbred blood and were being bought by English dealers, who would invest a few pounds now on what they might sell for 50 guineas in a year if all went well. One man with a ruddy face and a yellow overcoat took them by the dozen with as much sangfroid as if they had been oranges, entering each bargain in a bloated note book. He bought forty or fifty during the time that Dodds was watching him.

"Who is that?" he asked his neighbor, whose spurs and gaiters showed that he was likely to know.

The man stared in astonishment at the stranger's ignorance.

"Why, that's Jim Holloway; the great Jim Holloway," said he; then, seeing by the blank look upon Dodds' face that even this information had not helped him much, he went into details. "Sure he's the head of Holloway & Morland of London," said he. "He's the buying partner, and he buys cheap, and the other stays at home and sells, and he sells dear. He owns more horses than any man in the world and asks the best money for them."

It is not to buy young horses, however, that the great dealers come to Ireland, and the real business of the fair commenced when the four and five year olds were reached—the full grown, perfect horses at their prime and ready for any work or any fatigue. Seventy magnificent creatures had been brought down by a single breeder, a comfortable-looking, keen-eyed, ruddy-cheeked gentleman who stood beside the salesman and whispered cautions and precepts into his ear.

"That's Flynn of Kildare," said Dodds' informant. "Jack Flynn has brought down that string of horses, and the other large string over yonder belongs to Tom Flynn, his brother. The two of them together are the two first breeders in Ireland."

A crowd had gathered in front of the horses. By common consent a place had been made for Mr. Holloway, and Dodds could catch a glimpse of his florid face and yellow covert coat in the front rank. He had opened his note book and was tapping his teeth reflectively with his pencil as he eyed the horses.

The salesman had mounted upon a chair, and his keen, clean-shaved face overlooked the crowd. Mr. Jack Flynn's gray whiskers were at his elbow and Mr. Holloway immediately in front.

"You've seen these horses, gentlemen," said the salesman with a backward sweep of his hand toward the line of tossing heads and streaming manes. "When you know that they are bred by Mr. Jack Flynn, at his place in Kildare, you will have a guarantee of their quality. They are the best that Ireland can produce, and in this class of horses the best that Ireland can produce are the best in the world, as every riding man knows well. Hunters or carriage horses, al' warranted sound and bred from the best stock. There are seventy in Mr. Jack Flynn's string, and he bids me say that if any wholesale dealer would make one bid for the whole lot, to save time, he would have the preference over any purchaser."

There was a pause and a whisper from the crowd in front, with some expressions of discontent. By a single sweep all the small dealers had been put out of it. It was only a long purse which could buy on such a scale as that. The salesman looked round him inquiringly.

"Come, Mr. Holloway," said he at last. "You didn't come over here for the sake of the scenery. You may travel the country and not see such another string of horses. Give us a starting bid."

The great dealer was still rattling his pencil upon his front teeth.

"Well," said he, at last, "they are a fine lot of horses, and I won't deny it. They do you credit, Mr. Flynn, I am sure. All the same, I didn't mean to fill a ship at a single bid in this fashion. I like to pick and choose my horses."

"In that case Mr. Flynn is quite prepared to sell them in smaller lots," said the salesman. "It was rather for the convenience of a wholesale customer that he was prepared to put them all up together. But if no gentleman wishes to bid——"

"Wait a minute," said a voice. "They are very fine horses, these, and I will give you a bid to start you. I will give you twenty pounds each for the string of seventy."

There was a rustle as the crowd all swayed their heads to catch a glimpse of the speaker. The salesman leaned forward.

"May I ask your name, sir?"

"Strellenhaus—Mr. Strellenhaus of Liverpool."

"It's a new firm," said Dodds' neighbor. "I thought I knew them all, but I never heard of him before."

The salesman's head had disappeared, for he was whispering with the breeder. Now he suddenly straightened himself again.

"Thank you for giving us a lead, sir," said he. "Now gentlemen, you have heard the offer of Mr. Strellenhaus of Liverpool. It will give us a base to start from. Mr. Strellenhaus has offered twenty pounds a head."

"Guineas," said Mr. Holloway.

"Bravo, Mr. Holloway; I knew that you would take a hand. You are not the man to let such a string of horses pass away from you. The bid is twenty guineas a head."

"Twenty-five pounds," said Mr. Strellenhaus.

"Twenty-six."

"Thirty."

It was London against Liverpool, and it was the head of the trade against an outsider. Still, the one man had increased his bids by fives and the other only by ones. Those fives meant determination and also wealth. Holloway had ruled the market so long that the crowd was delighted at finding some one who would stand up to him.

"The bid now stands at thirty pounds a head," said the salesman. "The word lies with you, Mr. Holloway."

"Thirty-one," said Holloway, with the air of a man who has gone to his extreme limit.

"Thirty-two," said Strellenhaus promptly.

Holloway grew angry at this persistent opposition. His red face flushed redder still.

"Thirty-three!" he shouted.

"Thirty-four," said Strellenhaus.

Holloway became thoughtful and entered a few figures in his notebook.

"At the end of your rope, Mr. Holloway?" asked the salesman, with the suspicion of a sneer.

"Thirty-five," cried Holloway gruffly.

"Thirty-six," said Strellenhaus.

"Then I wish you joy of your bargain," said Holloway. "I don't buy at that price, but I should be glad to sell you some."

Mr. Strellenhaus took no notice of the irony. He was still looking critically at the horses. The salesman glanced round him in a perfunctory way.

"Thirty-six pounds bid," said he. "Mr. Jack Flynn's lot is going to Mr. Strellenhaus of Liverpool at £36 a head. Going—going——"

"Forty!" cried a high, thin, clear voice.

A buzz rose from the crowd, and they were all on tiptoe again, trying to catch a glimpse of this reckless buyer. Being a tall man, Dodds could see over the others, and there at the side of Holloway he saw the masterful nose and aristocratic beard of the second stranger in the coffee-room. A sudden personal interest added itself to the scene. He felt that he was on the verge of something—something dimly seen—which he could himself turn to account. The two men with strange names, the telegrams, the horses—what was underlying it all?

The salesman was all animation again, and Mr. Flynn was sitting up with his white whiskers bristling and his eyes twinkling. It was the best deal which he had ever made in his fifty years of experience.

"What name, sir?" asked the salesman.

"Mr. Mancune."

"Address?"

"Mr. Mancune of Glasgow."

"Thank you for your bid, sir. Forty pounds a head has been bid by Mr. Mancune of Glasgow. Any advance upon forty?"

"Forty-one," said Strellenhaus.

"Forty-five," said Mancuna.

The tactics had changed and it was the turn of Strellenhaus now to advance by ones, while his rival sprang up by fives. But the former was as dogged as ever.

"Forty-six," said he.

"Fifty!" cried Mancune.

It was unheard of. The most that the horses could possibly average at a retail price was as much as these men were willing to pay wholesale.

"As a mere matter of business, gentlemen," said the salesman, "it is usual in such cases to put down a small deposit as a guarantee of bona fides. You will understand how I am placed, and that I have not had the pleasure of doing business with either of you before."

"How much?" asked Strellenhaus, briefly.

"Should we say five hundred?"

"Here is a note for a thousand pounds."

"And here is another," said Mancune.

"Nothing could be more handsome, gentlemen," said the salesman. "It's a treat to see such a spirited competition. The last bid was fifty pounds a head from Mancune. The word lies with you, Mr. Strellenhaus."

Mr. Jack Flynn whispered something to the salesman.

"Quite so! Mr. Flynn suggests, gentlemen, that as you are both large buyers, it would, perhaps, be a convenience to you if he was to add the string of Mr. Tom Flynn, which consists of seventy animals of precisely the same quality, making 140 in all. Have you any objection, Mr. Mancune?"

"No, sir."

"And you, Mr. Strellenhaus?"

"I should prefer it."

"Very handsome! Very handsome, indeed!" murmured the salesman. "Then I understand, Mr. Mancune, that your offer of fifty pounds a head extends to the whole of these horses?"

"Yes, sir."

A long breath went up from the crowd. Seven thousand pounds at one deal. It was a record for Dunsloe.

"Any advance, Mr. Strellenhaus?"

"Fifty-one."

"Fifty-six."

"Sixty."

They could hardly believe their ears. Holloway stood with his mouth open, staring blankly in front of him. The salesman tried hard to look as if such bidding and prices were nothing unusual. The crowd listened in silence.

"Sixty-one," said Strellenhaus.

"Sixty-five."

"Sixty-six."

"Seventy."

But the clockwork had run down. No answering bid came from Mr. Strellenhaus.

"Seventy bid, sir."

Mr. Strellenhaus shrugged his shoulders.

"I am buying for another, and I have reached his limit," said he. "If you will permit me to send for instructions——"

"I am afraid, sir, that the sale must proceed."

"Then the horses belong to this gentleman." For the the first time he turned toward his rival, and their glances crossed like swordblades. "It is possible that I may see the horses again."

"I hope so," said Mr. Mancune, and his white, waxed mustache gave a feline upward bristle.

So, with a bow they separated. Mr. Strellenhaus walked down to the telegraph office, where his message was delayed because Mr. Worlington Dodds was already at the end of the wires, for, after dim guesses and vague conjecture, he had suddenly caught a clear view of this coming event, which had cast so curious a shadow before it in this little Irish town. Political rumors, names, appearances, telegrams, seasoned horses at any price, there could only be one meaning to it—he held a secret and he meant to use it.

Mr. Warner, who was the partner of Mr. Worlington Dodds, and who was suffering from the same eclipse, had gone down to the Stock Exchange, but had found little consolation there, for the European system was in a ferment, and rumors of peace and of war were succeeding each other with such rapidity and assurance that it was impossible to know which to trust. It was obvious that a fortune lay either way, for every rumor set the funds fluctuating; but without special information it was impossible to act. He returned to his office in the afternoon, half inclined to back the chances of peace, for of all war scares not one in ten comes to pass. As he entered the office a telegram lay upon the table. It was from Dunsloe, a place of which he had never heard and was signed by his absent partner. The message was in cipher, but he soon translated it, for it was short and crisp.

"I am a bear of everything German and French. Sell, sell, sell, keep on selling."

For a moment Warner hesitated. What could Worlington Dodds know at Dunsloe which was not known in Throgmorton street? But he remembered the quickness and decision of his partner. If he was to act at all he must act at once; so, hardening his heart, he went down to the house, and, dealing upon that curious system by which a man can sell what he has not got and what he could not pay for if he had it, he disposed of heavy parcels of French and German securities. He had caught the market in one of its little spasms of hope, and there was no lack of buying until his own persistent selling caused others to follow his lead, and so brought about a reaction. When Warner returned to his offices it took some hours to work out his accounts, and he emerged into the streets in the evening with the absolute certainty that the next settling day would leave him either hopelessly bankrupt or exceedingly prosperous.

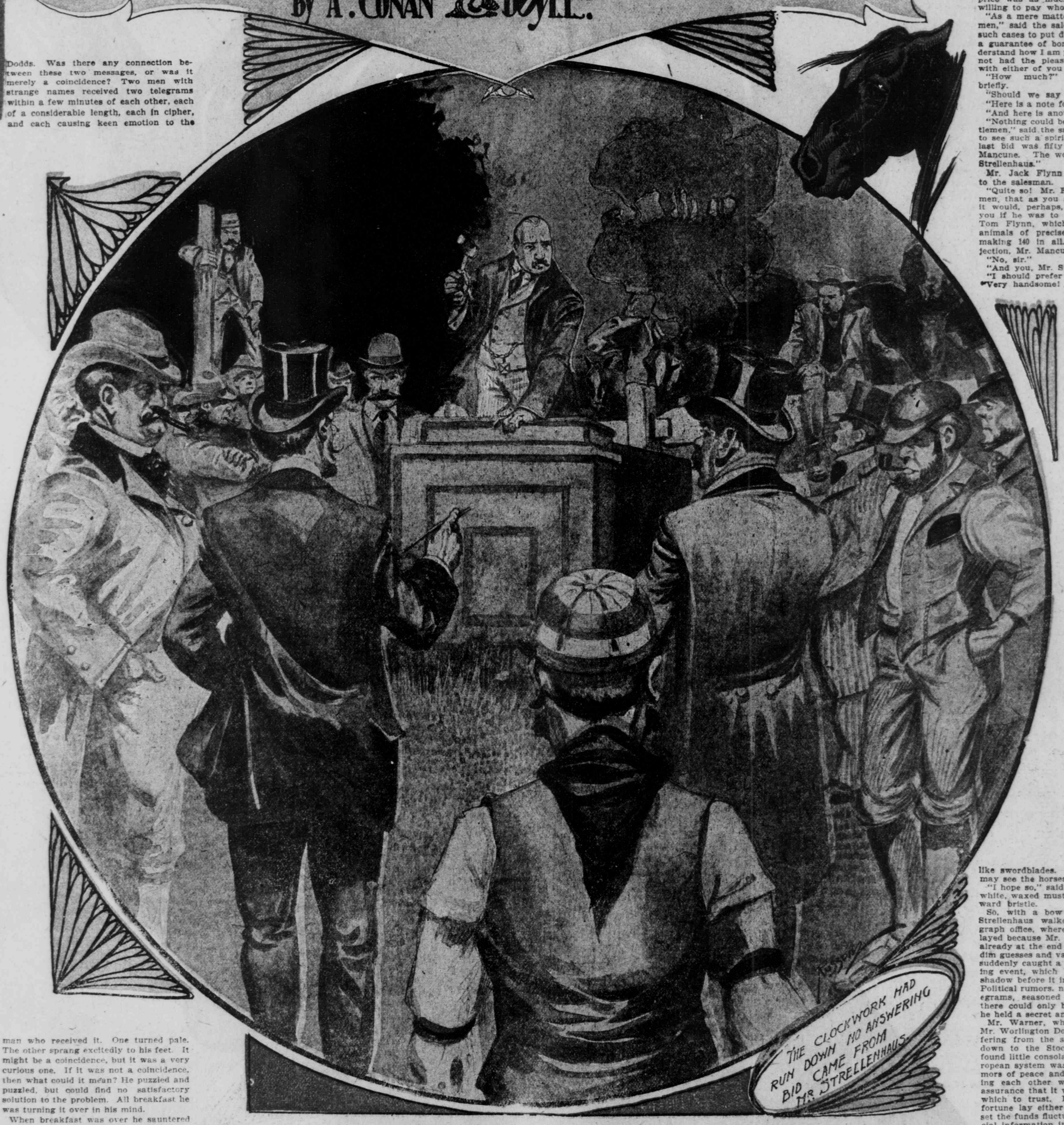
It all depended upon Worlington Dodd's information. What could he possibly have found out at Dunsloe?

And then suddenly he saw a newspaper boy fasten a poster upon a lamp post, and a little crowd had gathered around it in an instant. One of them waved his hat in the air; another shouted to a friend across the street. Warner hurried up and caught a glimpse of the poster between two craning heads:

"FRANCE DECLARES WAR ON GERMANY!"

"By Jove!" cried Warner. "Old Dodds was right after all."

Two German explorers are planning to go to the North Pole in submarine boats. They think it will be easier to steam under the ice pack and come out at or near the pole than to climb over the pack with dog sledges. They are not afraid of getting lost, for they intend to use wireless telegraphy to keep in communication with their base of supplies. Let us hope that they may be more successful than Andre, who sailed away in a balloon to find the pole and has not been heard from since.



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