

## THE GATES OF CHANCE

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By  
Harper & BrothersBy  
VAN TASSEL SUTPHEN

## CHAPTER IV.

## The Private Letter Box

HAD agreed to meet Esper Indiman at the Utman and dine there. The weather had turned cold again, for it was the end of our changeable March, and the fireplace in the common room of the club was heaped high with hickory logs, a cheerful sight, were it not for that odious motto, "Non Possimus" graven over the mantel shelf where it must inevitably meet every eye. Never could I read it without a tightening at my heartstrings; a potency of blighting evil seemed to lie in the very words.

There were but two or three club members in the room, one of them the young Mr. Sydenham, who had attracted my attention once or twice before by the infinite wretchedness of his face. A mere boy, too, hardly five-and-twenty at the most. He sat in a big chair, a magazine with its leaves uncut lying in his lap. For an hour or more he had not stirred; then he rang for a servant, and he had him bring any mail that might have come in the afternoon delivery. Nothing for Mr. Sydenham was the report, and again the young man relaxed into melancholy musing. An hour later, and just after Indiman had joined me, Mr. Sydenham repeated his inquiry about my letters, receiving the same negative answer—"Nothing for Mr. Sydenham." Evidently the disappointment was not unexpected, but it was none the less a bitter one. With a sigh which he hardly attempted to stifle, the young man took up his magazine and made a pretence at examining its contents; I watched him with a lively but silent pity; my active sympathy might have seemed obtrusive.

A servant stood at the young man's elbow holding a salver on which lay a missive of some sort, a telegram, buff message, to judge by the flimsy, buff envelope.

"Telegram, sir," said the man at length. "For Mr. Sydenham; yes, sir. Will you sign for it?"

The boy turned slowly, and there was a shaking horror in his eyes that made me feel sick. He signed the buff message, and took it from the salver, apparently acting as a sense of the most intense repulsion, and for all that unable to help himself. The message once in his hand he did not seem to concern himself with its possible import; presently the envelope fluttered down at Indiman's feet. The latter picked it up and handed it to the young man, who thanked him in a voice barely audible over the hum of the room.

"The man is waiting to see if there is any answer," suggested Indiman, quietly.

Mr. Sydenham started, colored deeply, and tore open the envelope. He read the message through carefully, then perused it for a second and a third time, and sat motionless, staring into vacancy.

Indiman leaned forward. "Well?" he said, sharply.

The young man looked up; the cool confidence of Indiman's gaze seemed to inspire in him a feeling of trust; he took the risk; he handed the message to Indiman. "What answer would you advise me to give?" he said.

"The Empire State express passes the Fifty-third street bridge at 3:35 o'clock tomorrow morning," said Indiman. "The guard-rail. Is life more than honor?"

Indiman looked at me then like a man.

"Let us go into the card room," he said, quietly. "Thorp, will you come?"

The young man's story was very simple. He had held until the previous afternoon the position of cashier in the firm of Sandford & Sands, stock brokers. On Jan. 15 a shortage of \$50,000 had been discovered in his books. Mr. Sandford, an intimate friend of the elder Sydenham had declined to prosecute.

"Let us proceed frankly, Mr. Sydenham," said Indiman. "Did you take the money?"

"I am beginning to think so," answered the young man, dully.

"Come," said Indiman, encouragingly, "that does not sound like a confession of guilt. Do you know?"

Mr. Sydenham shook his head. "I can't tell you," he answered, hopelessly. "My accounts were in perfect order up to Jan. 10, when I discovered that our bank balance showed a discrepancy of \$50,000. I covered it over for the time, hoping to find the source of the error. Five days later I told Mr. Sandford. The money was gone, and that was all that I could say."

"Let us recall the events of Jan. 9. Did you make your regular deposit that day, and where?"

"We keep our account at the Bank of Commerce. But that afternoon I overlooked a package of bills in large denominations. I sent another messenger to deliver it. But there are other means of getting at the truth. The most practical is to reproduce the situation as exactly as possible. Given the same first cause and we get the identical results. First, now to see Mr. Sandford, with whom luckily I have some acquaintance."

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"Yes; I was busy with some of Mr. Sandford's private affairs, and that day, until all the others had gone. I left about 5 o'clock."

"And now who is V. S.? Pardon me, but the question is necessary."

"Miss Virginia Sandford, Mr. Sandford's daughter. I was engaged to be married to her."

"Since when?"

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"And it is the same V. S. who sends this message?" asked Indiman, smoothing out the telegraph blank which he held in his hand.

"The young man took a bundle of papers from his breast pocket. They were all telegraphic messages, and each was a suggestion towards the destruction in one form or another. 'Suicide's corner' at Niagara, poison, the rope—al all couched in language of devilish ingenuity in innuendo, and ending in every instance with the expression, 'Is life more than honor?' Answer, V. S."

"I have had at least one every day," said the young man. "Sometimes two or three. Generally in the morning, but they also come at any hour."

"And Miss Sandford?"

"I wrote and told her of my terrible misfortune, released her from her announced engagement, and begged her to believe in me until I could clear myself. I have not seen her since the fatal day of the 15th of January."

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