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THE SCRUTINIES OF SIMON IFF

By EDWARD KELLY

No. VI — Ineligible

Simon Iff, the mystic, was the most delightfully unclubbable man in the Hemlock Club. But all was forgiven to a man of his powers — and of the extraordinary charm which he radiated, even when sitting silent in his favorite window. It was a genuine triumph for any one to get him to talk. One Christmas evening after dinner, the editor of the "Emerald Tablet" informed him that the Committee had made a new rule to the effect that the eldest member of the Club who happened to be present must tell a story under penalty. It was a genial lie, and appealed to Simple Simon's sense of humor. "What sort of a story?" he grunted.

"Tell us of the first occasion on which you used your powers of reading men."

The mystic's face darkened. "It's poetic justice. You shall be well paid out for your impudence in inventing new rules. The story is hideous and horrible; the gleams of heroism that shine in it only serve to make the darkness more detestable. But you shall hear it: for one reason, because the result of my interference was to save this Club, and therefore the Universe (which revolves about it) from irreparable disaster.

I.

His Majesty's Sloop "Greyhound" was wrecked in the Bay of Biscay in the month of April, 1804, of the vulgar era. She was carrying dispatches to Sir Arthur Wellesley. Captain Fortescue, who was in charge of them, escaped the wreck, in company with a sergeant of marines named Glass. They found themselves cast ashore on the north coast of Spain. Many days' journey lay between them and their destination. However, they fell in with friendly guerrillas, who aided them in every way. But the luck changed when they were within sight, almost, of their goal. A battle had taken place; and Masséna, retreating, had chosen a line which cut them off completely from Sir Arthur's positions.

Becoming aware of these facts, they broke away at right angles towards some mountainous country, intending to traverse it, and, descending the opposite slopes, to fetch a compass round about the flank of the French army. Unluckily for them, they were perceived as they crossed the first range of hills, and a detachment of light infantry was sent in pursuit.

Immediately on seeing this, their Spanish guide took to his heels. They were thus not only hunted but lost. They knew the general direction of the British lines; they had about two hours' start; otherwise they were hopeless.

They gained the crest of the second range just as their pursuers, spread out in a long line, swarmed over the first; but in beginning their descent, which was excessively steep, with only a narrow mule-path among the enormous tangle of rocks, they came upon a cottage; and the path ended. Fortescue recognized the place, for the guide had spoken of it on the previous day; it was the home of a desperate brigand, a heavy price upon his head from French and English alike. They had no choice, however, but to go on. Chance favored them; the brigand was away, leaving but one drowsy sentinel. Fortescue ran the man through with his sword before he had time to seize his gun.

The two Englishmen found themselves alone in the cottage. Could it be defended? Possibly, but only for an hour or two; reinforcements would arrive in case of a prolonged resistance. The vital question was to find the way to the valley.

The cottage was perched upon the edge of a cliff; they could see the path winding away below. But access to it seemed to be cut off. Glass it was who reasoned out the situation. There must be a way through some cellar. Quickly he searched the cottage. A trap-door was found. Glass descended the ladder. All was well. He found himself in a large room, half filled with barrels of gunpowder. A narrow door gave exit to the path below. "Come on!" cried Fortescue.