

# Home Cooking

BY ROBERT SHANNON

Illustrated by Anton Otto Fischer

**T**HE low brow of Kid Conley darkened with a stubborn scowl.

"For the last time, I tell you, I'm goin' to beat it up to Kansas City," he repeated with stupid persistence.

The hard blue eye of his companion measured the Kid up and down contemptuously.

"And have the coppers nail you the minute you step in the station!" Bert Brennan, thin-lipped, lean, and dapper, smiled with evil amusement. "You'd be a lot more successful, Kid, if you'd keep out of jail; but if you're pinin' for free bed and board, go ahead!"

Brennan turned away from his fellow crook, bought a paper, and opened it to the classified advertisements. He folded it in half and glanced over the page rapidly.

Like a bull-pup following a terrier, the Kid came after him, plowing through the crowd in the Memphis station.

"You ain't ditchin' me, are you, Bert?" he asked. "You ain't sore about me wantin' to go back to Kansas City?"

"If you want to be bull-headed," replied Brennan, without lifting his eyes from the newspaper, "it's your own lookout. I'm goin' to hide away for a few weeks, till it blows over. They know you in K. C., and they know me. There'll be a squawk to the cops inside of an hour, and when it comes I'll be on a train somewheres where they won't find me—that's all."

Left to his own limited resources, Kid Conley began to weaken.

"Where you figure on goin', Bert?" he inquired.

Brennan marked a spot on the paper with a slender, well-manicured finger, and thrust it under the nose of his partner. The Kid read:

Board for several gentlemen. Genteel surroundings. Home cooking. MRS. JOHN KENDALL CHRISTIE, Bayport, La.

"Home cookin'," said Brennan. "Three weeks of heavy feedin' away down in the sticks; a little flier in the famous Dixie hospitality. Better play safe and come along, Kid."

As Kid Conley slowly read the modest advertisement, a gentleman in St. Louis—a gentleman of entirely different style and stripe—was, at the exact minute, reading it also. Luck is the power of the press.

The remarkable coincidence came about in this way. The newsdealer in Memphis had inadvertently sold Brennan a paper that was twenty-four hours old. When the issue had been fresh from the press, a commercial traveler had bought a copy, had carried it with him to St. Louis, and had cast it into the vacant chair in the lobby of the Planters' Hotel just before taking the elevator up to his room.

Having finished his meal in the spacious room, Bernardo the Great appeared in the lobby, lit a cigar, and dropped into the soft leather of a huge chair. The paper beside him caught his eye and he picked it up casually. Subconsciously, perhaps, his mind was seeking a diversion from the gloomy luxury of the Planters'.

Despite his senatorial appearance, Bernardo did not appear at home in the famous hostelry. He was more thoroughly at ease in the small-town hotel, in the smoking-car of the branch-line railroad, but most of all on the opera-house stage in some back-country village.

It was there, facing his audience of gullibles, that Bernardo the Great rose to his grand heights, plying the mystic arts of hypnotism, mesmerism, and legerdemain. The simple twist of the wrist, the deft pass of the hand before the eye, the card up the sleeve, and the ancient and magic word "presto" on the tip of the tongue—that was Bernardo in his native element.

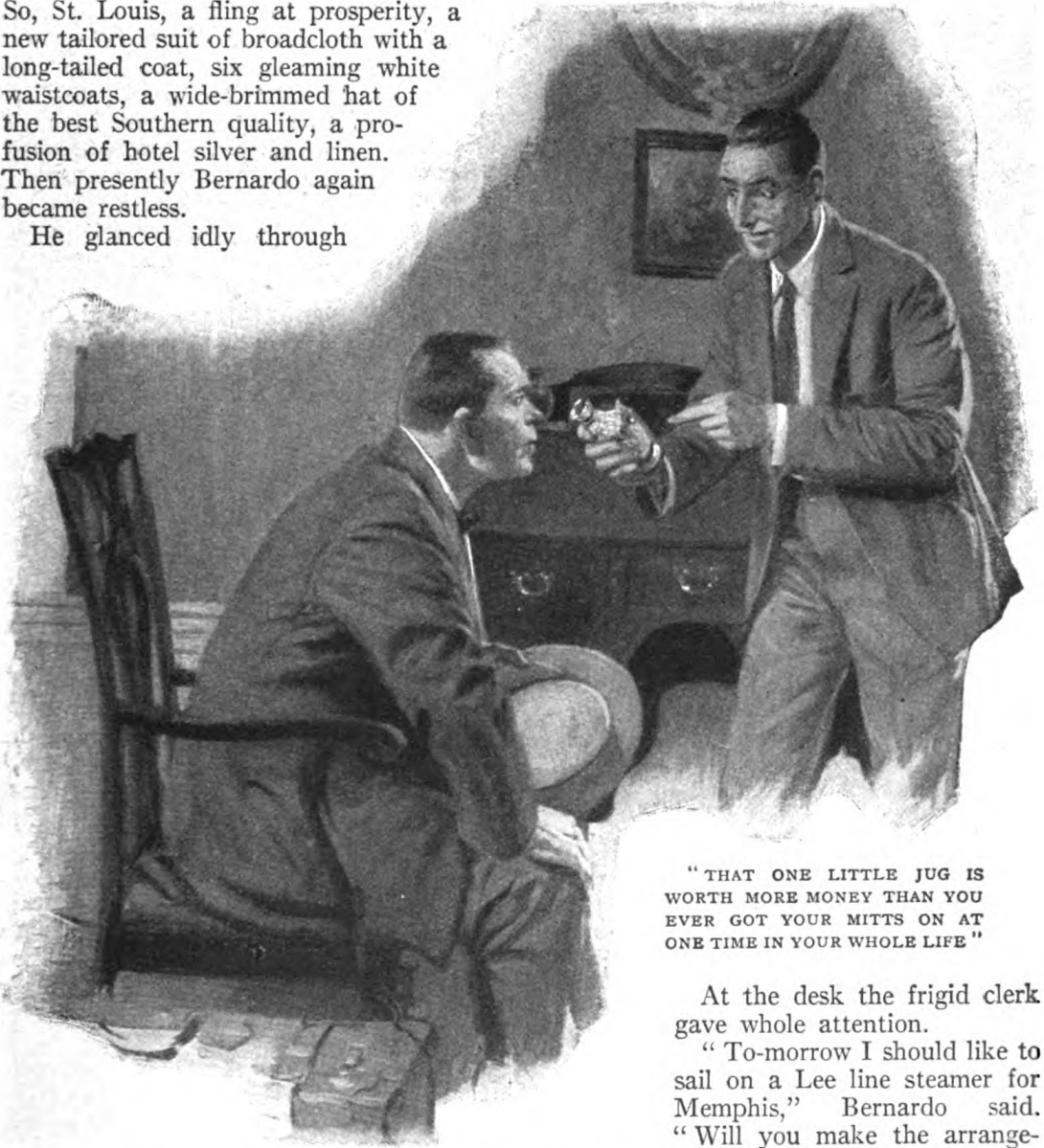
How came it, then, that the charlatan

was discovered in the Planters'? Fate—who shall say? Two successive months of unprecedented profit on the road found him with an unprecedented thickness of bank-notes in his wallet. It was enough. While the roll lasted, the show season was over.

So, St. Louis, a fling at prosperity, a new tailored suit of broadcloth with a long-tailed coat, six gleaming white waistcoats, a wide-brimmed hat of the best Southern quality, a profusion of hotel silver and linen. Then presently Bernardo again became restless.

He glanced idly through

and act according to plan and reason, and with that systematic regularity which we are pleased to call normality, certain characteristics in the man Bernardo must ever remain more or less mysterious.



"THAT ONE LITTLE JUG IS WORTH MORE MONEY THAN YOU EVER GOT YOUR MITTS ON AT ONE TIME IN YOUR WHOLE LIFE"

At the desk the frigid clerk gave whole attention.

"To-morrow I should like to sail on a Lee line steamer for Memphis," Bernardo said. "Will you make the arrangements, please?"

The hypnotist was not asking a courtesy; he was announcing an intention.

## II

THERE had been days when Peach-Tree Road, which led out from Bayport to the old Christie mansion, had seen fine guests in fine carriages rolling toward the galleried and pillared plantation home.

Over the same road spirited horses had

the Memphis daily, scanning the pages with half attention, until he chanced to come across the announcement of Mrs. John Kendall Christie's—the same that simultaneously was engaging the wavering attention of Kid Conley.

"I need a rest," he told himself, "and therefore I shall take myself to leisurely Bayport, Louisiana."

To those of us whose custom is to move

drawn Andrew Jackson, the Marquis de Lafayette, the semigentleman pirate, Jean Lafitte, and, in another generation, Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis. But that had been in the magnificent days when there really had been a Christie plantation and Christie men—proud, virile Southerners who must now be turning in their graves with aristocratic shame at the poverty and humiliation that had fallen upon their house.

In an ancient depot hack that creaked and swayed, Kid Conley and Bert Brennan, scum of scum from the underworld, progressed along the highway of distinguished associations until they were deposited, grips in hands, before the venerable homestead.

It was Brennan's soft hand that raised the quaint old knocker, and it was his glib tongue that did the talking. The Kid wasn't that kind. His simple gifts ran in another direction. A deadening clout on the jaw was his idea of finesse.

When Brennan removed his hat and bowed, as Miss Lucy Christie answered the door, the Kid, too, pulled his hat from his bullet-head and attempted to emulate his pal's actions, with a hazy idea that it was part of the game.

"Might we be fortunate enough to find accommodations here?" Brennan asked with his most ingratiating air.

For a moment there was a puzzled expression on the face of the young girl, and then a smile flashed.

"Oh, you're bo'arders, aren't you?" she asked in a soft-accented voice that rose gently in surprise.

Brennan looked straight into her eyes and smiled.

"We hope to be," he said.

"Why, of course," she said, a trifle confused. "You see, you're the first ones who've come, and really we scarcely expected that any one would come."

She bade them enter the old-fashioned parlor.

"If you'll wait, grandmother will come and talk to you," she told them. "Just sit down and be comfortable."

When she had left the room, the keen eyes of Brennan darted about, swiftly appraising everything in sight. A glance showed him that he was in a patrician home.

"Pipe the French clock on the mantel," he said in an undertone. "There was one like that marked four hundred dollars in a store on Fifty-Fourth Street in the big

town. This joint looks like the real thing to me."

Kid Conley assented with a jerk of his head.

"Swell-lookin' kid," he remarked. "Lots of fire in them black eyes. Did you get the back curls, eh?"

Brennan had risen and gone over to a delicate mahogany table, and had picked up an exquisitely wrought gold pen that lay beside a curiously figured ink-pot of the same precious metal. He fingered both articles reverently before he sat down again.

"Oh, baby!" he breathed. "I know where there's a bird that deals in that stuff. There's scarcely any limit to what he strings these rich guys for it. Oh, baby!"

It was too much to expect that Kid Conley could grasp more than one idea at a time.

"Don't look a day over eighteen," he asserted. "Weight about a hundred and ten, ringside."

"How's that?" Brennan asked.

"And she's got a color like—like a peach," the Kid added, straining his imagination.

"Are you talking about that girl?"

"Sure—a swell-looking little jane!"

Brennan leaned forward in his chair and tapped his friend on the knee impressively.

"Lay off that right now," he said, with the light of a great inspiration in his eye. "You ain't no ladies' man, and besides, you don't speak her language. We stumbled into something soft here, and don't you gum it up by getting fresh. You keep your mouth shut—I do the talking, see?"

The characteristic scowl began to cloud the Kid's face.

"Can't a guy think what he pleases?" he demanded.

Brennan lowered his voice to a sinister whisper.

"I'm going to do all the thinking and all the talking on this job. We came here for a rest, and we fell into a regular gold-mine. If my hunch is right, there's enough junk in this dump to make you and me rich. Lay low and leave it to me. Let me lay this thing out."

Despite the high respect he had for Brennan's judgment in such matters, the Kid was disposed to quibble.

"I don't see nothin' much," he protested. "Looks to me like it would be a waste of time to try to cop any of this stuff. I don't see no diamonds layin' around."

Brennan cast a cautious glance toward the door.

"People like these don't have 'em," he explained patiently. "These people got antiques."

"They got what?" queried the Kid, mystified.

Brennan directed the barbarian's attention toward a slender, graceful gold vase, inlaid with enamel, not more than six inches high, which stood on the top of an ebony *secrétaire* of colonial design.

"See that little jug? If it's the real thing—and I'll bet my right eye it is—that one little jug is worth more money than you ever got your mitts on at one time in your whole life—"

There was a rustle outside the door.

"When she comes in, stand up," Brennan warned quickly out of the corner of his mouth.

There stood before them a slender little woman, white-haired but erect. Brennan bowed, and the Kid followed him. Mrs. John Kendall Christie bowed.

"Gentlemen, my granddaughter tells me you would partake of our hospitality?"

There was a modulation in her voice and an ineffaceable mark of breeding in her manner that bespoke generations of gentlefolk. It was not lost entirely on Brennan, at least.

"Madam, it would be a pleasure indeed," he said. "May I introduce myself? I am Albert J. Brennan, of Omaha, Nebraska, and my friend here is Mr. Delbert H. Conley of the same city."

And because Mrs. John Kendall Christie was the real thing, she did not play the *grande dame*. Time, perhaps, had taken away something of her keenness of mind, had left her a bit more talkative than she would have been twenty years before, but it had not left her with any austerity.

"Sit down, gentlemen, and we'll talk it over," she said pleasantly, seating herself. "You are the first boarders that ever came to the house of a Christie, but we might as well face the facts. The family's about played out. Lucy and I are the only ones left—and we haven't any money, so we decided to take in boarders."

Brennan tried to look compassionate.

"Of course, it must be hard for you—" he began.

"Don't pity us, please!" Mrs. Christie said, with a wisp of a smile. "We have our own problem, and we're facing it. Red

Cross work right here in our own community has taught us a lot of things. We've grown to understand life a little better; not but that we hold our heads just as high as ever."

"I understand," Brennan murmured.

"And I repeat it—don't pity us. Taking in boarders is perfectly honorable—perfectly, when one must. We've figured that we can make a reasonable profit at twenty dollars a week. You'll have a good bed and home cooking. You'll have the run of the house, just as if you were old-time guests, and we'll try to make you comfortable."

Brennan's tricky brain was working rapidly. With all the cunning of his kind, he quickly grasped the old lady's character. He saw that she was living in an age of vanished associations, and he shrewdly judged that he could win her confidence if he played a genteel part.

"This is better fortune than we hoped for," he said with a telepathic glance at the Kid. "Mr. Conley"—by way of explanation—"will appreciate the quiet surroundings, I'm sure. He's been one of the big brains on production work during the war, and it must be confessed that he's just about worn himself out." He smiled patronizingly, and raised one white hand as if to check a protest from the Kid. "Don't deny it, Conley. You've worked day and night, and I'm going to see to it that you keep absolutely quiet and rest. He's a thinking man, Mrs. Christie—one of those ninety-horse-power minds that are going all the time."

Mrs. Christie looked with interest on the mental marvel who at the moment had a singularly blank expression.

"And you, sir, I presume, were in it, too?" she asked Brennan, with the flash of a fine light in her eyes.

"Naval intelligence," he told her unhesitatingly. "In and out of the Kiel Canal—but even yet we aren't permitted to tell the whole story. You see, Mrs. Christie, we naval men—in my branch—we don't speak of it often."

"Many of the Christie men have been seafarers," Mrs. Christie said proudly. "Particularly the Virginia Christies—"

"I, too, am from a family of sailors," Brennan said quickly, anxious to follow up. "Perhaps this would interest you." He leaned forward and lifted his thin watch-chain with the tips of his fingers. "It was worn by Lord Nelson at the battle of Tra-

falgar. It's a family heirloom—fallen to me—the eldest child—”

“Oh—Lord Nelson!” the hostess gasped in awe.

“You mean Battlin' Nelson, don't you, Bert?” the Kid cut in, anxious to cover a seeming blunder.

Be it said for Bert Brennan that he was ever swift in pinches.

“Yes, I believe some of the contemporary historians did refer to him familiarly as Battling Nelson.”

There was murder in the secret glance he shot at the Kid. Silently he determined that he would get an iron-clad pledge from Conley to keep in character as the silent thinker.

“If you are interested in antiques—” Mrs. Christie said tentatively.

“I adore them,” interjected Brennan fervently.

“Then you have a treat in store. The house is literally a museum of them. The inlaid vase on the *secrétaire* is said to be a genuine Cellini. That gold pen belonged to Rochambeau. I must show you a dear snuff-box that was Lafayette's. He gave it to grandfather. And there is a curious set of six goblets of beaten gold in the dining-room—Florentine work.”

Brennan could not conceal his enthusiasm.

“Wonderful!” he exclaimed. “Oh, this is wonderful!”

“For more than a hundred years the Christies have been collectors,” continued Mrs. Christie, the pride of possession strong upon her. “When Uncle John Christie was in Italy in 1856, he picked up a most quaint piece—the hilt of a sword said to have been given to the Vice-Regent of Naples by Francis I. It's solid gold, and weighs nearly a pound.”

Kid Conley, who was beginning to be impressed and interested, ventured a query:

“How come you don't sell this here stuff?”

An expression of pain on the aged face sent Brennan rushing again into the gap.

“Dear Conley!” he exclaimed reproachfully. “Your war-time efficiency makes you forget. Sell it!” He turned to Mrs. Christie. “It would be sacrilege to part with a single piece.”

There was a wistful smile on Mrs. Christie's face; her chin quivered slightly.

“I suppose it would be bad form,” she said softly. “They're all gone now, except Lucy and me, and they all loved the things

so much. I suppose I'd rather starve than dispose of a single trinket, but for Lucy's sake—”

She paused, and Brennan resolved that if the Kid opened his mouth he'd murder him then and there.

“And now, if you gentlemen will follow me,” she said, controlling the quaver in her voice with an effort, and rising, “I'll show you your rooms.”

### III

THEY followed her up the broad old staircase and into the sunny, high-ceilinged bedroom. There was a canopied four-poster, a rosewood high-boy, a huge mirror of carved and gilded wood—furnishings so rich and rare that they would have proved the sensation of any Fifth Avenue shop.

“I trust you'll be comfortable here, gentlemen,” Mrs. Christie said, halting at the door. “The only person outside of a member of the family that I can recall occupying this room was General Robert E. Lee, commander-in-chief of the Confederate armies. Dinner, gentlemen, is at seven o'clock.”

After she had gone, Bert Brennan threw himself luxuriously across the soft bed.

“Oh, baby! Oh, baby!” he cried gleefully, deep joy in his soul. “We're just going to skim the cream right out of this place. All we want is just one trunk packed with these souvenirs, Kid, and we'll take a jaunt over to Paris. We'll blow down to the village in the morning and have a new trunk sent out, and we'll get you some clothes—”

Kid Conley scowled.

“Look here, sucker!” he protested. “I got clothes.”

“No, you ain't; you're as naked as a goldfish. You can't wear them spotted polka-dot shirts and red neckties you bought to wear at the Louisville track around this joint. I'm goin' to make a gentleman out of you for once in your life.”

“What's the idea?”

“Kid, you're goin' to be quiet and subdued around here. You're goin' to wear white shirts and black ties. Yes, and I think I'll doll you up in white flannel pants. Lemme look at your face.”

“What's the matter with my face?”

“Yep, just to make it good, I'm goin' to buy you a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles for dignity!”

The Kid sank heavily into an armchair

that had once borne the weight of the military genius of the South. He eyed his energetic monitor with honest admiration.

"Say, Bert," he asked, "how do you get that way? Where did you ever get hep to all this language you are throwin' at the old dame?"

"The warden lent me books—that's how. The next time you get into stir, grab yourself off an education. It 'll come in handy. This job is a cinch, Kiddy, if you don't glue everything all up."

"What's the dope for me?"

"Well, it's a tough part, but you only need to play it for about three days. Keep your mouth shut, keep your spoon out of your coffee-cup, and use your table-knife to cut with—only. If you get stuck, look to me, and I'll give you the office."

"I'm game."

"Sure you are—you're a deep thinker and a gentleman. When you don't know what to do, shut your mouth and simply get lost in thought. Get me?"

"I got you."

"Oh, baby!" Brennan caressed a pillow.

"Real linen, Kid—oh, baby!"

#### IV

THE sun shone brightly on the veranda where Kid Conley sat the following afternoon, with a heavy volume from the Christie library in his hands. For two hours he had not stirred in his chair or lifted his bespectacled eyes from the "Complete Works of William Shakespeare."

"A great student, a tireless reader of the classics," Brennan confided to Mrs. Christie, who, with her daughter, came around the corner of the house with him after an inspection of the flower-garden. "I've seen him sit that way for hours, immersed in the beauty of a fine piece of literature. It's his way of reading."

Miss Lucy Christie smiled as she gazed at the thick-set figure.

"But he seems to be asleep," she said.

Undeniably, Kid Conley was not fulfilling the part of a student that Brennan had assigned to him for the afternoon; a rule designed to keep him silent and impressive. His head drooped and his mouth was open.

"Ah, yes—he seems to be asleep, but in reality he is pondering over 'Hamlet,' perhaps. It is his habit to close his eyes and repeat the immortal lines over and over in his mind."

"Do you think he is doing that now?"

"I know it."

"How?"

"Well, I just know it—mind-reading, telepathy, I guess," Brennan remarked carelessly.

A sudden flash of interest showed on the girl's face.

"Are you interested in telepathy?" she asked as she sat down on the rustic swing suspended by chains from the veranda ceiling.

"Somewhat"—vaguely but agreeably.

"Grandmother is. It's a hobby of hers."

"Ah, yes; a wonderful thing," Brennan stalled.

"She believes in fortunes, too—isn't it awful? She went to a medium in Baton Rouge once, and she learned a lot of things, really. Do you believe in anything like that, Mr. Brennan?"

It was a question put with childlike eagerness. Quick to seize an idiosyncrasy of a prospective victim, it flashed through the mind of the crook that he might be able to utilize the grandmother's strain of mysticism.

"I can't say that I do believe; yet I can't deny that many strange things do happen."

"That's what grandmother says," Lucy affirmed. "She says you can't explain things that happen—telepathy and such."

It was a slender clue, yet for the rest of the afternoon Brennan pondered upon it, twisting it about in his mind and hoping that somehow it would give him a line to follow out. So far, he had not decided upon a plan of getting away with the trunk-load of valuables.

Out in the orchard he dropped on his back under a pear-tree and lay for two hours gazing at the lazy, pewter-colored clouds. Mrs. Christie saw him from a window and thought that the poor man was sleeping in the cool shade.

At the end of that time he rose, brushed the leaves from his clothes, rescued Kid Conley from Shakespeare, and took him strolling down Peach-Tree Road.

"Got it all doped out," he announced with enthusiasm. "Now follow me close. The old lady, I've found out, is a bug on spirit business and mind-reading stuff. Got that straight, Kid?"

The Kid nodded.

"I got you."

"Fine! Well, the two of us, you and me, we're going to pull the old razz on her, see? We're goin' to frame a mind-reading

stunt that 'll knock her cold. We're goin' to work this up great with trimmings—understand me?"

But the Kid, with little taste for intrigue, was not enthusiastic.

"You're always fram'in' some-thin' complicated," he demurred pettishly.

"Wouldn't it be quicker to let me tap 'em both on the bean—just a little tap, Bert—and cart the junk off in a wagon?"

"It would not," Brennan snapped. "You'd be pinched before you got out of town. Now listen—my layout is sure-fire. It's the old mind-reading watch trick. They sit in the parlor and turn the lights all out. All the time I'm out in another part of the house, and of course I'm not supposed to know what they do.

"Then the old lady, for instance, hides something—a silver dollar, say—some place in the room. Here's where you come in. You go look at it, see; put your hand on it, to make sure exactly where it is hidden. That's fair enough, and they won't kick. Then you tell 'em you're going to concentrate your mind on the place—see? They call me into the room and nobody says a word—not even a cheep. I read your mind, go straight to the place they hid the dollar, and pick it up."

Then in the look that Kid Conley gave his partner there was a mixture of surprise and concern.

"You're gettin' nutty, Bert," he said, grieved. "You know you can't read my mind."

"Certainly I can't."



"A NEW GUEST," SHE ANNOUNCED. "MR. WILLIAM TICKHAM BOWERS, OF CHICAGO"

"Then how in—"

"That's the trick. When you put your hand on the article, to make sure where they hid it, you slip your watch right down next to it in the dark, see? When I come in the room they all keep still. I nose around till I hear where the watch is tick-

ing—and that's where I find the article. I pick up the watch in the dark, and they never see it. We work it both ways. You leave the room next time, and I plant

the watch—and you come in and do the finding."

So simple was the scheme that it was understood immediately by the Kid.





"It's a great little gag," he agreed; "but what's the good of it?"

Brennan smiled cleverly.

"We work it two or three nights and get 'em used to sitting in the dark. All the time we're getting the lay of the house and where everything is located. Oh, they'll fall for this! The old lady's a bug on the subject, and the girl's nothing but a kid. We'll have 'em believing anything we tell 'em—leave it to me, old-timer."

"It sounds all right so far," the Kid said somewhat dubiously.

"We pull the blow-off on about the third night," Brennan went on. "There's a ten-o'clock train out of Bayport. We call a hack and have it here waiting for us by nine thirty. Then we tell the two dames to sit in a dark room with the curtains down—don't worry, they'll do it. We're going to show 'em something special, see? It's to be a mind-reading message through space. I got it all figured out. After concentrating two hours the minds get into tune—their two minds. We're supposed to be down in town while this concentrating is going on. Then, when we get the vibrations all proper, we can send messages back and forth through the air, just like we was talking over the telephone."

The Kid was following him, though somewhat lamely.

"You mean that's what you're goin' to tell those two janes?"

"Sure! We plant 'em both in a little garret room—in the dark. Then we take off our shoes so we won't make any noise, carry the trunk down-stairs, and stake the joint to a vacuum cleaning. We won't leave anything, because we know by this time what to cop and where it is. All right! The trunk goes in the cab and we go in after it—hop the ten-o'clock rattler—off at the first stop—get tickets, and check the trunk on the first train in the opposite direction. They'll never trace us in a thousand years. Meanwhile—those two women sit up there in the dark wondering why the message don't come into their minds. You and me, Kid—"

The Kid's pudgy hand shot out and grasped Brennan's.

"I want to shake hands wit' a great man, pal," he cried, carried away. "You got the greatest nut I ever seen!"

Brennan graciously acknowledged the tribute.

"Always classy—nothing rough about

yours truly. Always clever, Kid—always clever!"

## V

AFTER TWO EVENINGS of thought transference, Mrs. Christie and Lucy were completely convinced that their guests possessed powers more wonderful than they had ever before encountered. Brennan's best hopes were realized, and even the Kid admitted that possibly the gentlemanly methods of burglary were preferable to his own primitive school of thievery.

As the two sat alone at breakfast with Irish-linen napkins in their laps, silver with the Dublin hall-mark in their hands, and old English china on the table before them, their joy at impending success was tinged with a bit of sorrow at the thought of leaving.

Such cookery! Crisp waffles swam in golden sirup before them. They had just finished a melon apiece. Fresh eggs and fragrant ham, moistened with thin, brown liquor, tempted them from a blue-rimmed platter. Lucy, daintily clad in white, came in from the kitchen with a plate of buttered toast, hot and brown, and deposited it between the two. Like many of the girls of the new South, she had learned the art of cookery, along with music and the like.

"I'm hating to leave here," Brennan told the Kid as he watched the slender miss disappear back into the kitchen.

Conley, with his mouth full, nodded.

"Pretty fair chuck," he replied, peppering his eggs from a silver piece of 1773.

"Pretty fair chuck!" Brennan snorted as he poured himself another cup of coffee from a tall, vase-shaped coffee-pot of chased silver. "Pretty fair chuck!" he repeated as he watched the dark liquid pour from the gracefully curved spout. "Kid, this living is a little bit rich for your blood. I'm worried about you. Last night you licked the spoon you'd been eating strawberries with. You oughtn't to do that, Kid; you'll lick some of the silver off, and it 'll make you sick."

The impervious Conley reached for more ham.

"Yes, I'd like to stay," Brennan continued, "but I got your interests at heart. You'll be a sick man if you keep up this struggle for the chicken-eating championship. You're not a temperate eater, Kid. Five pieces of fried chicken at one meal—it's really dissipation. Besides that, you

been punishing too much mince pie. You might stand up under it for a while, but it 'll get you in time. You ain't got the constitution for it."

"I'm all right; you lemme alone," the Kid protested.

"Nope, old scout! We got to move—to-night or to-morrow night. This Southern atmosphere's taking away your ambition, and it's doing the same thing to me. Why, a few more days of this and I'd want to settle down in Dixie with a little black-eyed damsel like Miss Lucy—"

Brennan drifted away mentally into a picture of happy domesticity. His dream was interrupted, not by Kid Conley's audible eating, but by the arrival in the dining-room of a stranger, preceded by Mrs. Christie.

"A new guest," she announced. "Mr. William Tickham Bowers, of Chicago."

Bernardo the Great always used his real name in private life. He bowed gravely as the introductions were accomplished. Lucy appeared and was presented. When he was at table the grandmother and granddaughter sat, too, and the conversation was informal and most friendly.

"Mr. Conley was in war production, and is recuperating," Mrs. Christie explained.

"And Mr. Brennan was in the naval intelligence," Lucy added.

The new guest eyed the two men, and was puzzled to understand the evident respect that was accorded them. Perhaps he was a bit piqued, for Bernardo himself was accustomed to bask in the pleasant glare of the spot-light on all occasions.

"Something wrong with these birds," he thought to himself, for he had the gift of quick and accurate decision.

"In what line of war production were you engaged, Mr. Conley?" he inquired politely.

The Kid hadn't expected such a question.

"Guns," he said vaguely.

"Black-jacks, more likely," Bernardo thought as he turned to Brennan. "I had a nephew in the naval intelligence," he said with a friendly smile—"Commander Bowers. He was stationed in Holland. I wonder if by any chance you knew him?"

The look of hopeful pride in the eye of the stranger tempted Brennan, and he fell.

"Not personally, I regret to say," he pleaded; "but, of course, we all knew of his work. A very fine man!"

"All right—you're a liar," Bernardo said

inwardly as he beamed happily on the crook.

"Allow me to shake your hand again, sir," he said, playing up to the tone of flattery in Brennan's voice. "It's wonderful, Mrs. Christie, to meet some one who knows what work the boy did over there."

He gripped Brennan's hand heartily across the table, his dark eyes glistening with what seemed to be a great family pride.

"Of course, I can't say in detail what he did, but all of us knew—"

Brennan was playing safe, but Bernardo waived the explanation.

"I understand," he said. "None of us in the family know the full story, but we're mighty proud of the lad, just the same—mighty proud, sir!"

"It is indeed interesting that you two gentlemen should meet in my house," Mrs. Christie said. "It makes it so much more pleasant."

"And, Mr. Bowers," Lucy exclaimed, "we do have such interesting times. Mr. Brennan and Mr. Conley can read each other's minds. You can hide anything in a room, and either one of them can come in and find it. It's perfectly wonderful!"

"It's nothing but simple telepathy, Lucy," Mrs. Christie remarked. "But even more wonderful," she told Bernardo, "we're going to send messages through the air by mind vibrations, aren't we, Mr. Brennan?"

Before he replied, Brennan gave a cautious glance at Bernardo, who looked at the moment so deeply impressed, so delightfully innocent, that he felt no hesitancy in answering affirmatively.

"We are, most surely," he replied boldly.

It was the only thing to do—to include the new arrival with the two women and carry the plan through.

"I'm a believer myself," Bernardo stated; "although I don't say much about it—people are so likely to misunderstand."

"So I've found," said Brennan. "I never care to make any experiments unless I'm sure the people present have a genuine interest in the subject from a scientific view-point."

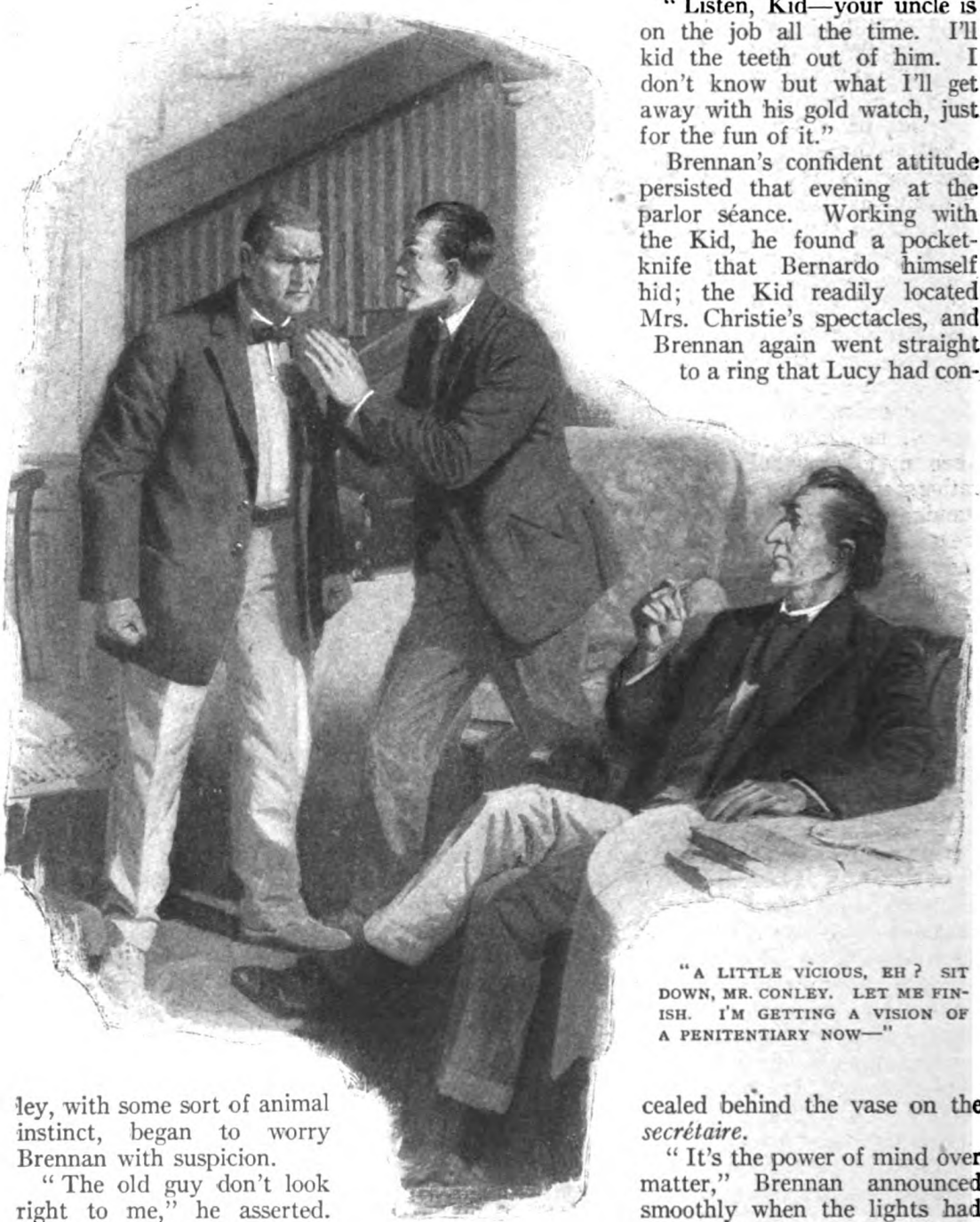
"You just wait until to-night, and you'll be surprised," Lucy told Bernardo exuberantly.

## VI

AFTER the meal was finished and the two crooks were alone in their room, Kid Con-

"Listen, Kid—your uncle is on the job all the time. I'll kid the teeth out of him. I don't know but what I'll get away with his gold watch, just for the fun of it."

Brennan's confident attitude persisted that evening at the parlor séance. Working with the Kid, he found a pocket-knife that Bernardo himself hid; the Kid readily located Mrs. Christie's spectacles, and Brennan again went straight to a ring that Lucy had con-



"A LITTLE VICIOUS, EH? SIT DOWN, MR. CONLEY. LET ME FINISH. I'M GETTING A VISION OF A PENITENTIARY NOW—"

ley, with some sort of animal instinct, began to worry Brennan with suspicion.

"The old guy don't look right to me," he asserted. "There's somethin' about him that makes me feel kinda nervous."

But Brennan, filled with the confidence of youth and an abiding pride in his own cleverness, laughed at the Kid's warning.

"Don't weaken, Kid," he said. "I thought myself, for a minute, that maybe he was wrong, but I sized him up at the table, and he's a cinch. He's just an old rube."

"Well, he don't look good to me."

cealed behind the vase on the *secrétaire*.

"It's the power of mind over matter," Brennan announced smoothly when the lights had been turned on. "Conley and I are in such perfect mental accord that our thoughts play backward and forward between us almost as freely as the spoken word."

Bernardo nodded and rose to his feet, pausing impressively before speaking, and running his long fingers through his mass of black hair. There was an enthusiastic glitter in his eye that was almost fanatical. Before him was his audience—he was again

the Bernardo the Great of the stage. The consciousness that all eyes were staring at him stimulated him to the rare, magnetic pitch that always made him effective.

With a truer psychology than that of Brennan, he was completely certain of his power to dominate. He appeared to be keyed up with suppressed excitement; yet in reality he was smoothly calm.

First, he played the trick of inspiring curiosity and a creepy feeling in his audience. It was a method that he had tested before a thousand audiences—that erect pose, that vague, far-away expression in the eye, those few effective moments of silence and suspense.

"I, too, am a mystic," he said with mystery in his voice. "There are moments when my inner sight—my subliminal self—gathers powers and vision, and all things stand revealed to me in a mighty flash of great cosmic understanding."

Brennan's eyes darted quickly to the Kid and then back to Bernardo. Mrs. Christie and the girl were eagerly expectant.

"I'll show you a sample of this strange power," Bernardo went on, speaking more naturally. He drew a small pad of note-paper from his pocket. "Just write down a couple of questions, please, and don't let me see them," he said, handing it to Mrs. Christie. "Anything you like; it doesn't matter. I do this merely to show how easily the mind can be read."

"But I don't know just what to write."

"Anything that occurs to your mind, Mrs. Christie—a little epigram, a little snatch of verse, a significant date in history."

A thought came to the hostess, and she wrote very deliberately. When she had finished, Bernardo took the pad from her, averting his face so that he could not see what she had written. He tore off the sheet, handed it back to her, and slipped the pad and the pencil back into his pocket.

"Now, if you'll show it to the others, please, I'll leave the room while you all concentrate on what has been written."

Brennan's anxiety vanished.

"The old duffer's a joke," he whispered to Conley. "I knew that trick when I was eight years old."

Bernardo reentered the parlor after a moment's absence.

"The first question," he announced, with a hand clamped thoughtfully to his brow, "is: 'Who was the South's greatest man?' Is that correct?"

"It is," Mrs. Christie said.

"'Robert E. Lee' is the answer to that question."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Lucy.

"All telepathy is wonderful," her grandmother asserted gravely.

"The second question is: 'Who was the South's greatest woman?' And I will answer that question, Mrs. Christie, by saying that the choice lies between Miss Lucy and yourself. In my estimation, whichever one was responsible for those delicious biscuits we had to-night deserves the palm."

Bernardo smilingly bowed to both of them.

"Now you're joking," the aged woman protested.

"Many a true word, madam, is spoken in jest. Who shall say that the woman who ministers to man's primal wants is not truly great?"

Brennan applauded mildly and politely.

"Men are all alike—you're all flatterers," Mrs. Christie remarked with a momentary return of her youthful vivacity. "It's been a pleasant and instructive evening, gentlemen, and I've thoroughly enjoyed it. Come, Lucy; it's after ten, and time for us to retire and leave the gentlemen to their smoking."

## VII

LEFT to themselves, the men lit cigars.

"The marvels of mental force—" Bernardo began, but he was interrupted by the smiling, sarcastic Brennan.

"Nix, nix, brother! Say—that old trick about answering the questions. How do *you* work it? I used to smear a smudge of carbon on the bottom of the second sheet, and read the message on the third."

Back in Bernardo's brain was the recollection of his boyhood days, when he delighted in such simple tricks as the one that he had just performed. It was that early fondness for deception that had led him upon the stage. Like most tricksters, he was always equipped to perform a simple illusion, which accounted for his having the prepared pad of paper at hand.

He looked at the two smiling crooks with a serious expression.

"Also, I can do mind-reading," he insisted. "I can tell things that would surprise you."

"Don't make me laugh!" cried the Kid.

"That's all right—that's all right," Brennan said with mock sympathy. "You're

O. K., brother. Kid the ladies along, if you want to, but don't hand us that stuff!"

"But I can read minds, and I can tell the past and the future," Bernardo asserted firmly. "For instance, you two gentlemen are going to eat your last meal in this house in the morning."

"How do you get that way?" Brennan demanded, amused.

Bernardo regarded the pair quizzically.

"No, I'm wrong. You've already had your last meal here. I can see a couple of disappointed wise guys beating it down to catch a midnight train that will take them far, far away from here. Of course, I can't see their past very clearly—but I suppose almost any good Bertillon gallery would have it. Any well-informed police chief could give it to me, if necessary."

Even the slow-witted Kid got his meaning. Brennan was white-faced.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded with a feeble effort at bluff.

"Just a little mind-reading—clairvoyance, some call it," Bernardo replied smoothly. "I don't pretend to tell everything. For instance, I couldn't say exactly at this minute just what all the details of the game were; but I seem to naturally smell the old bunk at work around here. Lot of valuable swag in this old home—"

Kid Conley hulked to a standing posture.

"A little vicious, eh? Sit down, Mr. Conley. Let me finish. I'm getting a vision of a penitentiary now—"

Brennan bounded to his feet.

"Come on, Kid," he cried, nervously but prudently. "Let's beat it!"

Bernardo, leaning back comfortably in his chair, puffed his cigar.

"Don't forget to leave twenty dollars for your board-bill—both of you—and you'd better slip about a five-buck tip apiece on the pillow for the maid. I'll just glance in the room, to see if the money's there, so I won't have to phone the sheriff to collect it at the station."

"There ain't no maid here," Conley protested.

"Never mind—we'll leave it," Brennan hastened to say.

"Too bad you boys couldn't be satisfied with all this good home cooking!" Bernardo mused. "Living down here in the land of milk and honey didn't seem to satisfy, eh? Well, some people have strange tastes. Now take General Lee—he was satisfied here."

But the two had mounted the stairs and were out of hearing. When they came down with their grips, they stopped at the door.

"No hard feelings, pal, I hope," Brennan said diplomatically. With more imagination than the Kid, he realized how many dire possibilities lay in the hand of the stranger who had seen and blocked their game. "We left the money. You can look and see."

"No hard feelings, exactly," the professional exponent of magic answered; "but it isn't polite to show up a man's tricks. It hurts his vanity. Now, I didn't string you about the old watch-gag in locating lost articles, did I? No. It wouldn't have been well-bred."

The Kid tugged at his companion's arm.

"Come on," he pleaded. "Let's move!"

Bernardo rose and produced a card-case.

"My card," he said, handing it to Brennan. "I open again in about six weeks up around St. Louis. Come and see the show."

"No!" boomed the Kid.

"Well, anyway—" He followed them out upon the veranda. "If you ever see my nephew in the naval intelligence division, Brennan, give him my regards. I've never met the boy. In fact, I never heard of him before."

He stood for a few minutes in the moonlight and watched the two figures disappear down the road. Then he entered the house, clicked off the lights, and mounted the stairs toward his bedroom—his mind occupied with the pleasant anticipation of a home-cooked breakfast in the morning.

#### YOU CAST THE DIE

You cast the die; now be no coward of life,

Nor beg caresses from its unsheathed knife;

You knew the hard conditions, and you knew,

If you stood faltering, what waited you.

Know also in that last unequal strife

The brave man often wins where cowards sue!

Harry Kemp