

St John's Eve

Ed. King was a young man with a large & enthusiastic faith in himself and his own powers of self-possession and ability to get on under any circumstances. But it was to his credit that he was still very young, and had not as yet penetrated far into the world which he regarded with a rather cynical contempt and sneering pity for its general ignorance. He was but just out of school, and while waiting for the honors which, in the course of logical course of events would, in the near future surely be heaped on him, he condescended to inquire of his uncle for a position which would spread the butter on his daily bread. His lofty superiority was too much for his uncle's peace of mind, and when he could not refuse the boy a place, he looked forward to the prospect of daily contact with this nephew as being too great a strain on his nerves. King, Pangloss & King was a great commission house, with branches in various Southern cities. Mr. King found a convenient vacancy in the N.O. house, and ~~there~~ put his nephew there at once. In N.O. there came Ed. full of the dire necessity of regenerating the ancient town and ~~doing all the good~~ allowing it to reap to the full the benefit of his plan, necessarily a brief one since higher things must surely call him soon.

It was not without the latter part of May when he arrived and it was not long before he had gotten around the city, quite a little and had heard of its traditions, superstitions and legends to the full. They filled into with more than a mount amount of contempt, and he was wont to descend to his new acquaintances upon the folly of such traditions & beliefs in this enlightened age.

"Hill you fellows," he said oracularly, one day at noon, "it's all full, don't you know, for your people to be living here in this, your way say, twentieth century, with all such things - not as I hear, still about you, and you still having faith in it, why, I believe your people turn & its people have been asleep since its first building."

"Oh, I don't know," put in one Gasté, "I'm not so sure of that. If we had been asleep, there wouldn't be any big commission houses here for your youngsters to make a living out of."

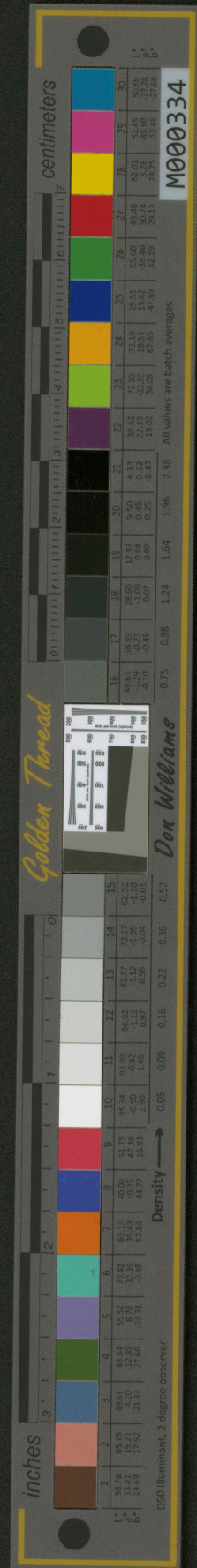
If Ed. perceived the thrust, he ^{took} ^{notice} made no ^{notice} of it; he puffed his cigarette calmly.

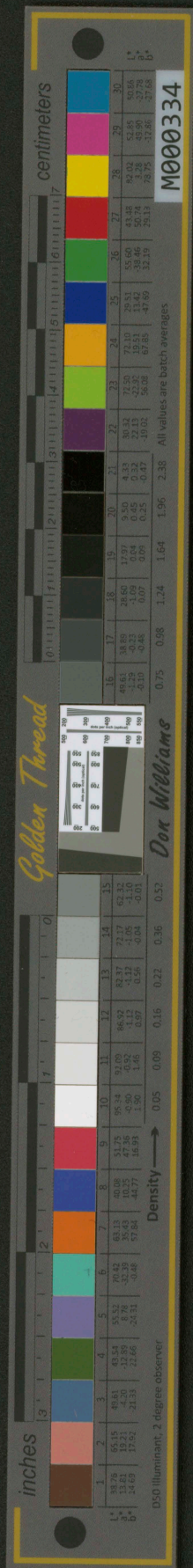
"It seems absurd," he continued, "all this clinging to old forms and old things just because your fathers liked 'em. Why, the people actually operate that old black praline woman down the street just because she looks like some other old black praline woman of fifty years ago. Now, a little fresh boy in a white jacket - the ~~same~~ ^{same} has had candies, would not only be neater and cleaner, but more active and less garrulous as well."

Gasté exchanged pitying glances with his companions, and here the conversation being no reply, the conversation languished. But Edward continued his investigations, and belittles them, and the scheme for a Society for the Cure of Unnecessary Superstitions, he was kept ^{fully} busy outside of working hours.

"See here," he said one evening to the other clerks, "what's all this nonsense about voodooism & other such thick ideas?"

Gasté, as usual, spoke for his companions, "Well it's rather





a big order, I'm afraid," he smiled queerly, as he spoke, "to attempt to describe it as full." "Oh, say now, you'd have any believe all such trash, wouldnt you? Just give me a general idea, you know."

"I'm afraid I can't," said Gasti coldly. For several days, Edward pursued investigation about the lower part of the city, and having arrived at the conclusion that the whole had unraveled all the mystery of it, he smiled knowingly to himself, and was content. His work success had not won him many friends, even his blundered perceptions noticed that his companions clear about the office avoided rather than sought him. This, however, he attributed to his staleness of his superior penmanship and mental equipments. He shrugged his shoulders and went his way, and said as many insulting things as ever.

It was late one night in June when he was walking up Decatur Street from the office and humming to himself as he strolled along. The clerk had all had to work late, and Ed the boldest to complain at what he termed an imposition, had been the first to leave when time was announced. Decatur Street is grim and forbidding looking at its best, and to night, E. thought, the machines and dark alleys had been burned as fully by burning shadows. He was going distinctly nervous, and when a hand was suddenly laid on his shoulder, he started violently and restrained himself from injury with difficulty. Gasti, for it was he, laughed.

"I didn't know you were nervous." "Well, well - I'm not, as a rule," stammered E. He was annoyed himself for being caught off guard. "But, this street isn't a promising one." "It isn't," assented G. "and it isn't a safe one, that's why I don't to catch you. We're the only two who come up town, and company is preferable about here." "Oh, I'm not afraid," boasted E. Gasti smiled & was silent for a while. Finally he broke in with,

"Still believing in superstitions?" "Well, a little, yes. I've about dismissed them all as bosh, however."

"Many others have before you." "All but nothing," continued Edward, "this St John's Eve business. What is that?"

"Well, I can't say that I know much more than that on that night, the vendors are supposed to meet & hold high carnival with rides & sacred to them."

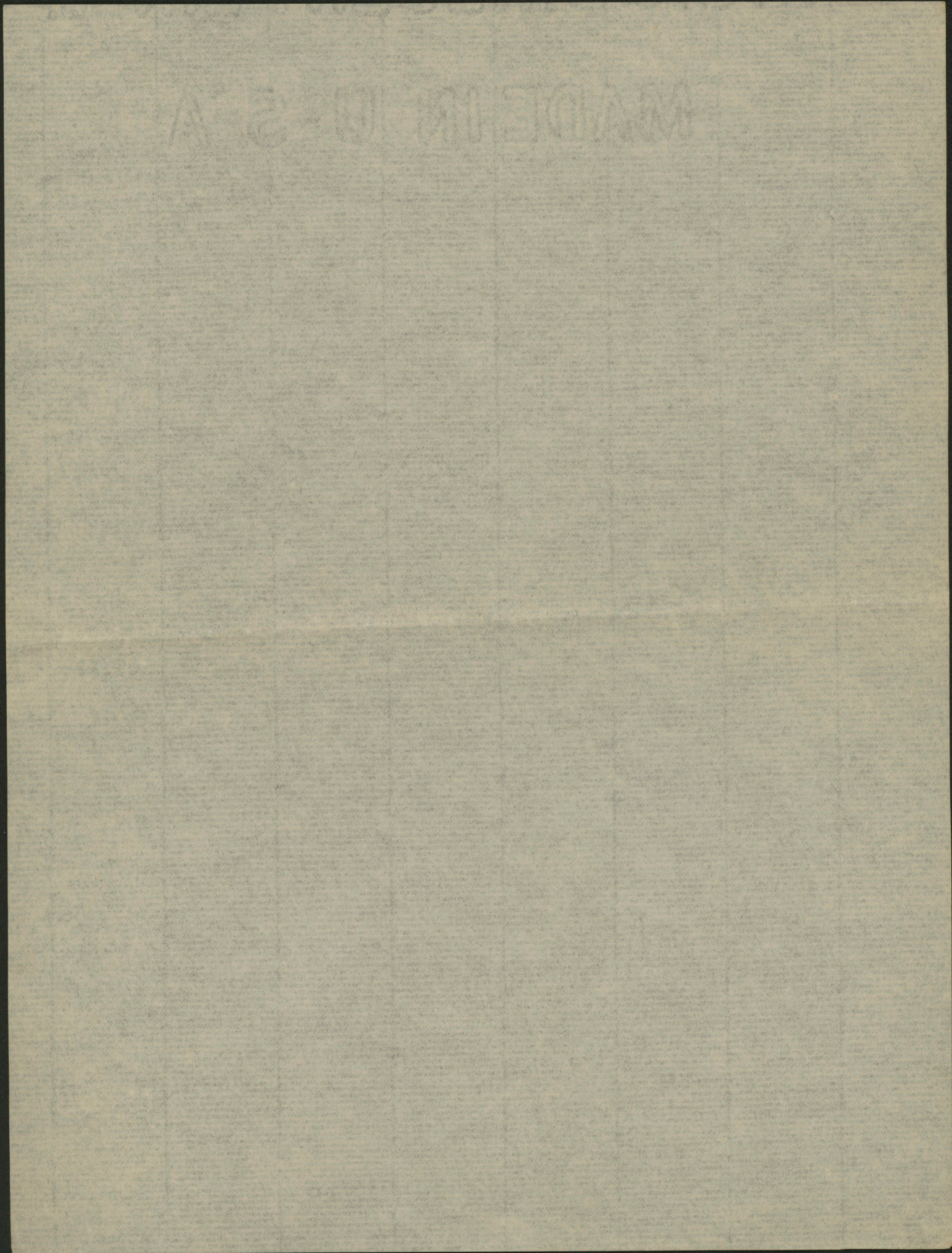
"Think I'll run out whenever it is and look at it," said E. "Then you'll do more than hundreds of others have done," said his companion shrilly.

"Why, is there a mystery about the meeting?"

"There is."

"Bosh, I'm going, wherever it is. I guess a little of this will do all I want. He clapped his pocket and jingled some silver." Gasti made no reply, and the conversation turned to other matters until they parted at their respective car lines.

But despite the clink of coins & the flash of bank notes E. was unable to find out even about St John's Eve than what Gasti had told him. At first, he was baffled & chagrined, but finally, his distrust cheerfulness



asserted story and he decided that the whole business was a gigantic
 joke, invented by garrulous old women to frighten children to bed. Then, he
 rested content, and proclaimed his beliefs loudly to his fellow clerks.

An unusually large consignment of rice was about to be handed at this
 time, and coming as it did, in the busy season, the work at the office was un-
 usually heavy. So busy were the clerks kept, night & day that time passed
 & none, least of all, Ed. who was still new to his duties, kept notice of the
 days. ~~Ed. was still new to his duties, kept notice of the days.~~

The 2nd of June came and everyone worked late into the night.
 It was hot and breezeless, and the men bent over their desks in their shirts
 sleeves, and looked longingly at the moonlighted roofs of the streets, the while
 they bent their heads closer to their lecture papers for a breath of air. Ed. bent an
 aching head over his ledger, and cursed the fate that kept him bound there to
 a row of elevating figures, when he knew that nearly by day the river and base
 and a boat. The stillness of the room was broken only by the scratching of
 many pens, and the occasional nervous cough from some hurried clerk.

"May Dom, Mr. King," said a deep voice suddenly.

Everyone looked up with a start. A tall dark man, dressed in black with
 a somber face and gloomy manner was standing in the center of the room. He
 had come in was a mystery, for no one had heard a foot-fall on the uncarpeted
 stairs in the hall. Yet there he stood, his whole mien that of extreme sadness
 and misery. Edward rose from his stool, and advanced toward the stranger.

"For you, Mr. King?" he asked.

"I am," was the reply.

"I am on a very important mission," said the stranger, "and
 your presence is an absolute necessity. I must beg you to come with me."

"But I don't know you," said E. "nor do I know anything about your
 mission." "It is a matter almost of life & death," persisted the man.
 "For pity's sake come on. You are not afraid, surely."

There was an underlying tone of contempt in the last words
 that nettled Ed. and without reply he started for his hat & coat. Gasti was
 out of his seat in a moment and would have restrained him.

"Don't be foolish, King," he exclaimed. "What do you know of this
 man? Send him about his business."

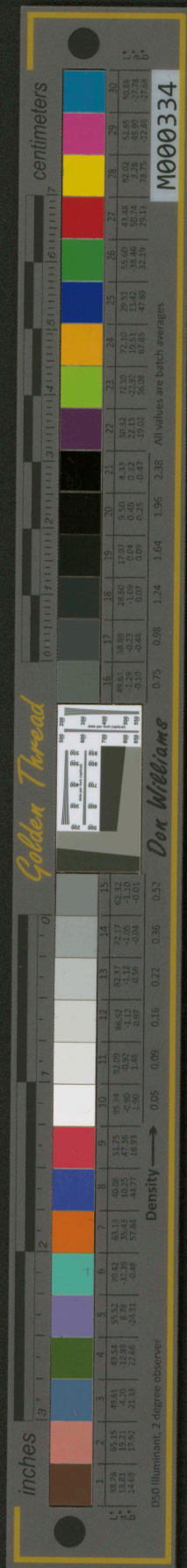
"This is my affair," said Ed. haughtily putting him aside, "I am
 no coward."

Gasti shrugged his shoulders and returned to his stool. The
 other men, hearing his refusal, turned again to their work & Ed. & the
 stranger passed out unnoticed.

When they had gained the street, Ed. inquired what the pressing
 business was that had called him out in such a peculiar manner. The
 sinister man shook his head.

"I must not speak," he sighed, rather than spoke. "I
 trust me, and all will be well." As he said this, he opened the door of a
 carriage that stood at the curb, and motioned Ed. in. The door was closed on
 the two and they had rattled down the street before E. had time to realize
 that the horses & driver were vague shadows and that they were curdled





within in intense darkness. Ed. wondered why the curtains were not raised, for at every moment the heat grew more intense. He spoke to his companion about it, but receiving no reply, he sank back in a corner, and gave himself up to wonder.

For as long while they drove. The heavy paving blocks of Decatur street gave way to a wooden paving, then Ed. heard the softer sound of a fine stone, then a clack clack of asphalt, and finally the ~~sharp~~ hard, clatter of a shell-road. For an hour or more they drove. There was no sound from the companions, still no breath of air within the closed vehicle. It seemed to Ed. that he must stop. He spoke again, this time sharply and imperatively, but before there was time for a reply, the carriage stopped, and the silent man had opened the door and was helping him out.

It was a weird scene on which he gazed. All about was a thick mist, and to the right was evidently a swamp, for the needle points of young palm-trees stood up straight and open like. The carriage had stopped under a great live oak, and its formal draperies of gray muslin hung in fantastic fustians about the driver's head and over the horses, giving them a strange unreal appearance. To the left there was the cheer of water under the moon-light, but whether of lake, bayou or river, Ed. could not tell.

He turned indignantly to his guide. "What does this mean?" he asked, and for he could not keep confessing to himself that his heart was heavy. "Why do you bring me here?"

There was a moment's silence. A silence that hung heavy and weighty on one, and in which the rustle of a falling leaf, was as the crash of a tree. The somber man smiled for the first time, a slow terrible smile, and for answer, waved his hands back of him.

Ed. turned & started back in horror. It was as if a scene had been conjured up for him. A great fire blazed in a clearing, fanned tongues feeding up and lighting up the great gray weathered oaks about. Around it in various attitudes of repose sat and reclined a number of half-naked women & men. Their ~~eyes~~ faces glowed in the weird glare of the fire. The women's hair streamed upon their breasts & there was no movement no life in the crowd, save when an uplash flickered or a hand was put up to push back a stray lock.

Suddenly in the deep stillness of the forest the far harsh notes of a bell were heard. It was as if its jangling tones had galvanized the group into life. With a start, every man & woman were on their feet, and Ed. could see that their skins were of all shades from deepest black to purest white. They paused with arms uplifted and eyes turned to the fire.

Then there stepped out from the throng an old man. He was great and strong-looking and black, while a white pat of hair like a beard swept his muscular chest. With finger pointed menacingly at the fire, he began in a low voice to intone a peculiar rhytmical chant. Motionless stood the figures, until he had done his monotone out, then when they struck into a higher key, the chorus of voices chimed in and chanted with him, the while their arms waved slowly up & down and their feet pattered slow time to the chant.

Fear gripped hard at Ed's breast & cold drops stood out on his forehead, for he felt that the eyes looking upon the rites of St John's Eve, & sceptic tho' he



was. he had heard enough of the fate of the ²²⁰⁰inlooker at the winter to himself be afraid. He looked about for his companions, but he had gone. Gone too, were the horses, the canyons & the ²²⁰⁰driving. He was alone in a death-trap. He looked about for a place of escape, but none there was save that which led across the vision of those at the fire. He crept as quietly as he could under the tangle of the great oak where the cany had stood, and ~~disappeared~~ ^{watched} with bated breath, for a chance to escape. Gradually, however, ²²⁵²curiously, put the bitter of fear, and he listened curiously to the chant.

It was in an unintelligible language to him, a rude, harsh patois, from which the syllables tumbled one over the other, and hurried out roughly. They were singing louder, now, and the waving of the arms was faster, ²³⁰⁰the movement of the feet lighter, quicker. Soudy, swelled the chant, faster waved the arms, quicker moved the feet. They had broken into a dance now, and loud cries mingled with the song. The dance had become a frenzy, and the song a shrill, continuous cry. The flames leaped & flickered in the wind, and hair and foam fled in the air. Some fell down, and were dragged away from the circle, but the dance went on.

Suddenly, the old man stooped and knuckled his knuckled hands upon the ground, every other being followed his example, and then, doubled and bent they danced on, waving their arms and singing. Dancing, dancing, centralized and twisted, while the cries ²⁴⁰⁰grew guttural and hoarse. They were growing smaller, smaller, their faces took on wignose hornlike shapes, their eyes shot forth wild animal glances. Their lips mouthed out, sent forth unhuman sounds. They were changing forms, already one man had —

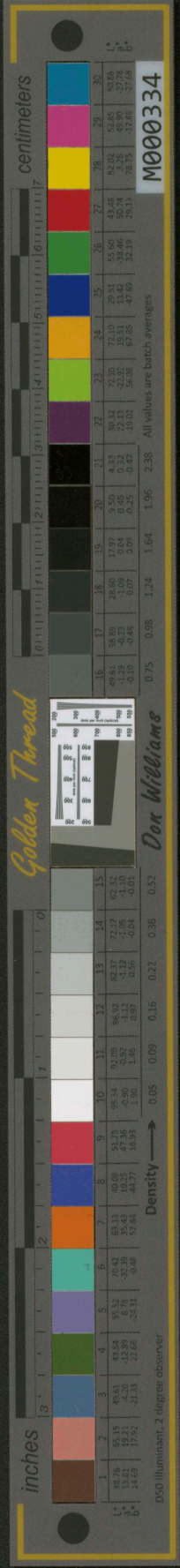
Ed. cried aloud at his lungs. He put his hand before his eyes and screamed aloud at the horror of the thing he saw.

There was a sharp silence after his cry. He stood still cowering with closed eyes, but he heard the pattering then the loud alarm call of the old man's voice, and the screaming of feet in many directions. He put down his hands and peered out again. They were searching, fumbling at trees ²⁵⁰⁰and at palm-trees. They were coming towards him. He felt his head reel, and then he was surrounded and was striking out savagely in every direction, fighting, scratching, biting, kicking, struggling for life.

He sent his back against the tree and clenching his teeth, prepared to sell himself ²⁶⁰⁰dearly. They were friends who danced before him, and they were bent on his life. He had no weapon save a small dagger and ²⁶⁵⁰that he as soon as he could draw this he struck out with it savagely. But there were fifty to one, and they were closing in around him, snatching his face like rollers. The great ²⁷⁰⁰old man was not among them; Ed. could see him fling the fire high with fresh wood and he shuddered as he realized the fate before him. He could not hold out another minute. His strength was ebbing fast from the blood from ²⁷⁵⁰innumerable wounds. Then he heard a deep familiar voice.

"Be still!" I said. The crowd melted away from him, and slunk off towards the fire again in sullen attitudes. Ed. looked up to see his former companion ²⁸⁰⁰at his side. 2697





The sun was ^{11:00} shining full on his figure when he awoke, bruised, stiff and aching. He could not realize at first what had happened, & then with the miserable consciousness of it, he shuddered and tried to sit up.

"Here, then, you see all right," said a cheery voice.

He looked about him in surprise. He was on the floor of the office, and Gasti was bending over him.

"What time is it?" he asked weakly.

"What am I doing here?"
"That's what I'd like to know."

"Eight o'clock," was the reply. "I came down early to finish

up something, and found you here lying under your desk."

"Guess I've been dreaming," said Ed. Standing trying to stand

up. "Well, I wouldn't dream of it if I were you, you look more as if you'd been fighting."

Ed. gazed blankly at his battle-scarred figure, and sat down on a chair, weak and helpless.

"Look here, Gasti," he said finally, "did I leave here last night with a queer looking fellow?"

"You did, like a - beg pardon - like a damned fool."

"Well, I suppose you won't believe me," said Ed. after staring hard at G. to see if he were speaking the truth, but I - well - I - his head fell forward weakly. Gasti found a cambric flask and put it to the boy's lips. "What happened?" he asked.

When Ed. had finished, Gasti whistled & drummed his fingers on the desk.

"The devil doesn't believe in his ribs being donated," he said slowly, "and I suppose he concluded to convince you. Now you'd better take a cab & go home."

"I'm convinced," said Ed. weakly, left the office, leaving a note to say that he was too ill to work that day.

"Well - I wonder?" whistled Gasti after him.

And so did Ed. but wondering did not get a solution to the problem.

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