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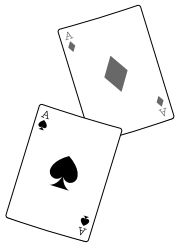

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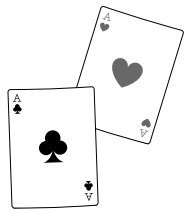


An Invitation to Magic

Edinburgh, July 1872

"Detectives, that would be the life for us," Edward Hamilton announced suddenly.

Artie Conan Doyle looked up from his Latin textbook and gave his friend a puzzled frown. "Ham, what on earth are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the future," said Ham. "I've been thinking a lot about it lately. My mother says now that I've turned thirteen I'm well on my way to being a man. I need to consider my future career."

They were seated on the floor of Artie's cramped bedroom at Sciennes Hill Place with their textbooks in their laps. Artie had a notepad in which he was scribbling a rough translation of the page they were working on. A large Latin dictionary lay on the floor between them.

"Why would we want to be policemen?" said Artie distractedly, running his finger along the next line in the text.

"No, not policemen," said Ham. "We'd be independent consultants with our own office and everything."

"Can I consult you now and ask you to look up the meaning of the word *ferentes*?" Artie pointed at the dictionary.

With a sour look Ham opened the large book and began flipping through the pages. "The point I'm making, Artie, is that we need to start planning ahead." A gleam appeared in his brown eyes. "I've been thinking, you know, about that business with the Gravediggers' Club."

A few months before, the boys had solved a mystery involving grave robberies and some unsavoury villains. It had all turned out well in the end, in spite of some terrifying moments.

In the following months life had returned to its normal routine, and as he read a tale of the heroes of the Trojan War for his Latin homework, Artie couldn't help yearning for some adventure, some new mystery, to enliven his world. He knew, however, that with his older sister Annette away at school in France, it was up to him to support the family through his father's frequent bouts of illness. He couldn't manage that by daydreaming.

"That was something we just stumbled into," he told Ham abruptly. "What has that got to do with our future?"

"Well," said Ham, "we solved that mystery, didn't we?

Don't you suppose somebody might pay us to solve other cases?"

Artie couldn't help scoffing. "Why on earth would anybody pay us to solve a mystery? They could do it for themselves. Or just go to the police."

"They might not be clever enough to solve it themselves," Ham insisted. "And as for the police, they didn't seem particularly bright last time. Plus, suppose it's a delicate matter that a person might not want to take to the police. That's where we would come in – Hamilton and Doyle, Consultative Investigators."

"Hamilton and Doyle?"

"Alright, Doyle and Hamilton if you like."

"As I recall, I had to drag you into that business of the gravediggers," Artie reminded his friend. "You weren't at all happy tramping around graveyards."

"Well, we could make it a rule not to take on any cases involving dead bodies," said Ham very seriously. "We could be more exclusive. And that would still leave burglaries, blackmail and other stuff."

For a moment Artie felt a stir of excitement at the thought. But no, he had responsibilities and for the sake of his family he had to be practical.

He shook his head firmly. "Look, Ham, nobody is going to hire a couple of amateurs for serious business like that."

"They do in America," Ham countered. "I read about that chap Allan Pinkerton who set up a detective agency over there, and he's Scottish like us."

"America is different," Artie argued. "There are so many bandits and outlaws over there, they need all the help they can get. Over here, there's simply no demand. No, I can't say this idea of yours appeals at all."

Ham cast a longing glance at the window and sighed. Outside the streets of Edinburgh were thronged with people enjoying the sunshine. "You know, Artie, I don't see what use all this Latin is going to be to us – not unless we decide to become priests." He made a face. "And I don't fancy that much. Black's not my colour and I can never remember the right words to all those prayers."

"Well, a lot of Latin terms are used in medicine and in the law," Artie pointed out.

Ham shook his head. "No, I don't see me being a doctor or a lawyer."

"I don't see you being much use to me either," said Artie, "if you don't look up *ferentes* like I asked you to do."

Book 2 of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the epic Roman poem containing the tale of the wooden horse of Troy, had been set as part of their homework for the summer break. Both were pupils at Stonyhurst College in Lancashire and even though the boys were back home in Edinburgh, the school demanded that they keep up their studies.

Reluctantly Ham consulted the dictionary. "It means… *bringing* or *bearing*."

"Right." Artie scribbled in his notepad. "*Greeks bearing gifts*." He looked up at his friend. "I thought your mother had your future planned out, Ham."

Ham rolled his eyes. "She wants me to follow a career in music, just because *she's* a piano teacher."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Artie.

"You know how little money she makes. Sometimes she even has to take in laundry to make ends meet. Besides, I can't imagine anybody paying to listen to me play the piano. She's been forcing me to bang out some sonatas and keeps telling me how well I'm doing, but I can hear for myself that it's a beastly racket."

"Maybe you just need more practice," Artie suggested.

"What would be the point? You see all those ragged chaps on the street playing fiddles and organs for pennies – they probably started out hoping for a magnificent musical career, and look what they've sunk to."

"I shouldn't worry about it, Ham. I expect something will turn up in due time."

"I don't agree, Artie." Ham wagged his finger exactly like Father Cassidy, one of their Jesuit teachers, did when making a serious point about religion. "Real life isn't like those stories you're always reading where some chap is snatched up by a giant condor, dropped into

a forest where he becomes the chief of a band of brigands, marries a princess and ends up as the ruler of Bangalore. You can't just count on luck coming your way."

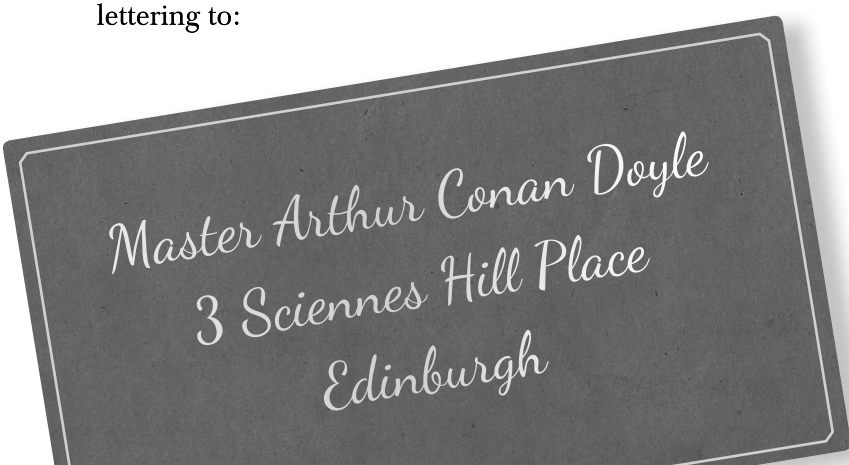
Artie looked up sharply from his Latin text. "Captain Mayne Reid and Mr Fenimore Cooper's stories aren't nearly as silly as that," he protested, naming two of his favourite authors.

At that moment there came a loud knock at the front door.

"I'd better get that." Artie rose to his feet with a grunt. His parents and two younger sisters had gone out for the day, so there was no one else in the house.

Crossing the hallway, he opened the front door but there was nobody waiting on the landing. Instead he spotted an envelope lying at his feet. For a moment he was afraid it might be another bill, but when he picked it up he saw at once that it couldn't be.

The envelope was deep crimson with a thin gold border running around the edge. It was addressed in gold lettering to:



When Artie returned to his room Ham had pushed the dictionary away and was seated on the edge of the bed swinging his legs. “I say, that’s jolly important-looking,” he said, hopping down to join his friend.

Artie took out his penknife and carefully ran the blade along the top of the envelope, opening a neat slit. Poking a finger inside, he slipped the contents out.

“Well, how extraordinary!” said Ham.

Setting aside the empty envelope, Artie examined the two oversized playing cards he now held in his hand. One was the ace of diamonds, the other the eight of hearts, and on the back, rather than the abstract design he might have expected, were a pair of identical invitations:

"Why, that's tonight," said Artie.

Ham craned in for a closer look. "What do you suppose it means: your discretion is requested?"

"I would guess we're not to tell anybody."

"That's a bit daft," said Ham. "Surely when you're putting on a show you want a big crowd to show up. How else will you make a profit?"

"This seems to be a very unusual show," said Artie, "and a private one. I can't think why I've been invited."

"Do you suppose it's a mistake?"

"Perhaps," said Artie. He was staring at the cards when a thought occurred to him. "The ace of diamonds, Ham, do you see?"

"See what?"

"**AC**e of **D**iamonds," Artie repeated, emphasising three of the letters. "ACD – my initials."

"Why yes!" Ham plucked the other card from his friend's hand. "And this one, the **E**ight of **H**earts. EH – that's me, Edward Hamilton."

"It seems too clever to be a coincidence." Artie rubbed his chin. "These invitations are definitely meant for the two of us. But why would anybody want us there, if this is so exclusive?"

Suddenly Artie felt the same excitement that had stirred him when he pondered baffling clues in the case of the Gravediggers' Club. The shabby walls of his tiny room,

the piles of school books and everything else seemed to fade into the background as this new mystery filled his mind, like a blaze of sunlight dispelling a dull fog.

"The only way to find out is to go," said Ham. "Oh, Artie, I haven't been to a show in ages. They're so expensive and this is *free*."

"We have to go, of course," Artie agreed, "but my parents won't care for the notion of me being invited to a mysterious magic show by an anonymous stranger."

"We need a cover story." Ham pursed his lips in thought. "I know. Tell them an uncle of mine got these invitations, you know, as a late birthday present for me. That way it all sounds completely above board."

"And what will you tell your mother?"

"I'll tell her they came from an uncle of yours, of course. It's perfect."

Artie flipped his card over to read the invitation again and his jaw dropped. "Ham, look at this!"

Ham gaped and turned over his own card. "Artie, that's amazing!"

To their astonishment, the words on the back of each card had vanished. In their place was a large black question mark.