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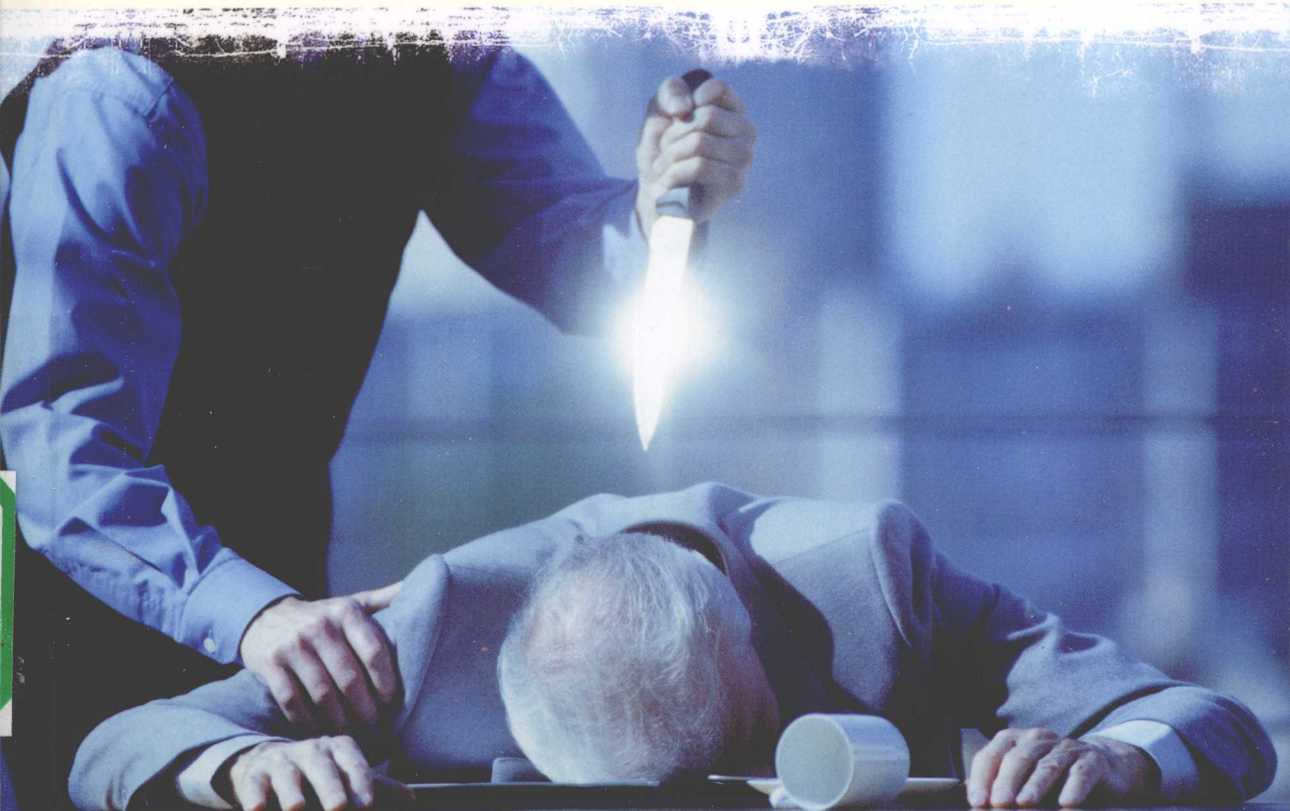
万无一失的谋杀

The Most Perfect Murder

逻辑学家凭一滴水能推测出大西洋和尼亚加拉瀑布的存在。

同样，生活也是一根环环相扣的链条，
只要看到其中的一环，整根链条的情况也就清楚了。

艾柯◎编译



文化艺术出版社
Culture and Art Publishing House

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封面设计 弘文馆·蒿薇薇

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地 址 北京市朝阳区惠新北里甲 1 号 100029

网 址 www.whyschs.com

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电 话 (010)64813345 64813346(总编室)
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名画失窃案

Problem of the Stolen Rubens

雅克·福特雷尔 / Jacques Futrelle

雅克·福特雷尔 (Jacques Heath Futrelle, 1875—1912), 美国推理小说家, 在他的推理短篇小说中, 有最著名的侦探家“思想机器”。脍炙人口的侦探小说为他在侦探小说界赢得了较高的声誉。

马修·科尔在车轴润滑油生意上足足赚了五千万, 随后他便开始四处收购名画。原因很简单, 他有钱, 欧洲有名画。可是他收购名画只是为了填满府邸中面积大约五千平方米的艺术厅, 所以他买了总面积大约五千平方米的画。画的品质参差不齐, 有好有坏, 最有名的当属他在罗马以五万美元买下的鲁本斯的名作。

收购完成之后, 科尔打算装修一下艺术厅。他让人把画全部摘下来, 正面对着墙壁储存在同样宽敞的宴会厅中。同时, 科尔和家人暂住在一家小旅馆内。

就是在这家旅馆里, 科尔和吉尔斯·德·勒赛普斯相遇了。德·勒赛普斯是那种典型的说话细声细气的法国人, 神经兮兮但是又聪明伶俐。他告诉科尔自己不但是个画家, 而且是个艺术鉴赏家, 声音中带着神秘。科尔想在这位“专家”面前炫耀一下自己的藏品, 于是带着他在宴会厅内费力地翻看着自己的收藏。德·勒赛普斯的眼中时而闪现出惊叹的样子, 有时却只是礼貌地笑一笑, 没有任何感情色彩。

随后, 科尔把鲁本斯的名作《圣母子》拿到法国人的面前, 虽然经历了岁月的洗礼, 但是该画依然色彩鲜艳, 栩栩如生。可令科尔有点失望的是, 德·勒赛普斯好像并没有对它另眼相看。

“看到了吗? 鲁本斯的名作!” 他大喊。

“看到了。” 德·勒赛普斯回答说。

“我花了五万美元买下的。”

“可能不止这些。” 德·勒赛普斯耸了耸肩, 目光移开了。

科尔有点懊恼地看着他。怎么回事? 难道他不知道这是鲁本斯的名作? 不

知道鲁本斯是个大画家？还是没听见自己说五万美元的价格？以前自己每次提到五万美元的时候，听众们总是目瞪口呆。

“喜欢吗？”科尔问。

“当然，”德·勒赛普斯回答道，“但是在罗马，也就在你买下它的一周前，我已经看过了。”

他们继续翻看着其他的画，突然，一幅惠斯勒的画映入眼帘，这是著名的泰晤士水彩中的一幅。德·勒赛普斯两眼放光地盯着它，还不时地瞟着鲁本斯的画，似乎在比较现代作品中的细腻与古老画派的豪放。

科尔却误解了德·勒赛普斯的沉默，说：“我也不怎么喜欢这个。”语气中略带歉意，“只是一副风景画而已，我虽然花了五千元买了下来，但还是不怎么喜欢。你觉得呢？”

“我觉得太棒了，”法国人兴奋地说，“我觉得这是现代作品中的精华，是最完美的一幅。请问我可不可以，”他转向科尔，“临摹一幅呢？我自认绘画水平还不错，我肯定可以画得以假乱真。”

科尔被夸得有点飘飘然了，也慢慢觉得这幅画确实很不错。“当然可以，”他答道：“我可以送到你的旅馆里，然后你能……”

“不不不，”德·勒赛普斯马上打断他，“旅馆里随时都可能发生火灾，万一出了问题我可付不起责任。如果可以的话，我能不能到这里来？这里宽敞明亮、通风好，而且还很安静……”

“我虽然觉得旅馆更方便，”科尔很大度地说，“但是你愿意的话，你到这里来吧。”

德·勒赛普斯走到科尔的身边，拉着科尔的胳膊诚恳地说：“我的朋友，如果这些画是我的，我不会让任何人在这里多做停留。我敢说这些画肯定花了我……”

“六十八万七千美元。”科尔骄傲地说道。

“那你不在家的时候有人看着吗？”

“有二十个佣人负责装修时家里的安全，”科尔答道，“其中有三个人专门负责看管这些画。我们进来的门是唯一可以进入这个房间的路径，其他的门都已经用铁棍封住了。只有我的允许或者拿着我的书面许可才能够进来。所以说，没人能偷走任何东西。”

“不错，不错，”德·勒赛普斯微笑着，充满敬佩地说，“我觉得我可没有你这

么强的预见性。”他回过神来漫不经心地看了一下，试探地说，“可是一个聪明的窃贼，完全可以把画从画框里割下来，然后卷起藏在衣服里面带出去。”

科尔笑着摇了摇头。

几天之后，德·勒赛普斯买齐了临摹惠斯勒画的所有物品。而科尔则亲自把他送到了宴会厅门口，德·勒赛普斯自然千恩万谢。

“简宁斯，”科尔对一个仆人说道，“这是德·勒赛普斯先生。他要到宴会厅内画几幅画，并可以自由出入。记住不要让任何人打扰他。”

德·勒赛普斯看到鲁本斯的名作被随意地丢在其他画的边上，画中的圣母正好面对着他们。“科尔先生，”他抗议道，“这幅如此名贵的画这样放着不大好吧。万一有老鼠呢？请让您的仆人拿一块帆布来，我会把它包起来，然后放到这边的桌子上。”

科尔表示感谢，让仆人照办，随后他们把画包起来放在了安全的地方。德·勒赛普斯开始布置作画的物品，纸张、画架、凳子等等，科尔看了一会儿便离开了。

三天之后，当科尔迈进来的时候，他仍然在画板前忙碌着。

“我只是路过，”科尔解释道，“来看看装修的怎么样了。还有一周就完工。我没打搅到你吧？”

“没有没有，”德·勒赛普斯赶忙说，“我也快完成了。看看我画的怎么样？”说着他把画架转向科尔。

这位富豪盯了一眼，转头看了一下原作，眼中流露出敬佩的神色。“哇，太棒了！”他大声说，“简直和真的一样。五千美元你肯定不卖吧？”

他们没有过多评论。随后，科尔出去转悠了大约一个小时，查看装修情况，然后又回到了宴会厅。他看见德·勒赛普斯在收拾画画的工具，于是等他一起回到旅店。德·勒赛普斯胳膊下夹着卷起来的惠斯勒画的临摹本。

一周之后，艺术厅装修完毕，施工人员随之离去。德·勒赛普斯主动要求帮科尔把所有的画挂回去，科尔当然开心地答应了。一天下午，他一边帮忙，一边和科尔开心地聊天，但是当他打开包有鲁本斯名画的帆布时，却突然目瞪口呆——画不见了！空空的画框上残余的帆布碎片留下了刀子割下画时的痕迹。

科尔报案一天之后，被称为“思想机器”的奥古斯都 S.F.X 范杜森开始关注这件事。画被偷后，科尔焦急地跑到警察局马洛里警官的办公室报案，他生气的双拳砸在马洛里的桌子上，气冲冲地说：“我花了五万美元啊。你怎么不去调查？你坐在这里盯着我干吗？”

“冷静点，科尔先生。”警官说，“我马上派人去找，你丢的到底是什么？”

“是一幅鲁本斯的名画！”科尔大叫道，“是一块上面画着东西的画布。我花了五万美元，一定要给我找回来。”

警察们马上开始着手调查。同时，记者哈金森·海奇也开始关注这件案子。他了解了画被偷之前的情况，然后敲响了德·勒赛普斯的门。门开后，他看到了这位艺术家近乎暴怒的眼神。德·勒赛普斯感觉到了记者对他的怀疑，大声说道，“老天，太不可思议了！叫我怎么说？除了我之外，那几天之内没人进过宴会厅；除我之外，也没人去保护过那幅画。现在画被偷了，损失这么大，我真是跳进黄河都洗不清了。”

海奇不知道此时该说什么，索性让他继续说下去。最终，海奇打断他，说道：“德·勒赛普斯先生，据我所知，你在宴会厅的这段时间内，除了科尔先生去过之外，好像没有其他人去过了吧？”

“没有其他人。”

“科尔先生说你在临摹一幅水彩，是吗？”

“是的，惠斯勒的，泰晤士风景画之一。”他回答说，“看，那边挂在壁炉上面的就是。”

海奇看了一眼，那确实是一副临摹得非常精美的画，他对德·勒赛普斯的绘画技巧产生了敬佩。

德·勒赛普斯注意到了海奇脸上的赞美，他谦虚地说：“还不错吧？我的老师是卡罗勒斯·杜伦。”

案件情况就是这样，后面的这则信息对海奇来说，也没什么特别的价值，现在整个事件都被放在了“思想机器”的面前，在海奇讲述的过程中，自始至终这位高人都没有说话，只是静静地听着。

“谁进过房间？”高人最后问。

“警察正在调查呢，”海奇回答，“虽说当时房子里有二十几个佣人，但是我觉得不管科尔的命令多么严格，佣人们总会有松懈的时候。”

“这让案件更加扑朔迷离了，”“思想机器”用他独具特色的、不耐烦的语调说，而这种语调似乎已是恒久不变的，“最好我们能见一下科尔先生，然后亲自调查。”

就像有钱人的媒体见面会一样，科尔表现得相当拘谨庄重。可是他还有点好奇地盯着这位矮小的科学家，而就是这位科学家告诉了科尔他们的来意。

“我觉得你们可能束手无策，”这位富豪说道，“警察已经在查了。”

“马洛里在这里吗？”“思想机器”无动于衷地问。

“在楼上佣人的房间里。”

“我们可不可以查看一下现场？”科学家礼貌地问道。他的这种语气海奇再熟悉不过了。

科尔挥了挥手，示意他们跟自己去宴会厅，画就是从这被偷走的。“思想机器”站在屋子中间环视四周。窗子很高。六扇门分别通往大厅和暖室，大楼僻静的角落里隐藏着任何作案的可能。在仔细观察了好一阵后，“思想机器”走过去捡起原先镶有鲁本斯画作的画框，然后认真查看着，科尔变得越来越不耐烦。最后科学家转过身来问道：

“你和德·勒赛普斯先生很熟吗？”

“刚认识一个多月吧，怎么了？”

“是有介绍信还是你们偶尔遇见的？”

科尔面带愠色地说：“我的私人关系与案子无关。德·勒赛普斯先生是一位极富涵养的绅士，我永远不会怀疑是他偷走了我的画。”

“不一定。”语气中有点讽刺的意味。随后他转向海奇问道：“那幅惠斯勒的画他仿得怎么样？”

“我没见过原作，”海奇回答道，“但是他画的真不错。科尔先生，我们可不可以看看——”

“当然可以，”科尔坦然地说，“跟我来，就在艺术厅内。”

海奇从头到尾仔细查看，说：“他仿得太逼真了。当然，我现在看不到真作品，不敢确定，但是他画的确实很不错。”

他们面前大门的帘子突然被掀开，马洛里警官闪了进来。他的手里似乎拿着什么，但是当他看到海奇和教授时，又把它藏在了身后。喜色溢于言表。

“啊哈，教授，我们又见面了。”他说道。

“他们想把德·勒赛普斯先生拉下水，”科尔向马洛里抱怨，“我知道事情绝不是这样，他是一个好人，是我允许他自由出入来画画的。他们却不相信。”

“思想机器”目不转睛地盯着科尔，眼光中充满了愤怒，随后他向马洛里伸出手。“你在哪里找到的？”他问。

“抱歉教授，这次你来迟一步。”马洛里话中带刺，他把藏在背后的手拿出来：“你的画在这里，科尔先生。”

科尔如释重负却又惊奇不已。他双手把画摊开，“很好，”他对警官说，“你终于把它找回来了，它可花了我五万美元。”科尔永远忘不了这个话题。

“思想机器”俯身向前端详了一下画的右上角，接着问道：“你在哪里找到的？”

“它被紧紧地卷起来，藏在了一个佣人房间的箱子底下，”马洛里解释道，“佣人叫简宁斯，现在应该被我们控制起来了。”

“简宁斯？”科尔惊呼，“怎么可能？他已经跟我好几年了！”

“他认罪了吗？”教授平静地问。

“当然没有，”马洛里说，“他说可能是别人藏起来陷害他。”

“思想机器”对海奇点头示意，随后对马洛里说，“那就这样吧，祝贺你，马洛里先生，这么快就破获了这起案件。”

十分钟后，他们走出来开车返回教授的住所。这种意外的局面使得海奇有点不甘心，于是一路沉默不语。

“马洛里并不总是那么笨吧。”海奇迷惑不解地问。

“是吗？”“思想机器”生硬地说。

“他找回了那幅画。”海奇坚持道。

“当然，只是有人故意放在让他找到的地方。”

“故意放在那里？”海奇惊讶道，“是简宁斯偷的吗？”

“他偷的话，证明他是个白痴。”

“如果不是他，还能是谁？”

“德·勒赛普斯！”

“德·勒赛普斯？”海奇不解，“偷一张五万美元的画，然后放在仆人箱子里故意让人找到，这是什么逻辑？”

“思想机器”转过神来盯着他。“海奇先生，”他直白地说，“有时候我觉得你真的很笨。但是我一直相信你是个聪明机智的人，了解马洛里的迂腐。”

海奇不禁莞尔，这样的责备他表示是第一次听到。可是直到他们到了教授家中之后，才重新开始讨论此案。

“海奇先生，我现在考虑的唯一的问题就是，”教授说，“我该不该去告诉科尔画的真相。他现在已经满足了，而且可能永远不会知道真相，所以——”

海奇恍然大悟。“老天，”他大喊道，“你是说马洛里找到画是——”

“假的！”教授补充道。“我个人并不太懂艺术，但是我是从逻辑而不是从专业角度去验证的。当原作被从画框上割下来时，在右上角有一点扭曲，仔细看一

下画布的画,你就会发现,而马洛里找到的画的右上角却没有这道痕迹。所以结论很明显。”

“德·勒赛普斯偷走了原作?”

“毫无疑问!他有太多的方法可以带出去。可能卷起来藏在衣服下面,也可能有一个同党。但是我不认为他用这些小儿科的方法。综观整个案件,我认为他相当有头脑。”

“比如说,他请求临摹惠斯勒的画,而你会发现它和鲁本斯的画大小相同。得到许可之后,他是在严密保护下完成的,只有科尔有可能进去。按照他的说法,三天之内他是完全一个人在工作。他知道科尔一点都不懂艺术,利用这个弱点,轻而易举地用色彩仿画出一张鲁本斯的画来迷惑科尔。原画在被包起来后他肯定就把原画割了下来,然后放在身边,一旦有人进来,也很容易放到隐秘的地方。你知道,那幅画值五万美元,当然值得冒这个险。”

“据我们所知,科尔根本不懂艺术,所以作为艺术家的德·勒赛普斯想要糊弄他太容易了。他肯定是用仿作作为偷走原作后的替代品。你看到了,马洛里分不出真假,所以他大胆断定科尔也看不出来。他担心的就是艺术鉴赏家们看到那幅仿作,所以他留下来,主动帮助科尔把画挂回去,然后大胆地自己揭露盗窃案。他有很多办法把仿作藏在简宁斯的箱子里,但是我还想不到具体是那种。”说完,他盯着天花板,手指不停地敲打着扶手,身体靠在椅背上半天无语。

“剩下的就是把真画拿回来。照你所说,现在肯定在德·勒赛普斯的家里,所以肯定很安全。而且他自己很明白,如果一旦逃跑的话,就会引起怀疑。”

“可是他怎么把画从科尔家带出来呢?”海奇问。

“与科尔一起离开的那天,他肯定已经把画藏在了袖子里面。”教授答道。

海奇惊讶地盯着他。几分钟后,教授站起来走进隔壁的房间,电话铃响了。教授回来后,拿起帽子,然后和海奇一起走了出去。

他们把名片递出去的时候,德·勒赛普斯正好在家,并且接待了他们。在他们谈论该案子的十几分钟内,“思想机器”不断地来回打量着房间内的一切。外面响起了敲门声。

“马洛里警官来了,海奇先生,”“思想机器”说,“请帮他开门。”

德·勒赛普斯的眼中一阵恐慌,但是随即隐去。马洛里进来的时候一脸的疑惑。

“马洛里警官,”“思想机器”平静地说,“我们该好好地欣赏一下壁炉上面这幅惠斯勒的画。多美啊?你记得看过的原作吗?”

马洛里咕哝了一声。德·勒赛普斯的脸上没有喜悦，而是瞬间脸色苍白、手脚冰冷，但是他很快恢复平静，面带微笑。

“它的美妙不仅仅在于忠实于原作，”科学家说道，“也在于它被创作时特殊的情境。比如，我不知道马洛里警官是否了解，如果把胶水、油灰和其他一些常见的材料和成黏稠物质的话，那就很容易用它无损害地掩盖油画，但是又可以作为画布。”

“这张水彩，也就是惠斯勒的画，”“思想机器”继续道，“就是画在我刚才提到的物质上。它的下面就是鲁本斯的画，它可以在不损害下面油画的前提下被除去。所以我们看到的不是惠斯勒的水彩，而是价值五万美元的鲁本斯的名作。对不对，德·勒赛普斯先生？”

德·勒赛普斯没有回答，也没必要回答。一个小时后，他就被关进了警察局的牢房内。而海奇则在电话中问了“思想机器”一个不解的问题：

“你怎么知道水彩是画在鲁本斯油画上的？”

“这是唯一可以让人找不到鲁本斯原画的办法，同时还能避免它受到损害，”“思想机器”答道，“我告诉过你，德·勒赛普斯是个聪明人，用点小逻辑就能想到。海奇先生，二加二不是有时才等于四，而是永远等于四。”

Matthew Kale made fifty million dollars out of axle grease, after which he began to patronize the high arts. It was simple enough: he had the money, and Europe had the old masters. His method of buying was simplicity itself. There were five thousand square yards, more or less, in the huge gallery of his marble mansion which were to be covered, so he bought five thousand square yards, more or less, of art. Some of it was good, some of it fair, and much of it bad. The chief picture of the collection was a Rubens, which he had picked up in Rome for fifty thousand dollars.

Soon after acquiring his collection, Kale decided to make certain alterations in the vast room where the pictures hung. They were all taken down and stored in the ball room, equally vast, with their faces toward the wall. Meanwhile Kale and his family took refuge in a nearby hotel.

It was at this hotel that Kale met Jules de Lesseps. De Lesseps was distinctly

French, the sort of Frenchman whose conversation resembles calisthenics. He was nervous, quick, and agile, and he told Kale in confidence that he was not only a painter himself, but was a connoisseur in the high arts. Pompous in the pride of possession, Kale went to a good deal of trouble to exhibit his private collection for de Lesseps' delectation. It happened in the ball room, and the true artist's delight shone in the Frenchman's eyes as he handled the pieces which were good. Some of the others made him smile, but it was an inoffensive sort of smile.

With his own hands Kale lifted the precious Rubens and held it before the Frenchman's eyes. It was a "Madonna and Child," one of those wonderful creations which have endured through the years with all the sparkle and color beauty of their pristine days. Kale seemed disappointed because de Lesseps was not particularly enthusiastic about this picture.

"Why, it's a Rubens!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I see," replied de Lesseps.

"It cost me fifty thousand dollars."

"It is perhaps worth more than that," and the Frenchman shrugged his shoulders as he turned away.

Kale looked at him in chagrin. Could it be that de Lesseps did not understand that it was a Rubens, and that Rubens was a painter? Or was it that he had failed to hear him say that it cost him fifty thousand dollars. Kale was accustomed to seeing people bob their heads and open their eyes when he said fifty thousand dollars; therefore,

"Don't you like it?" he asked.

"Very much indeed," replied de Lesseps; "but I have seen it before. I saw it in Rome just a week or so before you purchased it."

They rummaged on through the pictures, and at last a Whistler was turned up for their inspection. It was one of the famous Thames series, a water color. De Lesseps' face radiated excitement, and several times he glanced from the water color to the Rubens as if mentally comparing the exquisitely penciled and colored modern work with the bold, masterly technic of the old.

Kale misunderstood the silence. "I don't think much of this one myself," he

explained apologetically. "It's a Whistler, and all that, and it cost me five thousand dollars, and I sort of had to have it, but still it isn't just the kind of thing that I like. What do you think of it? "

"I think it is perfectly wonderful! " replied the Frenchman enthusiastically. "It is the essence, the superlative, of modern work. I wonder if it would be possible," and he turned to face Kale, "for me to make a copy of that? I have some slight skill in painting myself, and dare say I could make a fairly creditable copy of it."

Kale was flattered. He was more and more impressed each moment with the picture. "Why, certainly," he replied. "I will have it sent up to the hotel, and you can—"

"No, no, no! " interrupted de Lesseps quickly. "I wouldn't care to accept the responsibility of having the picture in my charge. There is always a danger of fire. But if you would give me permission to come here—this room is large and airy and light, and besides it is quiet—"

"Just as you like," said Kale magnanimously. "I merely thought the other way would be most convenient for you."

De Lesseps drew near, and laid one hand on the millionaire's arm. "My dear friend," he said earnestly, "if these pictures were my pictures, I shouldn't try to accommodate anybody where they were concerned. I dare say the collection as it stands cost you—"

"Six hundred and eighty-seven thousand dollars," volunteered Kale proudly.

"And surely they must be well protected here in your house during your absence? "

"There are about twenty servants in the house while the workmen are making the alterations," said Kale, "and three of them don't do anything but watch this room. No one can go in or out except by the door we entered—the others are locked and barred—and then only with my permission, or a written order from me. No, sir, nobody can get away with anything in this room."

"Excellent, excellent! " said de Lesseps admiringly. He smiled a little bit. "I am afraid I did not give you credit for being the far-sighted business man that you

are.” He turned and glanced over the collection of pictures abstractedly. “A clever thief, though,” he ventured, “might cut a valuable painting, for instance the Rubens, out of the frame, roll it up, conceal it under his coat, and escape.”

Kale laughed pleasantly and shook his head.

It was a couple of days later at the hotel that de Lesseps brought up the subject of copying the Whistler. He was profuse in his thanks when Kale volunteered to accompany him to the mansion and witness the preliminary stages of the work. They paused at the ball room door.

“Jennings,” said Kale to the liveried servant there, “this is Mr. de Lesseps. He is to come and go as he likes. He is going to do some work in the ball room here. See that he isn’t disturbed.”

De Lesseps noticed the Rubens leaning carelessly against some other pictures, with the holy face of the Madonna toward them. “Really, Mr. Kale,” he protested, “that picture is too valuable to be left about like that. If you will let your servants bring me some canvas, I shall wrap it and place it up on the table here off the floor. Suppose there were mice here! ”

Kale thanked him. The necessary orders were given, and finally the picture was carefully wrapped and placed beyond harm’s reach, whereupon de Lesseps adjusted himself, paper, easel, stool, and all, and began his work of copying. There Kale left him.

Three days later Kale just happened to drop in, and found the artist still at his labor.

“I just dropped by,” he explained, “to see how the work in the gallery was getting along. It will be finished in another week. I hope I am not disturbing you? ”

“Not at all,” said de Lesseps; “I have nearly finished. See how I am getting along? ” He turned the easel toward Kale.

The millionaire gazed from that toward the original which stood on a chair near by, and frank admiration for the artist’s efforts was in his eyes. “Why, it’s fine! ” he exclaimed. “It’s just as good as the other one, and I bet you don’t want any five thousand dollars for it—eh? ”

That was all that was said about it at the time. Kale wandered about the house

for an hour or so, then dropped into the ball room where the artist was just getting his paraphernalia together, and they walked back to the hotel. The artist carried under one arm his copy of the Whistler, loosely rolled up.

One week passed, and the workmen who had been engaged in refinishing and decorating the gallery had gone. De Lesseps volunteered to assist in the work of rehangng the pictures, and Kale gladly turned the matter over to him. It was in the afternoon of the day this work began that de Lesseps, chatting pleasantly with Kale, ripped loose the canvas which enshrouded the precious Rubens. Then he paused with an exclamation of dismay. The picture was gone; the frame which had held it was empty. A thin strip of canvas around the inside edge showed that a sharp penknife had been used to cut out the painting.

All of these facts came to the attention of Professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen—The Thinking Machine. This was a day or so after Kale had rushed into Detective Mallory's office at police headquarters, with the statement that his Rubens had been stolen. He banged his fist down on the detective's desk and roared at him. "It cost me fifty thousand dollars!" he declared violently. "Why don't you do something? What are you sitting there staring at me for?"

"Don't excite yourself, Mr. Kale," the detective advised. "I will put my men at work right now to recover the—the—— What is a Rubens, anyway?"

"It's a picture!" bellowed Mr. Kale. "A piece of canvas with some paint on it, and it cost me fifty thousand dollars—don't you forget that!"

So the police machinery was set in motion to recover the painting. And in time the matter fell under the watchful eye of Hutchinson Hatch, reporter. He learned the facts preceding the disappearance of the picture, and then called on de Lesseps. He found the artist in a state of excitement bordering on hysteria; an intimation from the reporter of the object of his visit caused de Lesseps to burst into words.

"Mon Dieu! it is outrageous!" he exclaimed. "What can I do? I was the only one in the room for several days. I was the one who took such pains to protect the picture. And now it is gone! The loss is irreparable. What can I do?"

Hatch didn't have any very definite idea as to just what he could do, so he let