

"What on earth do you mean? What is Colonel Norridrum's cook doing in my kitchen -- and where is my cook?"

"Perhaps I can explain better than Pellin can," said Ronald hurriedly; "the fact is, I was dining at the Norridrums' yesterday, and they were wishing they had a swell cook like yours, just for today and tomorrow, while they've got some gourmet staying with them: their own cook is no earthly good -- well, you've seen what she turns out when she's at all flurried. So I thought it would be rather sporting to play them at baccarat for the loan of our cook against a money stake, and I lost, that's all. I have had rotten luck at baccarat all this year."

The remainder of his explanation, of how he had assured the cooks that the temporary transfer had his mother's sanction, and had smuggled the one out and the other in during the maternal absence, was drowned in the outcry of scandalised upbraiding.

"If I had sold the woman into slavery there couldn't have been a bigger fuss about it," he confided afterwards to Bertie Norridrum, "and Eleanor Saxelby raged and ramped the louder of the two. I tell you what, I'll bet you two of the

"Colonel Norridrum's cook, ma'am," said Pellin. "The new cook!" screamed Mrs. Attray. commenced Pellin by way of explanation. see to things properly, coming in so sudden --" "Well, ma'am, the new cook hadn't hardly time to kitchen, Pellin?" she asked of the attendant maid. awfully sorry. Is anything the matter in the principally of red pepper and wet toast. I'm years," said her hostess; "that last dish tasted "My dear, it's the worst meal I've sat down to for had flickered out with the savoury. house," said Eleanor at last, when her final hope "Not quite the best luncheon I've enjoyed in your depression when he tasted the rognons Saltikoff. even the insouciant Ronald showed traces of outspoken denunciation would have been, and tears in her voice that was far more eloquent than said little, but when she spoke there was a hint of not redeemed by anything that followed. Eleanor over any meal that it had inaugurated, and it was soup alone would have sufficed to cast a gloom justly-treasured cook had built up for herself. The unworthiness of the reputation which she made its tardy appearance, was distinctly As a matter of fact, the luncheon fare, when it

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"My dear," said Mrs. Attray, "I don't want to offend them. After all, they are my landlords and I have to look to them for anything I want done about the place; they were very accommodating

"Why do you let him go there?" asked Eleanor Saxelby.

mother's natural anxieties."

for a crossing as expect them to bother about a might as well ask the Atlantic Ocean to keep quiet him play cards when he's over there, but you to stop it; I've asked the Norridrums not to let that he thinks about. Of course I've done my best and baccarat and poker-patience are positively all a waste of time, I think. But as to Ronnie, bridge and talk any day than play bridge; cards are such if she couldn't get me. I would much rather sit certain to ask that detestable Jenkinham woman that Edith always wants a fourth and would be hundred, and even that I shouldn't do if it wasn't afternoons in the winter, for three-pence a play -- a game of bridge on Wednesday never touched cards, and you know how little I don't know where he inherits it from; his father and already a confirmed gambler. I am sure I plaintively. "Only eighteen years old last February "Ronnie is a great trial to me," said Mrs. Attray

**The Stake**

Saki (H H Munro)



"He'll get round that in some way," said Eleanor with quiet conviction; "he'll sell things."

"My dear, he's done all that is to be done in that direction already. He's got rid of his wrist-watch and his hunting flask and both his cigarette cases, and I shouldn't be surprised if he's wearing imitation-gold sleeve links instead of those his Aunt Rhoda gave him on his seventeenth birthday. He can't sell his clothes, of course, except his winter overcoat, and I've locked that up in the camphor cupboard on the pretext of preserving it from moth. I really don't see what else he can raise money on. I consider that I've been both firm and farseeing."

"Has he been at the Norridrums lately?" asked Eleanor.

"He was there yesterday afternoon and stayed to dinner," said Mrs. Attray. "I don't quite know when he came home, but I fancy it was late."

"Then depend on it he was gambling," said Eleanor, with the assured air of one who has few ideas and makes the most of them. "Late hours in the country always mean gambling."

"He can't gamble if he has no money and no chance of getting any," argued Mrs. Attray; "even

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Amherst pheasants to five shillings that she refuses to have me as a partner at the croquet tournament. We're drawn together, you know." This time he won his bet.

if one plays for small stakes one must have a decent prospect of paying one's losses." "He may have sold some of the Amherst pheasant chicks," suggested Eleanor; "they would fetch about ten or twelve shillings each, I daresay." "Ronnie wouldn't do such a thing," said Mrs. Attray; "and anyhow I went and counted them this morning and they're all there. No," she continued, with the quiet satisfaction that comes from a sense of painstaking and merited achievement, "I fancy that Ronnie had to content himself with the role of onlooker last night, as far as the card-table was concerned." "Is that clock right?" asked Eleanor, whose eyes had been straying restlessly towards the mantel-piece for some little time; "lunch is usually so punctual in your establishment." "Three minutes past the half-hour," exclaimed Mrs. Attray; "cook must be preparing something unusually sumptuous in your honour. I am not in the secret; I've been out all the morning, you know." Eleanor smiled forgivingly. A special effort by Mrs. Attray's cook was worth waiting a few minutes for.