

POD, BENDER & CO.

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BY
GEORGE ALLAN ENGLAND

Author of "The Alibi," etc.



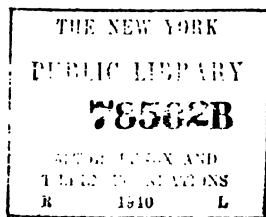
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TO
DR. IRVING S. HAYNES
I DEDICATE THIS BOOK
WHICH, SAVE FOR HIS SKILL AND CARE,
WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN
WRITTEN

✓
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I

WHEN POD TOOK THE COUNT

*Wherein Two Good Fists and a Bag of Aniline Pull
Down a Wad*

ROUND ONE

SHAKE HANDS

MR. POD SLATTERY, otherwise addressed as Slats, reclined ungracefully on a sweltering bench in Madison Square, puffed at the last half of his last cigar and stared moodily at the fountain. Those who were favored by intimate acquaintance with his engaging personality called him Pod because he measured sixty-three around the waist, and Slats because he liked that name, with its implication of the svelte. His lack of grace was natural, when you consider the unusual proportions of a waist which, despite a certain period recently spent in the seclusion of the Trenton "Pen," had of late years been steadily gaining on him; while his moodiness arose from the plain fact that he was busted.

Rubbing his chin, which bristled like the fretful porcupine, he surveyed his bulging shoes and frazzled

trousers, then gazed resentfully at the well-dressed summer throng, and felt the anarchist stirring within him. Familiar platitudes anent the inequalities of this world's benefits welled up in his soul; ungentle words escaped his lips along with the smoke of the vanishing cigar.

"Four forty-eight!" murmured a voice at his side.

No live wire could have galvanized Pod more instantaneously. The cigar dropped from his flaccid hand, his head turned with a jerk, and the short hair on his neck bristled like a bulldog's.

"Four forty-eight," repeated to himself the tall, well-dressed individual at his right, casually folding back his newspaper. "Mark-down sale at Trenton—regular slaughter. Six dollar shoes at four forty-eight—"

"Hush-sh-sh-shhh! Can that!" muttered Pod, glancing furtively about. "I reckon I know my number without havin' Pittsburg Bender sprout out o' the earth side o' me to remind me of it! Where the L did *you* blow in from, an' how's the dance proceedin' with you? You jumped me out o' steen years' growth!"

"Just what you need, Slatsey, old kick!" retorted the tall fellow, carefully adjusting a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. "You're not growing emaciated to any extent. I can see *that* in spite of my failing eyesight. Astonishing how suddenly myopia has tackled me; absolutely have to wear these now—couldn't get along without 'em.

"Curious part of it is that these windows should help me so, being just plain glass; but this world is full of marvelous things, chock-a-block full! Where've I been? Oh, touring the West, gathering in a few sheaves; I'll give you full details later, after you wise me how long

you've been out, *et cet.* I had the pleasure of leaving first, you remember—via that uncovered manhole in the yard. Too bad you couldn't have made your get, at the same time."

"Shhhh!" warned Slats. "We can't have no fly-cop buttin' in, here." Suspiciously he glanced about him, with anxiety writ large on his dewlapped countenance, now slightly paled from its usual turkey-red hue by durance vile. "Not so loud. You seem to forget my diameter's about eleven sizes bigger'n yours, wherefore I tarried. But no matter. I'm out, now—an' extensively disengaged. What's diddin'? Anythin' to subpoena a few ducats? Anythin' with legal tender at the end of it?"

"Maybe. Bumping the bumps, eh?"

"Am I?" Slats held up a ragged sleeve for the inspection of the cleverest con-man in America, the man he had aforetime pulled off one or two deals with, but who had for some time been far beyond his ken. "You got it right the very first time. Say, Bender, I've got nothin' to spend but time. I hold the long-distance world's record for shortness of kale. No chuck except at the wood-yard (ugh!) or them ladified soup-kitchens where they hand you out chow with one mitt an' gospel with the other. Hades! I sometimes wish I was back in 448 again, tappin' shoes, with you nex' door in 449, ditto. No worry there 'bout meal-tickets an' a bunk, anyway—everythin' free an' strictly sixteenth-class. I'm snug up against the cushion an' no way to bounce. Not a simoleon in sight; not an idea in my bean that the public ain't wise to; not even a smoke—"

"Here, try one of these," said Pittsburg Bender—

"Dr. Bender," as the most select circles knew him, in Crookdom. He handed over a fine, moist, black panetela, which Pod eagerly fell upon and began consuming with gusto.

"Gee!" he murmured, gazing with admiration at Ben's perfectly correct attire and blowing smoke upon the August air. "*You* seem to be goin' among 'em some, these days. Must be lots of fall guys where you been hangin' out—gilt-edge games galore. What kind of a deal you ribbin' up, anyway? Bill-collectin' with a string to it, soft-shoe work or the glad palm? Just put me wise, an' perhaps life may blush up a trifle for Poddie!"

"I don't fall very strong for the guy next to me on the bench," growled Bender cautiously, dropping into the lingo of the Underworld as easily as a duck slides into a barnyard pool. "He frames up kind of like an elbow, to me. Let's blow. Meet me in twenty minutes in the back room of Lanahan's crib, over on Third Avenue. Maybe we can get into double harness and pull a stunt or two beneficial to all hands. Go on, now, beat it!"

Pod rose carelessly, yawned, stretched and shuffled off. Bender once more became near-sightedly absorbed in his paper. Such of the passers-by as noticed the tall, carefully dressed reader, very probably sized him up as a successful, middle-aged professional man. Jail-bird characteristics he had none, except possibly a curious pallor which contrasted sharply with his straight black hair.

"How d'you work it?" was Pod's first question when Bender had rejoined him in the cool seclusion of Lana-

han's back room. "You look like a regular top-notch; look like you was handin' the merry chuckle to hard luck, an' that's no pipe. Unravel! Put me next! Collectin' for charities, or how?"

"Oh, several ways," answered the Doc, summoning a waiter. "What's yours? Suds? I'll take the same—two seidels, Bill. Collections are all right, too. Good easy graft; but it's low financing, not high. Nothing of the forty-two-centimeter class in it, at all. Beside which, you've got to flit onward, pretty often. I've got a gag in mind for you, now, to knock that cold. Something that will make all other hike to cover, and cut circles around everything in our line."

He lighted a twenty-five-cent regalia and shoved another over the sticky table toward Pod, then analytically resumed:

"It's a budget of jollity, all right, and a sure winner if you're long on sand. Glad I ran into you, old man. Just happen to be at liberty, two or three weeks. Really need a little occupation to keep the eng-wee off; and if the job will boost you, that's all to the mustard. This game I've got in my think tank, now, is a bird. It takes two to pull it. I'll be the promoter, and you'll frame up as the understudy. The understudy's got to be a plugger, which is a tough proposition to find. The one I had in Chi. got mixed up with a kid game and landed in limbo first crack out of the box. If he'd stuck to the legitimate he'd have been O. K., but he was naturally low and had to take a flier at lush-touching, which put the kibosh on him. Lifted a couple of karat sparks off a souse and got sloughed in when he tried to spout 'em. He was only a dope, anyway!"

"How so?"

"Oh, had no natural gumption. One time he annexed what he thought was a bar of lead off the rear end of a truck on Dodge Street, and sold it to a fence for a two-spot. *Think* of a man taking chances for two beans! Well, he found out afterward it was a bar of silver, went back, and made a holler for the extra mazu. Mr. Fence handed out an ice-wagon line of conversation; my understudy did the injured innocent, and threatened to bawl him out. He made good, *did* get him copped out, and himself too. Seven years and six months."

"Can you beat it?" murmured Pod, imbibing his beverage. "Some boob! But you should worry about my crabbin' the game by any such bush-league battin'. You an' me has worked together, before, Ben. You know my average at the plate, an'—"

"Dinner-plate!" drawled the Doc.

"No, I'm referrin' to diamonds," Pod flashed back at him. "So if you've got a good jiu-jitsu you can ring me in on, produce same."

Critically Ben surveyed Slat's, then leaned over and felt of his arm.

"Maybe you'll do," he judged. "I really need a running-mate. You used to handle the mitts pretty lively, once upon a time, didn't you?"

"Surest thing you know! Before I began carryin' this excess baggage I could hold up my end with any of the amachures. An' don't forget I once put Spike Hennissy to the mat for ten, in twenty-four rounds. An' knocked Slugger McCue cold in three."

"Think you could still go in the ring?" inquired Doc.

"Can that! Soft pedal on that chatter, Ben! Me,

that ain't had a mitt on my fin in twelve years, an' car-ryin' 268 pounds! Say, you must be—"

"Don't get me wrong, kiddo," the Doc hastily dis-claimed. "I only mean can you make the motions, yet? Can you stand up to it long enough to frame a respec-table imitation?"

"As I am, now, nix. But with a little trainin', may-be. Why?"

"Never mind the why. That's coming later. You're on. Here, take this gold and buy bread, same as in 'The Orphan's Friend.' For heaven's sake, get a shave, too, and a bath, and kip in a real bed again. Then meet me here again at two G. M. If you're still anxious to go up against a brand-new, center-fire, twelve-cylinder game, I'll wise you how the puzzle works out, and coach you liberal. You fall?"

"Some!" ejaculated Slat with emphasis.

"Then so long, and can all chatter!" With which affectionate farewell the Doc summoned and paid Lana-han's Ganymede, then, waving his hand at Pod, left that worthy pondering hopefully over an all but empty tub of dark.

ROUND TWO

WARMING UP

"UGH! Say, Ben, this trainin' down to one-eighty ain't precisely a delirious yen-yen pipe!" groaned poor perspiring Pod.

He let fall the handles of his chest-weight machine and blew like the good old whales and porpi.

"It ain't no pill-vision, an' that's a right-hook to the jaw of Truth!" he went on. "What's the matter with

firin' me from the job of heavyweight star, an' makin' a quick grab at a substitute?"

"*What?*" snapped Bender, looking up from his big leather-bound medical book on the reading-table of his snug flat where Pod had now for a fortnight been his hard-working guest. "What you gassing about?"

"Why don't we lure in some rumdum of an ex-heavyweight, by makin' a noise like five X's, an' let him do the job, 'stead of *me*? It ain't quite on the T-square for poor old Slat to get this third degree!"

"You want to crab the deal from the tap of the gong?" retorted Ben hotly, slamming his book together.

"Crab it, how?"

"Say, Pod, you're nuts! Blow it away and get rational! There's you and me and Michaels in it now, as principals, to say nothing of our husky bunch of supes. How many more d'you want? Whole directory?"

Pod, stung by the sarcasm, sank into his groaning easy chair. He was clad only in fighting-trunks and spiked shoes, as though for fistic battle, and his huge body glistened with sweat. Ben eyed him with sovereign irritation.

"Oh, Slatsey!" he exclaimed, "no wonder my hat-rack gets dizzy trying to keep you in bounds! You're more care to me than even Inspector Keene, and Heaven knows he's been climbing pretty near our roost, of late. Shame on you for putting up such a roar! Where's your gratitude? Haven't I boosted you out of the gutter, into a swell lay? And another thing, don't you know we still owe the State fourteen years, between us? It's hang together, for ours, now, or risk getting sloughed in; and a pull at this stage of the game would be fatal.

Stick to it, Podsy, and you'll teeter to the front, before long, with ice on your shirt-studs. Can the lazy streak and go to it!"

Pod answered not, but wrinkled his retreating brow with distaste as he eyed the fat-reducing apparatus.

"Well," he finally rumbled, "ain't I workin' all right?"

"Work? That's nothin'! It's your frigid feet that put me all to the craw-fish! And anyhow, what's your work, side of mine, sprouting sideboards and using up my lamps over these eighteen-story medical words? Do I holler? Nix on the repinings! Duty calls, and I'm at home to receive her, that's all!"

"But—" objected Pod, rubbing his double (erstwhile triple) chin.

"But—nothing! Snap out of it! Two weeks more and you'll begin to look human; don't pig the game now! Only another fortnight, remember, then it's you once more to the trough."

Pod smiled with beatitude.

"You wouldn't think, now, would you," he inquired with a touch of pride, "that the time was when a thirty-six-inch tape slipped round my waist—?"

"In the cradle?" interrupted Ben, but Slats gave no heed.

"—Or that I once had a punch would have dented blow-hole armor? But that's the veridicals, and I could do it again if I had to, which praise the Powers I don't in this prospective tangle. By the way, how's Hendrikson, our come-on? Still on? When did you gaff him last?"

"In the lobby of the Cosmopole, Friday night—by

accident, of course. Never keener; opened his batteries full force on me, first clack out of the box. Says he's coming up here some time next week, to see the dark horse I've discovered. From what I've slipped him, he believes you've got 'em all outclassed, till you'd make Coffey, Moran and Jess look like imitation phoneys. Two things you've got to remember. He thinks your monaker is 'McMasters' and he knows me only as 'Dr. Bennett.' He believes I'm a sure-enough crocus. Be careful not to destroy any of his sweet illusions. He's a classy sport, all right; and as for cush, he's the speedway boy all right! If that's not worth a month's perspiration—"

"Oh, it ain't the trainin' or the aqua-cart that gives me indigo-troubles; it's the actual go with the mitts that shoots the hook of timidity into my vitals—the punishment—the gaff—"

"Forget it! *You* won't get jerried!"

"—Most of all, the hurricane finish. I ain't keen on irrigatin' myself with aniline. It may taste bad—may even be poison—"

"Forget it! Harmless as a 'fixed' cop, and all flavored with peppermint. Just wait and see! Buck up, Pod; get to work again. As for me, I've got this chapter on 'Hemorrhages, Fatal,' to finish, so we both better ring off. Remember, it isn't every day or on every bush we grab off a wad like the one that's now looming over the horizon. Try a couple of hundred more on the weights, and fifty on the bells; then I'll give you a rub-down. No laying down on the proposition, now!"

Ben reopened his book, found his place and plunged once more into the eighteen-story words. Pod wearily

heaved himself up out of his beloved easy chair and with many groans again tackled the chest-weight:

"*One-two!*

"*One-two!*

"*One-two-three-four! . . .*"

ROUND THREE

A "KEENE" ONE

THE inspector wheeled round in his revolving chair as plain-clothesman Dempsey entered the inner office, and looked inquiringly at his subordinate.

"Anything doing?" he asked, rather anxiously.

"Yis, sir, an' no, sir, dependin' largely on—"

"There—there, now, that'll do! I don't care for any of your inspired philosophizings. Get down to hard-pan facts and spill what you know!"

Dempsey shuffled over to the desk, leaned his big knuckles on it and wagged a fiery red head.

"I'm clost on his track!" he hoarsely made assertion.

"Sure that track isn't a siding?" smiled Keene. "Certain it's the main line and leads to the terminus?"

"Word of honor—'tis! I've been follyin' th' slim duck now fer three weeks an' I know where he hangs out, know he's worrkin' wid a big fat guy, an' feel certain him an' his runnin'-mate is numbers 859, escaped, an' 448, discharged, from 'Sleepy Hollow.' Their worrkin' together agin is fer no good, sir, ye may depind upon it."

Keene knit his brows a moment in thought and stroked his clean-shaven lip.

"Good boy, Dempsey! Didn't think it was in you!" he congratulated his subordinate, thumping the desk. "I declare, you're a surprise to me! Go on, now; tell me what their present lay is, and what prospect have you of getting them bang to rights?"

The inspector pushed back his loose papers and, resting an elbow on the polished oak, gave close attention.

"Well—well, sir—" Dempsey hesitated, "I ain't quite certain yet on the points I'm sure on, but they're comin', comin'. This 859 seems to be consortin' more or less wit' a swell guy named Hendrikson, music-dealer on Nineteent' Street. They met only las' night at the Cosmopole—I seen 'em myself in the bar—an' they seemed framin' up some sort of a deal. I'm keepin' tabs, an' when the right time comes, sure, I'll just pile in an' nail 'em bote, see?"

"And let 448 go scot-free? That's you every time, Dempsey, all right enough. But you've done well, no doubt of it—I'll bear you in mind for promotion. Keep things watched, but be careful about making any unwarrantable arrests. Don't take any active steps till I say so. And remember, if you meet me with either of the men, you don't know me—never saw me before! All right; you may go."

He penciled some memoranda on a slip of paper; then, as the door closed after Dempsey, leaned back in his chair and meditated. The wrinkles that formed across his brow bespoke no good to men suspected of once having worn State raiment, of once having been called Numbers 859 and 448.

ROUND FOUR

SPARRING EASY

"BY the way, Hendrikson," inquired "Dr. Bennett," as the two men turned from Central Park West into one of the 100's where lived the dark horse pugilist whom the doctor had discovered, "by the way, who is this other chap you mentioned a few minutes ago—the man who wants to lay some money on my find, in addition to yours?"

"Well, I hardly know him at all, you might say," answered Hendrikson dubiously. "Fact is, we met casually the other night—he happened to sit next me at the 'Belle of Coney Isle,'—and between acts we got to talking. We drifted from one thing to another; went out and had a couple; got quite friendly. . . ."

"Yes!" The doctor's tone was careless, but his ears were open wide. Hendrikson smiled rather apologetically at the tall, spare medical man.

"So, from this to that we got on to the subject of prize-fights. Jacobs—that's his name, Jacobs—seemed pretty much interested, so I told him a little about the proposition and it looked good to him, so good that he—"

"Wanted to come in, too?" the doctor concluded.

"Precisely. No harm done, I hope? Nice fellow—pleasant, a good spender, all right every way. No objection to him, have you?"

"Why—no. That is, if he's got a tight jaw. We don't want this thing to leak, or we lose the benefit of my discovery, that's all."

"He's close. I know the type—nice clean-shaven

chap, good all-round sport. Don't you worry about Jacobs!"

The colloquy broke off as Dr. Bennett took Hendrikson by the elbow and pointed out to him a doorway diagonally across the street.

"There's the place!" announced Bennett. "We'll finish this when we're safe inside!"

A moment later both men had disappeared into a doorway, which, to the doctor, at least, was singularly like home.

"McMasters—Mr. Hendrikson!" the doctor introduced them. "Shake hands and get acquainted."

As the door of the protégé's apartment closed upon them, Hendrikson's soft hand lost itself in a steady grip that made the music dealer wince.

"Glad to meet you. Oh, I say," Hendrikson protested, "you better leave part of my hand, anyhow. I might need it."

The Unknown rumbled into a laugh, in which Dr. Bennett and Hendrikson joined him, the latter ruefully.

"'Seuse me, cully!" McMasters apologized. "Didn't mean t' put so much ginger in the grip—misjudged, that's all. No offense?" He rocked his great shoulders loosely under the dressing-gown.

"None at all," Hendrikson assured him, rubbing bruised fingers. "You do look like a husky scrapper," he added, with an admiring glance at McMasters, who led the way into the living-room—a room all cumbered with gymnastic apparatus. "Businesslike here, isn't it?"

His obvious attempt at ease in this, his first peep at the longed-for inner world of sport, seemed vastly to

amuse the doctor. But the protégé, with serious though rough hospitality, offered chairs.

"Squat, gents," he invited. "There's smokes on the table. As fer me—nix on the puffs till that dubb Michaels's block is beat off into the middle o' next week. But after *that*—!"

He sighed monstrosly.

"So you're quite sure of defeating—er—of knocking him out, then?" queried Hendrikson as he sank into a chair.

"Sure of it? Say! It'll be like takin' a mouse away from a blind kitten, that's all. Only thing I'm leary of is that it'll be too lead-pipe. Now, this left o' mine, so—then the right—point o' the jaw—then—"

The Unknown gave it to Hendrikson straight just how Michaels was to be put on the mat with the count of ten, and Hendrikson listened with ecstatic ears, watching the fists (they resembled badly cured hams) gyrate in air. For the first time in his life this 'angel' had penetrated the arcana of sportdom, and the smoke-laden air was as incense Elysian to his nostrils.

When the preliminary slaughter of Michaels was ended, he said:

"And now, Dr. Bennett, if I may ask—how did you ever find—er—run across this treasure? I hope you'll pardon the familiarity," he added quickly to the Unknown.

The giant nodded pleasantly, and Hendrikson beamed with intimate-satisfaction as the doctor made answer:

"Well, now, that involves some of Mr. McMasters's private history, but I know he won't mind. Facts are facts, and there's no use being squeamish about them."

He took a seat near Hendrikson, facing the protégé.

"Truth of the matter is, I came upon him in the course of my professional duties—was called to attend him for an aggravated case of dipsomaniac hallucinations, vulgarly called the D. T's. Probably one of the worst I ever saw—horrible case, very—for our friend here, though reformed now, used to be a perfect animal—a mere beast, gross and unspeakable."

He eyed the beast critically, as though to check the latter's seeming impulse to retort.

"Well, in taking his history, I found out he was an ex-heavy, with a wonderful record. But, at last, he met a champion that knocked him out—I mean King Alcohol."

"Too bad," murmured Hendrikson sympathetically.

"Knocked him out till I got hold of him," the doctor resumed. "I recognized his possibilities and gave him every attention. He's been under my care now for over two years, and I flatter myself he's almost, if not quite, as good as ever he was. I've had a terrible job with him; but I've restrained him, coaxed and driven and upheld him, trained him to a fine edge, and now he'll do. I'm going to try him out on this Michaels champ, who has unlimited backing, and some big money is going to change hands, I can assure you of that. Why, the way he is now, just the sight of him would make Jess Willard go to farming."

McMasters shifted largely in his chair and growled like a tornado trying to make Niagara Falls back upstream.

"You see," the doctor continued, "he was an anthracite miner for eleven years, and the muscle he put on

then—well, just look at what I've been able to get back."

He jumped up, went over to McMasters, and stripped the fighter's right arm clear. It looked like an elephant's hind leg.

"Feel of that, now!" he commanded Hendrikson, who timidly punched the arm with a thin forefinger which dented it no more than as if the arm had been so much wood.

"By gracious, he *is* solid, isn't he?" the music dealer admitted with enthusiasm. "He certainly ought to make good. I'm sure your judgment is O. K." He tried to adopt the easy language of a true sport. "And you're going to back him yourself, you say?"

"For ten thou', even money. So you see, you'll be quite safe in coming in. I wouldn't risk my coin if I wasn't sure, now, would I? Certainly not—it's an open-and-shut. I'll place yours and your friend's, too, on the same terms, or better if I can, say two to three. What say?"

One might almost have thought the doctor's professional vocabulary was losing itself in mere colloquialisms; but that was not for long. A slight frown on the ex-coal-miner's brow checked the sporting patter.

"There's only one chance of failure, and, to be perfectly honest with you, I'm going to tell you about it. You want to know all the facts, don't you?"

Mr. Hendrikson gratefully intimated that he so desired.

"Well, here's the contingency—and it's just as bad for me as it is for you, providing always that it *is* bad, which doesn't seem probable. There's one chance, say

in ten thousand, of the unexpected happening, certainly not more than that; a quite negligible quantity. Now, to the point.

"McMasters here has a slight jugular aneurism on the left side. You understand?"

"Certainly," replied the music dealer, in a tone which indicated absolutely that he did not.

"The submaxillary conjunctivitis is a trifle enlarged, with consequent slight emphysestic pleurodynia of the mitral. So, you see, just the right sort of a blow—just the right sort—"

"Of course."

"Not one chance in ten thousand of its being delivered, you understand; but still if it were, it might—"

"Er—er?"

"Why, produce extravasation of the sequelar thyroid, with hemorrhage and—"

"Dear me, how very unfortunate! Not fatal, I hope?"

"It might prove so—in that one to hundred thousandth case. But the chances are practically *nil*. As my good money's up, together with McMasters's own life, I think it a safe bet for you, all right. And if the one millionth chance doesn't intervene, why—the proceeds are all ours, believe me."

Hendrikson breathed a sigh of relief.

"So, then," continued the good doctor, "if you say so, we'll place your bet, at once."

The music dealer pondered a brief moment.

"It's a go," he decided.

"Good word! You're a true sport, all right—all right," the doctor congratulated him, shaking his hand

enthusiastically. "What's more, your fortune's as good as made. Bravo!"

"He's the stuff, ain't he?" McMasters growled hugely. "Smoke up, ole man."

And he pushed the cigars at Hendrikson.

They all "shook" on the decision again. Then, with plenty of good fumes coiling upward, they plunged into the various details of definitely pulling off the fight with Michaels at Schmitz's summer garden in College Point, the very next week.

ROUND FIVE

THE WHIRLWIND FINISH

MICHAELS was already sitting in his corner of the ring when McMasters, the dark-horse, entered from the ante-room of Schmitz's "athletic hall."

The barn-like place, drenched with electric light from a dazzling cluster of incandescents over the ring, was half filled with a subdued but excited bunch of men in various odd raiment, not excluding sweaters of green-and-purple stripe. Nearly everybody was smoking, nor were Hendrikson and his clean-shaven friend Jacobs any exception. They sat well down toward the front of the twenty-four-foot ring, hats cocked back in anxious imitation of being "tough"; sat and waited for the inevitable mopping-up of Michaels to make them rich.

The room was stifling, for the early September evening was oppressively warm, and every window was tightly shuttered. This was to be no "art exhibit," but frankly a knock-out with four-ounce gloves; so the rumor ran, together with offers of money in surprising profusion.

"I'll take that!" cried a lean chap guardedly when ten to six on Michaels was offered. The odds rose steadily for Michaels—two to one, three to one—"You're on! No finger-bets for mine! Show th' stuff! . . . It's highway robbery!"

At very advantageous figures the money of Hendrikson and his friend was placed—five, eight, ten thousand—they stood to win thirty thousand if all went well.

"It's pie!" whispered Hendrikson with shaking lips, in which he scarce could hold the tremulous cigar.

McMasters advanced in cold disfavor from his dressing-room, attended by Dr. Bennett and a single backer. Cat-calls, hoots and gibes assailed him, at which he scowled blackly. The audience vituperated only louder; you can get a good deal of vituperation at two dollars a head from muckers. True, the muckers didn't quite understand; but the two-spot was tangible, and promises of unlimited suds after the scrap held them to loyal exertion.

In the whole assembly nobody was "on," entirely "on," save Ben, Pod and Michaels—that is, nobody was expected to be. And Michaels all this time was beginning to earn his one hundred and fifty by scowling back at Pod even more blackly than the dark-horse frowned on him, whereat fresh spasms from the proletariat.

Up on to the platform stepped Podsy, and up to his chair. He glanced round with a curious old-time thrill; it made him think of other, far-off days, this padded floor, these incandescents overhead, the powdered resin and all. Even the smoke-fouled atmosphere seemed sweet to him; he sniffed it with keen nostrils as his backer

clambered over the ropes with towels on his arm, a wooden pail of ice-water, a sponge, lemons and bottle of cold tea—similar equipment to that of Michaels' backer in the other corner.

"Say, cully, is it a sure-enough fakerino?" murmured the backer to Michaels, bending over that fistic prodigy as though to give some final instructions. "I ain't more'n half wise. Put me on. 'Cause if it is a pulled game, it's sure th' best imitation of th' reel thing—"

"Fergit it!" growled Michaels sourly. "Yer biz is to back me right an' proper, not to do no Buttinsky stunts. An' see youse does it, too, or I'll fix you!"

In Pod's corner they were not idle, for there the Unknown's backer was holding a cold sponge to the back of his scrapper's neck, while Doc Bennett, close at his side, seemed giving parting words of caution.

"Gee!" whispered Pod, longingly. "Gee-roosalem! But I get strung up at sight o' this, though. Fact is, Ben, you got me trained down now where I'm bust if I don't think I reely could flip the mitts a trifle. Why, I'm taut as a fiddle—didn't think I had it in me, to come back, this way!"

"Forget it, Pod."

"Can't forget it! Does any guy ever forget, if he once used to mix it, eh? An' I used t' have an armor-plate punch, too. Hate to lay down an' let that pug hand me my D. and O. on a silver tray. Damfi wouldn't like to try an' reely give him a run, just to see if I couldn't beat his block off, like I told Hendrikson."

"For-get it! You want to crab things now, after all this trouble an' expense? What we got to do is freeze to the spon an' evap, on the P. D. quick; for, say, I don't

half like th' frontispiece of that Jacobs lad—seems like I'd seen him before, somewheres."

"Cut it—time to begin," answered Pod, as the referee (he cost ten dollars) jumped into the ring; a husky lad, reliable in case of trouble. At sight of him the excitement apparently rose to fever-pitch, and cries arose:

"Cut out th' gas, an' start it! . . . Let 'er go! . . . Swing them mitts—"

Hendrikson and Jacobs all this time, their money placed, sat tense and mute. Jacobs seemed passing calm, but Hendrikson's face had gone as white as bleached bone.

The referee laid gloves on a sheet of paper in the middle of the ring; the backers selected each a pair.

"Put 'em on!" commanded the referee.

"Here, now," whispered Ben, slipping into Pod's hand a curious little red sphere about the size of a walnut. "Here's the stuff, and for Heaven's sake give 'em a couple of rounds, at least. Don't bite till then, anyhow, and then bite hard; get me? You know how to do the rest. Now go on, and good luck, old man—"

The red sphere was in Pod's mouth, and Pod was advancing to the center of the ring, where stood the referee.

Michaels was a short, rugged scrapper, with bullet-brow and knobby muscles; Pod overrose him six inches, carried full fifteen pounds more weight, but seemed hardly less "fit"; for Ben's training really had been strenuous and good. Not in years had Pod even approached his present condition. It was a revived, a made-over Slattery that stood there now listening to the referee's final words:

"Come on now, boys! Shake! Mix it clean an' good, an' may th' best man win!"

The ring was empty; the two men touched gloves, retired somewhat toward their corners, assured their feet in the resin, seemed to be eyeing each other ferociously. Silence fell in the building, save for the occasional sharp rasp of a match.

"Clang!"

The bell had struck.

"Don't close in at first—jolly 'im!" exhorted Michaels' puzzled backer. "He's pursy—git his wind an' then slam!"

Michaels grinned, put up his dukes, and sprang forward to meet the dark-horse, who likewise advanced with lightsome step. They circled a moment, closed up just long enough to get their arms a-going and exchange grimaces, then jockied futilely while the crowd encouraged them to livelier work.

"Aw! Fergit de science! . . . G'wan—at it! . . . *Mix!*—"

The action livened, Pod leading, feinting, countering with the easy movements of the ex-athlete, no matter how stale. In a minute they were really whaling away. Michaels reached for Pod's chin; Pod came in under for the heart, and the fight was on.

"Work the right to the body an' git inside them punches!" Pod heard his backer shout, and cut loose with a peppering hail.

"Wish it was a square fight!" he thought longingly, as they circled the ring with rapid feet. "Wish I didn't have this here rubber balloon in my mouth to bother me,

an' was free to go to it! Hanged if I couldn't lay out that ex-heavy, stiff an' cold! . . . But biz is biz!"

The crowd began to wake up now. Suddenly Michaels fainted with his right, and dodged. Pod unwarily pursued; Michaels landed a left-arm jolt flush on the neck. It stung Pod to anger, and he rushed in with fiery eye. Another lightning-stroke of Michaels' mitt, and—the floor careened up, walloping Pod on the bean. Yells arose:

"Dat's how t' hand out de gruel! Say! He's blanketed! Buffaloed an' buried alive! . . . Done 'fore he begins!"

The referee began to count: "One! Two! Three!"

Pod opened his eyes.

"Gee! My skates must ha' slipped!" he pondered dreamily. "I'm a boob to try fancies at my age!"

Then, suddenly, he heard the shouts of the multitude, he perceived a monotonous voice counting: "Six! Seven!" and there was borne to him an agonized appeal. "Get up! For Heaven's sake, get up! Or you'll be out! *Get up!*"

Sudden realization leaped over him.

"Thank God, I didn't bite it yet, anyhow!" he exclaimed to himself as he staggered wearily to his feet, arms pendant—only to perceive an ominous body rushing at him.

"Clinch!" he heard Ben yell, and with his last grain of strength he ducked, flung his arms round Michaels, held on for grim death. The two scrappers reeled about like drunken men, Michaels really mad, Pod groggy and sore. No more realistic "fakerino," surely, ever was pulled off. And then, just as the referee with a "Clean,

boys; go clean!" tore Pod from the saving clinch, just as Michaels was preparing to land, and land hard ("It's me to the bitin' stunt if he *does!*" thought Pod)—the bell struck again, and the round was over.

As Pod zigzagged to his corner he caught a glimpse of panic-stricken Hendrikson, and the determination welled up in him that, next round, the come-on should at least have a show of encouragement. Pod, at bottom, was a good old grafter; he liked fair play in his inmost being, and always tried to give each victim at least a trot—if not a run—for his money. The sight of Hendrikson's collapse touched him deeply.

"I'm blowed if I don't revive his spirits for a while, anyhow," he told himself with profane emphasis as he collapsed into his chair.

"Fer Gawd's sake, feint him, an' dive into a clinch when he rushes!" his backer was saying. "Clinch, or leg it, an' you'll git 'im!"

The backer held ammonia under his nose, doused him with ice-water, and flapped him with a towel.

Strength revived in Pod. He looked across the ring at Michaels and saw with satisfaction that the other's nose was clareted. He also saw Ben speaking to Michaels, and, though ostensibly an inquiry after injuries, yet Pod knew Ben was privately giving Michaels "his" for forcing the fight. He felt that things might yet come his way a trifle.

"An' no matter what happens," he consoled himself, "I marked him. Me, I done it. An old has-been like me, marked him, an' no fake about the first round, anyhow."

The thought gave him infinite satisfaction as the bell

struck again, and once more he was face to face with Michaels.

"I'm a mind tuh kill youse!" growled Michaels, as they exchanged the opening blows. "I'd do it fer two cents, yuh mutt!"

Pod answered only by shooting in some rough work at Michaels' ugly map. The latter rushed, and twice was stopped with straight right-handers. Pod's stock was beginning to rise, and Hendrikson was getting back some color in his face. He even started cheering as Pod landed a couple of haymakers on Michaels' left ear.

Ben leaning over Jacobs, encouraged him:

"See? He's getting his second wind now—settling down to the hard work that's going to land us all on Easy Street! Rash; he always is at first, that's all—but that's over now, and you'll see what he can do—provided that butcher of a Michaels don't just happen to burst his aneurism for him!"

Hendrikson had climbed up in his chair and was shouting wildly:

"Go to it, Mac! Nail him! Kill him!"

Jacobs was watching, keen as a cat a mouse; he glanced at his timepiece, snapped it together nervously, and seemed to be feeling in his pocket for something; then changed his mind, and settled back to watch again.

And now the mill was going at a furious lick.

Michaels, scowling hideously, could make no progress, for Pod held him, drove him—and now it seemed that Michaels, in his turn, sought a clinch to escape punishment. Then, when they broke, Pod slipped easily away from the butcher's dangerous counters. One slashing mix-up let Pod nail a hard left home on Michaels' right

eye, which promised to give him a "shiner." The blow crashed home like a pile-driver. Michaels roared and rushed, to no avail.

Both men were panting and sweating hard, for the fast work was telling. Their bodies gleamed, white and wet, under the deluge of light. The crowd settled itself for a long mill. Hendrikson, clasping lean fingers, bit his pale lips till the blood almost started. For him the outcome meant ruin or wealth—which was it to be?

Mad clear through, on came Michaels, trying to beat down Pod's guard with an avalanche of blows and give him the promised killing; but Pod managed to keep him back with his own offense, though twice the Irishman jolted him on the ribs with terrific momentum. They ran into a clinch, broke again, and again the hail-storm raged, while both circled the ring with rapid foot-work.

Came a rush—above the tumult of cries Pod heard the voice of Ben yelling: "*Now! Now!*"

He knew the time had come.

He ducked, parried, lunged for Michaels. Before the final scene he would, at least, have the joy of seeing Michaels' back on the resin.

"*Thud!*"

Slats' big right, encased in its thin glove and driven with all the force of the great shoulder, caught Michaels full on the jaw-bone; lifted him clean off his feet, and flung him sprawling on the pad.

Yells rent the roof; hats went up; Hendrikson, his voice screeched to a frazzle, jumped up and down deliriously on his chair. The referee straddled into the ring and began to count again—but Michaels was up—was rushing—blood on his face, fire in his eye. The

blow, which would have almost killed an ordinary man, had hardly more than jarred him, so dense and heavy was his skull, so coarse his nervous system.

"*Now!*" Pod once more heard Bender yell; and as the Irishman rushed in under his guard and drove a staggering right to the neck, Pod's teeth closed suddenly, firmly in the little round rubber balloon which he held in his mouth.

"Plop!" he heard it give; his mouth was suddenly overflowing with a pungent, warm liquid, tasting strongly of peppermint.

A wild shriek issued from his lips, bubbling out with the crimson liquid; he reeled, flung his hands out, stepped back, and then, all of a sudden, dropped in a distorted heap on the canvas. He twitched convulsively a second, sprawled on his back, lay still.

Over the ropes leaped the doctor and the referee, as with cries of terror the stampeding audience bolted for the door.

The doctor dropped to his knees, and, trembling with beautifully acted horror, applied an ear to the broad chest.

"*He's dead!*"

The word was taken up, reëchoed, flung about by the wild mass of struggling humanity fighting for exit. Real terror sprang to being, for nobody but three in the whole place understood. Terrible confusion broke loose; chairs and benches were smashed, blows interchanged, and over all the yells and curses and fighting exhaled a faint, delicate odor of peppermint.

Hendrikson perceived nothing of all this. He had "flickered"—as the Underworld calls fainting.

His friend Jacobs, however, was less impressionable. With singular presence of mind he fished from his pocket the small object that he seemed previously to have been seeking. It was a silver police whistle.

"Trill-tr-r-r-r!"

In shattered the door, splintering; in stormed a squad of harness-bulls, hitting heads with night-sticks right and left, hitting hard. The stampeded mob surged refluxent, in horrid pandemonium of shrieks and yells:

"De place is pinched! We're pulled!"

Up on a chair leaped Jacobs, breasting the human tide.

"You're all under arrest!" he bawled. "Take everybody!" he directed his men. "Every last one—an' first of all, get *them*!"

He gestured wildly at the panic-stricken group on the mat.

Strange, passing strange! The dead man had revived, was sitting up, was scrabbling to his feet!

A rush, a tangle! Then *Snap!* went something; the incandescents died away and Egyptian darkness fell. The noise grew frightful—blows, curses, falling men, the crashing of chairs and benches.

"Lights, lights!" yelled Jacobs. Just then a swift uppercut jolted him to unconsciousness, and he went down on top of Hendrikson. A door slammed loudly in the darkness.

When lights eventuated, the cops rounded up a score of miserable, trembling pikers, tin-horn sports and ringers, together with one very groggy police inspector and one insensible would-be sporting-man.

As for the principals, they had disappeared. A dressing-room door, firmly locked from the other side, shed suspicion on their means of safety. Pursuit was organized, but it was both feeble and tardy. It did not avail.

In the big room, beside the herded underlings in their bizarre sweaters, the bulls captured several sets of boxing-gloves, scandalously light-weight, together with much other sporting truck. They also captured a large red spot of aniline appearance on the ring-mat, odorous of peppermint. But green they found not—the long green of the still-unconscious Hendrikson. Somehow, somewhere, search where they would, it had all been spirited away into the watches of the night.

LAST ROUND

VERY SHORT; PLEASE REMAIN

IN a first-class cabin of the *Prince Hector*, for Bermuda, a stout, somewhat bruised man was sitting at pleasant converse with a slim, dapper individual. The *Prince Hector*, as you know, is one of the smaller, less conspicuous boats, and carries no wireless apparatus.

“Deductin’ expenses for Michaels, supes, touts, rent, an’ all, which we’ll remit, how much d’you make it we killed, eh?” the stout man was inquiring.

“Six and six is twelve, carry one—let’s see, now—” the other answered, figuring carefully. “I make it just nine thousand five hundred and forty-six dollars and twenty-four cents. But then we’ve got to deduct contents of flat—total loss, all abandoned. Say nine thousand on the deal. Not so worse, what?”

"I should say nixy! Ocean trip, rest an' recreation, an' my health more to the elegants than it's been since Heaven knows when. I'm so husky now that I can run on the strength of it for years. Slip us a smoke, there; I'm perishin'."

"Not bad at all," Ben agreed, handing over a regalia. "I think this first stunt we've tackled since we joined partnership again pulled down a pretty decent bundle. But do you know what set the joy-bells ringing, for me, even more than the wad?"

"Well, what?" asked Pod, striking a match and hoisting his feet to the divan.

"Two things. First, the thousand bucks of police money we cleaned up, in addition to Hendrikson's—the thousand that Inspector Keene *alias* Jacobs, bet, so he could get in on the fight and try to nail us. Second, the uppercut I handed Keene. Oh, I 'made' him, all right. We're hunk with him, all right. No bum make-up like he had cuts any curve with me."

"Nor with me, neither," chuckled Pod. "It certainly was salubrious. But after all, it wasn't ace-high side o' my great an' lofty joy when Michaels hit the pads. That minute, say, I had the Fountain of Youth faded to a Harlem ash-can! Gad, the feel of it's in my old paw yet!"

And as Pod Slattery drew his first ecstatic whiffs of the regalia, he raised his good right hand, patting it gently with the other on the swollen knuckles.

"Good boy!" said he. "Good old boy! You'll have the finest glove there is in Hamilton, Bermuda, for reward, or I'm no candy with the mitts!"

II

A FLYER IN ANNUITIES

Wherein Our Friends Soar High, and Singe Their Wings

CHAPTER I

AFTER a few weeks spent in Bermuda, partly idling, partly dallying with certain trivial matters which, though petty, nevertheless kept the check-book decently padded, Pod and the Doctor felt a yearning of the heart toward home.

"All very picturesque and nifty, I admit," the Doc remarked, from his rocker on the broad piazza of the Hamilton House, "but still, there's nothing like home, sweet home, after all."

Moodily his eyes wandered over the sparkling harbor, the white sails, the whiter cottages and the turquoise of the broad Atlantic, beyond whose far horizon lay the Land of Graft Unlimited. Slats, catching his mood, nodded assent.

"I getcha," he murmured, stretching his huge, white-linen-clad bulk on the long wicker steamer-chair beside his partner. Prosperity and lack of exercise had brought him up to 277, with a steady tendency toward more. "I getcha, Steve. Time to drift north. An' these penny-ante games, here, ain't a man's-size occupa-

tion. I long to dally with some real get-there proposition again, that's all to the mustard. Well?"

"Dally is right," said Ben. "There's a boat out of here to New York, this P. M. That for us!"

"An' then?" queried Pod, with unusual animation.

"Oh, I've been incubating an idea for some time, concerning a certain fiduciary institution in The Hub that needs a little blood-letting to prevent it having apoplexy, it's that top-heavy with the unearned increment. The frame-up I've got buzzing round my thinkery, now, will be an East-and-West proposition. I pulled Act I in Chicago, on the Grangers' National Bank, last June. That's how I was flying so lofty when I met you in the Hotel de Gink, otherwise known as a bench in the Park. Now I've got a hunch we can fly still loftier in Act II, on the strength of Act I. So get a move on, and let's pack our keisters to lay a little paper in Velvetburg, in the good old U. S. A.—Unlimited Suckers' Aggregation!"

Some days thereafter three passengers sat in a smoking-compartment of the one o'clock limited out of New York, Boston-bound. A curious trio they were, three ill-assorted elements from the big human hive. One, a commercial traveler, courted his briar and read "The Alibi"; the second, a stout gentleman, dressed in expensive though rather erratic fashion, drew luxuriously at a black cigar, stared out the window at the whirling landscape, and rubbed his freshly shaven chin with satisfaction; while the third, a tall clergyman of reserved bearing, occupied himself steadfastly by looking up references in his pocket concordance and making copious notes in a portfolio.

Now and again the clergyman passed some remark

anent his pastoral duties or a forthcoming sermon, to which the stout gentleman replied by monosyllables, seemingly ill at ease in the presence of this man of the cloth.

At Providence the commercial traveler left the compartment, and no one took his place. In some curious manner he carried away with him the air of sanctity which permeated the atmosphere.

"Say, you petrified jelly-roll," remarked the clergyman as the train bowled out of the station, "toss us out a smoke, can't you? It gives me the wee-waws to play sky-pilot more than half an hour at a time. But tell me, on the level, how does it go?"

"Like salve on a sore toe," answered the fat gentleman. "Only don't spread it too thick or some one may slip an' tumble, see? What sort of a gazebo is this old Goodrich, anyway? Bug-eyed an' suspicious, or how?"

"One of the great and glorious tribe of E. Z. Marx," answered the clergyman, striking a match by deftly snipping it with his finger-nail. "Easiest ever! He'll fall for anything. I put the trimming-tools to him myself, six years ago, but didn't score hard. That's why I'm so keen to come again and gather the ripe harvest. As things are fixed now, he'll drop like a plum—he's only waiting to be shaken."

"Listens good, but are you sure?"

"Just as sure as I am that these here Rosaritos set me back a quarter apiece, and that *you're* costing me like sixty. Sure? I should say yes! With our present lay we can get the jacks under his Trust Company and elevate it before he even gets the idea soaked through

his cranium that he's being did. Just you watch and—cheese it! The con!"

"Tickets, please!" exclaimed that worthy, entering the compartment.

"Here you are," said the cleric, holding out two pasteboards. "My friend's and mine. Have you a timetable on the B. & M.? Yes, we're going through to Portland. You'll get me one? Ah, thank you, thank you. Yes, it is good weather for traveling, though a trifle warm."

The conductor departed.

"How d'you do it?" inquired the stout gentleman admiringly. "I thought *I* could juggle 'em along some, but say, you've got me beaten to a syllable! It's worth a gold-mine to be under-study to an article like *you*. Here, let's christen!"

He snapped open his Gladstone bag and brought out a half-pint flask of very strong waters. Shortly thereafter the flask, eloquently empty, went spinning from a window of the express, which, clipping along in a simoon of dust, was every minute shortening by a mile the distance between our two friends and President Abner Goodrich of the Commercial Trust Company, Boston, Massachusetts.

CHAPTER II

THAT afternoon when President Goodrich came back from lunch, he found waiting for him in his inner office two strangers. One of these, an austere clergyman, sat reading his breviary in short-sighted fashion, while the other, evidently an original, lolled back fatly in his chair and gazed vacantly at the coffered ceiling.

Both rose to greet him; the clergyman fumbled through his pocketbook and finally produced a card, which, after minute inspection, he presented to Goodrich.

"Francis G. Benedict," read the president. "Rector of St. Luke's Church, Roxbury."

"At your service, sir," murmured the clergyman, bowing. "Permit me the pleasure of making you acquainted with Mr. Hogan—Michael J. Hogan—of my parish."

"Glad to know you!" exclaimed Hogan, much embarrassed. He extended a fat and hirsute paw, which the bank president, seeing no escape, took reluctantly.

"Mr. Hogan is a benefactor of mine," pursued the clergyman, "or rather, of my church. He lacks the—the outward manifestations of culture, to some extent, but—er—his heart and soul amply make up the deficiency. A diamond, sir, a true diamond in the rough! Since he entered the parish, our poor have profited extraordinarily.

"His hobby—to use a cant expression—is what he terms an 'anti-poverty fund'; a most laudable one, I am sure. You see, to speak frankly, though to a certain extent—er—illiterate, Mr. Hogan has amassed a considerable fortune in the past two years, and now he has asked me to help him invest his money in a certain manner which I trust may prove advantageous to all concerned."

"Yes?" queried Goodrich impassively, settling himself at his desk. "Be seated, gentlemen; pray don't stand."

"As I was remarking," continued the clergyman, drawing up a chair, the while Mr. Hogan flopped down

on a leather divan which occupied one side of the office, "my friend has placed his fortune in my hands and has asked me to advise him in investing it. I have looked into the reliability of various institutions, and have chosen yours as one eminently safe to do business with."

"Thank you," remarked Goodrich, succinctly.

"I have therefore," continued the clergyman, "advised him to deposit a considerable sum with you. I, personally, neither have nor desire worldly goods; but I quite understand his attitude toward safeguarding the fortune he has acquired, for the furtherance of his own comfort and the cause of charity in my parish. Mr. Hogan has, like—like many imperfectly educated men, the ability to make but not to keep money. Pardon me, but do you—er—follow the copper-market?"

"Well, to a certain extent," answered Goodrich, in a non-committal voice, yet with a certain note of interest. "Why do you ask?"

"Simply because my friend here, Mr. Hogan, has been for some time past one of those disturbing factors—let me say the *chief* factor which, though hidden from public knowledge—"

"So?"

"Yes; he has (as he puts it, rather crudely) 'raked-off' over a quarter of a million in the last six months, and expects to clear as much more before the market breaks. Now you understand, Mr. Goodrich, I am not at all in sympathy with certain of his methods; but still, since he is my friend and has contributed so liberally to missionary and other work, I have consented to act as a mediator for him in the delicate matter of arranging a rather unusual investment, and in negotiating

for him if possible a—a life income in exchange for a certain large consideration to be paid you in cash. Do I state the case correctly, Mr. Hogan?"

"Dead right!" answered the copper-magnate, shuffling his feet in the thick carpet and twirling his thumbs. "You see, Mr. President, I ain't much on the talk—I can *make* the stuff all right enough, though; but what I want now is to find some way to *keep* it, see? Had snug on to a million four years ago an' went through it like a greased pig through a crowd. Now, *this* killin' I want to salt down.

"I hope you an' the dominie can fix it some way so's I can turn the whole bunch over to you, an' get so much a year as long as I hang out. I don't want no more worry or bother—just to draw the spon every three months, see? I'll leave the fixin's to you. It's two hundred an' fifty thou. clear in exchange for a good income, that's all." He ended his speech with a hearty use of a flamboyant silk handkerchief.

President Goodrich dissembled a certain glitter of the eye by leaning over his desk and carefully arranging a bundle of checks (during which operation the two visitors exchanged hideous grimaces), then answered judicially:

"To be outspoken, Mr. Benedict, your proposition is a curious one, somewhat in the nature of an annuity, I take it, and therefore, strictly speaking, rather more in the province of an insurance company than of the Commercial Trust; yet, under the circumstances—well—possibly we may consider it. Are you—er—prepared to discuss details at present and—and make a deposit to guarantee your friend's commercial reliability? In matters of this kind, you know—"

"Certainly, I understand perfectly. I'm quite at your service. No time like the present."

"The old fall-guy's bolted the bait, sinker, hook an' all!" muttered Hogan to himself. "Now, one good jerk an' we land him!"

"Well, let's get to business!" said Goodrich briskly, glancing at the clock. "These are busy days with me!"

For half an hour the banker and the clergyman talked in quiet tones, Goodrich the while making extensive calculations which he expounded at great length. The Rev. Mr. Benedict nodded assent or asked an occasional question, with here and there "I see," "I understand," "Exactly so," by way of encouragement.

Once or twice he put a keen query, which Goodrich skilfully met, or raised an objection, in the explanation of which the president betrayed his thinly veiled anxiety to close the deal. Between them they eventually drew up a paper detailing the proposed transaction, and made it ready to receive the "X" of Mr. Hogan.

The latter gentleman, the while, sat fumbling over certain papers and sorting them on his knee, which might have struck one as odd in view of the fact that he could neither read nor write. This task completed to his satisfaction, he replaced the papers in his breast-pocket and wandered idly about the luxurious office, hands clasped behind him, gazing with blank eyes at the pictures or staring vacantly through the plate-glass windows into the thronging traffic of State Street, below.

His back looked stodgily phlegmatic; yet nevertheless his pulse was running well over a hundred—higher than it had done since one unlucky day, five years before, when he had dallied with certain railroad pay-checks,

which had soon thereafter proved to be free passes to a bit in the Trenton "stir."

Now his whole future lay at stake. Was he to continue polishing park-benches, getting hand-outs and wearing bulgy kicks, or was he henceforth to ride in Pullmans, eat gamebirds and smoke Rosaritos? The question, as he turned it over in his mind, drew his brows into a black frown and set his fat fingers nervously clenching.

Finally, after what seemed at the very least a year, the Reverend Mr. Benedict arose, saying:

"Now, Mr. Hogan, if you please, the matter is entirely arranged, quite satisfactorily, I trust. President Goodrich doesn't care to receive more than \$200,000; but that sum, according to our plan, will yield ten thousand a year, payable semi-annually. It involves entire surrender of the principal, as in an annuity; but the income will be absolutely assured, and for life. Here is a paper for us to consider—you can sign it at your leisure. We are to come back to-morrow.

"Now," he added, turning to Goodrich, "we really should be taking our leave. I'm afraid we have presumed on far too much of your time already. Pardon me for just a moment, though, while I ask whether you will permit Mr. Hogan to deposit \$25,000 as an independent account for personal needs? No objection to carrying it subject to check? Very good, very good—my friend has a certified check on the Baltimore Exchange Bank. You'd like to see it? With pleasure! Yes, part of the estate. An excellent bank—Mr. Hogan carries a considerable balance there. Your receiving teller is—last window on the right? Thank you. You'll mention the matter to him? Very well; good day, good day."

The Reverend Mr. Benedict bowed graciously; the copper-king murmured words of gratitude, and both took their leave. While President Goodrich, left alone, rubbed his white hands with an extreme satisfaction, the astute clergyman deposited in Mr. Hogan's name a properly certified check on the Baltimore Exchange Bank for five-and-twenty thousand dollars.

CHAPTER III

OUR friend Goodrich was sitting at his desk, next morning, looking over a defunct mortgage in semi-idle fashion, when a tag-end of Boston east wind, eddying through a half-opened window, caught a little slip of paper which lay under the leather divan where Pod had sat, and whirled it wantonly out upon the carpet.

The eye of Goodrich followed, for the slip was curious—seemingly a list of names with hieroglyphs annexed. An odd-looking slip. The president's curiosity was aroused; he got up heavily, bent, and picked it up from the floor.

Odd indeed! What banker would not think odd a list of the richest Boston houses, marked by stars, triangles and circles, with cryptic words thereto? Strange indeed that the Commercial Trust Company, most dignified of institutions should be underscored in red and designated "Meat"!

"*Meat?*" ejaculated President Goodrich, sinking back with the grace of a hippopotamus into his leather chair. (He weighed 230 on the bath-mat.) "Meat! Well, well! Meat, indeed!" and he scratched his bald-spot vigorously, frowning the while.

The frown lasted only a moment, being chased away by an open-faced smile as a great white light broke into his mind. Reaching for his "Bankers' Register" he opened it at "Illinois" and thumbed it rapidly until "Chicago" lay under his gaze.

Shortly thereafter a peremptory *Buzz-z-z!* on the electric signal summoned Cashier Packard to the presidential desk.

The two men remained in heart-to-heart conference a pithy quarter of an hour. Toward the end of it two telephone messages went from the bank; one, a local, to Police Headquarters in Pemberton Square; the other, long distance, to the Exchange Bank in Baltimore. Of which messages our clergyman and his illiterate friend were ignorant as babes unborn.

Because of this blissful ignorance Mr. Hogan and his spiritual guide presented themselves about two o'clock at the Commercial Trust Company, and, sitting at one of the little glass-topped tables reserved for patrons, proceeded to make out a check calling for \$12,000, which the Reverend Mr. Benedict signed and Mr. Hogan carefully "X'd," chewing the while on an unlighted cigar.

"Here's where Goodrich makes his contribution to that anti-poverty fund, eh?" remarked the clergyman in a low tone. "It's double-cinched and diamond-hitched, provided we can turn the trick before it percolates through his upper works. When I got next to this coin-mill in '98 I vowed I'd come back some day for another bunch, and here I am! This is what the wise ones call the psychological moment. See? Grab that moment, Slatsey, then side-step—that's my tactics. Here, take the check

—now play it across the board, old boy, and—*st-t-t!*
Here comes a brass-buttoned coon. *What the—?*”

“Beggin’ yo’ parding, gemmens,” quoth the smoke deferentially, bowing with Chesterfieldian grace, “but Pres’dent Goodrich say he’d like fo’ to see yo’ in his office a minute. He’s waitin’ now. Step right in, ef yo’ please!”

“Say, see here,” queried Hogan; “is he alone in there, or is there some one with him?”

“Well, sah, Ah’d sho’ly like fo’ to oblige yo’ wif in-frammation, but Pres’dent Goodrich he say—he say—”
The messenger’s eyes rolled expressively and a sickly grin spread over his sable face.

“Here, my boy,” spoke up the clergyman in a subdued tone, looking the negro full in the eye. “Here’s a five-dollar gold-piece. Now *is* there or *isn’t* there a police inspector in there with him? My friend here and I are in the secret; you needn’t be afraid to tell *us*—and besides, there’s a fiver in it for you!”

“Oh, Lawdy, massa!” ejaculated the coon, his hands twitching for the gold-piece and his eyes bulging, “Ah sho’ly needs dat five, but—but—jes’ wait a minute!”

And he pattered away down the marble floor.

Hogan’s red jowls paled with sudden panic; the dominie glanced around with remarkable keenness for so near-sighted a man.

“The jig’s up!” he whispered. “We’ve got to beat it—but slow time or we’re flopped! Here, freeze on to some of these papers and then we’ll—*skiddoo! The bulls!*”

The last words burst from him in an irrepressible panic

as the street door opened sharply and a bluecoat officiously entered the bank.

Hogan sprang up, tipping over his chair, and with a fistful of loose papers hiked for the rear exit, hard-pressed by the clergyman. But ere the worthy pair reached safety, the president's door burst violently open. Mr. Goodrich, darting out with amazing agility, headed off Slats, and floored him with a "facer." The stiff blow on his meaty muzzle sounded like a brick striking a quarter of beef.

At Slats' fall which rattled the windows, the dominie backed up into a corner, whipped a venomous automatic from his coat-pocket and, with un-Biblical language, covered Goodrich. But before the ministerial trigger-finger had time to pull, the messenger hurled a brimming ink-well with such excellent aim as to strike the out-stretched arm like an inky meteor.

Crang!

The gun barked deafeningly, and the deflected bullet splintered a gilded cornice, just as Chief Inspector Ferrell popped out of the office.

Next instant Goodrich leaped in on the bespattered clergyman and the two went down rough-and-tumble in a tangle of fists and bad language.

Slats on the instant, wise as a serpent though not harmless as a dove, thrust the newly written check into his bleeding mouth and essayed to swallow it; but Ferrell, prying open his jaws with deft, ungentle thumbs, dredged out the paper, bedrabbled but still legible. Thoroughly cowed, Slats lay bellowing for mercy like a yearling calf.

"Explanation! Explanation for this outrage!"

panted the dominie from underneath 230 pounds of president. "Assault on a clergyman! Explanation here and *now!* I *demand* it!"

"Steady! Steady!" growled Goodrich. "Here! Are you still too near-sighted to read *this*, or shall I lend you my glasses?"

And, still keeping a strangle-hold with one hand, he held in front of the dominie's eyes with the other a telegraph-blank bearing this cryptogramic message:

Certified check 45322 forgery no funds in Baltimore Exchange make arrest alleged Benedict wanted connection Grangers' Bank Chicago last March.

"It's fifteen years apiece, all right, all right!" ejaculated Ferrell, elbowing his way through the turbulent crowd of clerks and minions. "Fifteen years, over *and* above a good stretch for the Chicago break! Mr. Goodrich, allow me the pleasure of makin' you acquainted with the guy you're flattenin' out—he's Pittsburg Bender, alias Doc Ben, 'wanted' in the Windy City for touchin' the Grangers' National last spring to the tune of forty thousand dollars!"

There is no dallying over tasks when they may involve life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Just as soon as the symbols were safely inside his skull he chewed up and swallowed the dangerous paper; and after that he began teaching himself how to "send," by using the forefinger of his right hand as a sounder and the first two fingers of his left hand as an anvil.

Most of his time was unavoidably occupied by business engagements in the paint-shop, where he primed bedsteads from half past six in the morning until half past five at night; and the rest of his daylight was taken up with meals and that cheerful lock-step circumambulation which passed for recreation; but at the end of forty-eight hours he felt, as he expressed it, "all to the wheat" on Morse, and ready to take his conversation on tick.

So it was that toward eleven o'clock, when all through the house not a creature was stirring, not even a warder, and when from the five tiers of cells in the west wing bass snores were blent with treble gurgles and baritone "prrr-oufs" in a syncopated minstrelsy of slumber, with here and there a soporific yodel for good measure, suddenly there came a tapping as of some one gently rapping, rapping with a nail on the two steampipes that led up through Bender's cell.

It was a faint, cautious little tapping, so it was, and might easily have been made by steam condensing in the pipes, had it not been so curiously methodical—just loud enough to be heard at all; yet not sufficiently strenuous to attract the ear of Turnkey Knowles, who was keeping watch in the rotunda, whence the four wings radiated spokedwise.

The tapping seemed to be made of dots and dashes.

First there came dot-dash; then dash-three-dots; then two-dots-space-dot; and so on, all very quiet and innocent.

If you had been there (which I'm glad you weren't), you might have heard the whole Morse alphabet repeated twice over, once from the cell of Bender, once from the cell where Pod Slattery lay wrapped in sleep and snores to all appearances, though with one arm sprawling suspiciously near the steam-pipes.

After the code had been ticked twice over, there came a little silence; then Bender heard this message:

..... . . . — . . . — — —
P r a c t i s e m o r e

Then it became a case of nothing doing on the pipeline. Several times Bender tried to draw further remarks, but failed. When at last he grew wise to the fact that he couldn't reopen the conversation, he desisted, and throughout the west wing silence, sleep, and the symphonic snore-fest reigned undisturbed.

CHAPTER II

NOW, on the fourth night after these occurrences, when Doc had "practiced more," and when several lengthy messages had come to him (whereat his eyes widened with surprised wonder), it happened that he was seized with very acute and painful cramps, so that he writhed on his bunk in uncontrollable anguish.

Bravely he essayed to bear his pain, to stifle his groans and not to cause the good turnkey any apprehension, as

this worthy made his two A.M. inspection; yet such was the agony that a few doleful moans escaped, despite all resolutions of fortitude.

The turnkey heard these groans; he paused at Bender's cell, peered through the door-bars, and listened. Sympathy was born in him, for he was a kind-hearted man, albeit rough-shelled.

Having harkened for a minute he did a very imprudent thing—took his keys, opened the cell-door, and stepped inside for the purpose of investigation.

Had he known Bender thoroughly he never would have risked any sympathy on him in any circumstances; but he didn't know him, so he stepped to the sufferer's cot, bent over it, and asked kindly:

"What's wrong here, eh?"

For all answer the suffering man groaned and distorted his face. Knowles noticed in the dim light which came from the corridor how ghastly pale the stricken one was; he did not know that the pallor was manufactured out of chalk ragged from the paint-shop, and, therefore, the cockles of his heart still further were melted with compassion.

"Come, come," he said, laying a large hand on Bender's shoulder, "snap out of it! What's the row? Why don't you speak?"

"Cramps—something terrific—lead-poisoning, must be—didn't want to wake anybody—" Bender managed to gasp. "Water, water, for heaven's sake!"

Knowles, all commiseration, reached for the jug, thus half-turning his back to the cot.

As he did so he was conscious of something swift, terrible; he threw up his arm, but too late to fend off the

blow which Bender's strong right hand, armed with his heavy prison boot, dealt like lightning.

"Thud!" went the hobnailed heel on Knowles's cranium, just back of the left ear; little birdies began to sing for Knowles, beautiful wavy circles of light wheeled and blended and widened to his view; then he doubled up, slid to the floor, quivered a bit, and went sound asleep.

All this happened very quickly and made no great noise, so that nobody was awakened in the adjoining cells; still, Bender kept up his realistic groans, semi-occasionally, as he rose from his bed of suffering, lifted Knowles on to it, and confiscated the bunch of keys.

This done, he hastily peeled off Knowles's uniform, donned it, set the official cap tight over his close-cropped poll, and wiped the chalk from his face.

By dint of some labor he managed to get his own striped coat on the unconscious man; then he covered him with the blanket, leaving the shoulders visible, and the transformation scene was complete.

In spite of the uniform being rather a far-away fit—especially the cap—Bender in that dim light was a sure-enough turnkey; and the striped figure gasping, gurgling on the cot, was he not a bona-fide prisoner? Bender figuratively patted himself on the back as he surveyed his handiwork and prepared for further tactics.

First of all he listened. Nothing—nothing but sleep, oblivion, symphonic snores. Nobody had heard, nobody knew; and even if any one of the prisoners *had* known there was little danger of snitching.

"Got this spiel beaten to a syllable!" he murmured, taking a final account of the situation.

Then he foraged under his pillow, paying as little heed to Knowles as though he had been a bran-bag, and produced a small piece of putty, which the paint-shop had also kindly furnished him on the Q. T.

A hasty rummage in the pockets of his new uniform dredged up a match-box. Bender emptied the matches into his pocket, loose, then dropped the putty into the box. After this he hastily put on his boots, and then found himself ready for a sortie into the enemy's country.

Boldly he moved to the door, with a word or two of comfort for the invalid, who was apparently beginning to get over his cramps; he tried one key silently, then another, and a third, which opened the lock. Swinging open the door, he stepped into the corridor.

"There, now," said he in tones like Knowles's (and Bender was no slouch of a mimic), "I guess you'll be all right. If you ain't, knock on the bars an' I'll come, see!"

Bender was taking no chances; everything had to be done decently and in order when the penalty for failure might be many years.

He closed and locked the door; then, humming a light air, continued the watchman's rounds.

Not a trifle too fast, he inspected the cells on his own gallery; his footsteps rang boldly. It was just as well to apprise every possible listener, official or otherwise, that the set routine of the prison was going on quite as it should. "Steady does it!" murmured Bender as he descended the circular iron stairs to the next gallery.

This he inspected also, found everything correct, and so went down one more round to the bottom floor, where

lay Pod's cell. At this, jingling his keys, he finally paused.

The inmate was waiting for him. Silently they greeted each other with a look; silently Bender tried the keys, one by one, until he found the right one. This he withdrew from the lock; then he took his lump of putty from the match-box and made a quick, careful impression of it, both side and end.

It was familiar work with him. The impression he carefully replaced in the box, which he slid into his pocket again.

"You're in the 'greatest' class, all right!" whispered Pod. "Got it, sure?"

"Ump-ah."

"Ain't this playin' on velvet, though? It's a case of takin' the tricks as they're led up to us, and that's no pill-prattle, neither. But ain't there no way *I* can fade, too, this evenin'? Tell the truth, I'm en-weed here."

"I know—but you just hold on—don't spoil things by any snap-shots. Stay right where you are and wait for me to furnish proper ammunition. The plan's a lay-over-all. You do nothing but keep the sand out of your bearings and we'll both be on Broadway inside of a month, punishing cold foamy ones. Patience for yours!"

"You're right," whispered Pod. "Well, patience is one of my four long suits. Ta-ta, now; you'd better cut loose and evap. By the way, how d'you reckon on givin' me the combination to whatever you write? We want to fix things some way so you can change it every time, in case the bulls tumble to it."

"Look under the sticker, that's all!"

"And you'll wire me out o' this *sure?*"

"Never fear—you can bet your hands to the plastering on me. Once a pal, always a pal, with me—especially when I need a guy in my biz, which I do you. Oh, I'll turn the trick, O. K. But you promise not to bat an eyelash, whatever mother I send you!"

Slats nodded.

"All right then, au revwar," whispered the Doc. "You're the real four-X, and no false start on *that*—you've got more details inside than an alarm-clock. Too bad your averdupois prevented you from playing first fiddle in this game!"

"Prance along now! Here!" and Slats poked his fat hand through the bars. Bender solemnly shook with him. Then Slats went back quietly to his cot and Bender continued his inspection.

When it was done he hung the bunch of keys, intact and in good order, on its accustomed hook, then sat down coolly for a few minutes at the warder's desk, and finally, with sovereign casualness, strolled out through the office to the small door whereby the employees left the building.

The drowsing night-watchman hardly glanced at him; under the visor of Knowles's cap Bender's face was well shadowed. Nobody had seen him, except this watchman and the warder of the north wing—this latter only from a distance; so Bender breathed deeply with relief as he opened the door and stood idly on the sill, looking up at the calm, beautiful stars, taking in great lungfuls of bracing December night-air.

Then there came a gust of wind—a sudden draft was it not?—that slammed the door, with our warder on the

outside. Five minutes later the night-watchman, wondering at his non-appearance, went and opened the door.

"Gosh!" said the watchman, "where in Halifax is Knowles?" He stood and scratched a puzzled cranium; then he hailed:

"Knowles! Knowles! Where *are* you?" But all the answer he got was a derisive little "*you!*" reechoed from the great granite walls of the hollow exit passageway.

CHAPTER III

TEN days later, or some such a matter, when the to-do attending the escape of the Rev. Dr. Bender (characterized by the press as "bold, brazen, unparalleled, masterful") had pretty well died down and when Turnkey Knowles was just about beginning to feel like himself again, Pod Slattery got a letter.

It was a poor, miserable-looking letter, written on cheap, lined paper with a pencil; the handwriting was wabbly, and the spelling would have done credit to the most advanced reformer on earth. There were several tear-stains, too—warped places on the paper that showed where the scalding brine had fallen.

The envelope was even more pitiful than the letter itself, for it was a mourning envelope and did not match the paper. The writer's hand had trembled with emotion over the word "Penitentiary." One could almost feel what poignant grief that word had inspired.

Even Knowles (now hardened by sad experience) murmured a few words of apology as he handed the envelope in through the bars.

"Sorry we had to open it," said he, "but you know the rules—all letters has to be inspected. If we'd known, though, about it bein' from your—your—"

"Mudder," said Slats, wiping his eye surreptitiously on his striped sleeve.

"From your mother," continued Knowles, "why—"

"Forget it!" exclaimed Pod, extending an eager hand for the epistle. "Rules is rules!"

He took the envelope and looked at it with tear-misted eyes; his face twitched painfully; then he said with husky accents:

"Sticks to me through thick an' thin, *she* does! Everybody else has gave me the merry ricaddo long since, but—" His voice broke and he turned away to hide the very complicated combination of wink and grimace which his fat face kinked itself into with joyous abandon.

Knowles uttered a mothy platitude and went on down the line with a few letters for others; Slats pulled the missive out of the envelope and looked it over leisurely while the stamp was soaking off in his mouth.

As quick as the stamp was well loosened he removed it from the envelope and looked minutely at the place where it had been. His keen little eye made out these words written faintly in that small area:

Read all mistakes carefully.

"Ain't that a blues-banisher of a scheme, though?" he asked himself with ecstasy. "Changes the com-b'nation every time, see? Well, now, this is goin' some, or I'm a livin' skeleton! Let's pipe off what the Doc is tryin' to tout me. High art, I call it—

salt-water splashes an' all. Oh, he's the real people, Bender is! Let's see."

With filial affection he read the letter over scrupulously. This is what it contained:

PITTSBURG, 12/20.

MY POOB, DEAR BOY:

At last I have found out where you are and I am coming there quick to see you. How could they ever put you in there? Somebody must have told a wicked ly.

I know you are a good boy and would not do such a loe thing as rob that bank they say you tried to rob. But I will stick by you til death, my dear boy. I shall be there Descember twenty-fourth or sooner. I hope they ewes you well there.

I sor Lawyer Carlyle about you this morning, my dear boy, and told him whare you were and he duredted me to petition Governor Kingman. I wil do everything possible.

When we mete I will tell the home news. I am taking boarders ever since you left home. I have thre now and it is hard work and I Am getting discouraged. Your brother Francis is working in the moterboat works here and gets only three dollars and a haf a week. We are having a mile season here, no frost yet.

I will be doun and see you the first boat I can get on the rivver. We all know you never robbed that bank. My heart is broak, butt I am still hoapful to see you very soon, my dear boy. Good-by and be geod and Heaven bless you.

Your loving

MOTHER.

"Wouldn't that make you snap your eyelashes?" asked Slat's enthusiastically of himself when he had finished.

"The Doc *may* be short on the decalogue, but he's loaded clear to the muzzle with brains. He's a swift mover, with a full supply of non-slip, and that's no phony dope, neither.

"Well, now, me for the careful scanning. Mis-

takes, eh? I may not be Andy Carnegie, but here's some spelling that has got me hypnotized all right. Let's see—let's see."

His unseemly forefinger traced the pitiful letter with eager zeal.

"Ah, *here's* one—and here—and here! 'Ly . . . loe . . . til . . . Descember 24, use sor—*what?* Sor, sor? *Saw*, eh? Oh, sure, use saw!—'whare duredected . . . mete . . . thre . . . Am . . . motorboat . . . haf mile . . . doun rivver . . . broak butt hoapful.' That's all! But I guess it'll hold me for a while.

"'Lie low till December 24; use saw where directed.' That means that me poor, dear mudder what takes boarders is goin' to *bring* the saw, eh?

"'Meet you 3 A. M. with motor-boat half a mile down the river,' to put it free. 'Broke but hopeful'—*that's* the spiel! Broke, but goin' to get a motor-boat; oh, yes, that's pie for the Doc. He's a board-sweeper from cocktails to cordials, *he* is; I bet he'd go out with a broken-bladed jack-knife and come in with a whole hardware store—that's him."

And Slats methodically tore both envelope and letter into fine bits, which he laid in a small pile in the corner, to be swept out at the next morning's clean-up.

That night he slept the long, sweet sleep of one who dreams of freedom and beer unlimited, after the dull routine of prison life.

If Pod Slattery had been moved even unto tears by the mere receipt of a letter from his affectionate parent, how shall we describe the Niobe-like melting into lachrymosics which took place when a shabby, bent, lame lit-

the woman in rusty mourning was shown to his cell the following Sunday afternoon?

Even Knowles, used to touching demonstrations, turned away from witnessing the pathetic scene.

Far be it from us to detail the meeting; the poor, homely sentiment; the heart-to-heart interchange of questions, of hopes and fears; the grieving and the sorrow.


Knowles, true to his duty, stood at the door to see that no suspicious present should be given the felon; but on this score he found nothing to fear, since the old lady came quite empty-handed.

How was Knowles to know that, when the parting-time came and the poor old creature threw her arms about her wayward boy, she dropped down his back a cleverly palmed key and a short steel saw for metal-cutting, the key being one made by subterranean methods from a certain putty impression, and the saw bearing the words "basement window" scratched on its smooth side in microscopic letters?

CHAPTER IV

THE Reverend Doc Bender, what of him? Whence had come the saw and the key which Pod kept artfully concealed in his boot-toes (the same being large and square)? Whence had come the tearful, loving letter? How about the motor-boat which the Doc, though "broak," had promised for the night of December 24?

Bender's first move when the employees' door was slammed behind him by that very opportune draft was to peer about with cautious expedition.



The outlook was good. He found himself in the tunnel-like passageway which communicated with the street and was used, as we have said, only by employees.

This fact, in addition to his uniform, was quite sufficient to reassure him thoroughly. He fronted with boldness, though noiselessly, down the steps, opened the iron grille (which was fastened only by a spring-lock), and stepped forth a free man.

High above him loomed the penitentiary walls, dark, chill, ominous; the night was cold and cloudy—unusually so for early December—and the street was deserted save for a solitary “cop” near the electric light at the corner.

Bender’s predestined course led him past that light; he did not hesitate, but with businesslike step launched forth upon his travels. He even ventured a silent nod to the minion, who returned it unsuspectingly.

Once past the corner, darkness shrouded him again, in the lee of the prison-yard wall. Ahead of him was a closely woven nexus of obscure streets and alleys which offered safety.

Thither he bent his steps; therein he plunged, and the night swallowed him. Twenty minutes later he had found refuge with a former pal of his, one McNamara, barkeeper in a blind-pig.

With this worthy he lay perdu for three days, till the hue and cry of pursuit had abated a little. When he issued forth it was as a tramp, with a stubbly beard shading his jaws, an old felt hat hiding his close-cut hair.

McNamara had given him aid and comfort, and had

even advanced two dollars in cash, on the security of the uniform, which contained much good cloth and was hardly at all worn.

Armed then with this money, with a passable disguise, and with his omnipresent gall in first-rate working order, he jumped the town at night via a side-door Pullman, and in due course traveled to New York, landing at the freight-yards over on the West Side, near a favorite resort of his, the "Eagle Pleasure Club," kept by an ex-gun blessed with the name of Magnus McCarthy Duff.

Once or twice he came near being sloughed in, but his good genius watched over him and he reached this safe haven after some lively dodging.

Within forty-eight hours a rather well-planned cleanup in the fawny jewelry line on Eighth Avenue had put him temporarily on his feet again and he was able to emerge from seclusion with the garb and bearing of a gentlemanly salesman.

This make-up, next to his clerical one, had brought him his best hauls; he felt that success was drawing near. As for his suspiciously short hair—well, a recent run of typhoid accounted for that admirably, as well as for the slight pallor which prison days had bequeathed to him.

And now Bender, traveling elegantly in the drawing-room car of an express, gave himself the pleasure of being whirled northward to a thriving river city about thirty miles down-stream from the public hotel in which his running-mate was incarcerated.

Thus far advanced, I invite you to behold him one

evening seated at a little iron table in the back-room of a not too gaudy saloon, conferring intimately with a rough-neck friend of his, over certain beverages.

"It's dead open-and-shut—simply a scream, I tell you!" Bender was saying, tapping with a well-manicured nail the newspaper-clipping which lay before him on the table. "Here this duck, this Van Duzer fellow, advertises his choo-choo boat for sale; says 'Will sacrifice for cash'—oh, yes, he'll *sacrifice* it all right, or I'm a Sunday-school superintendent! Calls it a 'four-cylinder, air-cooled Croteau motor.' I bet Van D. will need some cool air himself after the Sahara brand I unbottle for him!

"'Twenty miles per hour guaranteed—accommodating four to six persons,' and so forth. 'Accommodating!' Yes, that's the very identical word—*accommodating!* First rate! But three persons at the outside is all I'm counting on.

"Now, then, Flynn, if you've followed my line of jollyisms, here's a proposition we can make a book on and take all the money that's offered. All you've got to do is remember your name will be Maynard, and you're a sporting guy with coin; play up to my lead; get under the tree while I shake it—then this plum simply does one grand kerchug down your epiglottis, see?"

"Maybe," growled Flynn, "but what's to hinder his pinchin' us both by telegraft?"

"What's—to—hinder? Why, my prattling babe, d'you expect I'm going to leave the honorable gent in any situation where the proximity of telegraphs will give him insomnia? Just wait till I get the whole dope

ladled out to you, and see if you don't agree we'll make a span that nobody can give any dust to—see if you don't weep with joy." Emphatically he banged the table with his fist, then continued:

"You're trotting after money, same as all the rest of us, yes? Well, then, here's a chance for you to gallop, to acquire the coupon-cutting habit; and yet you get an attack of frosted pedals, you want to fold up and steal away to the high woods. Say, you ought to be ashamed—you must be a dead one from your heels up! Did I ever steer you wrong, say now?"

"No; but dis here frenzied frolic looks like it was pretty risky, and dat's no pipe!"

"Risky rot! All you do is dress and look the real thing for half a day, at the end of which time you find yourself owning said property as billed above. You make quick sale at point of landing, same as I've explained already, then do a fade—nothing easier. *I* don't want the goods, nor the mazoom, either, not a sou marquee of it—all *I* want is the aforesaid accommodation for about twelve hours. You know how to run a motor, and I don't. 'I'm from Missouri'—see? Well, for the service of 'showing me,' you get the boat; fall to it!"

"You'll gimme it, sure t'ing?"

"I will."

"Yes, but—"

"Oh, feathers! You're a phoney, a never-happened, a narrow-gauger!"

"Cut dat! *I* ain't said no to the deal yet!"

"You'll romp into it, then?"

"Sure—if you do de palaver."

"Palaver's where I live. Agreed? *All* right, we'll christen! Here, waiter, another bot of joy-juice, and hump it lively!"

Had you, dear reader, been endowed with X-ray vision, you might on the next morning have easily seen with the naked eye our friend the Doc entering the office of one Benton Van Duzer for the purpose of talking motor-boat.

Our friend looked fair and prosperous; he was smoking a twenty-five cent Imperial; his clothes fitted well; his card bore engraved in refined Gothic capitals the name "Paul Willard," and the explanatory words: "Chase Supply Co., Harrisburg." He waited with confident ease while the office-boy took in the card, which evidently produced a good impression, for from the inner office issued a thin, nervous voice saying:

"Show him in!"

Mr. Willard graciously let the boy usher him into the presence of Van Duzer, who was even thinner and more nervous than his voice—a regular picked chicken of a man, with large ears, tremulous Adam's apple, a little anemic mustache and veiny hands.

If you can imagine the spider-and-the-fly fable inverted, with the fly having a parlor into which he might invite the spider, you get the situation to a T.

Mr. Van Duzer wheeled in his revolving chair.

"Well?" said he briskly.

Mr. Willard produced the clipping about the boat and handed it over; then he drew a chair close to the desk, sat down, carefully crossed his legs (disdaining to ease the stretch of his trousers at the knee), and waited.

"Oh, yes, yes," chirped Van D., "that boat, eh? Hang that boat, she's made me more trouble than she's worth—three men been here this morning to see me 'bout her—taking up my time!"

Willard made as though to rise.

"Oh, in that case, if you're too busy, why—I might call on another man I have in mind."

"No, no—sit still now you're here, though I don't think we can trade—that is, I want a pretty stiff figure for her, you know—cost me three thousand and I've put in new engines since—racer, seaworthy, and all that, air-cooled, bird's-eye maple finish on the—"

"About what price do you set?"

"Two thousand—couldn't go a mite lower—been offered eighteen hundred already. Hate to sell, but must—going abroad—can't afford to keep, that's the truth of the matter. The speed-bugs just go nutty over her. Splendid boat, splendid.

"Came in first at the Jamaica Bay races last fall—has beaten everything on the river so far this season—but I can't winter her again, can't do it. Hate to lose her, though—can't bear to think of it—"

"Of course; I quite understand," murmured Mr. Willard, laying his cigar carefully on the edge of the desk where the beautiful aroma would waft like incense toward the excitable Van D. "Won't you smoke?" And he produced another Imperial.

"No, no—thank you just the same—can't do it—nerves won't stand it, simply will not. Don't tempt me!"

"Neurasthenia?" Willard queried sympathetically.

Van Duzer nodded.

"Yes," said he, "bad case, too—been under treatment two years past—can't stand strain, excitement, stimulants—liable to go to pieces any time, doctor says. However, that's not germane. Are you inclined to follow up my boat—at two thousand?"

Willard picked up a pencil from Van Duzer's desk and made a brief calculation on the edge of the newspaper which was lying there.

He contemplated the result a moment, while Van D. fidgeted with his watch-chain.

"I'll tell you how it is," Willard answered frankly, "that comes to a bit more than I—that is, than we were calculating on, but still we might arrange it. I'm not here on my own account, but for a friend of mine named Maynard—Alonzo Maynard.

"Curious fellow—good man, but of obscure origin—not a bit grammatical, you know, or—or, anything of that sort, but a mighty good sportsman. Self-made, lots of money, and all that kind of thing. Relies on my judgment, you see. If I say the boat's all right, he takes it, at whatever figure you and I agree on. Of course, you understand, Mr. Van Duzer, this is strictly *entre nous*? Certainly; I see you get the situation precisely."

"Yes, yes, of course," assented Mr. Van D.

"Well, then, to continue: Maynard saw your advertisement last night and 'phoned me to see you at once. He's something of a crank on motoring of all kinds—owns a boat already, but she's not fast enough, only sixteen miles. He's developing ambitious ideas, Maynard is; wants a winner and—"

"I can suit him *there*!"

"Exactly—must have something that will show a clean

stern to everything in sight. Fifteen hundred was the figure he named (the boat being second-hand); but if you insist, why, I shouldn't wonder if it could be arranged. Speed's the main thing. By the way, what does she make an hour?"

"Twenty to twenty-five, according to wind and tide."

"Good! Well, now, Mr. Van Duzer, how would this sort of a proposition strike you: Seventy-five dollars for every mile she shows? My friend's a dead game sport, right up to the handle—er—I mean, Maynard is an all-round sportsman, and I'm sure a proposition of that sort would tickle his fancy. Would it suit you?"

Van Duzer thought a moment, then said with a short laugh:

"Hang me if it wouldn't! Good idea, blasted clever!" The prospect of real money caused his over-reaching and his boasted offers to evaporate; and, moreover, the gambling proposition appealed to him. "Yes, I think we can do business on some such basis. And if the boat isn't satisfactory in every way, I'll *give* her to you."

Mr. Willard nodded in perfect agreement with this last statement.

"Exactly," said he. "Now, for the matter of an appointment, a try-out; when could we see you and the boat?"

"Mmmm—let's see—I'm head-over-ears to-morrow and next day; how would Friday suit? Friday morning?"

Mr. W. thought a minute, running over all his many, many pressing business engagements. Finally he shook his head.

"No," said he, "I'm not at liberty till Saturday."

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Chase Supply Company is pretty exacting I find. But if Saturday afternoon would suit you, why, it's all right for me; and as for Maynard, I can answer for *him*; he's a gentleman of leisure. Shall it be Saturday, the 23d?"

"Why, yes, I guess so—if nothing comes up, and it isn't too cold."

"All right, Saturday it is. Where's she lying?"

"Near the C. A. A. club-house."

"You don't say? Why, Maynard's a member of the C. A. A., and I go there often with him. Curious coincidence! Probably I've seen your boat a score of times. She's the—the—"

"*Javelin*—oak frame, cypress planking, carvel built."

"What? Are *you* the owner of the *Javelin*? Well, now, here's luck for Maynard! Hardly a week has passed all summer that he hasn't spoken about her."

"There isn't a craft afloat he'd rather own, I'll wager. 'Cleanest lines and slickest clip of anything afloat,' I've heard him say of her time and again. Your boat's as good as ours already, believe me. Saturday she changes hands, or I'm very much at fault. Two o'clock suits you? Very well; and where shall we meet? Here, you say? All right."

And Willard made another memorandum, this time on one of his business cards. He picked up his hat and his expiring cigar.

"Good day," said he, "and thank you immensely. I'm sure we *never shall repay* you for the service you're doing us both, *never!*"

"Pray don't mention it," said Van Duzer, rising.

Mr. Willard bowed himself out with Chesterfieldian grace. When the door had closed after him, Van D. sat

down again at his desk with a much-relieved expression.

"One sucker a minute," he soliloquized. "If there wasn't, what would become of men with worn-out boats? But I'll get twenty-one out of her *once* more, if I have to melt her cylinders!"

He took up his paper-knife and went at his letters again. "Jove!" said he as he ripped up the last of them, "isn't this pure bull luck, though, what with those notes falling due the 30th? This lets me out just in the ab-so-lute nick of time! That little fib about going to Europe, though—well, this is high finance, I guess, so I'm clear all round." And a look of beatitude wreathed itself over his lean features.

Two hours later a curiously misspelled letter had been written by our friend the Doc. This letter had been enclosed in a cheap mourning envelope, sprinkled dexterously with salt water, and enclosed in a box to Mrs. Johanna Tripp, *alias* "Kate the Booster," one of the cleverest "molls" in New York. In the box were full instructions, together with a very fine and small steel saw and a newly filed key. A sum of money completed the contents of this prize-package, for contingent expenses, which money left the Reverend Doc. Bender (as the letter said) "broak butt hoapful."

CHAPTER V

"WELL, which shall it be, gentlemen, up the river or down?"

Van Duzer straightened up after starting the engines of the *Javelin*, and laid his hand on the midships steering-wheel. He blinked nervously as the raw December

wind smote him in the face. The boat, just gathering speed, ruffled the green waters in a wide circle.

"I don't know as it makes very much difference, either way," answered Mr. Willard from his seat, wrapping his large loose overcoat about him; but Maynard interrupted with:

"Up the river fer me, if it's all th' same to you."

"Very well," answered the owner. "Up the river it is!"

Van Duzer shoved the spokes down; the boat swung gracefully around and straightened away with accelerated speed. The engines leaped into a double-quick tune, with now and then a hop-skip-and-jump, and foam began to whirl astern.

"She must be doin' fifteen already," remarked Maynard with satisfaction, peering over the rail at the swiftly cloven waters.

"Very nearly, and I haven't begun to let her out yet—she's just playing—wait and see! Would either one of you like to steer? Make yourselves perfectly at home. Act as though the boat was yours."

"T'anks!" said Maynard. "We t'ink she *will* be 'fore long!" and he winked at his companion. In a whisper he added:

"Lucky I woiked in de Union Garridge dat time, eh? If nothin' happens I can tout up a passable jolly on de engine, see? I guess she won't run away from me!" Then, aloud: "She skips some, don't she?"

"Well, yes, a trifle at first," answered Van D., without turning, "but when she gets into her stride she'll be all right—wait and see. There isn't another boat like her anywhere in these waters.

"Thank Heaven for *that!*" he thought, "though she's not doing so badly to-day. But on one of her cranky spells I don't believe the Old Boy himself could get anything out of her!"

A long silence ensued. They drew rapidly along. Mr. Maynard showed considerable curiosity about the engine, and he and Mr. Willard both asked numerous questions concerning its operation, which Van D. carefully explained. Maynard seemed to learn fast. His time at the Union Garage and along the river front, among motor-boats, had not been wasted, as he had already taken occasion to remark.

Van D. finally swung his boat around a curve into a long, straight stretch, took the time and bade his passengers do the same.

"Quarter of three, we'll call it. If we aren't in Marshport by 3.15 I'll eat the grease-cups, grease and all!"

As he spoke he drew goggles from his ulster pocket, slipped them on and pulled his cap well down over his eyes.

Willard and his friend nodded again at each other.

"Ain't this enough to make all de odder novelty-woikers drool wit' envy?" murmured the extempore engineer. "Say, Bender, you sure knows how to display an' deliver de goods! I'd take me hat off to youse if I wasn't scared o' losin' it. Just look at de come-on burnin' all dis gas, just fer a give-away! Oh, say!"

"The E. Z. Marks," Van Duzer was thinking at precisely the same moment. "If they only knew how she's racked and scored and ready for the scrap-heap any old time now, they'd certainly throw spasms. But it's not *my* place to tell 'em, since they can't see it. If they

want to fool themselves, there's no reason in high finance why I shouldn't be *particeps criminis*, even if I have to melt the motor!"

Then he said aloud, turning his head: "Let her out now as much as you like, Mr. Maynard, and we'll see some fun!"

Maynard pulled down the throttle a notch at a time, and the *Javelin* answered like a roweled mustang; she leaped ahead and began to whirl the water from her smooth shoulders in long, smooth surges, cutting through the waves rather than riding over them.

The exhaust of her four-cylinder engine swelled into a roaring quick-fire; on either bow long swirls of creamy froth spurted out, and from the stern whirled a long, undulating wake. The C. A. A. pennant at her stem snapped and crackled; now and then spray came aboard, dashed its spindrift in the men's faces.

Van Duzer fronted this unmoved; the tension was like wine to him; he thrilled with the nervous energy which had worn him out, even as the mad pace at which he loved best to drive the *Javelin* had all but ruined her.

Mr. Willard, 'midships, and his friend at the engine, crouched down in their upturned great-coat collars, held their hats on, and kept silent, save for a quiet word now and then. There was little need for talk so long as Fate was playing their hand, taking all the tricks for them.

Once Maynard remarked: "She knocks some—ain't firin' none too steady," and pointed to the engine. Willard nodded; in such a wind, with that whirring, loud exhaust droning angrily, conversation was not easy.

One or two scenes, however, drew remarks—they

passed curious comments on certain places which came into view as they sped on up the river.

At Portersville, it seems, Maynard had been involved in certain difficulties, and recalled the fact discreetly to his companion. Earlington, they agreed, was a good ripe town for a shake-down; while Dartmouth was excellent to steer clear of.

Occasionally they shouted some remark to Van Duzer about the pace, the miles covered, the engine—but only a word or two. Once or twice when the owner looked round they smiled cheerfully at him; nodded encouragement. Van Duzer grew cheerful, too, thinking of the graft he was going to obtain from his two dupes.

The majestic hills dropped steadily away from them toward the south; the craft they overhauled seemed almost standing still, while shipping, bound down-stream, whirled past at an astonishing rate.

Almost every boat they passed saluted them, and they waved back friendly greetings. It was, on the whole, quite like an ovation, that little trip of theirs.

"Marshport ahead!" shouted Van Duzer at last; the wind whirled his voice back to them like a feather in a typhoon. "Nearly ten miles, so far! Look!" and he held up his watch for them to see. It pointed to 3.12.

"*Bully!*" yelled Maynard; and then a very curious thing happened. Maynard looked significantly at his companion, who nodded and whispered: "Sure you got the 'peter'?"

For answer Maynard reached down into his voluminous pocket and brought up a four-ounce bottle with a dash of some colorless liquid in the bottom.

"All right," said Willard. He got up and staggered

forward to Van Duzer, buffeting against the wind, holding on by the brass rail along the gunwale. Van Duzer edged aside from the wheel to make room for him.

"Doing twenty-three, eh?" Willard shouted, looking all up and down the river to assure himself that no boats were near enough to see what might happen on board the *Javelin*.

"Or better!" answered Van Duzer. "You'll make the mistake—of your life if you don't buy her! Here, try—your hand at steering—see how slick she runs, true as—a watch!"

The wind whipped the words out of his mouth as he loosened his grasp on the spokes. No sooner had he done so than Willard's right arm flashed round Van Duzer's neck, and Willard fell to the bottom of the boat, dragging the unfortunate victim with him.

"Hold on! What—what the dev—" protested Van Duzer, sprawling grotesquely; but before he had time for another syllable Willard had crammed a handkerchief into his mouth, had wrenched both the man's hands behind him and had lashed them together with a short rope which Maynard tossed him.

The unfortunate Van Duzer, so unexpectedly put *hors de combat*, was bundled under the starboard seat, and thereafter, in spite of his glares and savage struggles, received little more attention than the seat itself.

Willard, calmly rising, assumed control of the wheel, heading the *Javelin* out into midstream.

The river, more than a mile wide at that point, offered the best of privacy for any little deal of this kind; and as the two men looked at each other, then around at the few indifferent boats which here and there dotted the water,

they nodded and smiled with the satisfaction which a good conscience inspires when seconded by a sense of duty well performed.

"Ease her up a bit!" directed Willard. "We've got all the time there is now—there's no use racking the motor. Next to honesty, economy!"

Maynard answered by shutting down the gas, and the *burr-r-r-r* of the exhaust dropped suddenly to an intermittent tremolo.

Noise and wind both immediately diminished at once; the speed slackened to a conservative nine or ten miles an hour.

Leaving the engine to run itself, Maynard came forward and joined his companion.

"How much juice we got, I'd like t' know?" he asked, bending over the tank. "Half full, accordin' to de gauge—well, dat's enough fer to git me to some quick purchaser. Shut up!" he added, turning on the helpless Van Duzer, who at these words had set up a great commotion under the seat. "You keep still under dere, see? Dis boat b'longs to *me*, now, an' if you go makin' any holler, somet'ing's goin' to drop on you—dat's a hunch straight out from de lip—tumble!"

Then, turning to Willard: "Wot's de lay now?"

"Well, we've got time to burn, and the best combustion I know is to dodge in by the other bank somewhere in a quiet place. Lie there till midnight, then get rid of *that*"—with a glance at the paralyzed Van Duzer—"and then pick up our friend as per agreement. Anything better in your think-box?"

"Naw, dat's all to de good, just so long's I get de boat after youse is t'rough wit' it."

"Don't worry about that! There won't be any frosty phiz in this game—you know *me!*"

"Sure—well, head her fer Rockland; we'll feed an' have a few, when we git in a good place. Put de wheel over!"

It was a little before midnight when our two friends—working with the aid of a pocket flash-lamp—took the still groaning Van Duzer, loosened his gag, and held his nose until he gasped horribly for breath. Then Maynard filled the chloral hydrate bottle with water, and deftly poured the mixture down Van Duzer's throat.

This unfortunate, choking, had perforce to swallow; five minutes later he had gone to by-by. Then, freely untied, he was laid out on the bank, to wake up only after the dénouement of the little game. Shortly afterward, the measured "putt—putt—putt" of a gasoline engine, moving slowly across the dark reaches of the river through the night, was the only sign that the complex human chess-match was still being played.

CHAPTER VI

SLATS had by no means been idle, while all these doings were being put forward in his behalf. On the contrary, he had taken counsel day by day, and had formed, in his astute brain, every last detail of his intended coup.

First of all he had taken the pains to inform himself minutely concerning the habits of Turnkey Knowles. This had proved no serious task to one of his versatility. Very soon after Bender's escape he felt perfectly cognizant with the main factors of his own prospective one.

And of these he realized that Knowles was the chief.

This functionary, he knew, came on duty at 6:30 P. M. for one week, when he was on night duty, and at 7 A. M. the next.

The 23d of December came during a period of night duty. After having locked up the men under his care Knowles habitually went back to his desk in the rotunda, where he stayed till the midnight inspection.

Both before and after this he kept scrupulous watch down the four corridors; Bender's escape had hurt his reputation and he knew well that, should another convict "blow," his official head would have to fall.

Slat's understood, of course, that so long as Knowles stayed at his desk the chance of "making his get" was just nil. The question therefore arose how to get Knowles away from it for the brief minute necessary for his well-expedited flitting.

With this point in mind, Slat's managed to get a few mumbled words with his left-hand neighbor in the paint-shop, a "bit-faker" named Connors, in for shoving queer. Connors occupied a cell near the middle of the north wing, on the same floor with our hero; he was an accommodating person, and in consideration of certain quantities of tobacco to be sent him in case of a successful get-away, he promised to play his little part in the tournament of wits.

These, to sum up, were the main features in Slat's case:

First, his arrangements with Connors; second, a thorough knowledge of the prison-yard and the basement windows which opened thereinto (the same having been gained by observation and deduction while "doing his

separate"—i.e., at exercise); third, the key and the steel saw, which, as we have said, he wore safely in the toes of his boots; fourth, a lump of graphite he had pinched from the machine-shop where lay his daily toil.

Add a little bit of bright tin-plate which he had also picked up in the shop, and you have his total lay-out. Brains, ingenuity and nerve unlimited rounded these material assets into a beautiful, well-balanced whole.

Thus provided, it was with a good conscience and the happy presage of impending beer that Pod lay down as though to sleep on the evening of the 23d. Inert, resting, thinking, he was polishing up the details of his plan, accumulating reserve strength to carry it out.

One by one the hours and half-hours struck from the tower, at infinite intervals; the night, it seemed to him, was longer than most years.

About eleven o'clock he sat up quietly in bed, reached for his clothes, fished out the lump of graphite from under his mattress, and deftly went to work on the gray stripes of his jacket, toning them down. This was tough work, but he hung to it and by a quarter to twelve had largely obliterated the stripes on both jacket and trousers.

"They'll do," thought he. "They'll pass in the night, like Connor's lead jitneys!"

The clothes might fairly be counted on to escape public observation, if such had to be faced, until better could be had.

"They *got* to do till 3 A. M., anyway," said Pod, hanging them up carefully again, inside out, so that Knowles should not notice them at inspection.

Inspection passed quietly, perfectly, without suspicion.

Knowles reached Pod's cell about 12:15, flashed his electric hand-lamp in, perfunctorily, and passed on.

When Pod heard him go back to the rotunda, heard his chair scrape on the iron floor, he got up noiselessly and slipped into his modified clothes, leaving his shoes off. Then, creeping to the door, he took his piece of tin and poked it, at a certain already-determined angle, through the bars. Squinting into the reflection, he was just able to discern a vague blue spot which he knew was Knowles.

"Science wins again, by a hair!" he murmured to himself.

Then he stood still, the tin in one hand, his boots in the other, the key between his teeth. In the toe of the left boot lay the little steel saw on which everything depended. Standing thus, watching the blurred bit of color which represented Knowles, he once more reviewed the situation. At the end of the west wing he knew there was a short concrete stair leading down into the basement; a door closed this stairway.

This door was supposed to be kept locked, but as Pod had discovered, through innocent remarks of his, it was often left unlocked for greater convenience of the janitors.

Beyond the door lay a passage, flanked on the right by a sterilizing-plant and on the left by coal-bins. From midnight until 5:30 A. M. nobody was likely to be in that particular section of the basement, though farther along lay sleeping-quarters for some of the inferior employees.

The coal-bins were filled through windows which communicated with the yard; these windows had hinged gratings with vertical bars four inches apart; they were

strongly padlocked with two steel padlocks apiece. The bins at this season were almost full, a circumstance in his favor, as he could thus easily get at the bars.

These and other things, as we have said, he had discovered by keen observation and sound reasoning while at "exercise." As he passed over the various data in his mind, he realized to the full how very dangerous and difficult the obstacles were; how disastrous any failure would be, involving a longer term and much greater severity; yet, weighing the good and the evil in the balances of his judgment, he felt no serious discouragement, but only keen anxiety to be up and at the task.

"I'd take on a few more troubles," quoth he, "and yet carry the money home. I'd play 'em to win, for a place and to show, an' cop the coin all three ways, on this trot against Fate. Why don't that Connors get a wiggle on? Think I want to pose here like a livin' picture of Venus emergin' from the bath all night, eh? Well, I guess—"

"Tap! Tap! Tap!"

A sharp metallic rapping from the north wing signaled that some prisoner required attention. Slat, squinting at the blue blur, saw it move, rise, travel; then to his infinite joy it disappeared. Knowles had gone into the north wing!

"Here's where I cut loose!" thought Slat. "I've got just two minutes. Quick exit for mine!"

With the assurance of an absolutely colossal nerve, coupled with a perfectly thought-out and oft-rehearsed plan, he slipped the key into the lock, turned it without noise, swung the door open and peered out as a turtle peers.

Nobody in sight!

Relocking the door he dropped the key down his neck; then, holding the shoes in his hand, he stepped out in silent stocking-feet and hiked down the dim corridor, soundlessly as a shadow, swiftly as an exorcised wraith. Not one snorer serenaded less vociferously on his account; nobody knew, nobody even guessed what kind of fly-by-night was winging its way thence.

Pod's celerity was astonishing; unlike most men of Gargantuan girth, he was quick and active under stimulus, quick in body as well as in wits, which is still a rarer blessing. His 280-odd pounds of gelatinous avoirdupois seemed no longer to exist; he was agile as the proverbial gazelle.

In a jiffy he had reached the end of the corridor, had turned the end of the cell-row—now, at least, he was out of sight of the rotunda. Silently he padded down the concrete steps and tried the door.

Was it locked? Ah, wo, it resisted! Locked? No—it gave—it yielded—it was merely stuck—it opened wide! When it closed gently, Pod was on the other side, in the basement passageway.

"Huh, this is goin' some!" thought he. "As a swift mover they don't need to give *me* no handicap! And say, when they find the bird gone and the cage locked, well, won't there be some almighty altitudinous rhetoric, eh?"

Down the passage he skittered; in a minute he was on the coal, crawling toward the window. This coal was lump-size, very large, for the furnaces; therefore it did not roll and rattle like the finer sorts.

"Ain't this luck enough to make you radiate glad-

ness!" soliloquized Slat. "There's a dash of everything in it except heliotrope!"

Another minute and he had crawled up close to the window and was feeling of the bars.

"Half-inch, wrought-iron, I make it. If my equator was civilized, two bars out would turn the trick and put me in the fly-fly-birdie class; but as it *ain't* I'll have to gouge three. Well, here goes—fair heart never won a faintin' lady."

The quick rasp of steel on iron, very quiet, but very energetic, went zee-zee-zee-zee through the silence of the coal-bin.

Pod, subtly wise, attacked the bars not at the middle, as a novice might have done, but at the top, so that a single bend, with long leverage, would drag them down horizontally.

He worked with a quick, forceful stroke, pulling the little three-inch saw back and forth fifty or sixty times, then pausing to listen and to let the steel cool off so that it should not lose its fine temper. In twenty-five minutes the first bar was divided and he had attacked the second. This bothered him considerably, both because he was getting terribly tired and because the saw was beginning to lose some of its "set."

Still he kept on with good courage, changing hands once in a while, and at the end of about forty minutes more had divided the second bar. When this was done he took a long rest, listening attentively. Here and there above him he heard stray footsteps or a raucous snore; but that his absence had been discovered there was no indication.

"Here goes the fi-nal-ity—luck in odd numbers!" quoth he as he tackled number three.

Blisters had begun to form on his thumbs and fore-fingers; his arms and shoulders ached with the horribly monotonous saw-saw-sawing, so cramped, so exasperatingly slow.

"Glaciers is chain-lightnin' side o' *this*!"

The third bar became, as it were, a horrible, interminable nightmare, but Slat kept at it, with gritted teeth, sweating face, and veins that started out on his temples.

His hands grew numb; his neck was beginning to swell—a touch of heat-apoplexy that he had experienced four years previously, had by no means improved his health. On and on he hacked, however, for just beyond that third bar lay the prison yard; across the yard was the tool-shed built against the inside of the wall; outside of that wall ran the street.

"It's this time or bust!" he groaned wearily, throwing every ounce of energy into that endless, harrowing rasp; every nerve and fiber of him seemed striving against the sullen metal. Exhaustion rose about him like a tide, trying to drag him down, away from his work, but he fought it off savagely.

The prison bell struck two, and he realized that his time was growing short. On and on he wrestled. At last, when it seemed that flesh and blood could endure no more, when the blunted saw was worn almost smooth and his hands were raw, the blade slipped suddenly through. The bar was severed!

"I hope the fiend that made this here iron gets a snug

little corner down below—red-hot, too!” groaned Pod, slumping down on the coal to pant a minute.

The task was really but half done; the road he had to travel was but started. Summoning his energy, he seized the bars, one by one, and pulled them toward him with all his strength; they yielded and came down, leaving a space about two feet high by sixteen inches wide, through which he now had to squeeze his elephantine carcass.

“There ain’t a sardine livin’ but would blush to think of how I’ve got him outclassed!” thought he, exploring the opening with his torn hands. “But it’s this or else a merry canter back to durance vile. Better try it sideways, I guess. Here’s where leaf lard’s so far below par you’d need a Lick telescope to sight it!”

He poked his head through, twisted himself, and thrust his shoulders out. Then he stuck.

“*Eughhh!*” he grunted, tugging and writhing, all to no avail. His globular diameter flattened masterfully, but stuck fast at about the Tropic of Capricorn—which very naturally got Pod’s goat. Struggle as he might, he could not get through.

“Them damn buttons an’ clothes!” he muttered, and retreated, with difficulty, back on to the coal. He rapidly divested himself of his garments and had another try at the window, in a state of nature.

This time with pain, prayer, patience and profanity in equal doses, he made a go of it; lamely he dragged himself into the yard, a 280-pound cherub, lovely to behold. Then he reached in and pulled his clothes after him.

Rapidly he dressed again, then, with his shoes in

hand, stood listening. He could hear nothing suspicious, nothing but the usual night-sounds of that great terrible hive of sorry human bees with their torn, soiled wings; no sound there was to alarm him, yet he panted like one in great fear, and the sweat did not dry from his forehead, despite the searching wind which made him shiver.

"Next!" said he to himself, getting a grip on his nerve.

The night was cold and clear, with frost in the air. He drew a deep breath, passed a hand over his eyes, and looked up at the stars.


"Lord!" said he. "To think that any men should have the say-so over any other men—to think they can take *this* away from 'em!"

One look around, and he was creeping along the wall, in its shadow; now he had turned the corner and was opposite the tool-shed. This shed, as we have indicated, was built against the yard-wall, and was separated from the rear of the west wing by a vacant space of about sixty feet.

Slats looked at the space and hesitated; along in the shadow he felt comparatively safe, but out there—who could tell what eye might find him, what tongue raise the alarm?

As he viewed the yard, faintly lighted by the stars and by a dim aura from the prison itself, he felt what doctors know as *agoraphobia*, the fear of open places.

He trembled as with a chill; his teeth began to clatter. Behind him lay the "pen," years of servile, unpaid toil, bestial confinement; before him life, liberty, hope, everything.



"How *can* I buck such a proposition?" he groaned, shrinking closer to the prison's shelter.

Then, suddenly pushing his resolution as an unskilled diver has to do when plunging from a height, he took a long breath, set his jaw, and made a quick, crouching run.


Before you could have said "Boo!" to a bear, he was across—nothing easier in this world! Nobody had seen him, nobody knew he was there, and the run itself was only a trifle, even for his rotund corporosity; yet he was panting like a coursed jack-rabbit.

There was no time to rest, however; another and far harder task remained—climbing to the shed roof, escalading the wall, and then dropping to the street outside. To any man of normal build, this would have been no slouch of a job; but to Pod, with his huge bulk, it approached the impossible.

There is in human beings (as doubtless you all know) a mysterious secondary mind called the subjective consciousness, which, in times of great stress, asserts itself and endues us with powers quite beyond our normal capabilities.

This and nothing else it must have been which hoisted that Brobdingnagian bulk of Pod's to the shed roof. Just how it was done he never could recall. He had a vague notion, afterward, that he had first tossed his shoes up, had then swarmed up a stack of joists that leaned in the corner nearest the wall (which joists kept turning and slipping and would not be still); that he had then got a hand-grip on the edge of the roof, and had eventually pulled himself up.

How he had accomplished this last feat was not to be



explained in any ordinary way. However it may have been, Pod realized at last that after some frantic and excessive struggles he was on the shed, over twelve feet from the ground, with the yard-wall projecting six feet still above him.

Here it was dark and safe; here he sat and rested a moment, crouching close to the wall, on the tar-and-gravel roofing. The idea came to him that now was the time to put on his shoes. He crawled to them, slipped them on and laced them tightly.

Then he stood up, took a firm hold on the top of the wall with his swollen, painful hands, and, with a tremendous effort, wormed himself to the top. Here he hung, suspended like Mohammed's tomb, between heaven and earth; cautiously he peered over. The prospect was hopeful; only fifteen feet separated him from the street-level. An electric-light glared at the next corner, true, but not a soul was visible.

"Here's where I stack into a bunch of get-away!" quoth Pod, wiping his forehead with the rough sleeve which on a former occasion had served to dry his tearful eyes at mention of his "mudder."

Then, with the airy grace and debonair sprightliness of a ten-ton mastodon he swung himself over the coping, dangled a minute like a pork-barrel, loosened all holds, and dropped.

He hit the sidewalk like a runaway planet. The jar loosened up two flagstones, made Pod's cyclopean blubber undulate grotesquely, and shot a complete galaxy of constellations through his brain; it also wrenched his left ankle severely and hurt his back. Nevertheless, he scrabbled to his feet in a hurry.

"Me to the conifers!" he said, and beat it at an amazing pace toward the river-front.

A minute, and he, too, was swallowed by that same tangle of alleys which but a few weeks before had sheltered his astute friend the Doctor.

CHAPTER VII

THERE is an old Spanish proverb: *Salen á cortar lana y vuelven trasquilados*—"Some go out for wool and come home shorn."

With this brief introduction, let me invite your attention to a certain motor-boat which, in the thick gloom of the third hour after midnight on the 24th of December, was cruising tentatively along the east bank of the river.

This boat carried no lights and contained only two men, one of whom tended the engine, while the other, at the wheel, steered close inshore past a sleeping town.

The steersman's object seemed to be this: to keep within hailing distance of the various sheds and wharves along the river, yet not to approach close enough to be in any way conspicuous from the shore. After passing down-stream a certain distance, he swung his boat in a wide arc and ascended the stream. He seemed to be looking, listening for some signal.

Twice the boat performed this maneuver. Save for a trivial remark, now and then, the two men kept silent. As the one at the wheel turned his boat southward for the third time, he scrutinized his watch by the light of the electric flash-lamp.

"Past three already," said he, "and not a sign of

him yet. What if he'd slipped up! That *would* be hilarious, wouldn't it? What the *devil*—?"

Over the dark water came booming and rolling a deep-toned bell in rhythmic cadence: "Dong! Dong! Dong!"

"They're on!" ejaculated the man at the engine.

"*That's* no bull!"

"Hike fer ours!"

"*What?*"

"I said, we better make a push away from here. Flit, fade!"

"Not—on—your—life!"

"But they're dead onter 'im!"

"What *of* it? If we can't outplay the tads, I'll turn farmer."

"But, Bender—"

"Chaw that right off; there's no 'but' *to* it! D'you suppose this trip was arranged for your convenience? This boat is mine till I get through with it, now you fall to that! Ease her off a bit!"

"S'pose I won't?"

"Won't? Did I understand you to say '*won't*'? Well now, Flynn, my sweet cherub, you must be suffering from relapsed memory. Don't forget you still owe the State nine years and eight months; if the bulls get a hook at you there'll be iron between you and the sky P. D. Q., and that's on the level.

"Me? Yes, I owe time, too; but this deal goes through or we both show down. I've never been bluffed yet and you can't do it as long as I hold this wheel in one hand and a gatt in the other—loaded."

As he spoke there came a little glint of light on polished metal which corroborated his words.

"Ease off!" commanded the steersman again, and this time the rough-neck obeyed, grumbling profanely. The boat's speed slackened till she hardly made steerage-way.

From afar the bell still tolled, presaging misfortune.

"Pipe that!" exclaimed the steersman suddenly.

Away to the left, at an indefinite distance, lights were gleaming, moving slowly.

"Pipe that! They're hitting his trail! Shut that engine 'way off!"

The "putt-putt-putt" ceased; the boat drifted silently, invisibly with the current, a shadow floating on shadows.

Still the bell tolled from the distance; the flickering lights seemed coming nearer, nearer.

"What's *that* now?"

"Sounds like somebody's got a damn cough, over dere," answered Flynn.

From down-stream a short distance there drifted to them a sudden coughing, persistent, asthmatic, painfully choking; it seemed to proceed from a long wharf that projected beside a disused warehouse, dimly visible through the gloom. Toward this spot the lights seemed hurrying.

"Start her along a bit! Look lively!" commanded Bender.

The engine coughed as though in answer to the unseen sufferer; the boat drew in toward the wharf. Bender brought it close, then said, in an entirely matter-of-fact voice:

"Hello, there!"

No answer.

"Is this the P. S. wharf?" he asked.

"Hustle in!" answered a husky voice.

Flynn released the drive; the engine ran idly and the boat slid up to the wharf. Bender leaned over the coaming, seized the string-piece and brought the *Javelin* to a standstill.

A dim figure of rotund proportions emerged from the shelter of some mooring-bitts at the corner of the wharf, and started for the boat. As it did so, from beyond the warehouse a faint clatter-clatter as of heavy boots came running over cobble-stones; and still the vibrant bell tolled the alarm. Suddenly distant lanterns flashed; there rang cries of:

"This way! Here! Halt!"

"*Jump!*" commanded Bender.

Slats ran heavily (exhausted as he was), fell rather than jumped from the wharf, and landed in the boat like a ton of pig-iron; the *Javelin* quivered protestingly from stem to stern and rocked like mad. "*Ooof!*" ejaculated Slats.

At the same instant Bender leaped for Flynn, clinched, and threw him with a fancy half-Nelson. The two men rolled struggling in the bottom of the boat.

"Git off me! Lemme up! Watcher doin'?" protested Flynn, amazed.

"Grab hold here, Pod, and help me chuck this car-rion out!" grunted Bender, straining furiously to subdue his lively-fisted engineer. "*Quick! Quick!*"

Pod, still sorely shaken and aching tremendously, rushed to do his pal's bidding.

"Obey first, find out later," is a good rule to follow in such crises. Under Pod's weight the activities of Flynn very promptly subsided; in a few seconds, kick-

ing, cursing, biting, choking with violent protestations, he had been brought to submission. The *Javelin* had drifted with the current and was already some rods from shore. Lights now gleamed at the warehouse.

"Over with him!" commanded Bender.

"My boat—promised me—I'll be pinched—"

"Bite that off! This boat's *ours* now, and you get the kibosh!"

"But you promised—"

"*Out!*" The two pals forced him to the rail, beating off his frenzied handgrips.

"They'll gimme ten years!"

"Good! You deserve twenty! *Let* go there, will you!"

With a wrench that loosened a yard of the rail they jerked Flynn's clutch free and bundled him, blaspheming, over the side. He plunged into the ice-cold river with a gigantic splash.

"*Help! Help!*" he screamed involuntarily in an agony of terror, then choked as the water found his mouth.

Bender sprang to the engine, and threw the drive-lever forward. The propellor woke to furious activity, and at the stern there burst forth a seething blossom of foam as the *Javelin* surged forward. Bender pulled the throttle wide open, then ran to the wheel and jammed down the spokes.

A sudden castanet-clatter of footsteps echoed along the wharf, then:

"*Crack! Crack!*" barked a revolver. Another joined it, and lead whipped the water; one bullet spudded into the stern of the fleeing speed-boat.

"Down! Get down!" cautioned Bender. The fugitives crouched low, out of range.

"What made you—chuck Flynn?" Pod questioned breathlessly. "Grudge or—somethin'?"

"*Him?* Oh, nothing except the same reason they say the jovial Russians toss out kids for wolves. Besides, we get his share in the boat. See?"

"Kind of rough on him, eh?"

"For-get it! That isn't a fly-bite on some o' the other features of this get-away—a New York sport used to own this boat, see? He got Big Peter and is sleeping on the cold, cold ground, minus two thousand. Respectable old booster was persuaded to be your mama; *she's* pinched for conspiracy; may get three years; and besides that—"

"Who *was* she, anyway, Bender? I always was sort of inquisitive about whatever parents fate puts in me path. D'you know her?"

"No! Drop your sentiment, Pod! You'll be sympathizing with the come-ons, next! I'm ashamed of you, for a fact, I am! Hear that?"

Confused cries rose from the shore, mingled with faint splashings of the unfortunate Flynn.

"We got one of 'em, anyway!" they heard a voice cry faintly; then somebody shouted:

"Here! Here's a launch! Gimme a knife quick while I cut this blink-blank rope!"

Profanity followed; then a weak "Teuff-teuff-teuff" announced pursuit.

"The yaps!" exulted Bender. "Chasin' a twenty-five mile racer in a dinky little launch! It is to stretch a smile! Here," he continued, "take the wheel a min-

ute, and steer due south. I want to peel off some of my superfluous raiment—I've got two suits on, and it's rawther stuffy, when one of 'em is mastodon size."

"Two suits?"

"Sure—one's for you. In five minutes you'll be dressed like a sure-enough plutocrat and your late garments will be wafting on the boozum of the deep. How's that for poetical? Poetry—ah! me for it; but sentiment, never!

"Makes me cacchinate yet to think how Flynn put his head into the trap; why, the poor mutt really expected we were going to hand him this boat, after we got through with it. And good cold spongs waiting for us at Oldham, in Uncle Feinberg's pocket—eight hundred of 'em—when we deliver the goods to him, which we'll do long before sun-up."

"Eight hundred?" interrogated Slat, beginning to change his clothes. "You mean to say you're nickin' him to the tune of eight?"

"Eight is right. That's what he'll kick in with. I call that playing it pretty strong. *He* don't know the cylinders are about gone; no, he'll find that out later, when he's renamed, repainted, re-everythinged her. Never mind, sheep there be, and we must shear 'em, 'specially all such as try to shear us first, same as the man that owned this craft to begin with, and Flynn, and Feinberg. Eight hundred, kid, to speed us on our merry way. Here's to the speeding!"

Bender dredged up a flask from his pocket, ceremoniously handed it over to Pod, then took a long one himself.

"Flynn ought to have a nip," he remarked, catching

his breath. "I'll stake my last maravedi he's got cold shivers enough to last him a lifetime. It *was* raw to get up and go away and leave him like that, wasn't it? But he'll never dare to bleat a kick. It's a stand-off all round. *Hear* 'em entertaining him back there!"

Far through the gloom a faint discord came wafting over the dark surface of the river. Once or twice impotent little shots popped; there seemed to be an ant-like running to and fro with the lanterns.

Then the *Javelin* straightened out like a bird of passage for her northward flight to a safe haven with that most versatile of "fences," old uncle Feinberg, and all sights, all sounds of pursuit were blotted out.

IV

“AMMUNITION—WITH CARE”

Wherein Arms and the Man Indulge in a Merry Whirl

CHAPTER I

“**T**HAT may all be, and very much to the philosophics, I admit,” retorted Pittsburg Bender in answer to Pod’s lazy plea for continued idleness, after a certain period of seclusion, subsequent to the get-away.

“That’s fine and pretty in theory, but as for plugging the game along, it isn’t worth a cubeb cigarette to a yen-yen smoker. If we don’t get by with something pretty P. G. Q., we’ll be left in the cold, inhospitable hole. It’s all right enough to do the eloquent about not troubling Trouble till Trouble deals; but as a means of pulling down the green-boys it’s strictly on the pig. I blush for you!”

He blushed to the tune of another four fingers, then again fell to pacing nervously up and down the room.

“But!” expostulated Pod, “ain’t we still got three hundred an’ fifty bucks? I’m money-numb, on that. What more d’you want? Good’s a million, while it lasts! You surely ain’t tryin’ to lead me into temptation again? Lemme enjoy the luxury of bein’ honest fer a spell! I like it—the contrast is vo-lup-shus!”

Sprawled on the lounge of their snug flat on West 100th Street (in a most eminently respectable neighborhood not two blocks from the Park), Pod rested care-free and content. Digesting an excellent dinner, with a fat cigar in his mouth, and stocking-feet on a pillow no less rotund than himself, he felt absolutely at peace with the world.

All was well. High living and no worry for the past two months had done their work for Pod. He had put on all of twenty pounds, and now menaced any but the stoutest of Mission furniture.

“Oh, Pod, Pod, I didn’t think it of you!” sighed Bender, folding his long frame into a chair. “A few more hauls like that last one of ours with the buzz-boat, and I do believe you’d degenerate into respectability. Such a waste of natural talents! On my word—”

“You *got* a word, eh?” interrupted Pod with a lazy drawl.

“On my word, I shouldn’t wonder if a plenty of the gorgonzuma in your clothes would pervert you into a pillar of society!”

“Couldn’t be a solider one, could there?”

“Won’t you be serious?” snapped Bender.

His temper was worn by inactivity and the simple life.

“Sure thing! I am now! It’d be just like you prognosticate. With a little steady dough to bake, I’d ‘square it’ so sudden that you’d snap an eyelash out. I ain’t throwin’ cons for the fun of it, like you. Think I’m infatuated with flimflams? Nix!

“Nothin’ to ‘em, after all. It’s just the way I was raised. No, not raised; I mean kicked up. I’d like to

be cut square an' hemmed over as well as any man livin'. I tell you, this zigzag pattern of ours is all to the blink. Nothin' to it. Free to-day with a clinkin' pocket; doin' a bit in 'the Big House' to-morrow, an' at the end—"

"Well, what?" grouched Bender.

"Why, croak in some little iron bed with a screen round you, an' be a cadaver on a slab for the rah-rah boys. Not even a show-down to get planted in one piece with a marble dove on top."

"Rot!"

"Exactly. In small, assorted chunks. No, Ben, I'd like to chuck it if I could. That's why a few rupees relaxes me into virtue. It's my treat. At heart I'm a bug on this honesty stuff, I tell you. That's why, with only three hundred and fifty left, I'm doin' the Sleepin' Beauty on this here sofa, with a letter in my pocket that might be worth two thousand if—"

"What?"

Bender, all sudden energy, sprang to his feet.

"What? A letter? Two thousand? And you won't tackle it? Oh, you—you—"

"Tone it off a few, Ben; soft-pedal a bit," responded Pod, wiggling his toes comfortably into the pillow. "Some little pitcher outside there in the hall might happen to get a case of enlarged ear; and besides, the letter's in my hip-pocket an' I'm layin' on it, so it's no use for you to energize—unless you've got a pinch-bar up your sleeve, which I know you ain't."

Pod blew a smoke-ring or two, at which he dabbed a slow, pudgy forefinger. Bender glared with indignation at his supine running-mate.

"You squealer!" he protested angrily. "You got the

eternal limit hammered through and clinched! Us with a dent in our wad deeper than Culebra Cut; me with the indigos and not a touch in sight; every prospect that in a few weeks more we'll be hitting the gratuitous tiffin; and yet you—lie there—and—”

Rage choked him to silence.

“Yes,” smiled Pod obesely, “that’s what I do!”

“All right, then,” growled Bender, “go on lying! But just engrave this on your think-tablets, that I’m done with you! You’re not worthy a first-class con-worker’s friendship! Here’s where I blow, and get occupied on something for myself so quick that it’ll make a Marathon record look like freight-car schedules! Ta-ta for yours!”

And he scowled threateningly at Pod. The reposeful one woke to a semblance of anxious solicitude.

“Mean it, Ben?” he queried. “Really can’t stand the goody-goods no longer!”

“Not an hour!”

“And you’d quit your Podslat for the lure of—”

“Anything, rather than chair-warming!”

“Oh, well, then,” deliberated Pod mournfully, “I s’pose it’s ‘get energetic’ for mine, too. Life without you would be a shade too narcotic. So, if you insist we’ll give this the once over, an’—”

“Insist is my middle name!”

For all answer, Pod heaved himself painfully to a sitting posture on the distressed sofa, and with exertion drew from his hip-pocket a crumpled envelope. Bender the while observed him eagerly.

“Lug a chair and get receptive!” suggested Pod as he flattened the letter on his massive knee.

CHAPTER II

"IT'S from an ex-pal of mine in Canada," Slats prefaced the reading, while Bender sat down close in front of him and lighted a fresh cigar. "As letters go, it's all to the strawberries, and calculated to hand you the smile-capsules in double doses. You know the writer—Long Bob, the ex-gun, and—"

"Never mind about the rhetorics!" Bender interrupted. "Get verbal with information. I can hear your pyrotechnics any old time!"

Pod held up a warning hand.

"Peace, be still!" he commanded. "This individual in Canada, as perhaps you remember, used to be in the sparkler business here, but he had a little ruction with the gov'ment last spring regardin' a private tariff revision he was tryin' to put in force, and was taken with a sudden case of stampede toward a cooler climate where the laws is easier an' there ain't such rafts of flymen.

"Well, since he's been there he's had several brushes with our good old Uncle Samuel. Some of his deals have gone through, and some have wedged tighter than a Bronx express at 6 P. M. He's grazed the bird-cage, too, once or twice, and is gettin' leary of any elementaries like hollow boot-heels, stuffed neckties, an' such like. Fact is, both him an' his two pals are known, an' he can't move a finger without some bull buttin' in."

"So?"

"'S a fact. Remember the X-ray case last month? Yes? Well, that was his side-partner Jackson—'Hungry Bill' Jackson—that he'd induced to lunch on the pebbles before a trip to New York. But they caught

him just the same, with half a gill of the best Amsterdam 'Roughs' in his anatomy. I've got the newspaper clip-pin' somewhere all about it."

Bender's cigar-tip glowed feverishly with the tension of his receptivity, but he made no comment.

"So then," Slat's continued, "so then, this friend of mine develops leary-itis and stands off on a new tack. This is the tack, and it's pointed, too:

12, Rue Réaumur, Quebec,
Feb. 18.

DEAR POD:

B. J. tells me you and P. B. are on the loaf for a bit. How will you go ten per cent on shipment of Peerless Shells? If so, order through some regular sporting-goods house in New York, addressing "Canadian Cartridge Co." at above address. Want this to go through before last of March. Reserve shells in boxes marked "Ammunition—With Care!" Dispose you know where and remit, minus commission. Let me know.

Yours,

BOB.

A moment's silence fell as Slat's finished. Then with a sudden burst of enthusiasm, quite foreign ordinarily to him, Bender cried:

"Let you know? You bet we'll let you know! This sure does the carving cut to the D. and O. sensation and gives Jim Dumps his count on the mat! Let him know!"

And Bender sprang up, "all with joy irradiate," strode over to the table, rummaged in a box for stationery, and sat down to write a letter to Pod's ex-pal in Canada.

"Well?" interrogated Slat's with mild surprise. "Ain't you a trifle to the accelerate? You sure are a

bug to do the get-there act! You remind me of a six-ply psychic hurricane! Why, we ain't even decided whether we'll take the job yet!"

"I have!" retorted Bender. "And the quicker we get the fuse of those same explosives lighted, the sooner there'll be a cloudburst of legal tender round about us. Back, back to the shell, Tortoise! But as for me—give me cartridges or give me a quick wallop! 'Ammunition —With Care!' Me for it!"

And as Pod, the Quebec letter still crumpled in his mastodonic paw, chewed at his extinct cigar, Bender's fluent pen danced across the paper with a profusion of glad acceptances.

CHAPTER III

MID-MARCH had scarce melted the winter's snows when, of a certain Saturday forenoon, two friends of not unsportsmanlike appearance strolled into the little down-town branch of Howard & Collins' gun emporium on Reade Street.

From the gloomy back of the shop advanced to meet them a most obliging clerk. Recent memories of two or three advantageous sales of shotguns and accessories helped spread a welcoming smile across his face. To him graciously nodded the sporting gentlemen.

"That ammunition of ours arrived yet?" asked the tall, thin one pleasantly.

"Came three days ago," the clerk in charge informed them, giving his hands a dry shampoo. "Might have sent it out to you, if I'd had the address."

"Oh, that's all right," the stout, red-necked one as-

sured him, with a quick sidelong glance at his companion. “Time enough for that. Box come through all right, did it—not opened on the way, nor nothin’?”

“No, not that I know of. Why?”

“Er—er—why, we’re cranks on cartridges, him an’ me, that’s all!” And he jerked his thumb at the lean fellow, who seemed a nervous, fidgety sort. “I don’t b’lieve there’s a decent shell made in this country no-how; an’ he’s got a theory that once the original package is opened the—the—”

“Shells degenerate very quickly!” the other concluded with a frown of disapproval at the mastodon.

“Very likely, very likely indeed,” murmured the clerk, a trifle puzzled, despite his long familiarity with cranks of all brands and gauges on shot, shells, powders and percussion-caps. “D’you want to see the box? It’s out back.”

“What say, Bill?” the slim one queried, seemingly at ease again. “Might as well have a look, eh?”

“Sure!” assented the behemoth. “Then we’ll know what to send round for it—a baby-carriage or a truck. Is it much of a box?”

“U-m-m-m, pretty sizable,” the clerk judicially replied, leading the way toward the storeroom at the rear. “Must be all of a hundred. Did you intend to take it away to-day?”

“Why?”

“Well, we close at one, Saturdays, so you’ll have to get an expressman round here pretty soon. It’s past twelve now.”

“The devil it is!” growled the thin sportsman, glancing at his watch. “That’s right—say, I didn’t think it

was so late. And we've got to be out at Teaneck by three-thirty for the shoot! We ought to have come in yesterday. All your fault, Bill—just as I said things would turn out. Now what?"

"Aw, forget it!" gibed the other. "What's the matter with just takin' along a couple hundred shells, an' havin' the rest sent up Monday? I ain't afraid of luggin' a few pounds weight or bulgin' my pockets. Thank the Lord, I ain't got no shape to spoil!"

And he grinned at his own sally.

"Good idea," his companion acquiesced. Then to the clerk: "Just pry her open, will you, and we'll load up. I guess that's the best we can do for to-day."

"Just as you like," the clerk smiled, peeking here and there in the crowded storeroom for the box in question. "Um-m-m—that's odd! Thought I saw it here last night, right on top of this case. Hey, Burke!" he hailed vociferously, "where's that box o' shells?"

From somewhere below-stairs a muffled voice filtered up:

"What box?"

"The specials, from Canada!"

"I dunno. Why?"

"Two men up here looking for it—their goods. Come on up and lend a hand!"

Followed a grumbling, a confused sound as of packing-cases being lifted, a tramping on the stair, and from the basement emerged a dusty youth with smooth-plastered hair and a curiously mobile mouth.

"Can't find it, hey?" he interrogated. "Search *me!* Seen it myself yesterday. It was right here where your hand is. P'raps Sam might know. 'Member, we left

him here when we quit last night? Where's Sam?"

The dusty youth spoke jerkily, and at each vocal effort his mouth indulged in astonishing gymnastics.

"Where's Sam?"

"Sam? Why, I sent him out a few minutes ago to the bank—told him he needn't come back to-day on account of havin' worked overtime last night making up the shelves. D'you suppose he—"

The clerk paused in perplexed embarrassment, scratching a worried head. The two customers, with impatient, almost threatening looks, hung on his words, while the dusty youth said nothing, but swallowed nervously.

"Well, how about it?" exclaimed the mastodon named Bill. "Where in L's our box, an' where's our special shells? That's what we wanta know—not about Sam's half-holiday, whoever Sam is! We ordered the goods through you, an' you gotta produce 'em! Cough up!"

"Say!" the youth volunteered, coming to his perturbed superior's assistance with praiseworthy *esprit de corps*. "Say, seems to me I seen a box—empty—marked 'Quebec' down-stairs this morning. Lemme look!"

And he vanished, also jerkily, down the stairway, while the two customers, with rage and a great dread gripping at their hearts, glared at the unfortunate clerk, at each other, at nothing in particular.

"Here she is!" the youth's reedy voice rose fatefully from below. "An', by the way she's splintered, Sam opened her. I got her!"

He re-emerged to that perplexed and panic-stricken trio, with a large "empty" in his arms. An instant the mastodon's eyes bulged at this dread apparition, then he burst forth:

"Say, you bunch o' hamstrung June-bugs! You paralytic push o' pinheads! Where's our cartadges? Say!—" He shook a hamlike fist under the alarmed clerk's nose. "You think we order specials all the way from Canada just to have some dope-consumin' Dick-the-Deadeye-readin' office-boy o' yours—"

"Bill, cut that!" interrupted the slim chap, who had grown quite pale, but was entirely collected.

"—Boy of yours chuck 'em round like they was two cents a—"

"Cut it, I said! We'll find 'em yet. Where's your common sense?"

The mammoth's great jowls reddened like a turkey's wattles with suppressed fury as he choked the torrent of his eloquence at his partner's warning. He turned on his heel and strode ponderously out into the front shop, the others after him.

"*Find 'em!*" he bellowed, sweeping his huge arm in one comprehensive gesture of command toward the shelves. "That exhausted vacuum of yours has prob'ly put 'em out for sale! Now get busy an' find 'em! An' say! Have you sold 'em? Has anythin' gone out o' here this mornin'? Spit it out!"

The clerk, his visions of future advantageous sales fast dissolving like scenes upon a stereopticon, hunted for words, but found only stammering bits of speech:

"Why—er—I *did* notice that—there was some new boxes on the shelves this morning—but I never—never thought they was yours—couldn't—didn't know what Sam had done. I ain't sold anything out of 'em—there's some of 'em now, see?"

He pointed with tremulous finger to a row of blue

cartons behind the left-hand counter, a row with a gap at one end. The dusty youth stared with increasing apprehension.

“Have *you* sold any of ‘em?” demanded the clerk of him, while the two irate customers effervesced menacingly.

The clerk’s relief at exculpating himself added only fresh wo and fear to the dusty assistant, who now beheld himself unwittingly made scapegoat of the whole tangle woven by Sam’s blundering zeal at keeping up the stock.

“Only—only four boxes,” stammered Dusty, his vocal chords a-jump. “Them at that end. Sam, he put all that was alike together. What I sold was labeled—”

“Labeled how?” cried the lean man, in a taut voice.

“‘With care,’ in red letters. They looked extra nice. That’s why the feller said he’d take ‘em—”

“What feller?” Mammoth had Dusty by the shoulder as though to wring the information from him.

“How do *I* know? He come in about nine. Said he’d fergot to stock up at his own dealer’s. Said he wanted some extra-quality shells for a shoot this aft’noon—”

“What did he look like? Out with it! Tall, you say? With sideboards an’ a plaid cap? That’s enough! An’ where was he goin’?”

“Search *me!*”

“Did he say?”

“Why—seems like he did say somethin’—sounded like Cramp—Crompt—was it? Or—”

“Crompton?” snapped the thin sportsman, his voice incisive as a scalpel. “Was it Crompton, Long Island?”

"There, that's just it!" Dusty's voice expressed immense relief. "Crompton, that's it! D'you know—"

"Give us four boxes, quick!" commanded the lean chap. "Maybe we'll get there in time yet! It's at the L.A.A. No, you don't need to wrap 'em up! Jump, now!"

A moment later, clerk and Dusty were gaping with numb astonishment at the rapidly retreating figures of two agitated customers making a dash for the nearest subway station.

CHAPTER IV

THE train left Pod and Bender on the far end of the Crompton platform in a highly perturbed state of mind, yet exteriorly calm. The game must now, they realized, be fought out by diplomacy. Undue haste or eagerness might ruin everything; yet time was infinitely precious. Not a second must be wasted.

"Good Lord!" Bender was saying as they walked with apparent unconcern along the platform toward the station. "Good Lord! Here it's quarter past already, and the shoot began at two! Who knows but a couple of hundred thousand worth of 'roughs' may be already bombarded all over Long Island, from Mineola to Jamaica—?"

"Or spudded into squabs?" Pod answered in mournful antiphony. "But grip your nerve, Ben! These here functions is always pulled off late. We've got time yet! 'Tain't time that crimps my gears—it's what kind of a gassing stunt we're goin' to throw Old Sideboards once we get him staked out. There's where we've got

to prove ourselves charter members of the *Gab-fest-verein*. And first of all, we've got to spot this here powder-party without asking any Rubes."

"That's easy! See?"

And Bender nodded toward a solitary individual carrying a gun-case, who was striding rapidly off along the country road which crossed the track and meandered northward.

"That's right, too!" assented Pod. "Beats a personally conducted, don't it?"

Thus, in heart-to-heart converse the pals made their way after their unconscious guide. Their semi-sporting clothes and the boxes of cartridges they were holding vouched adequately for their destination, even though they bore no arms. From somewhere far ahead sounded the occasional popping of guns, toward which the little caravan proceeded.

Half a mile or so outside of Crompton, the road crossed a muddy little stream, over a stone culvert; and a bit farther on passed through a grove which advancing civilization had still left intact. On the far side of this grove only Bender emerged. By mutual consent, Bender's superior diplomacy had been entrusted with the task of dealing with Old Sideboards.

Ben, however, felt none too confident. The lay was new to him; he knew not a single name, nor had he any data to go on, as usually. What rôle he should play he had not as yet determined.

"Just have to go it blind, I guess!" he told himself. "But I know this—they won't have to throw more than one hint of any kind, sort, or description before I build my whole sky-scraper of campaign in half a wink!"

Thus he walked on, in tow of the sportsman. Presently, a turn and dip of the road over a knoll brought him in sight of a long, boarded-up enclosure with a red roof peeping over one end—the grounds of the L. A. A. Shoot Club. Now the desultory shots sounded louder; at each one Bender's nerves seemed to frizzle with apprehension. He almost felt the possible diamonds peppering his own hide.

"And better for 'em to land on me," he thought, hastening his stride, "than in some dope of a dove, or go skyhooting all the way to Montauk Point!"

His guide turned suddenly in at a sort of wicket in the club-grounds fence, and disappeared. Bender, not at all certain of what reception he might get, hastened on, and a couple of minutes later reached the wicket himself. A large, bony person of menial appearance and a singularly cold eye confronted him.

"Well, wot is it?" demanded the menial, recognizing with one glance an alien to the club and the social class of his masters.

Bender had his cue. A less skilful student of human nature than he might have assumed the master-air and tried to front in, but Ben was wiser than that. He dropped at once all thought of claiming kinship or invitation to the club, and shifted to the part of a menial himself—a messenger—a "bearer of gifts," as it were, such as the Trojans feared.

"Amm'nition, from Howard & Collins," he answered. "An' I'm to deliver it personal. It's very special."

"Who for?" interrogated Cold Eye, just a trifle less suspiciously. The subservient tone of this fellow tickled

his vanity a bit. (Nobody in the world like your lackey to browbeat the man lower down!)

“Fer Mr. Samuelson,” answered Doc Bender confidently, though with a quaking heart. “He got the wrong lot.”

“Samuel-son? There ain’t no such pusson as Samuel-son in this club!”

“This is the L. A. A.!”

“Yus.”

“Well, that’s funny. No Samuelson? Lemme look a’ the paper they give me. I got it wrote on that.”

Bender deposited the boxes at his feet and very elaborately frisked himself. All kinds of things came to light—tickets, envelopes, paper—but no Mr. Samuelson. Ben contorted a puzzled face.

“Blow me if that ain’t funny!” he ejaculated at last, scratching a dense head. Cold Eye seemed amused, almost interested, as Ben’s quick glance informed him.

“Can’t find it. Must ha’ dropped it. But I know the man—he got th’ amm’nition this mornin’. Then th’ boss found he’d give him smokeless powder, an’ sent me right out with these ’ere. A tall man with a plaid cap an’ side-whiskers he was—not the boss, I mean this ’ere Mr. Samuelson or wotever his name is, I don’t care, jus’ so he gits the shells!”

Cold Eye laughed with the mirth of a creaking hinge.

“You’re a bright ’un, all right, all right!” he derided. “Fine an’ dandy intelleck! Samuelson indeed! W’y, that’s Mr. Gorman you’re talkin’ about—K. M. Gorman, secretary of th’ club, an’ one o’ th’ best shots in New York! Money, too!”

The raucous voice lowered respectfully.

"Well, no matter!" answered Ben. Impatience was gaining fast upon him, what with the soul-destroying impediment of this crude fellow's inquisition and the pop-pop-popping of the guns inside—now sounding at a livelier clip. "No matter what his name is; these 'ere goes to 'im, see?"

And he picked up the boxes, longing the while to annihilate Cold Eye.

"Here, I'll take 'em," offered Cold Eye, and stretched forth a huge-knuckled hand.

"No, you won't neither!" answered Ben with some warmth. Now that he had found out the essential name, he felt that, even though he did not yet hold the key to the situation, he knew where to find it. With the open sesame of *K. M. Gorman* to juggle with, he felt certain of doing high magic. Therefore the tone of defiance with which he answered:

"No, you won't, neither! My orders was to give em to him personal, an' that goes, see? Or I go. An' who's to blame then? You know! You know who'll git the ax, that's wot—from Mr. Gorman!"

Cold Eye blinked with nascent surprise; but the cogency of this singular young man's argument landed and stung.

"All right, then, if you're so dang partickler!" he growled angrily. "Walk in an' find 'im yerself! He's prob'ly in the club-house. But I'll tell you this, an' it's straight out from th' lip, too—if I had you in the right place, I'd give you what-for! I'd bang y'r bean off, you fresh guy!"

Ben had a moment's frenzied impulse to give this inexpressible a quick jiu-jitsu wrench and flop him, then

“put a heel in his eye and spin,” but he choked back his anger, and, as the club’s Janus swung the gate open, silently marched through without so much as a look or sign of further recognition. It was magnificently done, this turning of the tables; Cold Eye raged inwardly, and the gaze wherewith he followed Ben augured ill for him when he should come out again, no longer a messenger.

“You wait, that’s all! blarst you!” swore Cold Eye, swinging his massive boot expectantly.

CHAPTER V

BENDER found himself in a spacious enclosed field or park, along the distant end of which lay a row of “traps” and other targets. At the near end a goodly number of well-dressed and leisurely men were standing or sitting on a long wooden platform, some with guns and some merely as spectators.

The club-house stood at the rear of this platform, with which it communicated by means of a raised board-walk. It was a rather long, low building, shingled up the sides and stained dark green, with a red roof. This much Bender’s swift eye, trained to see well and quickly, took in at a glance. Holding his boxes in no inconspicuous manner, he approached the club-house, braving a few curious and supercilious stares, mounted the steps, and crossed the porch.

“No snags so far!” thought he, his heart beginning to thump. “Now, if I only hold this gait ten minutes longer, it’s us to the cush, in wads!”

He swung the screen-door and entered a handsome

room, with an open fire, broad tables and luxurious chairs, and with guns everywhere in corners or on wall-racks among the sporting prints. At the far end of the room a door communicated with another apartment, whence sounded voices and the tinkle of glassware. Ben glanced out the front window to see if any danger threatened from Cold Eye. No; there he still sat, motionless. Down the field Ben noticed a clay disk that sprang into the air from one of the traps, only to be shattered instantly by one of the men on the platform. Everybody seemed occupied. For the moment he was safe to plan, to work.

"I'm inside the fort, anyhow!" he congratulated himself. "Now to get busy with the— My Lord, pipe 'em!"

Pale and with bulging eyes, he stared at the mantle-shelf. There sat three boxes, duplicates of those he held in his hand, save that on one which happened to be turned label-side out he saw the words, in red:

AMMUNITION—WITH CARE

"My Lord, my Lord!" he repeated, staggered by the find. "There they are—most of 'em, anyhow! An' there's the other! As I live, the bunch is here!"

On the table stood the fourth box, broken open and half empty. A full cartridge-belt, that sprawled snake-like beside it, obviously accounted for most of the missing ones.

A second, Ben seemed frozen, trying to whip his mind into shape. He knew not how to act; but stood there as though paralyzed, eyes fixed on the boxes, ears strained to catch the voices and the sounds of convivial-

ity in the next room, interspersed with shots from outside.

Through the screen the March breeze entered, swaying the curtains, tipping a huge Japanese umbrella that was suspended over his head, creaking the door. At the creak Ben found his cue. He tiptoed close to the wall, skirted it (invisible from the next room), made his way quietly to the door, and pushed it with gentle insistence. The draft coöperated, and the door closed so naturally that Ben himself might have thought it almost accidental.

“Now to work!” he whispered with sudden savage energy.

He came quickly to the table, seized the belt, and buckled it about his waist. Then he stuffed his vest-pockets with cartridges and dropped the rest of the boxful into the front of his shirt.

“One!” said he, grimly.

He strode to the mantle and broke open the second box. A minute later the contents had been deftly stowed in his trousers and coat pockets. Ben was a master, too, of carrying weight without making bulges. It had been almost a lifelong profession with him.

“Two!”

A footstep sounded in the next room, and Ben shrank back, gasping; but the door did not open. Only a round of laughter echoed through the wall, followed by confused babbles of men’s voices.

“Just a minute, now, and I’ll have ’em!” pleaded Ben, as to some patron saint. “I’ll have what’s ours by rights!”

Off came his hat, and into it poured the contents of

the third carton. Quickly he jammed it on his head—
thanking his stars, the while, that he wore a high and
commodious seven and a half.

“Three! . . .”

The fourth box was a “facer.” But only for a moment, for with sudden inspiration and deft speed he tucked the precious shells one by one inside the belt, their protruding rims catching against the top of the leather. He stowed them close, side by side, all the way round, then drew the belt up to an agonizing tightness.

“There, now, *you* won’t get away!” he gasped.

Then, buttoning his coat over the belt, he shrugged his shoulders as for an ordeal, walked straight out of the room, and fronted down the path toward the gate. Outwardly calm, his pulse was racing madly.

“Say, you!” Cold Eye halted him, “where the devil you goin’ without havin’ seen Mr. Gorman, eh?”

Ben gazed upon him with supreme contempt, despite the discomfort of the heavy hatload and the belt. But his contempt was chastened by caution as he answered:

“Didn’t have t’ see him! All I had t’ do was leave them cartridges, which I done, an’ now I’m goin’ home—that’s all.”

“Goin’ home!” Cold Eye mocked him. “Well, that may all be, but not before I’ve given you what’s comin’ to you—outside there, in th’ road, you hear?”

And he doubled a hard fist, weighing it suggestively.

Sudden fear gripped Ben’s heart, but he thrust his face close to the man’s growling:

“You lift a finger agin me, an’ Mr. Gorman knows the inside facts about them missin’ club supplies, hear me? I’m onta you! You know what I mean!”

The chance shot struck a bull's-eye. The gatekeeper started guiltily, dropped his eyes, and began fiddling with his watch-chain.

“I—you—” he stammered, then turned a shade paler and looked indifferently away.

Ben, in triumph, strode through the gate, and with never a backward look, made off at a good round pace toward Crompton and the waiting Pod.

CHAPTER VI

“HOLY Cats! I’m hangin’ to the smooth edge of a cave-in with buttered paws!” groaned Slats, as he flopped on to the creaking sofa and sprawled gelatinously at ease.

“Snap out of it!” Ben cheered him, snapping on the incandescents.

In the sudden glare both men squinted and blinked. They were a hard-looking pair; their clothes were sodden-wet, their boots all mired, and even in their ears, their hair, the mud was plastered. Yet, Ben’s good spirits did not fail him.

“See? Only three A. M.!” he went on, pointing at the clock. “We’re home early! But say, that was a chase what *was*, and no misfire!”

From his pockets he began dredging out upon the table handfuls of pulpy cartridges.

“Never forget it, long’s I live!” asseverated Pod. “That bunch doin’ fox-huntin’ stunts with you down the highway; then the quick swap we made in th’ grove, an’ afterward me shrinkin’ coyly under the culvert up to my top-knot in goo, while you on top o’ the bridge is ear-

nestly convincing 'em you didn't annex Old Sideboard's extra-fine hand-carved ammunition-belt!"

"Oh, feathers! . . ." Pod rumbled into laughter. "That's where you fell down, Ben—borrowin' that belt. If you can't be honest, be as—"

"Cut it!" snapped Bender. "Like to see you in that club-house, and up against Cold Eye! But no harm done, anyway. They couldn't prove a thing, and fair exchange won't hold in any court I know of!"

"No, but that creek-slime would!" answered Slat. "Think we'll ever get it off? Tell you what, no encores of that performance for mine—dredgin' up the bottom to get spilled cartridges, at midnight an' without a light—an' then, too, that boatin' accident story we had to tell all the way home!"

"Well, it's over now, anyhow," philosophized Ben, "and we're back again with the bundle. Let's have a look at some of the mazuma-producers, and then me to the hay."

"Ditto," assented Pod, heaving himself off the sofa and lumbering over to the table. "But I'd give a goodly slice of the rake-off to know just what those L. A. A. sports thought—just what they'll think when that belt gets back to 'em, by mail!"

"Forget the L. A. A.!" growled Ben, seizing a knife. "We've got something more to the point!"

And with deft fingers he began shelling out from the wet cartridges the precious "roughs" from Canada.

V

ART FOR ART'S SAKE

Wherein Even Jove Nods

CHAPTER I

"**I**T'S up to us to get in touch with some sort of a battery, wet or dry, that will put the coin in our clothes on the P. D. Q.," remarked Pod Slattery one day, a few weeks later, as he lit a fresh cigar and earnestly regarded his pal. "Time we was gettin' fixed right, again. No penny ante game, but *some* financial operation, this time—get me?"

"True enough—but what sort shall it be?" queried Bender. "What sort of an idea you got up your sleeve so we can bunch our play, again, and pull down a bundle?"

Pod thought a moment, blowing the smoke from between his puffy lips.

"Well," he answered at length, tapping the café table with his fore-finger, "well, seems to me High Art would be a good line to branch out into, now. Art, eh?"

"Art?"

"Why not? We still got two-fifty plunks for capital to start on, that ain't been copped by the wheel, plus our brain force. And if that ain't enough to put the

frog-skins in your clothes again, call me an honest man!"

"How are you going to work it?"

"Keep your listeners open, and you'll know! We've pretty well played out the regulation come-on's, ain't we? Now, says I, let's take a dive into the field o' culture. And you can fry me for a sausage if we go grubbin' very far in the field without rootin' up some stone or other that's swarmin' underneath with good, rich, juicy ants!"

Three days following this cheerful prophecy, Mrs. Jethro Simpkins, a widowed housekeeper, in Boston, took a new lodger into her sanctuary on Tremont Street, near Dover. Erratic and crusty of speech, this lodger bore the earmarks of impoverished gentility. He moved in with a rusty hand-bag and a square wooden box, paid his rent a week in advance and intimated that he enjoyed seclusion. Tall, thin and of indeterminate age, with heavy-lensed glasses and a visible aversion to soap, water and the razor, he seemed quite likely to get as much seclusion. Tall, thin and of indeterminate age, with tidiness to the *n'th* times x." He smoked vile cigarettes incessantly, littered the straw matting with innumerable butts, and ignored all those amenities which as a self-proclaimed ex-aristocrat and patron of painting might have been expected from him. His name (he said) was Aloysius Valentine.

Hardly was he settled in his quarters when other activities began to manifest themselves elsewhere. They broke out sporadically upon Hermann K. Slossen, the Cornhill curio dealer. Slossen was an elderly fellow, clever and erratic, slow of speech, but keen of eye and

nobody's fool. His name was familiar to some as none of the most rectilinear; but he had never been in court in his life, nor could anybody put the finger on any of his trades and say, definitely: "This is crooked." He was known to have money and to be not averse to having more. Altogether, an interesting individual, with possibilities.

On him called, unannounced, a stout, lax-appearing person, gross of body and bizarre of speech. Slossen received him in his dark little back shop, a veritable museum of bibelots, and politely bade him welcome.

"Won't you be seated, sir?" he asked, noting the caller's apparent lack of ease. "You've come to see me about—"

"Why, that there ad of yours in the *Collectors' Review*, askin' for antiques."

"Ah, so? Sit down! Very good indeed. You have something, I take it?"

"*Have* I? Bet your hair and never go bald at it, neither! Greatest ever! A Von Müller—genuine—that the owner thinks is only a copy! Are you on?"

"A—Von Müller—a *genuine*? Goodness gracious, let's hear about it. How very interesting! Are you sure of it?" And Slossen leaned forward across his littered bench, whereon an infinitude of odds-and-ends jostled each other for room.

"Sure of it? Some! Why, it's got a pedigree that would make a blooded one-best-bet look like a debased kopeck plugged with spelter. Genuine? Ab-so-lutely! But—" and he held up a warning, pudgy finger, "the owner ain't on. Who am I, to *put* him on? Or you? Between you and me—"

"I understand. 'Where ignorance is bliss,' and all that sort of thing. Well, well! Here, let me get you a cigar and we'll talk this over. It certainly is worth discussing more at length!"

"As I get you, then," the stout visitor was saying half an hour later just before he took his leave, "you an' me are goin' against this proposition on a partnership basis. I'm the Irish setter, an' you're the man with the artillery. You an' me make up three thousand to buy the work; we can maybe get it for two if we handle it right an' don't put him sagacious. My stake is \$250, for which I get my proportion in the rake-off when you place the work. My \$250 to be in your hands before we do biz."

"Precisely," nodded Mr. Slossen, relighting his cigar which had gone out in the stress of interest. "You have the right idea. Now all that remains to be settled is for me to see the picture. You won't expect me to buy a pig in a poke, of course?"

"Sure not!" asseverated the visitor. "I don't do biz that way. Nothin' to it. N-I-X! We'll go round to his joint to-morrow. You bring your wad and I'll bring mine. We'd ought to freight the dough right along with us, so's to close the deal at once, before the pinhead gets mavericked. O. K. for you?"

"O. K.," answered Slossen. "To-morrow afternoon. Good-day, good-day. I'll see you to-morrow with pleasure."

"Same here!" echoed the stout person, bowing himself out.

By some odd coincidence both he and Mr. Slossen

winked and grimaced elaborately, each to himself, the very moment they had parted company.

CHAPTER II

"SO he bit, did he?" queried the Doc joyously, as Pod finished outlining to him the results of his conference with Slossen.

"Bit? Grabbed it whole, bolted it like a whale absorbin' a squid. The bait never touched anywhere goin' down! We'll blow back here to-morrow at four with the coin, and by half-past if we ain't a big wad to the good may I never steer another honest graft so long's I stay top-side of the *terrier cotta*. It's a cake, a frosted cake, I tell you, an' we got the knife! Hooray for H. K. Slossen, E.Z., Prince of Markburg!"

The two pals pledged each other with strong waters, which they drank alternately from a square-face.

Our crusty connoisseur was vexed, and showed it, too, when on the following day his cigarette-tinctured reveries were broken by the arrival of Slossen and the stout man, bent (so they announced) upon examining his art works.

"Want to see my paintings, eh?" he piped querulously, peering through his thick glasses. "Why, I don't let anybody see them if I can help it. They're all I've got left from the—the—well, you can come in anyhow, I suppose, if you want to"

He grudgingly held open the door.

The visitors entered with smiles calculated to propitiate this inhospitable warden of unsuspected treasures.

"My name's Dobbs, Samuel F. Dobbs, of Charlestown," the rotund visitor introduced himself, "and this is Mr. Slossen, an art dealer. You're Mr. Valentine, of course? We heard about you through the Boylston Art Gallery."

Quite a general bowing and scraping as the impoverished recluse acknowledged the pleasure of his visitors' acquaintance, and admitted his name to be Mr. Aloysius Valentine.

"I'd invite you to sit down," he exclaimed a trifle petulantly, as soon as they were inside his little room with the door closed, "if there were chairs for you; but you see for yourselves how it is in this wretched little hole—only one chair and this rickety bed and my art-boxes. But make yourselves as comfortable as you can, gentlemen.

"Look out! Look out!" he exclaimed hastily, as the adipose Mr. Dobbs started to sit on the bed. "You'll break it, and *then* there'll be trouble. Better take a box, hadn't you? Good Lord, to think I should have come to this, after all I've had and been!" And he glanced round disdainfully.

"Too bad, too bad!" murmured Slossen with sympathy, "but really, things might be much worse. I understand you still have some remnants of your former prosperity—some paintings, some copies of quite considerable value? If that is so, very likely we—"

"Why, as for that, yes," responded Mr. Valentine. "They're very good, very good indeed, some of them. The 'Swiss Inn,' especially—quite a masterpiece!"

"Surest thing you know!" assented Mr. Dobbs.

"Have you ever thought of—er—of sellin' it? Because if you have, why p'raps we might be able to make you a flatterin' offer."

Mr. Valentine removed his glasses and polished them on his ragged handkerchief, blinking the while. Then he replaced them carefully, thought for a brief moment and finally shook a reluctant head.

"No, no!" he murmured, as though to himself. "I couldn't let any of them go. They're part of the former estate—and—and all that sort of thing. I couldn't do it, that is, at any figure that you'd be willing to consider. The intrinsic value of the canvases isn't probably more than four or five thousand; but the sentimental value I attach to it simply can't be calculated in dollars and cents."

"I understand all that," Mr. Slossen interrupted. "Nobody comprehends better than I do these little matters of sentiment," and his eyelid seemed to tremble almost imperceptibly, "but even so, there often comes a time when we have to sacrifice our feelings to our stern necessities, and you perhaps—"

"Oh, yes! I know what you mean! I'm certainly reduced enough to sell even my birthright if I had one—which I haven't!" And Mr. Valentine glanced nervously around the barren place. "I suppose I oughtn't to refuse any decent offer for the entire set—say, four thousand, or some such figure?"

Messrs. Slossen and Dobbs exchanged significant glances, while our ex-aristocrat ran his fingers nervously through his hair.

"We was thinkin' more of a figure in the vicinity of

two thousand," Mr. Dobbs answered. "Two thousand or maybe twenty-five hundred—and only for the 'Swiss Inn,' the masterpiece—"

"Of course," broke in Mr. Slossen, "on condition that this painting is—"

"Oh, I'll satisfy you about the painting, all right!" Mr. Valentine assured him, his pride visibly nettled. "Once you see it, there'll be no trouble on *that* score! Perhaps you *had* better see it before we go any farther; it seems rather absurd to talk of prices before you've had a chance of looking at the work itself—quite unprofessional, I'm sure!"

And, as he spoke, he picked up a hammer which was lying on his table, bent over one of the boxes, and began to pry off the cover.

Mr. Slossen, curiously interested, came up close beside him. The stout Mr. Dobbs remained a pace in the rear.

"Squeak! . . . Squeak! . . ." went the nails in the box-cover. Mr. Slossen bent to observe. Like a flash, something flipped down over his head from behind, something tightened on his windpipe and he staggered, panting, struggling, unable to cry out, then reeled and fell heavily to the floor with a towel twisted firmly round his jaws.

"Quick! His mitts!" he heard Dobbs command. Instantly Valentine was tricing up his wrists and firmly lashing them with stout cord which he produced from his pocket.

Mr. Slossen struggled, it is true, yet there was something perfunctory about his exertions; something which seemed to lack intensity and conviction. Had not his assailants been themselves so agitated, they must inevita-

bly have noted this. But, as it was, they only bound him the more firmly, then lifted and conveyed him swiftly to the lopsided bed, where they flung him without ceremony.

A moment later, Mr. Slossen's bulging pocketbook containing the joint capital of the art deal was in Valentine's pocket, and Valentine and Dobbs, stopping for nothing but their hats, had taken the most Gallic of French leaves.

The door closed behind them, the lock grated; footsteps echoed on the stairs. Mr. Slossen was left alone to meditate upon the mutability of human affairs.

CHAPTER III

"TWO for N' York, please!" requested an obese traveler, shoving a beautiful twenty at the ticket-agent in the South Station. "What track?" His companion, slim and tall, fidgeted uneasily.

"Eight. You've got to hurry if you want to make it!"

And the agent pulled down two tickets from the rack, stamped and laid them ready on the broad slab ready to be pushed out with the travelers' change.

But this was not to be; for, as the agent's eye fell keenly on the beautiful twenty, his hand stayed. He took up the bill, inspected it closely, crumpled it in deft fingers, and then with a smile flipped it back at the waiting men.

"Sorry," said he indulgently, "but I can't take that. It's N. G."

The two travelers interchanged looks of dismay. Pre-

cious seconds were passing. People were running for Track Eight. The stout one made as though to pull another bill from his pocketbook, but the slim one detained him.

"Here, let me look, first!" he whispered, drawing him away from the window and the agent's disconcertingly close attention. "Why, *that* rag's a phony, too! I do believe they're *all*—"

"Shut up!" growled the stout one. "Want to blow the game? We gotta seek seclusion, that's what, an' root up our own dough from this bunch of queer that Slossen has shoved on us! Then take a sneak on any old train—anythin' to get away! Come on here, Ben!"

The agent, meanwhile, had been growing singularly interested. Suddenly his fingers sought an electric button.

"Beat it!" cried the stout one.

"Here, you! Wait a minute!" shouted the agent; but they had business elsewhere. Out of the tiled room they clattered, broke into a ragged run through the great concourse, and made for the "L" stairs.

The crowd was thick. With it they mingled, as a hunted fox sometimes runs with the pack in momentary safety. As they reached the top of the stairs an incoming train, bound they cared not whither, gave blessed assurance of sanctuary.

And on this train Pod Slattery and Pittsburg Bender fade temporarily from our view.

But as they fade, our all-seeing eye discerns H. K. Slossen settling himself comfortably at his littered table in the musty back shop on Cornhill. He looks a trifle

sweaty and rumped, but otherwise at peace with all the world. Before him lies a roll of money, good money, the best kind—the kind that Uncle Sam makes.

“Two hundred and fifty of their kale, that’s right!” he contentedly remarks, spreading it on the table. “This will come in handy, eh? And the total expense was half an hour’s tussle with some knots and picking one single-lever lock—child’s play, all of it!

“I’d give a hundred cool, though, just to hear what those two connoisseurs say when they find out what they’ve got from me and what I’ve got from them! That little swap did the trick—just that elementary scheme of taking out and hiding *their* \$250 and substituting a \$250 of my own manufacture—or I’m no judge of art. And if they love art after this, by Jove, it will be art for art’s sake and nothing else, that’s all *I’ve* got to say!”

VI

THE OLD HOMESTEAD

*A Tale of Sentiment and Business, Wherein Rural Folk
Rise to Heights of Extreme Greatness*

CHAPTER I

“**W**ELL, Bo,” remarked Pod, as he stretched out his avoirdupois on the creaking sofa of their up-town flat—“well, Damon, your Pythias is sure rusting in the hinges for the want of a little rapid-fire work. That art-lemon damn near put the buffalo brand on *me*! I’m dyin’ for a change of air and some coke-talk with a ready-money angel. Anything in tune with your Marconi that looks like the real bonbons?”

Pittsburg Bender yawned and scratched his head before replying.

“Not much, and that’s a fact,” he grumbled peevishly. “What’s worse,” he added, drawing a check-book from his pocket and inspecting the last entry, “what’s worse and more of it, we’re pretty near down to mud-flat level. Our meal-ticket is just about all punched out. We’ve got to kick in with some sort of dough-winner mighty sudden, or—”

“Cut the *or*!” chuckled Pod, sitting up on the edge of the sofa, his face brightening into smiles. “There’s

no 'or' to it! The only word now on the carpet is 'when!' "

"And 'where,' " added Ben.

"New Hampshire, that's where," Pod decided. "Tomorrow—to-night, this very P. M. if you say so. Strike tent and beat it for the uncut, says I! Oh, joy, oi, oi!"

"Is the sacrificial lamb chosen?"

"You're hep! I'm in on the best ever, and in right! There's a section I wot of where the moon shines bright on an old New England home, and also on the closest turkey-neck that ever sat in the rear pew to save interest on his cent till the collection-box come round. Said turk needs Missouriizing—needs it bad. We need the collateral. Do we connect?"

"Like forceps on an ulcerated tooth!"

"One good clip of the calico, up yonder, and we can turn turtle for the summer."

"Meaning how?"

"Pull into our shells till the B. V. D.'s go into storage again."

"And it's really an easy lay?"

"Pushin' sick chickens into a duck-pond is sixty days on the rock-pile, by comparison! He's got an A-One cluster of the legal tender, our Joskin has, plus tumbler-pigeons in his mental granary, plus Greed for Gold. Ain't that a combination to make us toot the hoop-la signals? What?"

"Lead me to it!"

"Pack the grips then, Bo. While you're doin' that, I'll frame the necessary letter to him, and will then hike out to change a bill for twenty silver dollars, all genuine an' *all prior in date to 1890*, same bein' essential for

the present tangle with rurality. Looks like it's 3.30 northbound to-day for ours. When acquirin', says I, always make your selection before the goods is all picked over. There's no kokum about these goods, believe me! Celerity does it!"

"Right-o!" answered Ben, rummaging in the closet for the suit-cases. "Celerity and the friendly palm—they're the really-is duo every time! Every time!"

CHAPTER II

"JETHRO FARRAR, R. F. D. No. 2, Trap Corner, N. H."

"Sure thing, that's me," mused Jeth, scratching his chin with an unseemly forefinger. He leaned against the mail-box and tried to figure out the puzzle of a letter postmarked New York City.

"Don't know who it's from, do ye?" queried Lorenzo Cole, the R. F. D. man, fidgeting with his reins. The mail-route was to Loren as his own personal property. He took it sore amiss that any of his clientele should have private business unknown to him.

"Know who it's from? Wall, I ain't sayin'," answered Jeth. "Cal'late mebbe I wouldn't tell you, nohow, if I did!"

"Gid-dap!" cried Loren, and slapped his ring-boned mare with the leathers. Under his breath he added to himself: "Consarn yer hide, I'll fix you yit! Wait till nex' time you wash a canceled stamp an' use it agin—jest wait, that's all!"

Not until the postman had passed well around the turn

by the big spruce did Jeth see fit to open his communication. He read it once, thoughtfully, from end to end. He read it twice, with a new light in his narrow-lidded eyes. The third time, he carried it up into his hay-loft, sat down on an inverted bushel-measure, and studied out the whole thing, letter by letter, word by word, line by line.

"Gret horn spoon!" cried he, when he had finished. "Jeems Rice an' little fishes! Eleven thousan' dollars!" He glanced fearfully around. "Ain't no chance, now, is thar, that anybody else could git onto this? I don't see how! Why, my gosh, ef they don't—then it's mine, all mine! Le's see."

For the fourth time he read the letter. It was written on cheap lined paper, somewhat crumpled and dirty, and it said:

New york, may 10.

MR. J. FARRAR,

Sir and frend, this is wrote in a cheap Bowery lodging house whare i am very sick and the doctor says i cant live not more than a week at the outside. and before i die thare is something that i must let you no. i may be a bum and n. g. But i am greatful for what your father done for me once, and i dont Want to die without tellin you something for to reward You. about 18 years ago i come through your part of n. h. with part of a bundle of swag what I had stole from the second National bank in newport, your state, and They was close after me and i had to hide the stuff and i done so. then i had to look out for Myself and i come to your place and tole your father i was a Tramp and lookin for work. and he give me work and treated me o. k. and They never caught me that time. i staid six weeks and then run away and stole thirty-five \$ from your father and his Best boots and it has been troublin my conscence some times, my ingratitude and the Boots and money. i meant to go back and get the swag and pay your Father but before i cood do it i got sloughed in for a break in chelsea, Mass, and got fifteen years, and done

twelve of it, three years Off for good conduct. then i got in again before i cood get the swag and cought the consupcion in stir and now i am out a gain but havent hardly no time to live and i want to make Things right With your father if he is livin and if not Then with you. so i am wrighting to let you know that the swag is under the north West cornder of the barn on the old Bennett place where a man named Ezra Bennett used to live, in woodstock, next town to yours, and Take it all, it dont belong to nobody but you, but Say nothing as the Bank wood claim it If they found out. it is in a Gunny sack rite under the N. W. cornder dig it up some dark night, about four foot deep. i hear the Bennett place is going to be let for the summer to a couple of city men with Money, one a fat guy and one tall and skinny. dont let on to them, they wood dig it up themselves and keep it all. and they are bad men to Monkey with, don't let them get nothing on you or they would make it Hot for you. do just like i tell you and you will be rich enuf so you Wont have to work no more the rest of your life, and if your Father is living tell him i have not forgot him and i still thank him for his Kindness and if he is dead then i thank you. goodby i have only a few days to live. be honest it pays. i was crooked and see whare it landed me.

J. K. Burns.

p.s. the amount of money is eleven thousan \$ and by now the Gunny sack is probly rotted away so look all around in the earth and dont Miss none of the money it was in gold mostly with a bout two thousan \$ in silver, but no bills. the silver was mostly silver dollars. when you find them, you aint far from the gold. remember, Bennett place, you probly know where it is.

J. K. B.

"Gosh!" ejaculated Jeth.

Then he pulled off his long-legged boot, removed his coarse sock of "clouded" blue-and-white yarn, and tucked the letter into it. With the sock and the boot once more replaced on his foot, he breathed easier. The letter, at any rate, was safe.

For a long time he sat there on the bushel-measure,

cogitating. From time to time he nodded his head. Once he laughed outright—a cold, harsh cackle of supreme satisfaction.

“Can’t see whar thar’s any outs about it, can’t possibly see,” quoth he. “Dunno who th’ cuss is, an’ don’t care a hoot in Hades. He’s posted, all right, that’s sartain. My old man *did* take in a tramp, eighteen er twenty year ago, an’ that’s a fact; yep, an’ the varmint *did* rob the ole skinflint of some money, I know fer sure. How much, he never would let on. Dad, he was that close-mouthed! But he lost money, sure enough; serve him right fer shelterin’ a no-nation crutter! An’ now, now I’m—wall, gol-dog it! It’s a danged good thing the ole man ain’t alive!”

The impatient mooing of his kine in the tie-up below him roused Jeth from his pleasurable speculation.

“Durned if it ain’t past one o’clock!” said Jeth, standing up and consulting his battered silver watch. “Why, I must ha’ been settin’ up here more’n an hour, an’ no time to waste now, not by a jugful!

“City fellers goin’ to hire the old Bennett place fer the summer, hey? I prob’ly know where it is? By crimus, I’d oughter! Didn’t my grandpa Hiram live thar forty-six years, I’d like t’ know? And didn’t he sell it to Bennett’s father right after th’ war? Wall, ruther! And now Bennett’s a-hirin’ it out to summer comp’ny, an’ I ain’t to let the game on, to them, ner to the bank?

“Say, I look like a man what’d let on—oh, sure! They’re dangerous fellers, hey? Might make trouble fer me ef they ketched me foolin’ raound? Wall, by gary, they’ve got to ketch me, fust, he-he-he! What’s

that gol-durned consumptive critter take me fer, anyhow?"

Mumbling and grumbling to himself, Jeth threw a few scant forkfuls of musty meadow-hay to his cattle, then clumped heavily down the crooked, creaking stairs.

CHAPTER III

THE May moon, almost full, conspired for three nights with a cloudless sky so brightly to illumine road and field and country-side, that Jethro Farrar, Esq., of Trap Corner, found no heart to venture forth with spade and meal-sack for the treasure-trove. Strangely irritable he became. He beat his cows, kicked his horse, and cursed his aged housekeeper with unusual abandon.

She laid it to cider of the indurated or northern New England brand, and said nothing. J. Farrar, she knew by experience, wasn't a good man to answer back. He had such forcible ways of arguing with stove-wood, or chairs, or pitchforks, as forensic points.

So passed three days of vitriol and bile. But on the fourth day fortune favored. A southwest wind blew up slaty clouds, heavy with rain; the moon was banished, once and for all, and evening came on chill and dour.

Anything but dour and chill were Jeth's spirits that night. Despite his efforts to maintain a gruff consistency with his previous behavior, he let exhilaration ooze from every pore of his long, lank, picked-chicken carcass. At supper, over the beans and pie and hard-boiled tea, he even joked a bit with his housekeeper, and laughed with cavernous, gummy jaws. Of a certainty, J. Farrar never had felt more kittenish since that time when he

had shut off Hen Bolster's highway and had beaten him in the resulting fracas, when Bolster had "lawed" him for malicious mischief.

All the way up the long road from his farm past the marshes, then over Billings Hill, and so into Woodstock (where lay the Bennett place), his good humor and his greed kept equal pace with the rise of his impatience.

"No way in this mortal world as I kin dull, seems like," he assured himself, as he pegged along the dark, deserted country-road. "Not a sould knows a skrid o' this here thing, 'cepn me an' *him*, an' he's most likely dead by now. Ef anybody calls at my place to-night, Mis' Martin 'll say I'm over to the Grange meetin' at Foxboro. The Bennett barn's way to Hell-an'-gone off from the house, an' I'll work without nary light, so them two city sports won't have no nameable show to git onta what's up. Oh, it's easy, dead easy, this hull gorrammed business! Mighty lucky, ain't I, the old man's dead an' gone? He'd sure want half th' pickin's, mebbe more!"

With such-like cheerful musings, Jeth strode away, best foot forward, through the deepening gloom and the fine, misty rain. His pulse was running high when at about half past eight he reached the Bennett orchard, a quarter of a mile below the barn. Darkness had set in.

Cautiously Jeth clambered over the stone wall, with shovel and grain-sack, and made his way through the enclosure, stumbling here and there, up to the great weather-beaten structure. Not a light was to be seen in the farmhouse, which stood across the road and a little further up the hill than the rickety old barn.

"Mebbe they've both turned in," thought Jeth. "Better'n that, mebbe they ain't to hum. These here city crutters is great hands, they say, to gad. Looks like things was comin' my way fast—looks like it was all mine, whatever's here. Eleven thousan'—gosh all fish-hooks!"

With palpitant heart, he laid his meal-sack on the ground, close to the northwest corner of the big barn. Then, after a final reconnoiter, he spat on both hands, gripped the spade, and dug. So fast his breath came, and so thickly beat his heart, that he almost choked at his toil. Despite the chill of that early May night, the sweat stood thickly on his narrow, wrinkled forehead. The soil was loamy and the work of excavating by no means arduous, but Jeth panted as though he had been dredging gravel. He had to pause, every little while, to rest and "blow."

"Gosh!" wheezed he, "but this beats all th' diggin' ever I done, an' I been farmin' it, man an' boy, clost onto sixty-seven year!"

He worked on and on as rapidly as possible, till he had made a hole some four feet square and three feet deep, at the exact corner of the barn. Then he got down into the excavation and proceeded with more care. He did not now want to run any risk of losing a single coin—and the money, he knew, lay about four feet from the surface. That surface, he figured, might have filled in somewhat during the past eighteen years. He felt that now he was very close to the treasure, if not actually upon it.

Had he been in calmer mood, he might have wondered at the character of the soil. Cool judgment and exami-

nation might have suspected that it had been already dug over—and more recently than eighteen years, at that. But Jeth was far from analytical, that night, and darkness prohibited any ocular observation.

At what he judged was about three feet and a half, he began pawing over every shovelful of earth. One after another he searched them thoroughly, rooting the dirt like a long, lean razor-back. This was slow work, and back-breaking. It was also wet and chilly. Jeth began to feel cold shivers of nervousness race up and down his corrugated spine. His teeth took to chattering, and would not be still.

"D-d-durn it all," mumbled he, "where in T-t-tophet is that dev'lish money?"

He stood up, straightened the kinks out of his back, and drew a deep breath. From very far away, came doling to him nine faint strokes of a bell.

"Time's goin' fast," thought he. "I hain't g-g-got all night t' waste, an' that's a fact!"

Once more he set to work. Then, quite suddenly, his quivering talons touched something that sent the blood surging into his brain, and for a moment quite shut off his breath—something round, and thin, and hard.

He clutched it passionately in one hand and ran the nail of his other forefinger along the edge of this object. It was corrugated.

"Money! Money!" he panted. "It's here! It's mine—I'm rich— Money!"

Down on his knees he fell, and like a dog digging out woodchucks, began clawing up the dirt in fistfuls, with crooked paws. Wheezing, puffing, trembling, the covetous old man unearthed another coin—another and still

one more—cart-wheels, laden with the presage of great wealth!

Delirium possessed his brain. No longer he felt the drizzle of the rainfall or the cutting night chill. Oblivious to everything but money-madness, he fought away in stark frenzy at the resisting earth. So great did his insanity become, that he got in his own way and lost all powers of discrimination. He snatched up worthless stones and crammed them into his pockets; he threw out coins into the waste-pile. But, presently his native shrewdness reasserted itself. He came to his senses and stopped to think.

"Gosh a'mighty! S'posen I should miss some o' the stuff!" he groaned. "How do I know I'm a gittin' it all? An' deeper down thar's gold! My sould an' senses, but I gotta be keerful now!"

What should he do? Should he risk lighting matches to spy out the hoard? Should he fill his sack with earth and carry it home, there to search it over, bit by bit? Or should he dig still deeper with his spade and trust to luck?

"Don't like none o' them idees, gol-dog me ef I dew!" quoth he, scratching his head in agitation. "Seems like thar'd oughter be some better way."

Then, all of a sudden, inspiration dawned on him.

"My land o' livin', what a fool I be—jest a natchel, plumb, outrageous idjit!" he exclaimed. "Why, thar is a way to git it—all on it—as slick's a whistle, without nary danger, without hurryin' a mite, all nice an' easy. Good gosh, what be I a thinkin' of to go at things this way? Must be I'm gittin' old an' silly."

Out from the cavity he scrambled, and with feverish

haste began shoveling back the dirt. He tamped it solid, scraped it even, and made a good job of it.

"Thar!" he exclaimed at length. "Thar, now, I don't cal'late nobody's goin' to notice nothin' here, not till ter-morrow, anyhow. An' by ter-morrow, blow me ef the hull danged place don't b'long to me, to do with as I please, by gary!"

Hiding his spade under the barn, and making sure that the dozen coins he had already found were safe in his jeans, he struck off at a good pace across the field toward the road which led to Ezra Bennett's present dwelling, half a mile further from the town.

As he went, he chuckled to himself with huge delight: "It's all a comin' out fine, fine an' dandy! I tell yew, it takes a mighty gosh-durned com-plied game to git ahead o' me. Yew bet!"

CHAPTER IV

IT was close to quarter of nine when Jethro reached the house where lived E. Bennett, present owner of the farm where centered all the old man's hopes. Ezra was just going to bed when Jeth knocked at the back door. He greeted his visitor with no great cordiality.

"That you, Jeth? What in tarnation yew out so late fer? An' yer clo'es muddy, too! What's up?"

"Reckon I'll tell ye," answered the other, "ef yew'll lemme in out o' the drizzle."

"That's right, too. Wall, come along in ef ye want to—but I'm free t' tell yew I most gen'ally turn in 'baout nine, so—"

Jeth pushed past him into the kitchen.

"My land, but it's dark out!" he exclaimed. "I took a tumble comin' down Billins Hill. Reckon I be some muddled up. Guess I'll wash, ef ye don't mind."

While he dallied with the tin basin and the soft-soap, Ezra stood sucking at a corn-cob, sizing him up and waiting for explanations. A shrewd old fellow was Ezra, inhospitable and full of guile. His red beard wagged as he chewed the pipe-stem. A glint from the glass lamp on the shelf struck across his eyes, which had a decided cast, and were redder than his beard.

"Wonder what th' Sam Hill he wants o' me this time o' night?" he ruminated. "Suthin' up, that's sure."

He had not long to wait, for Jeth sat down without being invited in a rush-bottomed chair, spread his damp hands before the stove, and sailed in.

"It's ben some time, Ezry, sence I was over here, quite some time," he began. "Hain't seed as much o' ye as I'd oughter, as I'd like ter, but yew know how busy I be—busy, an' not over-an'-above well."

Ezra removed his pipe, spat into the ashes, and also sat down with a non-committal grunt. Jeth, unabashed, kept on:

"I'll tell ye, Ez, what's wrong. It's homesickness. Ever have it? Ever feel lonesome an' no-'count an' rim-racked, all the time, like a cat in a strange garret? No? Well, then, yew don't hev no idee how it gits on a man's nerve. It's plumb awful, that's what!"

"Must be," answered Bennett.

Jeth pulled a plug of black tobacco from his hip-pocket before continuing, and worried off a good-sized "chaw." He needed its reenforcement. His work, he clearly saw, was all cut out for him.

"Plumb awful! Fer the past two year it's ben a-gittin' wuss an' wuss. Never *did* like my place over to Trap Corner, nohow; and now I'm gittin' along in life it goes ag'in me suthin' desprit. Seems like I can't take no rest ner peace there. Somethin' keeps a-pullin' me an' a-haulin' me back to the Old Homestead whar grandsir used t' live so many years—whar father was born—whar I played when I was a kid! Remember them thar days, Ezry, when—when—"

"When I useter whale time out o' yew fer stealin' our apples after my dad bought th' place from your grand-pop? Sure thing I do. I allus was bigger an' stronger'n you, that's a fact; an' you was a most outrageous, thievin' leetle cuss. Seems like we never *could* git along, yew was so pizen mean—as a kid!"

"Let bygones be bygones, Ez," pleaded Jeth, swallowing some tobacco-juice in his trepidation. "Them days is dear to me, good an' bad alike. I can't fer-git that the place daown th' road, thar, was my Old Homestead, after all, an' that after grandsir bought it—"

"Remember the wuthless security he give?"

"—After grandsir bought it, you an' me lived neighbor fer a spell. No, I just can't git it off'n my mind. Fact is, I'm longin' fer the old place ag'in. Nights I ben layin' awake, thinkin' 'baout it—thinkin' how the wind useter sigh an' carry on through the pines out back o' the mowin'-lot; rememberin' the trickle o' the leetle brook through the orchard—"

"Where I once knocked out three o' your teeth, one dark night, hey?"

"Recallin' the old well—"

"That your dad tried to pizen, the winter after *my* dad foreclosed the mortgage!"

"An', in general, jest a-makin' myself mis'able with my longin's to git back thar, so's to live out my last few remainin' years in peace on the Old Homestead. Mebbe onreasonable, an' all that, Ezry, but yew know how 'tis; when a feller gits an idee like that a holt o' him, 'tain't no use a-fightin' it. Jest gotter give in, that's all—er die! An' so—"

"Wall?"

Ezra removed his pipe and tapped out the ashes into his horny palm, then stuffed them back again for another smoke.

"Wall, so—here's what I come fer. I come to buy the old place back ag'in. Can't go on this way, Ez. Can't die so fur from home. Can't let strangers live thar—it's jest plumb awful to me! Ezry, I ben a-fightin' off this here foolishness o' mine fer weeks an' weeks—fer months. But 'tain't no use!" Jeth's eloquence was waxing hot. He spat at random, waving his hands with the compelling moral earnestness of his plea. "No use at all! An' to-night it got so gol-dogged bad I jest couldn't stand it noway in this world. Had to git up an' come daown here, ploddin' through mud an' rain, to see ye, Ez. Had to ask ye, Will ye sell it back to me—that Old Homestead o' mine?"

He paused, overwrought with emotion. A tear glistened in his eye. Ezra, watching him narrowly, smiled a thin, dry smile.

"Will I sell?" he answered, shifting his pipe. "Will I? Why, yes, I cal'late so—ef the price is right. The ole farm's 'baout run out by now. That's why I moved

off, 'cause it don't perduce nothin' no more, 'cep'n rocks an' weeds. But ef yew want it so bad, Jeth, seein' as yew an' me useter be neighbors like, an' it's your paternal place, why—why—I dunno but I'll accommodate ye. Gimme two thousan' dollar, an' it's yourn!"

Jeth, gasping, sprang to his feet.

"Two—thousan'—dollars!" he shrieked. "Why, you mis'able ole skinflint, 'tain't wuth half that! 'Tain't wuth eight hundred; no, ner five. I kin buy th' Taber place fer six, an' yew know what *that* is! Two thousand! My Lord-a-massy, it's robbery! I won't never give it—never in this mortal world!"

Ezra smoked a minute before answering.

"Set down," said he. "Set, an' think it over. What you say's true enough, I admit; but mebbe *I* got sentimental attachments fer the place myself. My grandsir, he—"

"Robbery! Eight hundred I'll give, an' Heaven knows that's twice too much!"

"Sure thing! But my price, as I said before, is two thousan'."

Jeth sat down limply and heaved a heart-broken sigh.

"So that's yer game, hey? Coinin' up my childhood's affections inta gain an' profit? Ezry, I never thunk it of ye; on my sould, I never did!"

"Two thousan'! Ter-morrer it'll be three!"

Jeth paled visibly beneath his dirt and tan. He saw quite clearly that Ezra was wise to something—how much, he did not know—and that the old man, confident of holding the whip-hand, was going to drive him ruthlessly. With quick determination he decided to make the best of a bad bargain.

"That's nine thousan' clear profit, anyhow," he told himself, after a mental calculation—"plus what I can git fer the place." A brilliant idea struck him. "Once it's mine, an' I git up all th' stuff, then let Ezry know, he'll buy it back fer any price I set, an' dig the hull gosh-danged farm over an' over, from end to end!" No, decidedly, with this delectable prospect of revenge in view, the price was eminently reasonable. He held out his hand.

"Two thousan' it is!" he cried. "Shake on it, neighbor!"

Their cold, hard hands met in a Judas grasp. Their eyes blinked bitterly at each other. The deal was done.

There remained only the matter of binding the bargain, and this Jeth arranged by paying over to Ezra five of the silver dollars which he had already dug up. He took good care surreptitiously to wipe them clean and bright before laying them in Ezra's palm. He then made Ez sign a bill of sale.

"Not strickly bindin'," thought he, "but it'll mebbe hold him till I can git Squire Chase to do it right, in the mornin'. Ef he squeals on it now, by heck, I'll law him from here to Halifax, ef it takes every last penny I got in the world, the mis'able ole thievin' miser!"

Business settled, Jeth was not long in taking his departure.

"Thank ye, neighbor," he said, striving to inject a little feeling into his voice. "Thanks! Ye've done me good—done me good, to-night. I'll try t' do *ye* good, some time, ole man. My pore heart's more at rest than it's ben many a long week an' month. The Old Homestead's mine ag'in, ain't it?"

" 'Tis, ef ye pay me th' balance 'fore ter-morrer night!"

"It's mine. I'm at rest now, neighbor, an'—"

"Might's well tell ye that ye can't occupy it till fall. Thar's two city fellers hired it fer the summer. Did ye know?"

Jeth did not answer for a moment. He had temporarily forgotten this check on his ambitions. But his confidence was sure.

"No matter 'bout them—they'll move ef I ask 'em, ef I tell 'em how my old heart is—"

"Don't yew believe it!" chuckled Ezra. "Pow'ful pleased they are with the place. They jest dote on it—fine air, grand view, an' all. No, sirree; ye'll never budge 'em, not an inch! But no matter; wish ye good luck, jest the same. See ye ter-morrer, with the money, hey? Good night!"

Jeth found himself on the door-step, with the door shut after him. He heard the bolt slide, and Ezra's voice in a harsh, sneering laugh of senile delight.

Clenching his fist, he shook it at the door.

"I—I— Oh, ye ole skunk, I'll git yew yet!" he hissed. Then off he stamped down to the road which led back past the orchard to the Old Homestead.

CHAPTER V

BUT now a difficulty presented itself. What should Jethro do? "Huck along home, now, an' let things lay till mornin'!" thought he. "An' mebbe slip up on th' hull danged business? Er else skive in on them thar city fellers to-night, and ask 'em to vacate? Kinda

funny doin's, they'll think it; an', like as not, they'll make a row. It's sure hard fodder to chaw—bad, any way you bite on it."

He stood undecided in the roadway, while the rain trickled from his hat-brim down his back.

"Gosh all hemlock!" he at length decided. "Nothin' fer it *but* to finish up the job to-night, to git it over afore old Ezry, thar, has had the time to see 'em, to let 'em know how bad I want th' place, an' so to block my game. Here goes!"

At a smart pace he struck off toward the house which sheltered the two urban obstacles. His sharp knock on the door interrupted them in the midst of a most delectable conversation.

"Sure thing!" one of them had been saying, as with feet elevated on the dining-room table he blew a cloud of smoke ceilingward. "Surest ever, Ben; it's all to the velvet! *Everything's* gone all to the velvet with the bridle off, so far; and velvet it's bound to be, right through' to the merry end. We've got the place leased and secure for all summer. We've got the stuff planted back o' the barn and the come-on knows it's there. Well, what more do we need?"

"Nothing but patience," the other made reply. "Once he's had a session with the shovel, he's our chow! If we don't shake him down a few, then my name's not Dr. Pittsburg B!"

Pod Slattery laughed before commenting on this sentiment—a hearty, meat-shaking laugh.

"It sure does look, Bo, like we're the real live steppers, the big dogs with the brass collars!" exulted he. "Don't tell *me* we ain't the proper ducks to paddle

round these rural fun-ponds! We cert'nly have got this thing hooked proper. No matter what the phony is, ranker the better, these here vertebrae in the backbone of the nation always stand an' come across. *This* one's bound to put us in the Financial Who's-Who for many days, at a total expense of fifty bucks in car fare an' rent, plus the twenty dibs out behind said barn!"

"Yes," assented Ben. "My only objection is, it's too easy. Why, all we have to do is sock the anesthetic to him, administer the knock-out wallop, and evaporate. How high do you think we ought to start?"

"Start 'way up, say I, and then compromise. That's good biz. If we miss this, it's me to the crape. Say, now, *did* you ever see anything shape up neater? All by the book, one, two, three; then the swat-bingo and a quick finish— Oh, joyful! What's *that*?"

"Somebody knocking! I say—"

"Sh-h-h! It may be the sacrificial lamb, already yet!"

"I'll go see. You stay here, Pod. If it *is* him, for Heaven's sake, keep mum! Remember, I'm the doc and you're my erratic patient; and, above all, don't cut in with side-remarks. Let me do it all!"

Ben, thus admonishing his unruly side-partner, put on a sober face and opened the door.

"Hallo!" said he. "What's wanted? Who's there?"

"It's—it's me!" came an embarrassed answer in a bucolic voice. Pod and Bender saw a lank, lean, grimy figure standing on the sill.

"Oh, it's you, is it? Well, and who might *you* be?" snapped Ben. "Pretty time o' night to rout up a city doctor and his patient, I swear! Come, who are you?"

What's your business?" To Pod, in an urgent aside, he whispered: "For Heaven's sake, man, can the grin! You're sick, see?—and can't be disturbed. Go lie down!"

Jeth, somewhat disconcerted by this brusque reception, stood a moment undecided in the door; then, boldened by greed and the absolute necessity of concluding affairs that very night, pressed forward into the sitting-room.

"'Scuse me, gents," he deprecated. "I know it's late, an' all, but my biz with yew can't wait—it reelly can't. Fact is, ahem! I—I—"

"If you don't mind, I'll just ask you to shut that door!" cried Ben sharply. "Can't have drafts on my patient, here. He's a neurasthenic diplomaniac, you understand. That's right. Now, sir, what do you wish with us?"

Under his breath, Pod was exclaiming: "Joy an' bliss! We used to have t' chasé 'em, and take it away from 'em; but now they're huntin' us at night, and beggin' us to take it—just pleadin' for the chance to come across with the goods! We've got the record beat; beat brown, turned, an' done on t'other side!"

"What do I want with yew?" drawled Jethro, shifting from one muddy boot to the other. "Wall, jest this: I want to tell yew I'm th' new owner o' this here prop-erty. Jest happened t' be a-passin' by, an' thought I might's well drop in an' inform ye."

"Owner? You the owner? You're crazy, man! An old chap named Ezra Bennett, half a mile down the road—"

"Oh, yes; I know all 'baout *him*. He *was* the owner—that's right; but fact is, I've jest bought th' place, my

Old Homestead, ye understand—an'—an'— Why, what's the matter with yer friend thar?"

"Oh, nothing; don't mind him. That's Mr. Duffield, my patient, as I told you. A neurasthenic. Nervous, very. He don't look it, but is. Involuntary twitching of his risorial muscles. Nothing at all. Don't pay the slightest attention to anything he may say or do—he's not responsible. So, then, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Farrar, my name is. Jethro K. Farrar, of Trap Corner."

"Mine, sir, is Dr. Evans—K. Wilfred Evans, M.D., of New York. So then, Mr. Farrar, you say you've just bought the place? Well, what of it? We've hired it for the summer. I'd just as soon pay rent to you as to the other fellow. What's your idea in routing us up this time o' night?"

"Wall—er—truth o' the matter is, I've decided t' come an' live here myself," answered Jeth, thrusting his quid into his cheek for greater ease of conversation. His nerve was coming back.

"Next fall, you mean? No objection that I know of."

"Ter-morrer! Right off!"

"The deuce you are! Why, man, I've got a three months' promise of the place! It's just what we need, every way. Fine air, high altitude, grand view, best of water—we're here to stay, sir, I can tell you *that*! Beside, we've already paid—"

"I don't keer a hoorah what ye've paid! I'll make it all right with ye. But it's my place naow, my Old Homestead what I ben a-longin' fer, these months past, an' I'm a-comin' back, that's all, understand?" The old man's voice was rising, thin and gusty with emotion.

He clenched his formless hat in his claw-hands. "I'm comin' back, that's sartain!"

"It's an outrage, sir, a horrible outrage on my patient!" vociferated the doctor, in a passion. "You do this thing, and by the Lord Harry, sir, you'll suffer for it!"

But Jeth stood his ground. He was neither to be moved by entreaties, overawed by threats, or scared by prospect of personal violence. His fighting blood was up, and so was his consuming cupidity. Step by step, Doc Bender gave ground before him, arguing, pleading, menacing, but always in the end, retreating. Pod, in the meantime, he dismissed from the room with a peremptory command; for this patient of his, as the interview progressed, seemed to grow *very* nervous. The facial twitchings and the incoherent, mumbled remarks gave good ground to doubt his sanity.

At last, after an hour's heated discussion, Jeth came outright with threats at Dr. Evans, K. Wilfred Evans, M.D., of New York.

"Out ye go, both on ye, er I'll *law* ye out!" the irate farmer cried, brandishing at Evans the informal bill of sale, as his legal backing—a document which the doctor, wise as serpents, did not ask to see. "Out ye go! But I'll do the square thing, as ye say I'd oughter. Considerin' the inconvenience—"

"Danger to my patient's health!"

"Yes, an' loss o' scenery—"

"Of air, water, elevation!"

"Yes, all of them, an' the general put-out o' the business, I'll—why, I'll pay yer rent an' give ye—fifty dollars spot cash!"

Jeth drew himself up grandly as he made this magnificent offer. For all answer, the Doctor strode across the room, flung open the door and shouted: "Mr. Duffield!"

"Doctor?" came an answering voice, and Mr. Duffield entered in bath-robe and slippers, ponderous, massive of jowl, threatening of brow.

"Duffield, d'you know what this—er—this person is proposing?"

"Well, what?"

The doctor briefly laid the case before his patient, whose broad face grew mottled with astonishment and rage.

"You lobsterine!" cried Duffield, finally, unable further to contain himself. "You plow-pushing, bean-eating, leather-fisted son o' the compost-heap, you! Why, for half—"

"Calm yourself, my dear fellow!" protested the doctor. "Recall your dignity. He's not worth our wasting breath on. There, sir," (to Jethro) "is the way out. Pray take it and relieve us of the painful necessity of *throwing* you out!"

"A hundred, then!" cried Jethro, standing to his guns.

"See here, you," spat Duffield, with ugly emphasis. "We ain't no men to be juggled with. We know the law; we're wise, O.K., see? Your game's too thin, that's what. I'm hep. There's some reason *why* you want us to vamoose, now ain't there? Some all-fired good reason—something valuable you happen to know about, eh? This farm, here—"

"My Old Homestead!" panted Jethro. His teeth

were chattering with the fear that clutched his covetous old heart.

"Homestead, punk! It's more than Homestead you're dopin' out. There's somethin' on this place you want, an' mean to have. Don't tell me there ain't. Don't—you—dare tell me there ain't! Well, then, if that's so, why ain't him and me entitled to it, eh? Sue us all you please, an' be hanged; it'll take time, that will, and in the meantime, we'll turn this jay's paradise upside down, find whatever there is to find, an' *own* it. Possession's nine points, don't forget that! The law? Why—"

"Five hundred!" fairly shouted Jethro in despair. Now that the golden hoard was menaced, all his penurious niggling rapidly went by the board. After all, beside eleven thousand, what were a few hundred dollars?

"Make it an even thousand and we go, early to-morrow morning, with no questions asked," put in the physician.

"If you don't, *you* go, and we stay till Hell freezes, if we have to fight it out with lead!" Duffield supported him.

"And the publicity—think of the publicity!" added Evans.

"A thousand, yes, all right!" groaned Jeth, sinking into a chair with trembling limbs. "I'll pay it over, in cash, ter-morrer mornin' early. Only go, that's all!"

"You'll pay it to-night!" insisted the doctor. "Plus the rent!"

"As quick's you can hike home an' back, for it!" Duffield amended. "Then we blow, an' glad to leave

these parts—glad to get away from such low-lived, mean, underhanded, tricky bunco-games! Stick around, after *that?* Not for ten thousand!” With which virtuous sentiment he crossed his arms over his massive chest and drew himself up to his full height of five feet ten.

So it befell that, cowed, beaten, trembling with the lust of unearned gain, Jethro made off once more through the night, bound homeward toward the Loose Brick Savings-bank.

Some hours later, with one thousand and seventy dollars in good bills stowed safely in Ben’s wallet, the two pals stood in the road before the Old Homestead. Inside the house sat Jethro, now in full possession. Fevered was he, and wild of eye.

“My Gahd, wait till they’re gone!” thought he. “Wait till I’m free an’ clear t’ dig—an’ dig—an’ dig! Money! ’Leven thousand dollars! I’m rich, rich! Money. Lemme at it!”

CHAPTER VI

NOT yet the end of this mild tale—not yet, but soon. For as day dawned and our two virtuous friends, foot-sore yet light of heart, tramped over Billings Hill, half-way from Woodstock to the railroad station at Green Valley Junction, Jethro Farrar sat before the kitchen table in the Old Homestead, thinking.

Horrible were his thoughts, agonizing in their anguish. Pale his face was; his breath wheezed forth from tremulous lungs. His hands had buried themselves in his scant hair. On his wrinkled brow stood forth bright, glistening drops of chilly sweat. Abject, anguished,

annihilated was Jeth—and the cause of it all was one of his silver dollars which, under the feeble rays of the lamp, lay before him on the table.

He stared at it with glassy eyes, snatched it up, examined it, flung it down again, and burst into a long, whimpering, wailing moan.

"Oh—oh!" he cried. "The date! Eighteen year ago, th' letter said! That's 1897, ain't it? *Ain't it 1897?*"

No answer to his cry of pain. Once more he scanned the coin. Out burst a choking shriek of woe: "Eighteen-ninety-seven! *But this is dated 1904!*"

Then, in a flash of comprehension, the awful verity broke in on him. Up he started, flinging the chair backward. Hatless he bolted from the room, out of the house, with a wild, incoherent trail of rural profanity streaming behind him like an oriflamme. Out into the growing dawn he rushed, a figure horrible to behold; and down the road he hurled himself, in mad pursuit. But even through his insane frenzy the futility of such a chase bore in on him.

"They've got—half an hour's—start on me!" he gasped. "Can't *never* catch 'em—this way!"

He hauled up short, wheeled, and dashed back. In two minutes he had wrenched open the stable door, had jerked from her repose the old, gray, rawboned mare inside, had flung himself on her bare back; and, with flailing whip and drumming boot-heels, was rushing her up through the rocky pasture, through the woods, over the hills, and so away on a bee-line short cut, wilder than any steeplechase, toward Green Valley Junction.

Meanwhile Pod and Bender, best foot forward, were making tracks toward safety. As they hastened on, they held converse.

"It's all over but the spendin', Bo!" exulted Pod. "A good week's trimmin'? Some!"

"We aren't on the train yet," answered Bender. "The Great White Way is still far off."

"For-get it!" his side-partner gibed. "Long before friend Jethro gets through dallyin' with his little private Panama, we'll be reposin' 'neath the shade of the Schlitz. Ease up a little on the velocities, can't you? We've got time, plus; and I'm goin' shy on wind."

Thus, joyful and care-free, our worthy and honest friends made way, unmindful of destiny, which, on a gray mare, was pushing 'cross-country with malevolent intention.

But at the little gingerbread station, what an awakening was there! For, as they reached the platform, ten minutes before train-time, there came a rush at them, a hornet-buzzing of attack—and the fight was on!

"Thar they be, sheriff—thar they be!" they heard the voice of Farrar shrieking. "Take 'em both! Shell-game!—Gold-brick dodge an' bunco! Catch 'em. *Grab* that skinny feller, can't ye? Git th' big un, anyhow! *Git* after t'other one, yew men—I can't do no more—plumb beat out—*don't let 'em go!*"

Pod, turning to flee Fate (in the shape of a constable with a tin star on his breast and a hickory wagon-spoke in his dexter mitt), felt something like a bolt of lightning smite him on the skull. Stars scintillated. A thought flashed over him: "That dollar—that last extra dollar I

chucked in for luck to make it twenty-one, three sevens—*what was the date?*” Then he threw out both fat hands, staggered, and fell.

True as a die to his pal, he managed to cry: “Beat it, Ben!” Then his ego blent with Nirvana, and he entered into a very deep though temporary peace.

As for Dr. Pittsburg Ben? Both his trained fists clove out a path for him through the obstreperous horde. The grappling rurals stayed him not. And once outside the circle, in the gloom of that early, rainy May morn, with the whole of a big, dark, thickly forested New England outdoors to run in, half an hour put him (with the thousand and seventy dollars) far away in sylvan and impenetrable solitudes.

“Pod, *au revoir*,” he mused, with wonder how in Tophet the game had slipped. “Not good-by, Pod; just *au revoir*. I’d like to see the local jail that can keep *you* inside, long, while *I’m* outside! But as for you, friend Jeth, as for you, Old Homestead, a long, last, glad farewell!”

Then in his woodland fastness he sat down to rest, to smoke, to think, to reckon how he should best jump the next blind-baggage, southward-bound.

VII

POD FLITS

Wherein we find additional proof that "stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage"

CHAPTER I

TO Pod Slattery, sitting dejected in his narrow cell in the county "can," the rural turnkey delivered a newspaper which had been sent him, so its wrapper said, by one P. Benyon, New York City.

The wrapper was no longer on it, for Warden Tibbetts had ripped it off preparatory to inspecting the paper, lest in its bulk be hidden some metal tool, some dope or other contraband. But Tibbetts had discovered nothing. Though he had scanned the whole paper, sheet by sheet, he had found it innocent of guile. A certain blue-penciled article had, indeed, arrested his suspicious eye, but it had been merely an account of a riot at Tammany Hall.

"Nothin' to object to here," he had said to Turnkey Bartlett. "Let him have it." So Pod got the paper.

Wearily he unfolded it. No avid reader, Pod. He was pining for the open, now that summer was coming over the hill—longing for the good green Fields of Graft, where erstwhile he and Bender had so joyously disported,

before the Old Homestead misplay had combined with his own defective sprinting qualities to land him in the place of tin spoons, striped clothing and barred windows.

"Readin'!" he scoffed disgustedly. "Who wants t' flash a lamp at readin', I'd like to know, with all those tricks just waitin' to be trumped on the outside?"

He yawned voluminously. Then his sad eye caught the blue-penciling.

"Huh? What?" he queried. "That looks like news from home!"

He read the article all through, squinting in the dim light of the cell. Then he turned the paper over and looked carefully at the back of it. He passed his fat finger over the surface. A smile broadened his good-humored face.

"Huh!" he grunted. "I guess that's what it is, all right, all right—news!"

Once more he scanned the text with minute attention, holding the paper close to his eyes with one hand, while with the other he scratched his bald spot. When he had quite finished, he held the paper up to the dull square of light which seeped in through the window from the jail yard.

Never in his life had his perceptions been more keen. Here, there, in certain letters of the print, minute holes showed, mere tiny punctures with the finest of needle-points. Long and lovingly, Pod studied these punctures. Dawning comprehension brightened his smile. Half an hour or more he studied, by the fading light. Then he nodded, and with a sudden access of joy noiselessly slapped his leg.

He heard the *pad-pad-pad* of the turnkey's rubber

soles coming down the corridor. Instantly he tore the paper into bits and flung it on the concrete floor.

"Huh! Who th' devil wants t' read stale news, in here?" the turnkey heard him growl disgustedly. Then came a rattling of the cell-door.

"Hey, Bo, can't you give us somethin' that ain't green with moss?" Pod hailed.

"Shut up in there, you, or I'll report ye!" Bartlett retorted, as, frowning, he made his way to the office.

CHAPTER II

ONE week from that day a book came to the Ponkapog jail addressed to Mr. William Slattery, and this, too, reached his hands.

Warden Tibbetts, of course, looked it all through; but who could object to a series of essays on "Moral Regeneration" by the Rev. Kenneth Blair?

Pod let the turnkey see him dutifully reading the first of these essays; but that afternoon, at the early supper-hour, he "palmed" a tin spoon from the table, and took it with him to his cell. Before the lights were all put out, at nine o'clock, he had straightened the handle of the spoon till it made a sort of blade, and had pried open the thick pasteboard back cover of the volume.

From a little cavity deftly fashioned there he withdrew a very thin tablet of some reddish substance and a tiny camel's-hair brush. These he hid under his mattress. The book, after he had carefully pressed its cover together again and rubbed the edge with pipe-ashes till the split was hidden, he stood on the little corner shelf, along with the compulsory and unused Testament.

Next morning he chewed his day's allowance of tobacco into a strong quid and tucked it close up under his armpit, where he held it all day long. And in the quiet hour between eight and nine, when prying eyes were few, he sought out his brush and tablet.

Wetting the brush in his mouth he rubbed it on the tablet. The brush grew red.

"Aniline's the stuff, an' no missplay, at that!" he murmured, as with deft dabs he spotted his face, neck, chest and arms with a fine red rash. These dots he labored over till they were perfect.

"Tell me they ain't the goods!" thought he. "'Nothin' you ever learn, Bill, but what may help you some time,' my poor old mother used to say when I was a kiddo, and right she was! That time I panhandled in Beantown, dosed in Mike's inkpot on T-Wharf an' got hep to the gentle art of 'jiggered' arms and phony sores—say, what I learned then is the elixir now, eh? These here eruptions take the dust-microbes from none, or I'm a preacher. They'll keep me several laps in the lead over old Tibbetts, all right, till we uncover a few oddities!"

He finished his task, once more hid the tablet and the brush, then wrapped himself in his blanket and lay down in his bunk with a low groan.

"That groan comes pretty near bein' the genuine goods," he pondered. "Fact is, the quid's beginnin' to bite. By mornin' there'll be somethin' doin' in this jail, no white-powder trance about that! Well, let 'er happen. I'm ready—if Ben is!"

He snuggled the tobacco closer under his arm and composed himself to sleep.

"Gee, but I'm dizzy, now I stop to notice it!" he murmured. "There'll sure be a sick Pod by breakfast-time!"

CHAPTER III

THERE *was* a sick Pod, very sick, actively and noisily sick. By midnight, sleep had quite abandoned him. By 2 A. M. his groans were echoing with unsimulated wo through the corridors of the jail.

By three—though he made no demand for help—the night-watchman realized that oaths and threats and commands to "Dry up, in there, an' go t' sleep!" availed nothing. By three-thirty the warden himself, roused from slumber, was standing over Pod, a lantern in one hand and a clinical thermometer in the other. He didn't intend to be fooled by any malingerer, not he!

No doctor could be had at that unholy hour, save by telephoning over to Billings Center, eight miles away, where the county pest-house was. Judson Atkins, the jail physician, was off at a convention on hospital practice, in Rutland. Warden Tibbetts therefore officiated.

"What's th' matter with ye, hey?" he demanded, prodding the sufferer.

He had no love for this fat, quizzical prisoner of his who could, on occasion, discourse freely in the most extraordinary language, on rural characteristics.

"Come, speak up, thar! What's wrong?"

Pod only groaned and heaved, wrapped the blanket round his head, and breathed heavily in staccato time.

"Won't talk, you? I think ye're tryin' t' hornswoggle me, that's what I think! I've seed sech doin's afore. Cal'late this here thermometer will tell!"

He twitched the blanket from Pod's face, while the night-watchman stood behind him, holding the lantern, and thrust the little glass tube under the lolling tongue. Pod, sick as he really was, rolled his eyes horribly and added a little quiver to the groans.

"Thar! *Now* we'll see!" exclaimed Tibbetts presently, withdrawing the tube. He held it close to the lantern and squinted at it, turning it this way, then that, to catch the magnification of the mercury.

"What? One hundred an' two an' a half? An' pulse runnin' like a tarnation race-horse? *Je-ru-salem!* Say, Jackson, I reckon as how this here man has got suthin' crossways in his gizzard. Here, gimme that light, will ye?"

He held the lantern close to Pod's distorted face, and scanned it narrowly. A whistle escaped his puckered lips. He pulled down the blanket, ripped open Pod's coarse shirt and surveyed his fat chest, a growing fear in his eyes.

"My Lord, but I—I wish—" groaned Pod.

"Wish what, you?"

"Wish I'd—oh, my head!—been vaccinated 'fore I ever blew from New York! It—*uhhh!*—run out last year, my—last vaccination did!"

Warden Tibbetts dropped his lantern, crashing, to the floor, and backed away in sudden, sickening fear.

"You—you, Jackson—you've had it a'ready, ain't ye?" he gasped.

"Sure I have!" answered the watchman, gathering up the lantern just in time to save it from going out. "Twelve years ago last fall. I—"

"All right, all right!" cried Tibbetts, retreating out

of the cell. "You're th' man t' see this through, not me! I'll git a wagon. You wrap him up good an' hustle him out o' here, quick, see? Don't take him through the office. Take him out th' back way. We got t' git him over to th' Center right off quick!"

From well outside the place of dread he gave his orders in a tremulous voice. No more critical inspection for him!

"Gee, but it's lucky he's a coward, an' the light's poor!" reflected the very sick Pod, between genuine groans.

All up and down the dark corridor bunks were creaking, cell-doors rattling, lugubrious voices asking:

"What's th' row? Somebody dyin'? Hey, Bo, put us wise."

Somebody answered: "Smallpox!" and a general gasp pervaded the night air.

"Git him out! Hurry! Hurry!" repeated Tibbetts, executing a well covered retreat toward the office. Two minutes later he was rousing big Jim Butts, the prison hostler, and ordering out the express-wagon.

"Oh, my, what you goin' t' do with me?" blubbered Pod. "You ain't goin' to—take me to no—pest-house, are you?"

"Sure I be!" answered Jackson cheerfully.

"No! no!" protested the sick man with pitiable terror. "Not there! Any place but there! Oh, why can't you lemme die in peace, right here?"

"We ain't a-worryin' none 'bout your dyin'," Jackson assured him, as he wrapped the extra blanket close about Pod's quivering form. "It's the jail we're thinkin' of. Can't have that infected, y' see. Hev t'

fumigate it now, as it is. Come on, now, set up. Git yer feet to th' floor. I'll help ye. You kin still walk a bit, can't ye?"

"Walk? Nah! Won't neither! No pest-house fer mine!"

In vain Jackson pleaded, urged, threatened, expostulated. Only when he had commandeered a brace of trembling, panic-stricken prisoners, and with their help lugged the groaning, feebly struggling 290-pounder by main force down the corridor and through the back entrance, did Pod Slattery leave the county jail.

CHAPTER IV

AWAY in the misty dark of that early June morning started the little party, headed for Billings Center. Big Jim Butts drove the official mare. Jackson sat beside him, spitting tobacco-juice between stray bits of conversation; and in the bottom of the wagon, tightly wrapped in two thick blankets, lay the prostrate and complaining Pod. Warden Tibbetts did not appear, to see the party off. Already with panic haste he was getting out the sulphur-candles and filling the jail with strangling, choking fumes.

The village was asleep as they drove through it at a walk. The houses were all dark. No life showed itself, save a lone, barking cur, and a matutinal chanticleer or two. Over the rocky ruts the wagon jolted, to the accompaniment of the sick man's groaning. Out of the town it passed, and, turning to the south at the sign-boards, headed for Billings Center.

Jackson, had he bothered to look around, might have

seen his invalid reach in under the coarse shirt, withdraw something from his arm-pit, and fling it away; but Jackson saw nothing. He was too busy with his reminiscences of his own small-pox siege, some twelve years ago.

By the time the wagon had traversed four miles, Pod found his health notably bettered. The absence of the poisoning quid helped him, the fresh air revived him, and a certain expectant eagerness stimulated his returning strength. He forgot, now and then, to groan.

"Sinkin', is he?" queried Big Jim Butts.

"Seems like," the watchman answered. "No matter. What th' devil do we care? We're doin' our jooty anyhow, ain't we?"

He clucked to the mare, and urged her to a lumbering trot.

Another mile passed. The road took a curve, and entered Babbett's Woods, on the other side of which lay Billings.

"Dark in here, ain't it?" commented Jim, flicking his whip at an overbending spruce bough.

There came no answer, for all at once the roadside bushes crackled and in the semi-dusk Jackson and Butts saw a thin, crouching man run with unsteady steps back into the woods, dodging from tree to tree as though to hide himself.

"I swow! What th' tarnation's that?" cried Jim, reining the mare to a standstill. "Sheep-thief, or hobo, or—"

"I dunno. Somethin' wrong abaout it, anyhow!" Jackson replied. "Hey, you!" he shouted. "Halt, there, in the name o' the law!"

The fugitive sank to earth and disappeared. In the dark undergrowth, they lost all sight of him.

"Shall we drive on?" asked Jim.

"Not by a gosh-blamed sight!" Jackson retorted. He was keen for laurels and promotion. "No, sirree! You wait here; I'll ketch th' cuss an' see what he's up to, anyhow."

Over the wheel he leaped, through the brushwood he crashed, and with cautious circumspection made his way toward the spot where the stranger had seemed to hide. As he went, rustling last fall's dead leaves underfoot, he called out warnings, commands, and challenges.

"Don't hurt me! Leave me be!" rose a voice from a little dell off a couple of hundred feet to the left. "I ain't done nothin' to you!"

"That's all right what you've done er ain't done," roared Jackson, suddenly emboldened by the fugitive's evident fear and weakness. "You're a s'picious character, that's what ye be. Yeou come along o' me, savvy? I arrest ye, in th' name o' the State o' New Hampshire!"

The man lay quite still, cringing and terrified. Jackson strode up to him. Big Jim, craning his neck from the wagon, could just barely make out the watchman's figure.

"Get up!" commanded Jackson, kicking him.

"Oooh! Don't, please!" begged the man. Jackson saw that he was lean and ragged, and in apparent pain. " 'Tain't *my* fault if I'm sick an' ain't got no home nor place t' go. Lemme be!"

"Sick, be ye? Let's see! Reckon yeou'll be sicker fore I'm through with ye!"

Jackson knelt beside the prostrate form. Something

flashed. The watchman, with hair-bristling fear, found himself looking right into the round, cold mouth of a blue revolver—a mouth that seemed big as a young cannon to his terrified eyes.

“What—what—?” he stammered. The fugitive sat up and with fearful earnestness whispered: “Make me sicker, will you? We’ll see about that! Look here, you blundering yahoo, if you want to live, you do just what I tell you, now, and do it quick, see?”

“I—I—all right—what?”

“Put your two hands out here. No, closer together. There, that’s right. Now hold ’em so! No Rube with bushes and a tin can hand *me* anything. Shut your eyes, tight!”

There came a click, another one. Jackson felt something cold upon his wrists.

“Bracelets!” he groaned. “Gosh a ’mighty, what’s up?”

The man with the blue puffing-rod vouchsafed no answer. All he said was: “Now stand up against that hemlock, there. No, not that one—the other. Be quick, or—”

“All right, I will. Don’t shoot, mister!”

And the erstwhile valiant one backed up with an exceeding meekness to a towering conifer. A minute later, the thin man had lashed him firmly to it with a hank of braided rope, thin rope but very strong. Then with deft speed he gagged the captive with a rough stick and some linen twine. His hands were none too tender and the twine cut Jackson’s flesh, but Jackson never whimpered, for the fear of death was very strong upon him.

The slight man whistled twice, a shrill note, and started toward the road.

Big Jim Butts, his suspicions well aroused that something was amiss, dropped the reins and started to clamber down from the wagon. But just as his foot touched the top of the wheel, a strange thing happened. Up from behind him rose a huge, inchoate form, vast in bulk, shedding blankets right and left. Staggering it rose, dizzy with anguish, yet terrible in determination.

Clad only in rough prison underwear, pallid, with contracted features, this apparition hurled itself on Jim, from the rear, before the driver could so much as turn. Not by dint of blows, but just with sheer impact of weight, the mighty form hurled Butts to earth, fell atop of him, then clung, crushing the very breath out of him. Jim had no wind for even a second cry of "Help!"

Help was fast coming, though not for Jim. The slight and agile man, crying: "Hold him, Pod! Hold him!" burst out of the woods into the road, and Jim Butts, too, found himself inspecting the blue muzzle of the .44 smoking-iron.

"You can get up now, Pod," said the slim man.

"I don't know about that," Pod answered. "Dizzy? Say! My bean's doin' one merry whirl, all right. Here, Ben, give us a flipper, will you. So, that's right!"

He leaned against the wagon, panting.

Jim, gasping for breath, blinked at the revolver.

"Sma—sma—smallpox! Keep away!" he managed to hiccup. "You'll—catch it!"

"Sure, I understand," Bender assented. "Get up! Peel!"

"Huh?"

"Stand up and get your clothes off, P. D. Q., or I'll make a salt-shake out of you! Got it?"

Utterly dazed, Big Jim arose.

Five minutes later, he too, wrapped in blankets, was standing in the woods, bound fast to a tree and gagged with his own handkerchief.

"We'll send somebody for you, before night!" was Bender's parting shot as he and Pod climbed into the wagon and with a sharp cut of the lash started the mare down the dusky road through the woods.

CHAPTER V

BEN drove, while Pod with haste and more agility than seemed compatible with one so fat and recently so ill, clambered into the clothes of Big Jim.

"Now you take the ribbons, Pod," said Ben. And straightway he effected his disguise by simply peeling off his ragged gear and flinging it into the woods. Underneath, a clean, whole suit appeared. Ben drew a cap from his pocket, and the transformation was complete.

"Gee, Ben, but you're the nifty slickerine!" commented Pod with wonderment. "We've sure got the fun-ball circlin' now!"

"But not pocketed, as yet," Ben answered. "Remember, it's nine miles to the station at Jaffrey, and fast getting daylight. And this whole county a spider-web of rural telephones. Don't forget *that!*"

"You mean—"

"I mean that when the patient don't arrive at Billings pest-house, as he ought to, now, inside of half an hour or so, there'll be doings. Tibbetts has notified 'em

you're coming, of course. You see what's due to arrive, all right! If we romp home in the lead, it'll be no fault of *theirs!*"

"True for you. Shall we duck th' buggy and blow on foot?"

"Forget it! I've got something down on the dope-sheet worth ten of that. Just you wait and keep the optics skinned! Say, but it worked, didn't it, eh? Oh, a pip! All fitted together like a jig-saw puzzle. Tibbetts, ha! ha!"

"Took the hook, line, sinker, pole an' all. Scared green, too. Did a blamed quick reverse when he saw the spots."

"Don't blame him. Slickest make-up ever. So smooth it took all curves without a jar—except to Tibb & Co. And there's more show-me happenings, stamped with the hap-brand, too, still dated to arrive. Just wait!"

Joyfully discussing things past, present, future, they pressed on and on at the mare's best speed. Half a mile from the scene of the hold-up they passed a farmer driving in with milk to Billings. He eyed them keenly, but did not molest them.

"Damn this dawn-stunt!" growled Pod. "If it was only midnight, now—! Why ain't I a Joshua?"

Even in the deep woods they could see that the light was growing very strong. The sun would be up, now, any time. At a little brook running beneath the road, they paused for a drink and a wash, which served the double purpose of refreshing them and removing Pod's aniline rash.

"Quick convalescence, eh?" smiled Ben, as they once

more set forward and turned into a cross-road leading over the hills to Jaffrey.

"Surest thing you know!" assented Pod. "Nobody could stay sick long, with *your* patent get-there line o' remedies."

The woods thinned out, and finally gave place to cleared land as they kept eastward. Morning had now fully come, and with it a revival of life in farmhouses and along the road. Ben urged the old mare forward. Plain to see, he chafed under the rural scrutiny. Pod, too, was anxious.

Just outside a little settlement, which straggled down a hillside, they came to an old church set far back from the road in a grove of cypress. To the left of it stood a tumble-down hearse-house. Ben drove into the yard and reined the mare to a standstill beside this structure.

"Here we are. Get out!" he remarked. "Here's the place I picked."

Pod climbed ponderously down. He and Ben forced the door, with a couple of vigorous shoves, and peered in.

"Good! Still there!" said Ben. "You unharness. I'll run it out." He seized the shafts of the old-fashioned, solid-sided vehicle. Presently the wagon was in the hearse-house and the hearse was hitched to the official mare. They closed the door again. Nobody had seen them—so, at least, they thought.

"Now, Pod, here's the dido I haven't put you lucid to, as yet. In you go, now, quick!"

"In? In where?"

"In there!"

"What? Me, in that cold-meat cart? Without even a window to peek out of?"

"That's the program. You're dead—of smallpox—see?"

Pod spluttered protests, but Ben stood firm. "Get in, you stiff! What right's a cadaver to talk back, eh? Here, I'll help you up. So! Now remember, whatever happens, not a word out o' you, or it's all off!"

A minute later, Ben was on the seat, looking very lugubrious, and the hearse, weighted to the limit of its springs, was swaying and jolting out of the church-yard behind the somnolescent equine.

CHAPTER VI

BEN turned back from the settlement, back over the hill, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing the last of the church-spire with the morning sun gilding its tip. Down the first cross-road running east he turned, and urged the mare into a trot.

The hearse bounced and rocked, yawing heavily into the ruts and coming up into the wind, as it were, with a strong list as its ponderous cargo shifted. A groan, now and then, issued from the stuffy box, but Ben rapped on its top with his whip-handle, commanding silence. Farmhouses were scattered all along the road, and he could not afford to risk such a luxury on Pod's part as groaning.

They had proceeded a couple of miles, and already Ben's spirits were rising high—for the railroad now lay less than an hour's travel ahead, and with this change of equipage all chances seemed in their favor—when a disconcerting set-back brought the frowns to the driver's keen face.

They were just passing a farm, Ben driving decorously, with hat pulled low over his eyes, when a gaunt woman appeared at the door of a wood-shed and scanned the hearse with knitted brows and hand on hip. There were telephone-wires leading into the house.

"Cy! Cy!" Ben heard her call. "Come here, quick."

Ben kept his pose and never so much as jerked a rein, but his heart leaped. A man suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"I snum ef it ain't!" Ben heard him say, in answer to some inaudible remark of the woman's. "I'll hook up, an' see!"

"Oh, you'll see, will you?" thought Ben. He had passed, now, out of sight of the house, so he lashed the mare to a sharp trot.

"Somebody must be wise," he thought. "Somebody must have piped the game. And curse these rural telephones for gossip! This is a pinch, sure. Well, if we've got to do the dash, we've got to do it, that's all. Come on, there, come!" Once more the whip-lash whistled.

Ben felt that the true character of his freight was still quite unsuspected. Surely the time had been too short for the whole truth to leak; but none the less, if he were suspected merely of stealing the settlement hearse, that would bring on most fatal complications.

"Got to beat it now, that's all!" said he.

Around the bends he drove at a good lick, the old hearse creaking, jolting and careering heavily. A long hill, he saw, lay before him, down into the valley at whose lower end was Rawling, the railroad, deliverance. He thanked his stars for the long hill. That would speed him half a mile or more on his way. Vigorously he laid

on the whip; the old mare kicked up her heels and hit the grit in earnest.

And now the hearse lunged into a mad career. Loose rocks and gravel flew, dust rose in the morning sunlight, springs complained and loose spokes rattled.

Every "thank-you-ma'am" sent the crazy rattletrap bounding into air, to come down a-slew and right itself, rim-racked, with wild, eccentric gyrations. The pace quickened. The old hearse, freighted as never before, hurled itself down the hill, devouring space, faster and faster as it neared the bottom.

Ben, laughing aloud, laying on the whip where it would do the most good, glanced back. His laughter ceased, and a strong word filled his mouth. Behind him, just topping the hill some mile or so in the rear, plainly visible against the sky-line, he caught sight of a pursuing wagon. He saw the driver's arm rise, fall, and knew the rod was nowise being spared.

"Go it, Cresceus!" he shouted to the now terrified mare, and rained down blows.

The hearse struck a hummock.

Smash!

Shrill cries rang out—wild, inarticulate cries. Ben, hauling vainly on the ribbons, looked around. He saw the roadway strewn with boards, a-scatter.

"Good Lord! The bottom's out!" he cried. "Pod's running, in the hearse!"

Then, as he looked, a huge and rotund figure fell astern, rolled, ricocheted, sprawled, bounced and came to rest. It struggled up and lunged into a staggering run after the fleeing equipage, with wild yells, dusty, disheveled.

"Whoa, Emma! Whoa!" roared Ben, jerking the reins savagely. The mare obeyed. Slower and slower the mutilated hearse rattled, then stopped still.

Ben jumped from his seat and ran back.

"Hurt?" he cried.

"Hurt, nothin'! But say—what—"

"Cut the questions, Pod! They're after us. We've got to make a diversion of some sort, and hike cross-lots! Hear *that?*"

He held up a warning finger. Pod listened, panting. Far up the hill, out of sight around its sweep, came a rattle of loose stones.

"Yaps coming! Be here in three minutes! Quick, that hay!"

Ben pointed at a lop-sided old haystack by the roadside.

"Quick! Stuff the hearse!"

Without waiting for explanations, he dived for the stack and came back with a heaping armful. Pod, questioning not, imitated him. Into the hearse they crammed it. Enough bottom-boards remained to hold it in its place.

"Now, a match! Hurry! Hurry!"

The match went *Fsss!* Ben thrust it into the hay. A tiny flame leaped up, then thickened and threw out yellow smoke.

"All right, let 'er go!" cried Ben. "Duck for the woods!"

He gave the mare a fierce, final cut of the lash.

"Get up! Go on there, you!" he shouted, and kicked her in the ribs. Terrified beyond all measure, she leaped into a wild run.

Flaming like a meteor, with a long, dense trail of smoke streaming behind, the blazing apparition hurled itself into the valley.

"Down! Down!" cried Bender, seizing Pod and hauling him behind a tangled growth of birch and hardhack. Barely hidden from sight of the road, they heard the dash and rattle of their pursuer's wagon. Then came another, and a third. Profane, astonished yells rose on the air.

"Hell's loose! Thar goes—th' fust load—naow!" a high-pitched nasal voice shouted in mingled fear and amaze.

Quite still lay Pod and Ben. No more wagons passed. Gradually peace descended on the spring landscape.

"Come on, Bo, let's do a sneak—beat it for the uncut!" chuckled Pod, at length.

"Right-o. I'm with you!" answered Ben.

They got cautiously to their feet and started for the woods which lay a quarter of a mile back of the road.

"That'll hold 'em for an hour or two, that Hell-buggy will," grinned the ex-invalid.

"Longer than that," Ben opined, "or I don't know the Jay psychology. This is surely handing 'em a new one. By the time they get through doin' the crane stunt, let 'em find us—if they can! There's other stations besides Rawling, and other south-bound night freights besides the one that stops there. Give us a freight and the two phony-cards I've got in my pocket, and—"

"And it's the short route to Broadway for ours, a one best bet!" exclaimed the radiant Pod as they disappeared into the sheltering forest.

VIII

A GAME OF SOLITAIRE

Wherein a Complex Stunt is Pulled

CHAPTER I

THE firm of Aaronson & Jacobs, diamond merchants and dealers in *objects d'art*, were very wise with the wisdom of their calling, but they were not omniscient.

On the contrary, despite their business acumen they lacked the imaginative faculty without which no handler of this world's most precious commodity need hope for absolute and continued immunity from the slings and arrows of occasional misfortune.

Had this not been the case I am positive that Aaronson & Jacobs would not have summarily discharged their head bookkeeper for a certain trifling shortage in his accounts which they discovered one July morning.

Rather would they have taken him up into the firm and thereby given his talents the wider scope they demanded, the more so as said bookkeeper, Emmanuel Katzenstein by name, had been with the house a matter of eleven years, and was thoroughly conversant not only with their legitimate business, but also with certain other details no less ingenious than peculiar.

It may be that Aaronson & Jacobs did not know their

bookkeeper had familiarized himself with these details, which proves the firm's lack of omniscience. And as a conclusion to all the above, had Emmanuel Katzenstein not been discharged, certain other events would never have taken place.

Among several such events the most immediate is this, that Mr. Katzenstein would not, on the afternoon of his dismissal, have strayed down to the Palace Rathskeller on Greenwich Street and there sought liquid consolation, the while he cogitated on the injustices of human life, his own misfortunes, and how the deuce he was going to get another job.

His attitude, as he sat meditating and sighing deeply from time to time, had nothing in it to attract the attention of any but persons specially acute in reading signs; but just because Nemesis was getting ready to take a hand in the game of life and even up scores with Aaronson & Jacobs, a couple of such persons dropped into the rathskeller while Mr. Katzenstein was there.

I give you one guess to identify this pair. One was of corpulent habit of body, full-blooded and somewhat puffy, albeit with quick, keen eyes that managed to see everything without ever appearing to see much of anything.

The other, quite his antithesis in appearance, slim, scholarly looking and refined, seemed afflicted with acute nearsightedness and was forever adjusting his eye-glasses as though to bring the world into focus with his blinking optics.

Both were well dressed, unobtrusive, quiet. And both sat themselves down at the next table to Emmanuel Katzenstein, ordered brewage, and proceeded to imbibe

the same, discussing meanwhile the recent bearish turn taken by Consolidated Tin Plate.

Not many minutes after their arrival, Emmanuel Katzenstein had occasion to relight his cigar, which he had moodily permitted to go out; and lo! he found no matches in the little corrugated holder. Observing his look of inquiry the stout individual snapped open his own silver match-box and with a cordial smile passed it over to Emmanuel.

Five minutes later Emmanuel was sitting with the strangers, absorbing their beverage, smoking one of their panetelas and warming the cockles of his heart in the kindly glow of their sympathy.

Which shows that Emmanuel was already half-seas-over, if not indeed three quarters; he being, when quite himself, a reticent person with an utter aversion to laying bare his troubles even to his most intimate friends, who were exceedingly few.

What with the weather, politics, and business, the subject of their conversation rapidly veered round to the matter uppermost in Mr. Katzenstein's mind—none other than the dishonesty, rascality, and ingratitude of employers in general and his own in particular.

"Employers, eh? Employers? Ach, mine vas no better as gang of crooks demselves, und yet dey turn me off like dat" (he snapped his lean, knotty fingers) "for nodding but a few tollars vot aind't balance on mine books! Und no chance to make it up, neider! While if dey vas to get vot's really comin' to 'em by law—"

An acrid grimace indicated what sort of medicine said employers would indubitably have to gulp.

"Rogues, rogues nearly all," murmured the thin

stranger, carefully creasing his trousers with his thumb and finger. He seemed something of a fashion-plate in the matter of dress. "Rogues, crooks—all the more so because they're so rarely caught with the goods. The whole trouble lies with our present system—the big fish break the net called Law, while the little ones get hung up by the gills, eh?"

He turned to his plump companion for corroboration.

"Pre-cisely," assented the latter. "You hit the nail hard enough that time to drive it clean through the plank and clinch it in a bow-knot on the other side. *Waiter!*"

And he gyrated his thick fingers over the empty steins.

"Yess," went on the aggrieved one, setting down his mug a little later with a deep catching of the breath, "yess, so it is! Vot you t'ink of some embleyers vot shteat t'ousands, hundurts of t'ousands effery year from der goferment by evadin' duties on goots, der most waluable kind of goots, und den fire a poor hard-workin' bookkeeper chust because he don't can show vot happen mit forty-two tollars und a halluf? Vot you t'ink of dot, eh?"

"Atrocious!" commented the lean stranger, blinking rapidly behind his glasses. He seemed a man not only of culture but of the warmest sympathy. "I'm in grain, myself—my friend here's in tin-plate—and we're both trying to do business on the square; but even so, I have to see and pass things every day that couldn't be squared with the Golden Rule even by jamming 'em with a hydraulic press. Business is business, that's certainly a hard cold fact; and you can't mix oil and water, the Golden Rule being oil, as it were, and stocks and bonds mostly—er—that is, they won't harmonize, you under-

stand? But in your case, now, as you were saying—" He paused ingratiatingly.

"Vell, you see I can't giff no names, nor nodding like dat—it wouldn't do at all, you bein' stranchers mit me—no offenses!—but all I've got to say is dat it dond't look right for a man's bosses to shteal py wholesale und fire der bookkeeper for borrowin' a leetle cash py retail, especially ven dey dond't pay no decent vages und mein rent been raised twice de last year—and I been mit 'em eleven years, too, und knows all der business und lots dat aind't supposed to be knowed by anybody but der firm, neider!"

"Shocking!" sympathized the thin one. "Such a hard-working, intelligent man, too! Informed as to the entire business, you hear that, Reynolds?" he went on, turning to the podgy individual. "Knows all the ins and outs, has information invaluable to himself for blackmailing, if he didn't scorn to use it—information which would damage his firm e-normously, and yet keeps it all to himself like the honest man he is! Here's just the man we need, eh?"

"I getcha!" assented Reynolds with sudden enthusiasm. "For the chief accountant's place, you mean?"

The slim one nodded.

"My friend," said he, regarding the lush German with a critical eye, "would you consider a proposition to come in with us as head accountant—Edwards & Reynolds, corner of Broadway and Liberty, you know—at eighteen hundred to start on? We've recently lost our Mr. Samuels—pneumonia, very sad case indeed, wife and two children, no insurance—and we've simply got

to have a good reliable man, quick at figures, devoted and—honest. We're shy of using employment bureaus for several reasons; much prefer to pick up a man, the man we want, in this way. Man that can keep secrets, and all that, you understand?"

"Yess, yess—I keep 'em fine. Ain't I knowed for six year how mine firm dodge heavy dooties from der goferment by importin' effery month der best tiamond of der bunch in—in a bronze elephant or tiger und always keeps it standin' right on der shelf at der end of der showcase, aind't it, und neffer sell dat bronze und yet get anodder one nex' month und so on?"

"Aind't I find it out six years ago und keep it all dis time, eh? Secrets? You bet I keep 'em, chentlemen! Try me und—und see! Yess, I take der chob, *mit Vergnügung!* Und if I aind't fait'ful und honest mit decent treatments, den you be free to fire me mitout one minute's notice, so hellup me!"

Mr. Katzenstein was becoming bibulously emphatic, in a sentimental manner which was beginning to attract attention in the rathskeller. Edwards & Reynolds exchanged anxious glances, and the lips of Reynolds seemed to move with just the suggestion of these words: "Cut it!"

But Edwards, cool and courteous, albeit blinking somewhat rapidly, drew from his card-case a neat pasteboard oblong and passed it over to Mr. Katzenstein.

"Will you favor us with yours?" he asked politely.

Emmanuel bungled a jammed card from his pocket and returned the favor. Reynolds frowned when he saw that it bore no business address; but Edwards seemed not at all downcast.

"Come round and see us to-morrow afternoon, without fail," said he, rising. "We must really be going now, Mr. Katzenjammer—Katzenstein, I mean. Make it half-past two and you'll find us both. The work's not hard, the pay's good, and there's every chance for advancement for a steady, honest man. You'll come? Yes! *So glad! Gesundheit!*"

They shook hands, did the firm of Edwards & Reynolds, with their prospective head accountant, paid the entire bill, tipped the waiter with a Canadian half-dollar (which turned out later to be "cluck" of some unusually base metal), and politely faded from the cognizance of the Palace Rathskeller and Mr. Katzenstein.

Five minutes later they were thumbing the nearest drug-store directory.

"Higgins—Jackson—Jameson—*here* we are—K—K—" commented Edwards, running the leaves rapidly. "Oh, this is a scream of jollity, all right! Now then, Katz—Katzenberg—Katzenstein, so—Emmanuel, see? *That's* our Heiny! Bookkeeper, 12B Maiden Lane. Twelve-B for ours!"

Passing casually down Maiden Lane soon after, a glance or two put them in complete possession of the fact that 12B was occupied by the firm of Aaronson & Jacobs, dealers in diamonds, silverware, and *objets d'art*.

CHAPTER II

THE day following these somewhat curious doings, the metropolitan police were set scratching their heads over an odd bit of crime in the jewelry district of lower Manhattan. This crime was immediately reported by

the victims thereof, a reputable, German Jewish firm located at 12B Maiden Lane.

According to the account given by the senior partner, Aaronson, he had been in the store alone with a young clerk (the junior partner being out at lunch) when a couple of well-appearing men had dropped in to look at watch-charms. One of these men was slim and near-sighted, the other florid and stout. Both wore loose overcoats. Beyond these details Mr. Aaronson could remember little.

"Ach Gott, so many gustomers in a day. Vat you tin'k, I take a photograff mit effery one vot come in?"

After having examined two or three trays of watch-charms the stout gentleman had expressed himself as satisfied with a certain horseshoe and whip pattern—he seemed something of a sporting gentleman, Mr. Aaronson recalled—and had purchased the same, paying six dollars in cash, a five and a one; Mr. Aaronson remembered that all right.

While the clerk had been wrapping up this purchase the stout gentleman had strolled to the rear of the store and had inquired the price of a certain silver-mounted shaving mirror; the other gentleman had remained standing near the end of the showcase. The matter of wrapping up the parcel and giving the price of the mirror had occupied no more than a minute and a half, during which time both Mr. Aaronson and the clerk felt quite positive they had kept their eyes well open; yet the fact remained that shortly after the two gentlemen had left with their purchase, Mr. Aaronson had noted the absence of a small bronze elephant by which (it seemed) he set great store.

The curious part of the performance seemed to lie in the fact that—in case the two gentlemen really were concerned in the robbery—they had taken nothing but this little elephant, a thing (said Aaronson) valueless in itself, and had overlooked or disdained the trays of handsome gold and jeweled watch-charms.

“Well, wat you kickin’ about, annyhow?” the police sergeant queried rather testily. “You got off easy, dat’s wat! They might of turned you off to the tune of a hundred or a thousand, dead easy, and you says yourself de elephant ain’t wort’ four beans. My advice to youse is drop de case and be more careful nex’ time, and t’ank yer lucky stars you didn’t get nicked no worse, see?”

“Ach Himmel, it aind’t der loss we mind!” protested the junior partner, “it’s der idea of bein’ robbed. Our firm iss like der Bank of Englandt, vot spends a t’ousand pounds gladly to get back one penny. Ve got our rebutation to keep up!”

Indignantly he hunched his shoulders and continued:

“If it’s known ve been robbed vunce, somebody else vill try it und ve be in trouble all der time, aind’t it? Besides, it aind’t der real walue off der bronze ve care aboutt—it’s an antique, a Chapanese antique, made by Omara Omanko Ketskarri in der eighteenth century—”

“And wort’ only four dollars?” interrupted the astute sergeant. “Youse must be off your reckonin’ somewhere!”

“Four tollar? Did I say four tollar? Ach, I make a mistake—I mean forty! Forty, so hellup me! Dis affair haf got me so oxcited I make a mistake. Forty, sure! Und say,” he lowered his voice, “you put two

goot men on der case und get mein elephant back und I see you dond't lose noddings by it, eh?"

The sergeant's interest brightened visibly.

"All right," said he, "I'll do my best. Now tell me, have youse had trouble of late wit' anny of yer help—got in a row, or fired annybody, or—"

"Py Chimineddy!" exclaimed Aaronson in chorus with Jacob's "Py crachious!"

They stared at each other with dawning hopes.

"Out wit' it!" cried the sergeant. "Anybody on de inside bunchin' his play wit' dese outside guys? If youse got any trail, let's have it. Time's money!"

Shortly afterward, having unburdened themselves regarding Mr. Emmanuel Katzenstein, they left the station-house.

On their way back to the store they abused each other fluently for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was Mr. Aaronson's unaccountable equivocation as to the value of the stolen elephant.

"*Ach Gott*, suppose you avaken der suspicions, vat denn? Ve lose der goots, und ve get fined maybe fifty, maybe hundurt t'ousand tollar, und maybe ve go in der chail-house, yet! *Ach Himmel, was für ein verdammter Knarr!*"

For once the senior partner bowed his head and accepted the abuse of his junior. In his soul he felt it well deserved.

The two walked on, each revolving the case independently. Of a sudden:

"*Donnerwetter!*" exclaimed Aaronson.

"Vat iss?"

"It von't neffer do to get after Katzenstein diss vay!

If he's mixed up in diss, it must be because he knows more as ve *t'ink* he knows, und if ve have him pinched denn he's goin' to squeal, und where *we* be? In der chail, sure, like you said!"

And he wrung his hands and wailed.

"Schtop! For Heffen's sake, dond't!" protested Jacobs, hustling his partner along by the elbow. "People's lookin' alretty! Come kvick by der store und let's talk it ofer! Come!"

They went, and held frenzied, secret conclave. As a result the police-sergeant was very much astonished to receive a telephone-message that same afternoon stating that the missing property had been returned (which was at that time an unequivocal falsehood) and that the firm desired to drop all inquiry in the case (which was an equally unequivocal bit of truth).

"'Crooked work' is stenciled on dat, somewheres; dis game is soitm'ly wrong, but *I* can't spot it!" soliloquized the sergeant to one of his fellow officers. "One t'ing I know, though, is dat I'm sorry to pass up de good honest graft in it. Guess dey t'ought better of it when dey realized it was goin' to set 'em back somet'ing, what? But still, I'm kind of s'prised, dat's no pipe!"

The good sergeant, lover of honest graft, was doubly astonished two days after to learn that the bronze elephant had really been restored, but not until a full twenty-four hours after Aaronson & Jacobs had written that it had been returned; and that, moreover, it had come back in *two pieces*. Somehow a reporter on the *Evening Frost* got hold of the information and by way of a scoop put up a column and a half on the Mystery of the Sawed-up Elephant—an article notable for

several ingenious surmises, none of which approached within X distance of the truth.

The article ended by stating that Aaronson & Jacobs were doing everything in their power to hush up the matter, and that they refused to make any statement as to how the elephant had come back; but that a certain Emmanuel Katzenstein, formerly a bookkeeper for the firm but now promoted to partnership, had been interviewed in the Palace Rathskeller while celebrating his rise in life, and, although excessively reticent, had with sufficient stimulus dropped hints as to an express-package and an accompanying card inscribed with the most jovial of messages.

More than this could not, up to the time of going to press, etc., be discovered, etc., etc. Diagnosis: Another insoluble mystery. Next!

CHAPTER III

IF the indulgent reader will come with us and peep into a little hall-bedroom on the upper East Side, about an hour after the disappearance of the bronze elephant from the shelves of Aaronson & Jacobs, he will see our two friends sitting before a small table covered with a newspaper, on which paper rests the animal in question.

Hats and coats are lying on the bed just as they have been thrown down; two cigars, freshly lighted, are only beginning to tinge the air blue. An eager tension prevails; our friends appear much pleased. The fat one is puffing for breath, around his weed, while the slim one has laid aside his glasses and seems quite to have forgotten his myopia.

Both are regarding the elephant with a keen interest entirely out of proportion to its intrinsic value.

"If it's *in* there we prance on velvet, and that's no pill prattle neither!" the fat one says. "Rip 'er up, Doc, an' glad my headlights with a peep at the goods! Rip 'er up!"

"Rip is a good pronoun, though rather crude," answers the other, opening the table-drawer and taking out a small metal-cutting saw.

"Get busy, will you? My tongue here is gummed to the shingles on the roof of my trap with anxiety. Proceed with that dissection!"

"The elephant goes back to the shop, what?" asked Bender, thoughtfully.

"Sure! After the goods is recovered d'you s'pose the bulls will waste any sleep gum-shoein' after us? And the E. Z.'s can't blow the game without explodin' their own balloon, see? Sure it goes back!"

"In that case we won't want to mangle the brute; professional pride demands a clean job. Where's the best place to tackle?"

Pod Slattery eyed the elephant with affectionate and critical care. Then his bulbous finger indicated a spot on the side, just back of the left fore-leg.

"Good! Here goes!" said Bender. "You squirt the dope and I'll seesaw."

With this he set to, vigorously.

"Zee-zee-zee-zee!" the keen saw bit into the metal, Pod supplying oil liberally from a small can. Two, three, five minutes Bender toiled.

"Gee!" panted he at last, "this beats a full house for actual downright honest labor! I haven't sashayed into

anything like this since the time we made our boss and dandy get-away in the chug-boat. I tell *you*, Podsey, the making of those keys was no Saturday P.M. at the races!"

"Keep a-goin'!" Slat encouraged him. "This ain't a two-spot side of the ace-king-queen of a job I waltzed up against when I was layin' in that coal-bin, whittlin' cold steel with a hair-trigger saw worn smooth as a trust maggot's conscience."

"Magnate, you mean."

"Maggot. If you're all in, Bender—what the Heli-goland?"

Both men opened surprised eyes. The saw had begun to eat rapidly through the metal, altering its resonance to a dull *burrr*, and the filings had changed color from yellow to white.

"*Lead!*" exclaimed Bender. "Why, the thing's plugged, where they put the goods inside—plugged and brass-plated. Some game! Now we're sure we aren't bow-wow-ing up the wrong conifer, anyhow. Here, you take a hand with the saw. I'm not pining for any more, just now."

Under Pod's vigorous urging the little metal figure soon began to show signs of dissolution. In spite of the oil that Bender supplied, the saw grew hot, but Pod kept right on with a singleness of purpose worthy some less dubious cause.

Presently shreds of pink cotton-batting began to come out on the saw teeth, clogging the work. Pod made oration and removed them, only to find them keep coming without cease. The task grew more difficult as he

got out of the lead plug into the solid bronze again, but Pod was no quitter.

At last, after a good quarter of an hour's work he withdrew the saw, wiped the honest sweat from his bull-neck, and then, laying hold on the elephant, brought it down sharply over the edge of the table.

The remaining strip of metal cracked square off and there rolled to the floor a wad of pink batting.

Both Pod and Bender grabbed for it, coming thereby into violent and undignified contact. Bender got the prize, however, by virtue of superior agility, and a moment later was stripping away the cotton with as near an approach to emotion as his essentially glacial disposition would permit. As for Pod, his pulse was twenty beats above normal, and his eyes were showing the whites all the way round.

"Is she there? Is she *there?*" was all he could find to say.

"*Is* she? You bet your last marked deck she is!"

Under his lean and dexterous fingers the cotton vanished, and almost immediately there came to view a magnificent bluish-white solitaire. From its star-facets winked and shimmered scores of little spectra, purple, crimson, violet, yellow and clear-shining green, so acute, so coruscating, that the sight was almost pained; the splendid gem bathed itself in miniature rainbows—the most perfect, consummate work of nature.

For a moment neither man spoke. Then, with a deep intake of breath,

"My Lord!" exclaimed Pod. "Here's a haul what *is*! She's worth two thousand cold, or I'm a reformer!"

"*Two?*" answered Bender, with superior scorn. "If she isn't good to drag down four I'll eat her—buttered!"

"You don't say? But where can we sell her? Ice of this caliber is all registered, and *I* ain't achin' to go against no justice-factory at my time o' life, as I've said before. Now if—"

"Snap out of it!" interrupted Bender impatiently. "The way you talk makes me want to smite you most unfriendly. Say, Bo, you're in the A B C class! Who said anything about selling? Aren't there ways to grab off a bunch by means of this same article, other than by *selling*? Pod, Pod, when will you learn the wisdom I've been inoculating you with this long time past?"

And Doc Bender, shaking his head dolefully, bent once more to the pleasing task of examining the four-thousand-dollar lump of carbon.

CHAPTER IV

A MONTH or so from the time of the above-described events, the Collateral Investment Company, of De Kalb, Illinois, was honored by a visit from a stout rubicund gentleman, who brought with him a small box, securely wrapped, and with numerous hints at recent stock-market depreciations exhibited a handsome bluish-white brilliant on which he desired to raise, if quite convenient to the C. I. Co., the inconsiderable sum of one thousand dollars.

The C. I. Co., individually and collectively, examined the stone, in order to assure themselves entirely as to its genuineness. This slight formality arranged, the loan was very soon forthcoming, and the C. I. Co. figuratively

patted itself on the back, for the security was without any scintilla of doubt worth at least four times the money.

The stout gentleman with something of a shamefaced air pocketed the cash and the pawn-ticket and bowed himself out. Nothing was seen of him for a period of eleven days, at the end of which time, however, he reappeared, paid the principal and interest, took his diamond and once more disappeared.

The C. I. Co. felt a certain regret at this proceeding, for although the interest came to a tidy sum, the prospect of having lost the valuable diamond was none too jocund.


Their hopes were revived in due course when, at the end of another week, the gentleman again showed up, and this time without explanation asked rather apprehensively how much he could raise on said jewel.

The Company, rejoiced into liberality, offered fifteen hundred, which sum met the apparent expectations of the stout gentleman. The deal was quickly concluded and for the second time the stock-plunging customer departed.

"You can't lose me, eh?" said the stout gentleman a fortnight later, when for the third time he made himself manifest unto the now thoroughly interested Company.

"This time I come within an ace of bein' wiped out. But, thank Heaven, Preferred Radiator took a rise an' so I'm on Easy Street again. Here's your money and *here's* your ticket an' the interest, and I'll thank you for my rock! With any kind of luck I won't hafta bother you again!"

The C. I. Co. protested verbosely that the bother was *nil*, that they were there to do business, and that if at



any future time, etc., etc., to which our plump friend returned a galliard repartee. Then the C. I. Co. washed its hands with mythical soap in the manner of its kind, and bowed; the gentleman urbanely bowed also, and the affair was apparently at an end.

Apparently, not really. No, not yet by a whole row of jugfuls.

And right here, Reader, not to pester you with tiresome repetitions like those in the Arabian Nights' story of the swarming locusts and the granary, I must inform you that during the better part of three months the same little comedy of ups and downs enacted itself over the shiny counter of the Collateral Investment.

Not quite the same, however, for observe that with every successive pawning of the jewel, the Company, becoming more and more eager to win out in the eventual slump which they felt positive must sooner or later overwhelm the speculative plunger, raised the amount of the loan, now at the customer's instance, and again at their own, whereby they reaped a very respectable harvest in usury.

As for the diamond itself, that presently ceased to be subjected to any very serious scrutiny. The little incident of the speculator and his solitaire had become, as it were, a routine part of the business; the gentleman came in, delivered the jewel and took his money, each time a little more; the jewel was locked up in the safe until such time as he redeemed it. Nothing simpler.

But observe that by the end of the time in question the loan-value had increased to thirty-five hundred dollars, and that some of the employees of the house had placed bets among themselves dealing with this pregnant ques-

tion: Will the Old Gazebe save his bacon, in the end, or won't he? And if he doesn't, what profit, including all the interest up to date of said Gazebe's dereliction, will accrue to the benefit of the Collateral Investment Company?

Thus did the diamond and the stock-plunger become, as it were, a regular factor in the business of the house, a factor which, although a trifle irregular, might nevertheless be pretty definitely counted on to bring in a respectable monthly sum in interest.

Hence it was that when said plunger finally failed to make good his appearance, and his pledge and the diamond passed into the possession of the C. I. Co., by default, the Company's satisfaction at owning so valuable an asset was somewhat tempered with regret at having lost so steady a graft in the matter of interest-charges.

On the same day when the last business transaction took place between the stout gentleman and the Collateral Investment Company, this gentleman, together with a tall, slim companion, took passage eastward in the very best of style. In their possession was a genuine and magnificent four-thousand-dollar solitaire, plus three thousand five hundred dollars in good bills and coin of the realm.

The land was theirs and the fulness thereof. As they sat at a small table loaded with the good things of life, both wet and dry, dining in the privacy of their state-room on board the Projectile Limited, their contentment for the time being was absolute.

"Are we all to the best in our fiscal department, or

ain't we? That's the question!" remarked the stout gentleman, refilling his tall glass with cold and bubble-some nectar. "It was a dead open-an'-shut, from the call of the card. O Lordy, Lordy! I'd give an eye to know just what them geezers say when they go to put that big phony in the condemned pledge sale—when they find out it's a hunk of bum ice we've slipped 'em!"

For answer the slim gentleman raised his glass.

"There's one born every minute, and sometimes more. Here's *to* 'em!"

Which toast they both drank with that complete satisfaction experienced only by those who have done their duty to the limit, according to their lights, and have most adequately sustained their spotless reputations.

IX

CRAYONS AND CLAY

Wherein Two Wise Ones Rub Once More Against the Ruralites, and What Befell

CHAPTER I

THE pals were well nigh broke. Between the two of them, they couldn't have raised ten bucks. A certain picking of the wrong horse in a sure-thing race had "cleaned their kicks." And now the finish seemed looming in sight—that is, unless something should turn up.

"Gee, kid," Slatsey was saying, as he scratched his unshaven chin and tilted back in his chair, "gee, several times! We're due to uncover some nifty little graft right away or go to work, which would cert'nly be Hell an' repeat. Are you hep?"

"I getcha, Steve," the Doctor replied, gazing moodily out of the window of the Eagle Hotel, on the Bowery, where Fate had flung them. "Graft is right, Bo—but what? These metropolitan whirls are about played out. It's sparkling October, Podsy! Something rural, eh? Autumn leaves and babbling brooks for ours, what? Ozone, rest-cure, and some old turkey-neck with spon! What say?"

"Looks pretty chesty to me!" responded Pod, with

kindling enthusiasm. "Another of those good old village cut-up didoes with the hard-fins is certainly the brand. Us to trifle with the Slab City boys, an' pay up a few old scores, due since the time when our drivers slipped on the backwoods tracks. Let's go to it!"

"You're on! But how? Got anything on the rural dope-sheet, cull, or is it just hop-talk and a blind stab?"

For all answer, Slat extracted from the pocket of his huge vest a clipping which he extended toward Ben.

"Here," bade he, "put your reflectors on this bunch of good tidings! Here's some little go-fix-it, believe *me*! If I ain't a sure-enough has-been, there's a bill of lading on the Win Out Line in this, for Pod, Bender & Co. Pipe it, that's all!"

Ben took the clipping—just a brief mention of one Prof. Hotchkiss, of Yale, having discovered traces of an aluminum-clay deposit in Windham County, Connecticut. Twice through Ben read it, then puckered puzzled brows.

"Well?" queried he. "Wise me to the lay, Bo; wise me!"

"Can you get a job, kid? A bony-fidy job as agent for something or other, to cover any part of that county?"

"A job. Really go to work? *Me?*"

Pod laughed rumblingly.

"I know I'm puttin' it up to you pretty strong, Doc," he admitted, "but it don't have to last long. Couple of weeks, at the outside. You'd work two, wouldn't you, if we could get a transfer to Big Wad Center?"

"Meaning how?"

"Meaning some job or other that would brush you up against the plow-pushers, for fair! What? Not wise,

yet? Do you see it, kid, or have I got to grab you by the fin an' lead you to it?"

"Seems like a glimmer was beginning to float in, but I can't say it's exactly lucid."

"All right, listen! Here's the way I frame it; I handle the New York end an' you do the ruralisms. You've still got raiment that'll get by, on this agent stuff. I reckon we can make a minor touch, somehow or other, that'll finance us a fortnight. An'—"

"Yes, but what's the lay? What—"

"Shhh!" Pod silenced his nervous pal with an uplifted palm. "Ring off, the line's busy!"

He rolled himself another cigaret, then, with a far-away look in his blue eyes, began the lay-out of the new campaign.

"Remember," he conjured his side-partner, "remember, kid, we stand at Hard-up Junction an' we battle for the Wad!"

CHAPTER II

THE town of Hampton, arching its long and elm-shaded street across the eastern slope of Hampton Hill, resposes in immemorial peace among its orchards and broad farms. Since the days of '61, nothing had disturbed it. No flood, fire or famine had smitten it; no railroad had even been put through; all had been Nirvana. And Hampton had waxed well-to-do. Also there was one rich man among her people, even judged by the standards of the outer world.

His name was Joshua Leach. He was a farmer, judge, money-lender, stock-breeder and local magnate. His big holdings stretched from the village up and away over

the heavy timber-growths of the hill, which he was hanging on to till the Interurban Paper Company should come to his terms.

Leach was an odd stick, all through, a living incongruity. Dwarfed in frame, thin and bent, with sparse gray hair, he assumed the manners of greatness. Ignorant in many ways, he was keener than steel in trafficking. Nobody dared stand against or contradict him—nobody but Dianthy Leach, his spectacled and sharp-tongued wife.

A bad man to argue with, was Joshua. He always carried a knobbed maple stick. More than once he had been known to strike. But his chief weapons were the loan, the mortgage, the foreclosure. He owned more than half of Hampton, and calculated on gathering in the rest. A formidable figure.

Into the plane of Hampton inactivities, one breezy October afternoon, modestly projected itself a figure, one of that tribe "despised and abandoned of men"—a canvasser. This person dawned via the Eliot stage-line, bringing only a suit-case and a large leatheroid roll. He inconspicuously took a room at the Prospect House and signed "E. J. Wheeler, Boston," on the register. The leatheroid roll bore in gold letters: "Orient Photo Enlarging Co."

Hampton nestled in its sleep, got one eye open and inspected the invader. He showed no unusual signs or symptoms, was tall of stature, lean, a trifle near-sighted, and very civil-spoken.

"A durned agent!" grunted Hampton, through its whiskers, preparing for another nap. "We don't want no photygrafts enlarged!"

Mr. Wheeler got busy at once. After writing a long letter and posting it—the post-master noted that it was to “The Standard Refining Co., Lock Box 3432, N. Y. City,”—he hired the best “rig” in the stable, took his roll and drove off.

“A hustlin’ critter, seems like,” the village oracles declared, that night, on the porch of Fuller’s store.

Next day and the third, Wheeler still drove abroad with the best team. He divulged no information, neither did he loaf and yarn at the store, like most agents, but kept to his room and his own counsel. Hampton began to grow defiantly and uneasily interested. Despite itself, it wanted to inspect the contents of the big roll and have the pleasure of saying “No!”

Next day was Sunday, and E. J. Wheeler toiled not, neither did he spin. Early in the morning, while the sun was still low-hung over the pines on the shoulder of the hill, old man Whittaker observed him striding down toward the cemetery, at a good pace. He carried a small hand-bag that till then had not been seen to put in an appearance.

About ten o’clock, Bill Judkins saw him cutting cross-lots in Henry Bean’s back pasture. Bill trailed him. To his astonishment he found the stranger’s tracks led to Beaver Brook. There, hidden behind a thicket of young spruce, he observed the man digging in a clay-bank. Bill saw him slide at least two trowels of clay into the hand-bag. Then Bill withdrew and lit out for the village, afire with eagerness to carry the news from Aix to Ghent.

Wheeler wasn’t done, yet. He arose, took fresh bearings and headed slantingly up along the hillside toward

the farm of Joshua Leach. Here, on the headwaters of the same brook, he dug more specimens of clay. Then he returned to town by a circuitous route. Half a mile from the post-office, Jerry Bacon gave him a lift in a buckboard. Wheeler informed Bacon he had been botanizing.

Arrived at the hotel, old Sam, Hathaway, the inn-keeper, handed him an envelop bearing the imprint of the Standard Refining Co. This envelop, which Wheeler had carefully dropped in the hallway near his door, contained only the clipping about Prof. Hotchkiss and his discovery of aluminum clay in Connecticut.

"Cal'late you lost this, mister," remarked Sam, around his quid. "It's yours, ain't it?"

"Why—yes. Thanks, awfully!" replied Wheeler, in a startled voice. "I wouldn't have lost—" He checked himself, and with perturbation looked at the back of the envelop.

It was still sealed. He sighed, as with relief, but really in joy at his observation that the envelop had been steamed open and carefully re-gummed. Without any further parley he locked himself into his room, peeled off his coat and made ready to work.

Fifteen minutes later, old Sam peeked through the key-hole. It just happened that Wheeler had set the table in line with that vantage-point. Sam puckered shrewd lips at the sight of Wheeler sitting in front of a table covered with newspapers, on which lay several lumps of clay.

A microscope and a retort stood on the table. Wheeler was hard at work with both. Sam beheld him grin and caper with joy, then, suspicious, turn and stare at the

key-hole. Thereafter, a coat was hung over the knob, effectively cutting off any further observations.

In a state of high excitement, Sam crept into a room adjoining Wheeler's. Over the transom he craned a poultry-like neck.

Wheeler now was writing a letter.

To whom, and why? Read on, and all shall be made plain unto ye.

CHAPTER III

HAMPTON, CONN.—it's "Con," all right, all right!
Sunday.

Well, Pod!


Things are certainly all to the festive in this bunch of hack-matacks. Since my last, there's been lots didding. I've got the lay thoroughly piped and the whole schedule laid out. Everything depends now on you.

The chosen sacrifice is named Josiah Leach, in the big square house at the south end of the village. He's said to have about \$50,000 in his jeans. We ought to be able to make a stab at half of it. That's a fair split.

On receipt of this, mail me a postal *at once*, with "Samples rec'd. Analysis will be made immediately and report sent you as soon as possible." Be sure you raise enough, somewhere, to doll up like a sure-enough plute and blow in here on time. Make it Wednesday G. M., about three. Above all, don't forget the certified check. You've had lots of time to get it from Keezer.

I put in the morning, here, doing the little digging stunt, as per schedule. Not a gazebe inside of ten miles but is hep to it. I've got 'em all going. All the other accessory touches have likewise been put through. Nothing to it now but to gather, and fade.

Remember, Pod, you're a regular guy now, and must talk as such. Can the lingo, for a while, and come across with the refined spiel. Don't slip on the banana peel of your native dialect, just on the doorstep of prosperity! Recollect that the star scene is to be the scrap. I'm willing to stand for being put to the mat



for the count, and will even take a bunger, but don't forget yourself and pass the limit. When you get under way, you sometimes imagine you're back in the ring again. Have a care!

Looks to me like we were due to wreak the vacuous-wallet sensation on Leach inside of 3 days. From the standpoint of crayon-enlargements, these embattled titewads have the hard-shelled armadillo spiked to the post. But, after all, the art game is certainly the bossest kidding-song ever vocalized. A real killing in sight, Podsy, old hoss, if you don't tip your mitt off by a misplay. Oh, joy!

Ta-ta, and be good till next Wed. G. M. About that time, if we don't unfold a Gold Coast map that will make all others in this line pull stakes and flit, my name isn't

Your long-suffering pal,

BEN.

He finished the letter with a contented sigh, re-read and sealed it with care, and addressed it—like his first—to the Standard Refining Co., Box 3432, New York. Then he locked his clay specimens and his microscope in his closet—but neglectfully left the key on the bureau—after which he minutely cleaned his boots, slicked himself up and went down to dinner. He was some minutes late.

All through the meal at the long fly-and-oilcloth-covered table he sat in silence, save for a few common-places with his host and the half-dozen boarders who with wonderfully disengaged carelessness tried to draw him out. After the meal he studied the time-tables and the mail-schedules tacked up in the hotel office, and presently, having reflected deeply, ordered a buggy.

“How far did you say it was over to Clarke's Corners, where the Vermont Central connects?” he inquired. There was a Sunday mail-train on the V. C., bound for New London and New York. “Eleven miles? Fine! No, no—you needn't send a man with me. I like driv-

ing. Really, I'd much rather go alone. Wouldn't trouble you, for the world, to send a man!"

Fifteen minutes later he drove out of Hampton, on the Clarke's Corners road, at a good round lick. Under the seat he had the hand-bag, and in his pocket the letter. At the Corners he waited for the train, and himself shoved his letter through the slit on the mail-car. He expressed the bag to the Standard Refining Co., first insuring it for \$2000. All of which was noted by Hank Bascomb, station-master.

As he drove back to Hampton, he smiled up at the telephone-wires, above, with well-satisfied good humor.

"It's a battle-ship to a bean the news beats me to Hampton," he murmured. "Talk about the blessings of modern civilization! Without 'em, where would we poor honest con-men get the lubricant to keep the little fun-wheels buzzing?"

CHAPTER IV

INDUSTRIOUS, as was his wont, E. J. Wheeler began the new week by a campaign of the village itself. Having canvassed the outlying districts, he now tackled the settlement, seeking orders for the Orient Photo Enlarging Co., of Boston.

His success was far from marked. Everybody was "willin' to look, anyhow," but very few of the embattled ones cared to dig five scads out of the family sock for the elegant life-size all-hand-work pastel gems of portraiture whereof he showed samples.

"Only five dollars, madam, all ready to stand on the easel beside the parlor organ, and with a genuine silk scarf or throw gratis; heavy gold frame; likeness guar-

anteed! A marvellous bargain, madam, only made to advertise and introduce these goods. Never before equalled in the history of American art!"

Such was the ballyhoo he shoved at them, but Art fared slim. Clay, however, seemed to be at a premium. Not a householder or a wife but wanted to talk Clay. They sprang bunches of questions on him, some with diplomacy, others bluntly, according to their several natures.

To all, E. J. Wheeler frankly made answer that he was also the agent for a New York brick-manufacturer, and that he usually put in his Sundays exploring for suitable fire-clay. The town voted him a vownation liar, and the mercury in the curiosity thermometer kept soaring.

It was on Wednesday afternoon that he reached the house of Joshua Leach—a large, square house, of forbidding aspect, set on well-fenced terraces—the best house in the village, as befitted the residence of Hampton's overlord. A flagged walk conducted E. J. Wheeler to a kitchen porch, where signs of life were visible. With the sensations of a crusader summoning a castle-warder, Wheeler knocked.

The scrape of a chair and the thud-thud of a stick announced Leach's presence at home. Presently the door creaked on its hinges, and the dried-apple countenance of the old miser peered out.

"Good morning, sir! Can I beg a moment of your valuable time to show you the most remarkable—"

"Don't want no pictures, ner nuthin'!" growled Leach. From somewhere in the penetralia of the house a voice shrilled:

"Now, Joshuay, how d'you know what we want, er

don't want, afore you've seed 'em? 'Vite him in, why don't ye?"

Leach grimaced uneasily at the sound of Dianthy's voice.

"Come 'long in, if ye want to," he grumbled, "but I might's well tell ye—"

"Oh, *that's* all right! That's what I'm here for, to show samples whether I make sales or not. But I feel sure that if you once see this remarkable art-work—"

Leach ushered him grimly through an entry and into a great, high-posted kitchen of ancient type, with beams across the ceiling, whence from blackened hooks depended bacon, strings of onions, and other comestibles. This room was almost bare of furniture, save for a stove, a table and two chairs. The floor was innocent of even oilcloth. Yawning cracks gaped between its rough-hewn boards. In the stove, by way of economy, only a couple of sticks were feebly flickering. E. J. Wheeler noted the dead branches piled for firewood, in a corner, and scorn for this miserly "plute" possessed his soul.

"If this isn't strictly virtuous, to pry a few loose from such a T. Wad, what is?" thought he.

Leach, meanwhile, had hobbled to a chair, without even inviting Wheeler to sit down. Oblivious to all rebuffs, the art-promoter placed his hat carefully on the table, undid his sample-roll, and sailed in. Just as he had reached the end of his rhetorical first heat, a lumbering and formless creature navigated into the room and came quiveringly to anchor in the other chair.

"*Good morning, madam!*" And Wheeler did his little barking stunt all over again. Mrs. Leach puffed and twirled her thumbs, wrinkled her chins (she had four)

and nodded as with the palsy. The old man snorted and shuffled his feet, the while he tapped the floor with his knotted maple cudgel.

I purpose not, good reader, to waylay you with the details of that long session. "The worst I ever went against!" thought E. J., sweating with heat and anxiety.

Finally he put the question.

Leach spat, and growled "No!" That meant "Yes!" for Dianthy. Then they scrapped—and Joshua lost. E. J. Wheeler, all this time, stood there thumbing over what seemed a thick packet of orders and signed contracts.

At the crucial moment he looked up.

"All settled, then?" smiled he. "Here's the contract, all filled in except the style, date of delivery and signature. You'll take the frame, of course? *All* right! Which of you is having the portrait, please?"

"Both!" snapped Dianthy. "I cal'late if Deacon Baxter an' Jim Titus an'—an' all them others he told us about is havin' two, we cert'nly ain't a-goin' to be out-did!"

Joshua quivered, gasped and gave in. A different man was he, at home, from the dominant figure who stood before the public eye.

"Ah, very well, then. Sign here, and here, please," murmured Wheeler, laying out a couple of papers on the table, one above the other.

He kept his hand on top of these papers, as though to hold them firm.

"Come, Joshuay! Don't you see he's waitin'?" grated Dianthy.

Leach, all humility, stumped over to the table, took

Wheeler's fountain pen in quivering fingers, and glanced over the document. In spite of his distress, the instinctive wariness of his nature did not desert him. All was right with the paper. Through the maze of "Whereas" and "Party of the first part" and all the rest of the legal verbiage, he perceived the contract calling for \$5, one month from date, in exchange for a portrait of specified size and quality. With a sigh he traced his name in staggering letters on the dotted line.

"Now the other, for your wife's picture," requested Wheeler.

Still holding the papers firmly with his left hand on the table, he deftly slipped up the bottom part of the upper one, with his thumb, exposing its apparent duplicate.

"Right on the same line," he suggested.

Leach, dazed by the sudden stroke of misfortune which had suddenly reft him of ten good dollars, wrote the fatal name again.

"Thank *you!*" The relief in E. J.'s tone couldn't be quite suppressed. "Much obliged, I'm sure. Not a penny down, you understand; and when the pictures arrive, you don't have to take them unless quite satisfactory in every way."

"Which they won't be, by cripes!" the old man mentally vowed.

"And now," concluded E. J., "all you have to do is hand me the pictures you want enlarged. You'll get them, madam? Thank you—don't hurry—take your time."

When all was over and E. J. had bowed himself out, civil war flamed in the Leach kitchen. But before it

reached a crimson stage it was interrupted by an interesting discovery.

For there on the floor, under the table, evidently where Wheeler had dropped it unawares when looking over his contracts, lay a fat, long, yellow envelope, with the imprint "Standard Refining Co." neatly rubricated in the corner.

Dianthy saw it first, but Joshua got it, for he could stoop more quickly than she. As he snatched up the envelope, his spouse gave him a vicious side-thrust. The Squire rolled under the table, upset a chair, and crawled out on the other side, with the envelope in one hand and his stick in the other.

Dianthy advanced to wrest the treasure-trove from him. Even a cornered rat will fight. Up came the knotty stick. Dianthy retreated, to lay hands on a broom.

But in this lull, Joshua made a masterful retreat to the barn and ascended to the loft, the stairs of which he could defend against all comers, with his stick and a pitchfork. Here, without leave or license, he proceeded to pry into the private affairs of E. J. Wheeler, with such good heart that for a while he quite forgot the bitter ordeal of the double signature.

CHAPTER V

THE envelope contained a goodly bunch of papers—some printed sheets, a pamphlet, a typewritten letter and certain penciled memoranda. This much the old miser perceived at first glance, as he scrutinized his find under the dusty light of the loft window.

"Now, by ginger!" he exulted, "I'm a-goin' to find

out what the crutter's really up to, an' what his true business is! That 'ar pitcher-makin' game never fooled me none. Takes a dognation smart man to git the upper holt o' *me!*'"

He thumbed the papers hurriedly, fearful lest Wheeler should return for the lost envelope, before thorough examination should be made.

"Maps, eh? An' marked with red ink! Why, I'm vummed if here ain't Windham County an' Hampton! What's all these here little red spots, hey? Dunno what the game is, yet; but I swanny to goodness thar's suthin' cur'us right round here. If I don't git onto it, ye needn't never call me the smartest man this side o' Hartford. P'r'aps this here letter will explain things, hey?"

The letter was dated from New York, and was neatly typewritten. Across the top was penciled: "*Burn when read!*"

The old man grinned.

"Not quite slick enough, was ye?" he cackled as he waded in:

DEAR WHEELER:

Your bulletin at hand, and contents noted. Glad all is going well. I thought you'd strike something in that section. The main thing, now, is to keep the crayon-enlargement bluff going, and not let the natives suspect anything. They mustn't get in on this, whatever happens.

"Mustn't, hey?" snorted Leach. "Gosh all fish-hooks, we'll see about that, if it is wuth gittin' into! I want to know!"

Your samples haven't arrived yet, but am expecting them tomorrow. If they analyze up to what you yourself have tested, the clay-beds in question ought to pan out as high as \$.15 per

cu. yd. The beds on the Leach place, you say, are even better than those down-stream. Keep your eye on Leach. Don't let anything happen to arouse his suspicions or to make him distrust you.

"The vownation scoundril! What the Halifax? By gum!"

From your description, it seems that the supply is almost unlimited, running up Beaver Brook through several farms, and that the silicates look O. K. I judge you will find plenty of bauxite in the upper part of the tract. We shall probably want to harden direct, and extract without the use of alloys.

Have talked it all over with Randall. We both advise you to go ahead and get Leach's confidence, in this picture-game. Get well acquainted with him, and then broach the proposition of buying him out. We *must* have that land, Wheeler, and we look to you to work things right.

"Must have it, must they? Well, I swanny, but they *wun't*, now! Eh? What's this?"

Make a liberal offer. Go up to \$25,000. Unless your estimates are away off, we stand to clear as much more, before exhausting the property. I have inside information that Lenox, of the Consolidated, is headed your way, to investigate on his own hook. *Don't let Lenox scoop you!* He'll probably offer \$35,000 to \$40,000, to outbid you. But again, he may conceal his real purpose and say he merely wants the place for a summer home, and not offer more than \$5,000 to \$10,000. In any event, checkmate him. He's a hard proposition to buck, with all that unlimited capital back of him; but we count on you to go him one better, in advance. Try to close the deal with Leach before he arrives.

"Tophet an' brimstone! What next?"

Let me remind you again not to let a word of this leak, as otherwise Leach and the other property-owners along the brook might block us and reap the harvest themselves. Silence and tact, alone, can make a success of this wonderful opportunity. Burn this and all other letters from me. Keep me in touch with

the situation, constantly, and wire in the code if anything urgent develops. We are back of you, here, to \$50,000.

Yours ever,

BREWER.

Old Joshua Leach's head grew light as he finished reading; a dazzling came before his eyes, and he had to steady himself by leaning against the wall. He was breathing hard.

"Reap—reap the harvest—themselves!" he panted. "Burn this!—Fifty thousand dollars—Land o' livin'! Here's suthin' so big it—it *scares* me! Gosha'mighty! I understand now what he's up to—an' what that clip-pin' meant, that Sam found—an'—an' all!

"Why, it means that the whole dummed land out back o' my farm, here, along that dangnation little brook, is plum full of aluminum! Worth fifteen cents a yard, hey? They'd—they'd be *millions* in this, fer me, if I understood how to work it right! Oh Lordy, Lordy! What shell I do?"

He stood there trembling and sweating, all but swooning with the overpowering violence of his money-lust. But before he had found time to think or to collect his scattered wits, he heard an ominous disturbance below-stairs. Questions he heard, in a sharp, hard voice; then his wife's treble, and the other voice again. With sickening fear he realized that Wheeler had come back!

"I don't know nothin' 'bout no envelope!" he heard his wife protesting, "but mebbe Joshuay might ha' seed it. Up to the loft you'll find him—he went up fer to git some hay. *You* thar, Joshuay! Come down!"

"What's wanted?" the old skinflint managed to quaver. Tremblingly he jammed the papers back into the

envelope, tearing the letter as he did so. He seized the pitchfork and began tossing hay down for the cows that were still at pasture.

No answer came. But now the miserable Leach heard a rapid footstep on the narrow and dusty stair. Then very abruptly E. J. Wheeler appeared on the scene.

One glance confirmed Leach's worst fears. From a mild-mannered and inoffensive agent, the man had suddenly transformed himself into a keen, angry and aggressive persecutor. Joshua, accustomed to lord it over only poverty-stricken countrymen, found a very different proposition looking him in the eyes.

Leach drew back, on the defensive, with raised fork. But Wheeler still came on.

"You give it up, damn you!" he menaced.

"Give *what* up? I dunno what—"

"You lie! I dropped an envelope in your kitchen. Had it when I went in, and didn't have it when I got out. You found it! You've got it now—I can see *that* in your face! Don't hand me any beef, you shinny-mark, or I'll have you indicted for usury! I know *you*! Come across!"

Despite his consuming fear, anger also rose in Leach. Never in all his life had anybody—except of course the redoubtable Dianthy—used such language to him. He bared his crooked, worn and yellow teeth in an ugly grimace.

"You—you be a'mighty keerful how you talk to me, young man!" he retorted. "I'm Jestice o' the Peace, here, I'll hev you know, an'—"

"Drop that, and shell out, you! Or I'll start something you won't like, and start it mighty sudden, savvy?"

I've got money back of me, and men, and you can't come any rube justice o' the peace racket on me! Out with that envelope, *quick!*"

Caught dead to rights, Joshua angrily hauled the envelope from his pocket and flung it into E. J.'s grasp, snarling:

"Thar! Take yer old duffle an' git, now! You hear? I hain't bothered yer old stuff, none. Now, hyper 'long off'n my proputtty afore I *throw* ye off! An' say, don't you dare send no photografts to *me*, er by crimus I'll law ye! Un'stand? Now git!"

E. J. made no start, but glanced inside the envelope.

"Huh!" he sneered. "I said you were a liar, and I repeat it! You've been reading this letter, all right, all right! Don't you dare deny it! Now let me tell you right here, Whiskers, you've done the worst day's work ever. Beside what you've lost, in cash—a fortune!—you've laid yourself liable to suit for tampering with the United States mails and for misappropriation of property. Before you're through with this—"

Wheeler did not finish; but the cold and pitiless look he bent with his black eyes upon that miserable ruralite shriveled within the dried-up carcass what little soul still dwelt there.

All at once, down below, they heard the trampling of a horse, driven up into the door-yard. Then an unctuous bass voice demanded:

"Is this the residence of Mr. Justice Leach?"

"Yes, sir," answered the thin falsetto of Dianthy.

"I want to see him at once, *at once* on important business. Kindly tell him!"

E. J. inwardly rejoiced.

"You're on time, all right all right, Podsy old pal!" thought he. "Now if you'll only talk real English for a few minutes, it's us to the clover!"

He peered out of the cobwebbed window, and with exultation discerned his side-partner, disguised as a gentleman, ponderously clambering out of the buggy. Nothing of his joy, however, transpired in his actions. On the contrary, he showed keen dismay. With an oath and a shrill whistle he started back, faced Leach, and shook an angry fist at him.

"There's Lenox now, damn you!" he hissed in a real Second Avenue melodramatic voice. "You've queered *my* game, you hound! This is a frame-up—you sent for him yourself, and—"

"I never!" cried the miser, terrified. "Don't even know what ye mean! You tetch me if ye dare, an' I'll law ye, quicker 'n scat, so help me!"

"Joshu-ay!" rose Dianthy's shrill pipe. "They's a man down here t' see you! Says he can't wait long. Gotta take the 4:12 back to Noo Yok."

Leach eyed E. J. with apprehension. Wheeler gestured sullenly at the stairs.

"Go on down!" growled he. "I'll go, too. That devilish scoundrel of a Lenox can't bluff *me*! What I'm going to do to you—will keep!"

Torn with conflicting emotions of fear and hope, old man Leach shuffled through the loose hay and descended the stairs, with Wheeler close behind him. Whatever might happen now, Leach felt confident. For Lenox was there, the potent Lenox, of the Consolidated. Lenox would confound the wicked schemes of the Standard

Refining Co., would rescue him from Wheeler, would make his fortune with a single dash of the pen!

Thus, eagerly the old man hastened to his doom.

CHAPTER VI

AS Leach and Wheeler emerged from the barn door, Lenox gazed inquiringly upon them with that bland blue eye of his.

"Ah!" breathed he, with relief. "Mr. Justice Leach? Delighted! I was afraid you might be away, and the business I'm on can't wait."

"Come right in the house, mister," invited Leach. With unusual hospitality he added: "I'll tie yer critter an' give him a fodderin' of hay."

Lenox entered the house, while Leach attended to the horse. Not so much as a single word or look passed between the pals.

Leach also entered, and after him, Wheeler.

When the Magnate perceived this interloper, he frowned.

"Well, sir," exclaimed he, "this business I'm about to transact can be done quite well in your absence, sir!"

Wheeler folded his arms and glared.

"So you're here, are you, Lenox?" exclaimed he, with bitterness. "All right! Go as far as you like! I've got ahead of you, this time; you're too late, all round. Go ahead, and let's see where you get off!"

"See here, mister," the skinflint burst out, suddenly, appealing to Lenox, "this here fella's tryin' to work some game on me! Some kind o' blackmail gold-brick

scheme to git my clay-banks away from me, fer next to nawthin'! He's been threatenin' and browbeatin' me on my own place! Can't ye fix him, some way? *Wun't ye?*"

The old man was trembling violently, torn between fear of Wheeler, desire for revenge, and the great surge of covetousness that Lenox had suddenly inspired.

"You fix him, some way, an' git him outa here, an'—say! I'll do the right thing by you! I'll sell—"

"You *do!*" bellowed Wheeler, advancing with menace against the usurer, "and I'll expose you! Oh, I've got *your* record all right! I'll have those clay-banks myself, or shove you for five years!"

Lenox, purpling with righteous indignation, faced Wheeler.

"Damn you, what d'you mean, sir?" shouted he, in a hoarse voice. "You and your fake photo-enlargement game—you hound! Prosecutin' your contemptible schemes on this mutt—this worthy man, I mean! You dare to browbeat him, to bunk him—"

"That's what he's tryin' to do—bunco me!" quavered Leach, livid with fear and excitement. "It's a tarnation gum-game, an'—"

"To wrest this valuable property away from him by foul an' underhanded means? To come between him an' *me*, sir, an' the Con—Consolidated? I tell you, sir! I know you! I'll—"

Roughly he shoved Wheeler to one side, whirled him and gripped him by the shoulder, and thrust him toward the door.

But Wheeler had no intention of submitting.

Fair at the Magnate he aimed a blow, which the Mag-

nate ducked with a celerity suggesting that of the prize-ring, then seized Wheeler by the collar in a clutch of steel.

"Damn you, take that!" snarled Wheeler. From the Magnate's grip he writhed. He snatched up a stick of firewood to defend himself, while Dianthy's shrill cries rang through the kitchen.

But now Leach and his stout maple staff drove into action. The brittle firewood snapped at the first crash of cudgels. Lenox rushed in.

Before the allied forces, Wheeler went down. Not few were the blows of stick and fist that reached his struggling body.

They hauled him, still fighting, into an adjoining room and locked the door. On this he banged, vindictively; but Leach only roared through the panels:

"I arrest ye in the name o' Connecticut, fer assault an' battery, blackmail, gittin' money under false pretenses, fraud, defamation o' character an'—"

"Hold on, that's enough!" interposed Lenox. "See here, my man, I've only got fifteen minutes to spare! You can hand him *his* after the deal's closed an' I'm gone! Your farm, the *Financial Register* says, is worth \$25,000. I've got a certified check here, payable to you, for \$50,000. You're *rich* now, man! *Rich!* Do you know it?"

While the deal was being closed, in the kitchen, and the deed handed over, Wheeler was by no means idle in the adjoining room.

With a screw-driver which he had taken from his pocket, he was now removing the lock from the door that led to the front hall.

"Ta-ta, Leach, old boy," said he, as the door opened. You may never hear from me again; but I've got one hunch that when the Willimantic National Bank presents the sixty-day note for \$12,000 that you signed *under* that picture-contract—a note I'll discount this very P. M.—you'll think of E. J. Wheeler! Oh, yes, I'll never be forgotten!"

Then, while Lenox was handing over a beautifully forged check on a non-existent bank, Wheeler let himself noiselessly out into the hall, appropriated the best hat he found there, carefully unlocked the inviolate front door, and strolled away.

He returned to the hotel, remarked that he had been summoned back to Boston, and for the last time hired a rig.

An hour later he was in Willimantic. The 5.27 New York express bore him and a huge wad forever beyond the ken of Hampton, Conn.

CHAPTER VII

ONE week later.

"So much for *that* bunch!" contentedly sighed Pod Slattery, around his cigar, as he finished counting a bulky roll of yellowbacks and snapped a rubber band about them. On to the table of their sitting-room in the newly hired, cozily furnished flat he tossed the roll. "There's \$9,775, so far. How much in the other wad, Ben?"

"Tell you in a minute," answered his pal, counting. A pleasurable silence lengthened in the smoke-perfumed

room. "Seven-six-nine-five," he presently announced. "That makes \$17,470, to a dot. Not bad for a two weeks' whirl, eh?"

"Might ha' been better," grumbled Slats, "if his farm had really been worth a hoot in Hades, which it wasn't. Between you an' me, kid, that old broker of an Underwood will soon tumble he's been stung bad in buyin' the title-deed!"

Came a well-pleased little pause. Then remarked Ben:

"Say, I'd give a hundred cool, for just one squint at the old boy when that note comes due!"

"And I'd put in another," added Slats with a chuckle, "to pipe him when he tumbles to that Consolidated check! Con-solidated, all right all right!"

"Crayons and clay—some combination!" ejaculated Ben. "Art, you're a winner, what?" He blew a cloud of costly smoke.

"You're on—when the artists is *us*!" concluded Pod, with a fond glance at the El Dorado on the table.

X

THE TURNING OF THE WORM

Wherein the Truth of an Old Saw is Demonstrated.

CHAPTER I

OUT in the hen-house Mr. Bartlett Brooks, of Bean Corner, stood reading over for at least the tenth time a letter which the R. F. D. had brought him.

Mrs. Bartlett Brooks' powerful eye could not penetrate the hen-house, wherefore Mr. Brooks had chosen it for the meditation of his correspondence.

The letter was neatly mimeographed, but Mr. Brooks thought it typewritten, the wily mimeograph being just a few jumps ahead of Bean Corner experience. The long, official-looking envelope, post-marked New York, added manifest weight to the tremendous contents.

DEAR FRIEND:

We know you by reputation as the most prominent and influential citizen of your community, and have therefore decided to permit you to coöperate with us in our work as Private Distributing Agents for the United States Government.

Such coöperation will enable you to earn in a short time anywhere from \$1,000 to \$25,000, or even more, by a method easy, simple and, above all, *strictly honest*.

As Private Agents for the government, it devolves upon us to market in the country districts the annual supply of condemned

United States silver certificates—bills no longer available for city use but still acceptable for rural circulation.

These certificates we dispose of on a 10% basis. For \$100 in new bills we exchange \$1,000 in worn ones; for \$500, \$5,000, and so on. In every case you clear 90% on your investment.

We desire to call your especial attention to the fact that these bills are *not* counterfeits.

We guarantee every bill to be genuine United States currency.

Though worn and soiled, these bills are perfect legal tender.

Our offer closes Nov. 30th, after which, according to Act of Congress, all bills remaining in our hands must be macerated.

If you decide to take advantage of this unparalleled opportunity, come personally to New York City with whatever ready cash you desire to invest. One of our official representatives will meet you near the main exit of the Grand Central station.

We trust to your own intelligence and wisdom not to divulge to any person so golden an opportunity, but rather, at all hazards, to avail yourself thereof and at one stroke make your everlasting fortune!

We are, dear sir,

Very respectfully your servants,
THE INTERNATIONAL BANK-BILL SYNDICATE.

Important!—Fail not to wear a small red ribbon in your buttonhole, and remember the password, "Wizard."

"I swan!" ejaculated Mr. Brooks. Then he hid the letter back of the speckled pullet's nest, took unto himself a nonchalant exterior, and strolled into the house, aggressively indifferent.

A week later or some such matter, Bean Corner was stirred to its hard-pan foundations on receipt of the news that old Pop Brooks was making preparations for a visit to Cousin Frank, in New York, and that he purposed going down in style.

The grocery gossips, sardined in behind the stove, thrashed the whole subject out thoroughly among themselves while at target practise on the sawdust-range.

Some elaborated on the "catouse" Mandy Brooks had made; others cast up the total of Bart's socks and shirts; while another faction, led by Ezry Hopkins (who had been as far as South Paris and seen electric cars), descanted upon the miracles and dangers of metropolitan life.

From A to Z the whole adventurous expedition lay open in the limelight of Bean Corner publicity, and Bart's leather handbag became as a revealed vision to all eyes. When the train started with a great rattling of milk cans, one fine morning of early November, and bore old Bart off with it, cityward, the grocery Nestors knew it all—all save this: that the rusty bag contained a mimeographed letter in its official-looking envelope and a wad of clean bank-notes aggregating three hundred dollars, the same having been privately withdrawn, two days before, from the Farmers' Industrial Bank at Sanborn Falls.

CHAPTER II

BART reached New York eventually, after certain wanderings which concern us not. Worn, wan and cindery, he unlimbered himself from the step of the smoker, elbowed his way grimly along the cement platform, and jostled with the crowd through the many-portalled exit of the Grand Central "spill."

The day was perfect, the hour two of the afternoon. Save for cadaverous doughnuts and anemic "hermits" brought from home in a shoe-box, he had had no food in four-and-twenty hours.

His woolen shirt-collar gaped as if absolutely played out; his chin bristled like a music-box roll in spite of the uncompromising scrape Mandy had given it; and his purple necktie hung outside of his vest.

But a red wisp of ribbon burned in his buttonhole, his brain lay alertly cunning in his knobby old skull, and his leathery heart throbbed with as near an imitation of abandon as it could possibly devise.

On with the human avalanche the old man drove, gripping his satchel and opening wide eyes to catch a glimpse of the official brass buttons belonging to the International Bank-Bill Syndicate's special representative.

No uniform appeared, however, but only a stout, red-faced, thick-necked man, extraordinarily well-dressed.

This individual, wearing spats and carrying a Malacca cane, slipped in behind Bart, jogged him with a well-rounded elbow, and murmured in his ear the talismanic password, "Wizard."

Bart's gasp of glad surprise was lost in the dense crowd which eddied them in behind a sheltering lamp-post.

"Be you the special agent of the International—" queried the old man.

"Hush!" interrupted the stranger in a warning whisper, holding up a sleek hand whereon sparkled a ring of price. "That ain't a name to be bandied about the open streets. Our company, our corporation rather, operates under special concessions from the gov'ment, an' so of course the authorities—the police, that is—out of pure spite an' jealousy throw all sorts of obstacles in our way.

"Our gain is their loss, so I don't blame 'em, much,

at that. What say to a taxi? This ain't no place to do business. Let me call a taxi an' drive you to our up-town offices! Hey, you!" And he beckoned a chauffeur with a fat, hairy finger.

"Hold on, mister! Hold on! I want to be dead sure you're my man 'fore I go a-drivin' off! Why ain't you got a uniform on, if you're a U. S. officer?"

"The secret service officers never wear no uniforms, an' that's what I am—a secret service man."

He rolled the words out in good style. "My badge is here, under my coat; feel it! Satisfied? I don't wonder you're suspicious. There's a fierce lot o' con games goin' on all the time. But you are safe with me, sir; you are entirely safe with me. Here y'are!" as a very shiny car drew up to the curb.

"This our buggy?" asked old Bart. "My lan', but she's a beauty! Looks like they washed her every week, don't she? Did you say it was our'n?"

"Our buggy, yes, sir," answered the special agent with the ghost of a smile. "Buggy is right—very. Step in, sir—step right in. It won't cost you a red."

Certain passers-by had paused to stare at the couple, and the agent seemed slightly ill at ease. Bart noticed nothing of it, however, but sank back on the leather cushions, crossed his legs and let his big boot dangle luxuriously.

Swinging easily over the pavement, off they started—a new, delightful sensation to the representative citizen from Bean Corner. The taxi headed for Fifth Avenue, where it turned south and bowled along at a pace so smart that the old man had barely time to marvel at one miracle before another smote his senses. He became all

eyes and ears, and the great city opened as a huge kaleidoscopic whirligig to his exalted soul.

My land, if Mandy could only see him now—Mandy and all the grocery gossips. He slid down another six inches on the cushion and crossed his lean legs the other way. It was ecstatic, it was blissful, it was *life!*

But with all the general splendor, old Bart's native bed-rock shrewdness never played him false for an instant; his free fist never for a minute let go its vigorous hold on the satchel. "They ain't no darned bunco man kin git the best of me!" he kept repeating over and over, to himself.

"Smoke?" queried the agent. "They're Rosarios—cost a quarter. Lucky it all comes out of Uncle Sam, eh? Here's a vesta—you don't hafta put your hand over it—the wind can't blow it out. Great idea, ain't it? Yes, the city's full o' great ideas. That's what people live on here—ideas. Everybody has 'em. I bet a fiver *you'll* have some before a great while. They're catchin'. By the way, you don't know my name, do you? Well, it's Ling—C. P. Ling—here's my card. You can see my official connection with the Treasury Department, yourself."

Nonchalantly his fingers extended a splendidly engraved card.

Bart spelled out:

CLEMENT PRESCOTT LING

Special Agent, U. S. Treasury Department,
Washington, D. C.

"I vum!" was all he remarked.

Thick smoke began to issue from his cigar and his

horny fist relaxed a trifle, just a trifle, on the handle of the leather bag.

On they sped, and still on, deftly guided by the skilled chauffeur, who seemed to know the way full well and who appeared unusually willing and intelligent. Evidently he was a very superior person.

After a certain while they reached a park, dominated by an immense tower, the highest Bart had ever seen, and also by a lesser one whereon a golden lady, inadequately clad, indulged in archery practise at invisible targets. Bart wished he could have had more time to study this fascinating work of art, but alas, the golden lady quickly vanished.

They swung sharply to the left and made rapid way until they came to another avenue, more crowded and noisy than the first, up and down which a great bridge, covered with roaring trains, extended in endless perspective.

The taxi drew up with a jerk at a tall building.

The two men alighted.

"What's the bill, Bill?" inquired the smiling Ling.

"Oh, 'bout two, I guess," answered the chauffeur with a yawn that looked oddly like a grin.

"Well, here's a five-spot. Back to the G. C. for yours, for the four-twenty-five."

"Sure thing! Thanks!" With a growl of gears he faded round the nearest corner.

Five minutes later our friend from Bean Corner, having been whisked up to a great height by an astonishing contraption on a rope, had been piloted to a ground-glass door bearing in black letters the words:

INTERNATIONAL BANK-BILL SYNDICATE

and had been admitted by a cautious person to the inner office of the government agents. Bart wondered if all government officers used a special knock like the two-three-two that Ling had employed.

But he had scant time for wondering, so cordial was the greeting which the president of the corporation extended to him. The president's name, it seemed, was Stillings.

This gentleman, tall, thin and scholarly-appearing, shook hands warmly with the prospective customer, reaching over a broad counter which bisected the office. Outside the counter a table and two chairs formed the only furniture. Inside, however, the office boasted an iron safe and a roll-top desk, one end of which abutted on the counter, close to the wall. The outer and inner portions of the office were connected only by a narrow passageway close to the other wall. In front of the counter stood Messrs. Ling and Brooks, holding discourse with President Stillings, who stayed behind it.

A bookkeeper, shirt-sleeved and perspiring, was laboriously casting up columns in a big red ledger, prominently stamped in gold, "Treasury Dept., U. S., No. XXIII."

The traveling bag stood safely upon the counter, with Bart's leathery left hand resting on it hard.

"Now, as you understand," President Stillings was expounding, letting his eyes play all over Bart and the wall beyond, "these bills we offer are good bills in every way, except for being a bit too worn and dirty for city use. City people kick up a fierce row if they can't have clean, fresh money—that's a fact you can go to sleep on. There's no sense in any one's being so particular.

Our rural friends have a pile more sense—money's money to them, and whether it's new or old don't make any difference. Not a particle. But here—it's different."

His lean, clerical-appearing face wrinkled in a frown of disapproval as he scratched a match on the counter and lit a fresh Rosario.

"You see now, I hope, why we communicate with the rural population, the backbone of the country. That's how we get this money back into circulation again and save the government having to issue fresh all the time at an expense of millions—yes, sir, millions.

"The saving we make for the government is something beyond belief. It pays all our expenses a hundred times over, and we live well—yes, we live well; we don't want for anything, do we, Mr. Ling?

"I guess not! And all through the industry, thrift and intelligence of the rural population. No wonder we call 'em the backbone of the U. S. Why don't we go right into the country ourselves and spend the money so as to get it circulated quicker?

"Ha! A good question, sir—a good, keen question! It does credit to your intelligence—your unusual intelligence and acumen, it does, indeed! Doesn't it, Mr. Ling? That's what!

"Let me answer it by asking another. Why doesn't every man in the mint or every bank president spend the money they handle? Honesty prevents them.

"That money's a sacred trust they'd rather die than betray—a sacred trust, that's what!"

The president was warming up; his pale face showed something almost like a hint of color, and his eyes gleamed as he continued:

"Now you understand why we wrote you? We're on a salary here. It doesn't make any difference to us whether you accept our offer or not, but for your own sake I advise you *to* accept it—that is, if money's any good to you—if you've got any use for ten or twenty thousand. I hope you never brought less than a thousand with you, Mr. Brooks? Surely not less than that! I hope so for your own sake—indeed I do!"

Bart colored up as much as his leathery hide would permit. How mean, poor and unprofitable his paltry three hundred seemed in the presence of all this wealth, this roll-top desk, these white-handed capitalists!

"I guess, mister," he ventured timidly, "my money'll look pretty small here. Fact is, I ain't got but three hundred dollars that I drew out of the Industrial. That, an' my watch an' car-ticket's all I've got. I couldn't git no more, so—"

"Shall we open an account for three, Mr. Benedict?" interrupted the president, turning to the shirt-sleeved clerk.

"What's that, sir?" queried the clerk, looking up, the while he kept his place with an inky forefinger. "I was running up the New Hampshire totals, and didn't hear. Three thousand, you said? Why, that would be O. K., I think—yes, certainly, by all means."

"No, no—not three thousand! He said three *hundred*, plus his watch and ticket. We might allow him thirty-five hundred or some such matter. What's your say?"

"Well—as an accommodation—since he's come so far—I suppose we can enter him, though I really don't think we ought to waste time on any such amounts. Guess we

don't want the ticket; that's more useful in his pocket than in ours. Keep quiet down there, Rex, will you?"—as something stirred furtively under the counter.

"That fool dog's got to go 'fore long," he added as if to himself. "I can't have him under foot much longer, and I won't."

It was evident that Mr. Benedict was rather an irascible person.

He rose from the desk, opened the safe, withdrew a tray heaped with worn bills, and slid it carelessly upon the counter.

A vision of miraculous wealth dazzled Bart's eyes; the drawer was stacked with what seemed perfectly bona fide certificates bound with rubber bands and labeled in blue pencil "\$5,000," "\$20,000," and the like. The aggregate loomed 'way above his modest means of calculation.

"Will you kindly let me see your bills and watch?" asked President Stillings. His voice was as blended oil and honey.

Bart unlocked his satchel and spread bills and watch upon the counter. President and agent examined them all closely, Bart watching in trepidation. Suppose his money should be declined, the chance of a lifetime fade away like dream-money through impotent fingers? Hot and cold waves ran up his back. Finally Stillings yawned wearily and passed his verdict.

"They look all right, though not A1. I put the watch at fifty. That makes thirty-five hundred, eh? Let's see—three thousand five hundred—three thousand five hundred. Here you are! Count it yourself and see that it's correct. We don't want any complaints from customers, you know."

He slid a big packet of bills over to Bart, who counted them with the grace of a grizzly bear. The bills were genuine—no doubt of it in the world. Thirty-five hundred dollars, and all his! As he dropped the heavy roll into his old satchel the room whirled into a golden haze.

“Rap, rap, rap!” It was a wooden knocking at the door—a noise as of some one tapping with a club.

“Sh-h-h-hh!” whispered President Stillings. “It’s that fresh District Inspector again, trying to butt in and make trouble! See here, Mr. Brooks, if you want to get away with your money, set your bag inside the counter here, light up this cigar, keep still, and say nothing. Otherwise you’re apt to get arrested and have all your stuff confiscated. You just do as I say, and you’ll come out top of the heap. Understand?”

“Bang, bang, bang!”

The glass door rattled with louder, more impatient blows. “Open, in the name of the law!” commanded a stern voice without.

Bart, in mortal dread, handed his satchel to the president and sank back motionless in a chair, an unlighted cigar projecting stiffly from his petrified face.

Ling, growling, threw the door wide open. Bart’s fear-smitten eyes beheld a blue-coated copper, adorned with very many brass buttons and a shiny new badge.

“Is there a man named Ling on the premises?” began the policeman tentatively. “I’ve got a warrant for him.”

“Oh, you have, have you?” broke out Ling. “Well, I’m your man. I’ll go. I ain’t afraid. Don’t you touch me, though; I’ll go all right. Mr. Stillin’s, I’ll be back to-morrow morning; if I ain’t, please have

Brice bail me. Hell! Who's afraid? They can't do nothin'! In the first place it's all Chief Foley's spite-work, an' in the second—"

"Aw, cut it!" interjected the policeman curtly. "I ain't here to listen all day to your rag-chewin'. Tell it to the judge."

Laying hold on Ling, he hustled him in no gentle fashion out into the corridor. The door closed behind them; their footsteps rapidly died away. When all was quiet, President Stillings tiptoed out around the end of the counter, with the satchel, opened the door quietly, and peeked forth.

"All right!" he whispered, coming back to Bart. "Here, take your money and clear. Skip! Evaporate! Fade! Take an up-town car and pike for the station.

"Get out of town just as quick as you can; don't stop for anything—just hike for the dairy! In an hour New York will be too warm to hold you; you'll understand by the time you get back to the tall tamaracks. Here's your bag. Vamoose! You're mighty lucky to get off as easy as you're doing!"

He bundled old Bart out into the hallway and closed the door decisively. Bart heard the spring-lock snap. His clothes were awry, his brain in a whirl, but he had his leather bag, bulging with booty, and exultation thrilled him.

A minute later he was on the street; in less than an hour a Boston train was whirling him out through the tunnel, out and away into the daylight once more, far away toward the north, toward Bean Center. Not until he reached New Haven did he bethink himself of the curious noise that "Rex" had made under the counter—

a noise so very un-doglike—and with fear gripping at his vitals he tore open the satchel.

Beyond shirts and socks, it contained nothing save a roll of neat manila slips cut to the size of government certificates.

CHAPTER III

IF Bart Brooks' first pilgrimage to New York had stirred Bean Corner to its foundations, the little Oxford County village rocked visibly when the news was bruited forth, a few weeks later, that the old man was planning another trip.

As oil on flaming brands fell the additional details that Mandy was to accompany him, that Bart had purchased two hand-bags for their use, alike in every detail, and—oh, choice delectable morsel of gossip!—that the old man had bought him a black wig. Insanity in the first degree, unanimous verdict.

What would it have been had the wiseacres known that the Brooks place had been mortgaged to the water's edge and that five hundred dollars of the proceeds lay in one of the new traveling-bags?

"Mandy," Bart was saying as the train slowed to a stop, "I'll go over it ag'in with you, jes' to make sure you understand it all right. From the minute we leave this here train you don't know me an' I don't know you, no more than as if you was a Frenchman an' me a Turk. Here's a map of the city. You git right on to a car at the depot, goin' east, remember, an' make 'em let you off at Third Av'noo; then take a car south to Twenty-Seventh Street, git off an' wait till I come. Mind, the southeast corner.

"You know the rest. When you git home to the farm, set still and say nothin'. I'll turn up like a bad penny, an' don't ye doubt it! One last thing—don't you gossip with *nubbody*! Understand? Here's the switch-yard; the depot's right beyond. Not another word betwixt us now! Good-by!"

Up he got and shambled off down the aisle. As strangers born and bred were his Amanda and he from that moment.

She, aided by the metropolitan police, steered an uncertain course down-town to their dim and unseen rendezvous; he, grasping his richly fraught satchel, of which she had the twin, perambulated hither and yon through the station as though in search of some particular friend.

The President of the International Bank-Bill Syndicate had just examined the black-haired stranger's five hundred dollars, and the stranger has just dropped into his satchel five thousand dollars in legal currency, albeit somewhat frayed, when "Rap, rap, rap" came an imperative summons at the door.

"It's that diabolish inspector, I'll bet a million!" exclaimed as though to himself President Stillings, he of the clerical face and deft hands. "Look here, Mr. Man, if you want to save your bacon, you set your grip inside the counter here and say nothing till he's gone. Mr. Ling, will you please open the door? Come, let's have the bag! Be quick or you're apt to lose every solitary cent you've got!"

He stretched out his thin white hand. The stranger moved not toward that hand, however, but toward the door.

"Let *me* open it!" he exclaimed politely, gripping his satchel with a strangle hold.

Ling jumped for the door, but met a stinging side-swipe on the beefy jaw that knocked him cold. Dashing open the door, the stranger smashed the fictitious policeman outside a good one, fair in the face, with the heavy bag and darted off down the hallway.

"Goin' down!" he bellowed like a yearling calf. Two minutes more and he was striding rapidly northward up Third Avenue toward Twenty-Seventh Street.

His black hair hung jauntily awry, but his old face was cracked across by an exultant grin that crystallized into a thousand wrinkles.

Contemporaneously the president, the policeman and "Rex" [who now had emerged from his lair under the counter] were holding hurried conclave in their desecrated office. Ling lay groaning on the floor. That was no time for tender ministrations.

"Hell!" ejaculated Stillings with fury. "You're some bull, aren't you? You big flat slob, to stand paws-off, that way! Why didn't you stop him?"

"None o' that, now, you pot-chested jail-bird!" retorted the bull, sopping a bloody nose. "I may be a dubb but I ain't never done time. What's this here Ling of yours here for, anyway, I'd like to know, if not to keep the come-on's from doin' a duck? If you'd had me for inside-man, we'd have the mazu this minute—tumble to that? Now see what we're up against—a chase an' general rough house! Aw, you're a bird of a president, you are!"

"Can it!" broke in "Rex." "While you nuts are ragging, that old gazebo's making tracks for the G. C. Can

it an' get busy! You, Ben, head him off around Twenty-Seventh, I'll cut for Twenty-fifth, an' you"—indicating the cop—"pike right up the Avenue. Here! I'll brush you off a bit.

"Straighten up that badge and cork the claret, for God's sake! We can pull him O. K. on the street, if you peel your eye. Stop his lip-work and hustle him back on the fly. The street for ours! You first!"

Putting on a good front, the rehabilitated cop descended to the street. Luck favored him. From the top step of the office building his keen eye, sweeping toward the north, "made" the stranger a block and a half away, headed up-town. Smiling derisively, the cop swung himself on to the front steps of a passing car. "The damn yap!" he murmured to himself.

Just at that moment, however, "the damn yap" turned into Twenty-Seventh Street, out of view. There an expectant little woman stood, holding a leather bag. Without a word they exchanged; then she started off rapidly toward Second Avenue. As for the stranger, he came back to the corner and stood there, staring at the cars, irresolute which to hail.

A heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"Here, we want you! Come along and say nothin' or you'll get a taste o' this!" The policeman flourished a formidable billy. "We know all about you—you're in with a gang o' con men, that's what, so come along easy or you get the bracelets!"

Bart, yielding meekly, noted with secret joy the policeman's battered nose. Certain curious folk stared; a few urchins trailed behind, hoping for the arrival of the Black Maria, but disappointment overtook them. The

copper haled his prey to no box, summoned no patrol. No, he simply led him back a couple of blocks to the tall building that contained the offices of the International Bank-Bill Syndicate.

At the end of the hallway, behind a wing of the elevator shaft, where the shadows were deep, the bull thrust Bart with final instructions not to "open his map in the elevator" on pain of having "his block knocked off."

"I ain't a-goin' to make no row, nohow," replied Bart, shifting the hand-bag nervously. "I got enough. You don't s'pose, do you, that you lemme go ef I'd give you the satchel back?" An eager expression leaped into his eyes.

"Well," replied the policeman, wrinkling his brow in deep study, "I suppose that'd suit the International Bank-Bill Syndicate O. K. Let me look at the grip." Bart yielded with feigned reluctance. "This ain't regular, Grandpa, but I'll let you blow this trip," continued the bluecoat patronizingly. "But if I was you, I'd do a quick skate for the timber an' forget the way back here. Come, now, beat it!"

Bart felt a heavy shove that started him toward the street, into which he vamoosed. Meanwhile the cop hastened to the rooms of the International Syndicate.

"Rap-rap! Rap-rap!"

Slowly the door swung inward. Pod stood behind it, and behind Pod, held in a fat and hairy fist, dangled a sandbag. It was obviously intended for Bart, had the satchel been accompanied by that Bean Corner worthy.

The bull peered around the door at Ling, knowingly, and held up the coveted grip with one hand, closing the door with the other.

In bustled Ben and Rex breathlessly.

"Gimme that keister!" exclaimed Ben, whipping out his pocket-knife. "We'll get into this right now; no time to wait for a key."

Four covetous, wolfish faces crowded close as Bender cut a long gash in the leather bag, and his white hand, diving deep into the interior, drew out what by all means belonged to them—a neatly wrapped bundle of manila slips.

Simultaneously, some blocks away, Bart caught up with Amanda in the neighborhood of the Grand Central. Around his tired old mouth played a satisfied smile and in his deep eyes glowed the light that appears when dreams come true.

"Hold onto the han'bag tight, Mandy—they's five thousand in it," he murmured into her sunburned ear.

XI

LOBSTERS AND LOOT

Wherein a Hardshell Loses Coin but Gains Experience

CHAPTER I

NOT satisfied with cleaning out the treasury of the International Bank-Bill Syndicate, old Bart added insult to injury by writing a certain letter, soon after his arrival home at Bean Corner—a letter to the “Front Office,” or Police Headquarters, in New York. As a result of all this, the state of our friends’ health decided them to flit, temporarily at least, from the scene of their disastrous downfall. With these few well-chosen words I now invite you to behold them, far from the madding crowd, sitting on the rocks on Peaks Island, in the harbor of Portland, Maine.

No great degree of prosperity was writ upon their raiment and habiliments as they observed the marine prospect and consumed sandwiches, under a sparkling matutinal sun of early winter. Pod’s smile had changed to a frown. The doctor’s pale and classic features looked even more austere than ever. Both pals seemed vis-à-vis with our old friend and companion Melan Choly.

Ben heaved a sigh, round the remnants of a cheese-sandwich, and huskily remarked:

“This limpet-stunt on the hard and rock-bound coast

may be all very well for health-resorters, but as a blues-banisher it's some chill. Now that we're *personae non get-there* in Manhat, we've either got to winnow some grain out of the plow-pushers or take a through ticket to Down-and-Outberg. It's up to us to grind some choice dope, C. Q. D., and take a fall out of Trouble before she gets the collar-and-elbow on us, or I see where starvation beats us to the wire. Well?"

Pod shifted his huge bulk into a more comfortable position on the ledge, and brushed from his clothes the few remaining crumbs of frugal lunch, before replying.

"Ben," said he, huskily, "it pains me to remark it, but the fact is we're here because you insisted on ringin' in them other guys, both of 'em frosts, on our proposition. As long as you an' me plays a two-handed game, it's a ten-to-one shot we gather; but the minute you shove in outsiders, the flue for ours. So—"

"Can the reminiscence!" interrupted Ben. "Here we are, and here we can't stay. We're far from the Great White Lights, and we've got just \$8.42 between us, plus that bunch of canceled bonds we had left over on the Mackintyre deal. As a lay-out, some punk! Is it time we prepared for a quick reach with the bread-hooks, or isn't it? That's the chorus of our little song just now!"

Slats nodded ponderously. "Surest thing you know," he admitted. "But what sort of a reach? Anything on the fly in your mind that you figure Pod, Bender & Co. can pull down?"

Ben sighed deeply, but made no answer. He only looked out across the sparkling channel, where the clear green waters were heaving with languid ebb and flow.

To his ears came the rapid putt-putt-putt of a small naphtha launch, dory-built, swift, wide of beam, piled with what seemed to be rounded wooden crates. He watched it casually, wondering the while how by any means on earth his fortunes and those of Pod were to be recouped. Pod's usually fertile brain seemed to have been numbed by disaster. Ben felt that he alone must be the Ways and Means Committee, this time, to work out their salvation.

"There's certainly got to be a real clean-up, a live killing, inside of a day or two," thought he, "or it's all off. No white-powder illusions about *that!* But what can it be, 'way up here in this little corner of the map, with neither friends, cash, credit of even a stack of anything but blues?"

The motor-dory once more drew his attention. Its occupant had cut off the power, and now the boat lay rocking gracefully, as it fell into the trough of the rollers. From its stern shot a weight, fastened by a long cord. The weight splashed out of sight into the cool waters. Then the skipper of the little craft bent over the side with one of the wooden crates in his hands. He let go of the crate, which sank.

"Hmmm!" commented Bender. "Lobsters, eh? Well, now, I wonder if that's an omen? Does it refer to the harmless necessary come-on, or to *us?*?"

Out in the channel, with one lobster-pot placed, the boatman had shifted his position and was preparing to set another.

"If it was only as easy to cop the biped lobsters as it is the decapod ones!" thought the Doc. "Just a little gurry, for bait—a little line, and a trap, and it's all to

the velvet. The worse the gurruy is, too, quicker they bite. Well, *that's* like the human, anyway!"

He pondered a minute or two; then all of a sudden, inspiration dawned.

"Pod! Hey, wake up, old man!" he cried jubilantly, reaching over and digging his companion in the well-padded ribs. "Wake up. I've framed a ten-strike hummer, a bounding tar-baby of a scheme, I tell you, sure to take the rino in large packages. Give us any kind of going, old boy, and we'll breeze in, easy winners, with our pockets just greasy with bacon!"

"You say?" queried Pod, sitting up with reviving interest. "Sure there's no needle-dream ideas in this present bunch?"

"All top-notchers, every one! Wait till you've had a flash at 'em!" Ben assured him. "But, now—"

"What materials?" Pod asked dolefully, turning his pockets inside out, and gazing down at his wrinkled clothes. "What tools an' appurtenances? You, Ben, look pretty near O. K., and there might be coin enough to swing your end of it, but where does Pod Slattery, A. B., Absolutely Busted, fit?"

"Fit? In the rôle of low-born, impecunious hobo, which by nature you're cut out for!" Ben retorted with a grin. "Busted, and clever in a way; possessed of a valuable secret; and above all—"

"Yes?"

"Dead honest!"

Pod bowed acknowledgment of the compliment. "I'm all o' the above," he admitted modestly. "But, what else? Who's the fall-guy that's goin' to set things droppin' our way?"

"Some well-fixed lobster-man, with a thirst for sudden wealth," Ben answered, "and with a conscience like your own. *He* won't be hard to find, not in a town like Portland."

"Yes, but the game, the game?" demanded Pod, with rapidly growing interest. "The lay? The ducat-puller?"

"Hold on, and I'll dope it proper," Ben replied. He was extracting from his pocket every last bit of currency and piling the little fund securely on a flat rock. Then he found a sheet of paper and a stubby pencil, and began tabulating several items which Pod, looking over his shoulder, recognized with growing curiosity as

NECESSARY EXPENDITURES

Motor-dory hire	\$3.00
Three tin chests	3.75
Advertising75
Miscellaneous50
Total	<hr/> \$8.00

"Which leaves," remarked Ben judiciously, "just forty-two cents for two husky Epicureans to subsist on, one week, not mentioning shaves for me, and shines, absolutely essential."

"Nor pad-money!" exclaimed the other with mournful emphasis. "What d'you think? A man of my avverdorpis goin' to sleep out, with newspapers over him, a whole week, this time o' year?"

"Forget it!" laughed Ben. "There's freight cars, eh? and hand-outs, here, same as everywhere. Even if we have, on happier past occasions, had our own state-

room on the *Kurfürst Wilhelm*, we're not above scraping hard-pan for a while."

"Not when we have to. But wise me to this idea of yours that's goin' to take a fall out of Dull Care. What's the dory-hire for, and—"

"Why, it's just this way on my dope-sheet," answered Ben. He replaced paper and pencil in his pocket, together with currency, and faced Pod with the air of a teacher instructing a pupil.

"This scheme of mine's the real chattels, all right, such a big IT that you won't need any glass to see it with. Before it's through, I tell you, only a Marathon runner will have so much as a look-in at—"

"Can that!" cried Pod, almost angrily. "Amputate rhetoric, and get down to facts! What is it?"

"This," answered Ben, launching into the main, large outlines of his campaign.

CHAPTER II

BY common consensus of opinion, old Mellen Rowe was one of the shrewdest, keenest and most avaricious lobster-fishermen who ever pulled a "short" warily out of Casco Bay or sold an underweight on loaded scales. His floats, dories, and boiling-house, his bait-shed on a rock out in the Cushing Island channel, his very many lobster-pots over the most fertile breeding-beds—all these were the envy of his competitors. Just how much money he was worth, those competitors could not say; but they were never loath to speculate about old Mellen's wealth, especially when deftly questioned by strangers.

To Mellen there appeared, on the evening after this

story begins, a stout untidy person, with a considerable growth of beard and shabby clothes wrinkled as only clothes are wrinkled which have been slept in.

The old man, casting up his accounts alone in his boiling-house, which was built on piles out over the water of a Commercial Street slip, looked up from his books as the stranger entered. The light from the smoky lamp with its tin shade, hung over Mellen's head by a rusty wire, cast uncertain shadows on the old man's bald head, thin cheeks and boldly curving nose, and lost itself among his grizzled whiskers.

"Wall, what ye want, hey?" quoth Mellen with acerbity. "It's after business hours. I don't need no help, nohow, an' wun't buy nothin'."

The stranger did not answer immediately, even had this broadside of inhospitality left any very large loophole for conversation. Instead, he sniffed the heavy, rancid air of the lobster-house, and peered round at the row of boiling-vats, the piles of empty baskets, the long table covered with a litter of claws, shells and débris of defunct crustaceans.

"Wall?" repeated Mellen, more tartly, as he laid down his pen on the littered and dirty table which served him as a desk. Inside the drawer of that table lay a revolver, fully loaded. Mellen was a good shot, too.

"Say, mister," answered the stranger, thus appealed to, coming up close to the table. "Say, d'you know a good likely A-One place, out somewhere in th' harbor, to—to—"

"To what?"

"To bury a dead body!" The stranger's voice sank to a husky whisper. Apprehensively he glanced round.

"*What?*" cried the old man, for once startled out of thoughts of profit and self-protection.

"Bury a body. A stiff. A dead one, see?" repeated the stranger. "In the bay. Got it? Six bones for doin' it, I get. I go fifty-fifty with you. See?"

"Three dollars—to bury—a—!" stammered old Mellen, his lean jaws dropping with entire astonishment, thus disclosing toothless gums for which he had always been too mean to buy store-teeth. "Bury a body—for three dollars?"

"Sure," answered the stranger cheerfully. "Why not? You go out every mornin' early, anyhow, don't you? Well, if I and *it* go out with you, to-morrow mornin', before anybody's up, an' you let me drop *it* overboard in deep water—well, you'll be makin' three seeds mighty easy, that's my say. If you turn a trick or two that ain't accordin' to Hoyle, why not? Every way you look at it, Cap, it's a hit-bang and get-away little screamerino, that's all. Are you on?"

The old man simply goggled at him with astonished eyes. Of a certainty there was something wrong about this stranger. His language and appearance were not those of the bona fide hobo. Mellen, though he could scarcely analyze his impression, felt that some deception was under way. So, like all narrow and ignorant natures when confronted with the new, he shrank back. Not even his itch for the three dollars could overcome his instinctive fear.

"Come, Bo, say yes!" pleaded the stranger, more earnestly still. "Tip us the Go Ahead! Say, this is certainly the most velvety little deal that ever slid through the rollers. Come, be a sport. Look here, Pop, I'll

make it four! That leaves only two for me, but I'm so punk for lack of the legal tender that even two bucks would be a yenyen dream. When you ain't got no tender it's surely tough. I'm a charter member of the In Bad bunch, and I—need—the money, savvy? Take a chance! Steve did. Four tainted one's don't grow on every bunch of kelp. Pick these four, Uncle—nothin' to it but an easy jaunt!"

The extraordinary visitor ended his pleading with a hearty blow on the table from a powerful fist. Old Mellen started in his chair; the lamp danced and rattled above his head. What to say he knew not. His suspicious soul feared the singular visitor; it feared the apparently illegal deed of burying an unknown body in the Bay; and yet it craved those four big iron men. Fear, however, conquered.

"Nope, can't dew it," same the answer. "I ain't a-goin' inta no sech tarnation business fer no four dollars. Who is the cuss ye're talkin' 'baout, anyway? Who killed him, an' why?" In his heart the old man hoped to discover some dark crime. Visions of great rewards flitted through his mind. "Who is he, hey?"

"Oh, you should worry," the stranger briskly reassured him, pulling up an overturned lobster-basket and seating himself thereon. "No murder done, nothing o' that sort; nix on the crime! Let me parcel this dope-sheet to you, so. Once you know the inside, you'll fall for it, even though there's no ice on your sidewalk. Gent named Wilfred Hawkins croaks off natural, all O. K. Nice a death as you'd care to see. Has the cremation-bat in his belfry—"

"Hey?"

"Wants his corp burned; get me? Well, that's all right, too. It is burned, to ashes. Then the will says the ashes mustn't be used on slippery front steps, nor for fertilizer, nor tooth-powder, nor nothin', but just be dumped in the drink—reunion with nature, an' all that. Get me?"

"Uh-huh! Cal'late I've hearn tell o' sech outlandish practises, before. What next?"

"Heirs agree. Want it done. All but wife. She objects. Wants her Wilfred to stand on mantle, in a flower-pot. But the rest can't see it. No way for 'em to pull the ducats, if the will's busted. So one of 'em annexes the corp—the ashes, see?—an' hires me to negotiate the dumpin'. Offers four beans, but I give him the boosty line of palaver an' get it up to six. He says I gotta take the ashes out as far as White Head, anyhow. See?"

"Yup. Go on." Old Mellen was beginning to grow interested, in earnest. His scruples were wavering. The stranger hastened his tale:

"I'm nix on the rowin' stunt. Never been in a boat three times since I quit the Milky Way. An' you know what kind of a sea runs out there, at White Head. So I got to have a capable guy. That means you. Do you fall for it?"

"Ain't no lies ye're tellin' me, be they?" demanded Mellen, fixing a keen though aged eye on the stranger.

The stranger's reproachful gaze dissipated all possibility of falsehood.

"Well, ef it's the truth you're tellin' me," said Mellen, "why, I dunno's I'd hev any objections to yer goin' with me—fer five dollars."

"What?" cried the stranger, outwardly aghast though inwardly radiant. "What? An' leave me only one buck for all my time an' trouble?"

"Huh! To jedge from yer looks, time ain't wuth much to *yew!*" exclaimed Mellen with acerbity. "Five dollars, anyhow; them's my terms. Take 'em or leave 'em."

Secretly Mellen had resolved to come down to four, if need were, but his indifference was well-simulated. Long years in the lobster-business, facing inquisitive inspectors and fish-wardens on the trail of shorts, had turned his countenance to brass. The stranger, looking at it, beheld only inflexible determination and a sternly virtuous resolve never to break the law for less than five units of value.

"All right," he accepted the terms, at last. "Five it is. Robbery, but can't be helped. When d'you start, mornin's?"

"You be down to the float at four-thirty, see?" old Mellen directed. "Walk raound side o' this here shed, on the wharf, then go down the ladder. I'll be on hand, all right."

"So'll I," promised the stranger. "Good night, Unk."

Old Mellen did not reply to this parting word, but sat there at the table, a wizened little figure of covetousness, watching with keen eyes the withdrawal of his obese and curious visitor. Only after the stranger was gone did the old man vent his emotions in a whistle. For a long time, till close to midnight, he sat there at his littered desk in the odorous lobster-shed, thinking, thinking.

"Goin' to make a fool o' me, hey?" he finally chuckled

to himself, as he got up, reached for his sou'wester and started to lock the shop. "Deceivin' of me, thought he was. But I'm too all-fired smart for sech gentlemen, now I'm a-goin' to tell ye. We'll see what we shell see, an' if I don't make suthin' handsome outa his hide, my name ain't Mellen Rowe!"

CHAPTER III

LONG before the wintry dawn loomed over the islands of Casco Bay, two figures emerged upon the large square lobster-float in front of the boiling-shed. One of the figures, an old and grizzled man in "oil-ers," his features but dimly visible in the gloom, was piling lobster-pots into a motor-dory moored at the float. The other, rotund but ill-clad and shivering with the cold, tapped impatient feet against the reeking boards of the float, and urged more haste.

"Come, Unk, dope the old bullgine, there, and let's get busy!" exhorted the stout man. His utterance was somewhat impeded by the castanet-play of his chattering teeth, but he spoke forcibly. Old Mellen Rowe frowned.

"Naow, don't be so gosh-fired impatient there, yew!" he adjured his companion. "They's all day, ain't they? Think 'm goin' to hurry, an' mebbe ferget somethin', an' spile a day's haul jest fer a fool trick like this, hey?" And the old man continued, with forced deliberation, making his preparations. Deadly curious as he was to see the working-out of the undertaking, whatever it might be, by no word or sign would he give evidence thereof.

Pod, with a muttered objurgation, shifted from his

right arm to his left a small package securely wrapped in newspaper, and went on with his pedal gymnastics.

Mellen only grunted, as he climbed into the dory, primed the engine and turned on the current. Little had he slept, last night. Convinced that more, much more was doing than the fat stranger had been willing to admit, yet wholly at a loss to understand, the old miser had in vain cudgelled his brains for an explanation. The stranger's dialect, his haste, his lack of money and at the same time the evident importance of his mission, all convinced Mellen that here he had to deal with some city desperado in the commission of an undoubted crime. The old lobster-man's New England conscience, indurated as it was, rebelled against being party to this dark deed at any such beggarly price as five dollars, but his hopes of getting inside information and thereby some possible reward worth while, overcame all scruples.

"Git in!" he commanded brusklly, pointing to the stern-sheets of the dory.

Pod obeyed and sat down on a thwart. Shivering acutely, he put his parcel securely between his feet on the floor-grating. Mellen cast off the painter, cranked the engine and shoved off. The motor coughed, sneezed and barked, then settled to its work; the dory drew out of the slip, away from the floats, past the pier-head, and set her course out across the cold, oily waters of the early morning bay.

Neither one spoke. The barrier of lobster-pots heaped up between them discouraged conversation, even had either wanted to talk. The old man, 'midships, tended his engine and steered—a singular figure in his yellow, crackling oilskins. Pod, at the stern, just sat and shiv-

ered and growled beneath his breath. Thus, through the drifting mist, out past the anchored coal-barges and wind-jammers, past Little Diamond and into the channel between Peaks and Cushings, they navigated. The long swells from the open sea took them. They drew near to the ragged buttresses and foaming surf-line of White Head.

"Nearly there, Unk?" queried Pod in solicitous tones. "I want to get Wilfred at rest before too many of the Rubber Trust shine their lamps at us."

"Don't yew worry none, we'll git thar soon enough," Mellen replied. "I got some work to do, 'fore I run out to the Head."

"Damn the work! Let it wait!"

"Wun't, neither, fer no sech foolishness as this!"

Nothing that Pod could say shook his obstinacy. He put in at the rock in the channel where stood his bait-house, and then proceeded to drop his lobster-pots, one by one, all down the channel. With nonchalance he worked, though inwardly full of wonder, greed and eagerness.

At last, little by little, they reached the outer end of the channel. Only a slight glimmer of dawn filtered through the low-hung fog. The long swells from the open sea cradled the dory. Ahead, to the right, they saw the ragged buttresses and frothy surf-line of White Head.

"Wall, I reckon we're 'baout there," remarked Mellen, as he headed the dory's nose toward Ram Island and slowed the engine a trifle.

"Anchor!" said Pod with laconic force, from the stern-sheets.

"What? Can't yew chuck the box overboard any old place, hey?"

"I can, but I won't, see? I said, *anchor*. Who's pushin' out the legal tender for this spiel, you or me? Come, toss the mud-hook, Spinach!" And Pod's fists doubled menacingly.

Mellen gasped at the insolence of this wastrel. His old face flushed; his eyes blinked angrily as he stared at Pod. But Pod did not mind the look. There were now no lobster-pots between him and the old man. Mellen noted his passenger's large fists and determined air, and his heart sank within him.

"Oh, all right, if yew're dead set on it," he hastened to capitulate. He stopped the engine, tossed the anchor over and paid out. It ran twenty fathoms. The dory rocked, tugged, and came to rest.

Pod looked about him with keen eyes. Mellen saw that he was taking precise observations on the landmarks. The dory lay in a direct line between the light on Ram Island and a yellow cottage on Peaks, one way; the other, it intersected a line from the range-finders on Cushings and the southern point of Jewell Island, far at sea. Old Mellen was no less sharp to note the position than Pod, but he said nothing. A good navigator could, he knew, at any time re-locate the position within a few yards, almost a few feet.

"I cal'late this may be useful to know, some time or other!" thought he, with sly and secret self-congratulation, as he watched Pod's further doings.

Pod, quite oblivious to the old man, had bent and was undoing the papers from the package at his feet. Mel-

len's eager eyes perceived a tin chest or box, such as valuable papers are often kept in. He noticed that the crack around the lid was sealed with red wax, as though to make it water-tight; and much his wonder grew.

"Don't see any return of ashes to ashes, dust to dust, man's body to the sea, in *that!*" thought he. "If Wilfred's idee was to reunite with nater, what for would they seal him up, hey?" Confused and puzzling doubts mingled with his speculations.

But Pod vouchsafed no explanation. He took a cord from his pocket, unrolled it, and tied one end securely to the handle of the chest. From the other pocket he removed with some difficulty a flat iron weight. This weight he secured to the cord, about five feet from the box.

Without a word he tossed box and weight overboard, and let the line pay out. Both he and Mellen in silence watched the bubbles rise and break on the heaving surface of the sea, as the strange burden sank from sight. The line came to an end. Pod released it. It vanished.

"Now, home!" commanded Pod. "And mind you this, Whiskers, you've seen all that's mortal of a man buried here at sea, in a tin chest. Well an' good—but, I warn you for your own good, lock up your gab-works an' lose the key. For—your—own—good, that's all. Are you on?" His look and his tone were so peculiarly sinister that Mellen felt the goose-flesh start all over his lean body.

The whole way back to town not a word was said on either side. At the lobster-float, Pod climbed out, paid five dollars from a meager roll of six, and said a curt "Good-by!"

Mellen in silence watched the huge figure climb the ladder, circle the shed and disappear.

Only then did he exclaim, beneath his breath: "Wall, I be blasternally jiggered, durned if I ain't! . . .!"

CHAPTER IV

IF these strictly preliminary events resulted in jiggeration for the old man, what then shall describe his supreme mystification when, late in the afternoon of the next day, he received a call from a brisk, lean, business-like individual, who showed an insatiable curiosity regarding what had happened off White Head?

It was after five o'clock when this individual called. Most of Rowe's men had gone home. Only one or two still lingered, to finish packing some barrels of lobsters for shipment. The shed was practically deserted.

"May I have a few minutes' conversation with you, if you please?" queried the newcomer politely, glancing round with distrust at the laggard employees.

Old Mellen instinctively felt that something important was in the wind.

"Why, cal'late so," he answered. "Private business, hey?"

"Very. Perhaps I might as well wait a minute or two, till—" And he nodded at the men.

"Yew boys, thar, leave them barr'ls till mornin'!" directed Mellen. "I want to close up, here, now." So, presently he and the newcomer were alone.

"Wall, sir, what might be your pleasure?" asked the old man with unusual courtesy. Something in the visitor's air impressed him. The man was none too finely

dressed, true, but he was well brushed, clean shaven, and had fresh linen; and there was about him the indefinable air of assurance which comes only from long habitation of a large city. Mellen sized him up at once as a person of some importance. He had seen a few men, in his day, with eyes like this one; and he knew the breed.

The visitor stood there looking at him for a long, silent minute before answering. Mellen felt that look pierce through and through him. He shifted his rubber boots uneasily.

"Wall, sir?" he asked again.

"You are Mellen Rowe?" the caller queried, slowly, distinctly.

"Yes, sir, that's me. Why?"

"Hmmm. Let's sit down, if you don't mind. I've got something to ask you—something that may surprise you—something I want the truth about!"

A peculiar emphasis on the last few words stirred Mellen's temper, but he merely asked: "What is it, hey?"

"The truth," repeated the visitor, as he produced a card from his waistcoat-pocket and handed it over. Mellen, squinting with eyes accustomed more to sun and sea than to business-cards, read "HENRY H. WALCOTT," and, penciled in the lower left-hand corner, "26 Broadway."

"Walcott. Henry H. Walcott," he repeated, feeling the while that this might be a name of no mean worth. "Glad t' know yew, sir. What kin I do fer yew?"

He extended his gnarled hand, but the city man apparently did not notice it. Instead, he drew out a pair of spectacles, adjusted them carefully, and made a memorandum on the back of a long, important-looking

envelope which he took from an inside pocket. Mellen began to grow downright uneasy. He moved nervously in his cane-seat chair by the littered table, made as though to speak again, then changed his mind and remained silent. Walcott, the memorandum finished, looked up again.

"Did you, or did you not," he inquired slowly, "go out in your power-boat yesterday morning with a—a certain party, known in the underworld as the Boston Bull-buster, and help, aid and abet him to—er—drop overboard, off White Head, a certain box, or chest?"

Each clear-cut word was heavy with the accusation of grave guilt, guilt undeniable, guilt absolutely assumed and easily to be proved. The old man felt a sensation of positive heart-sickness creep over him. His mouth opened convulsively, but not a word issued. He sank down lower in his chair, gazing with frightened eyes at this strange, menacing person, so calm, so cold, so ominous in his reserve.

"Well?" asked the stranger sharply. "Did you, or did you not?" He replaced the long envelope in his pocket. As he did so he pushed the lapel of his coat aside, and Mellen caught a fugitive glimpse of a shining metal badge upon the breast of the waistcoat.

"I—I—that is—" began Mellen, tremulously; but the other snapped him short.

"Did you, sir? Yes, or no!" His words fairly clicked, like a steel trap.

"I—yes, sir. I did. No—harm meant, sir. Why, what—?"

"You admit it, then," said Walcott, with an air of tremendous finality, like a judge pronouncing sentence.

"You admit the action. You, and nobody else, were party to the deed!"

"He only—hired the use o' my boat, that's all!" protested Mellen, in desperation. "I never knowed what fer! Never so much as asked him, no, ner touched the—the—"

"The chest. No matter. You were *particeps criminis*, and the law of tort, as well as that of primogeniture, *honi soit qui mal y pense* and *jus primae noctis*—"

"Say, hold on thar!" cried the old man, his dander rising despite his alarm. "Hold on! 'Vast the Latin, thar! You're 'way out o' the channel, on the wrong tack, wrong soundin's and all! This here cuss—"

"A big, stout ruffian of a fellow—the Boston Bull-buster!"

"That must be him. He comes to me, night afore last, an' wants the hire o' my boat. Says he ain't got but a few dollars, an' tries t' beat me daown."

"A characteristic lie. Money? Oh, he's well supplied, never doubt it. The—man who's backing him in this nefarious game sees to that. Go on!"

"Wall, I agrees to let him use the boat. Jest use it, that's all—set in it, while I navigates. No crime in that, mister. He shows up, early yestiddy mornin', gits in with a bundle all wropped in noospaper—"

"Yes, yes! That was it!"

"Which I don't touch, handle, ner have nothin' to dew with, whatsomever. Not a blessed durned thing, so help me!"

"That's no exculpation of *ne plus ultra* and *viva voce* culpability before the law," interrupted Walcott with great severity. "Even though you didn't touch the box,

you had it in your boat, and you knew all the time that the letters, data, records and memoranda were there."

"My gret Horn Spoon! What letters? What records? What memmerander? He said it was *ashes!*"

"Ashes? See here now, sir, are you trying to fabricate to me? If so, I warn you in advance you're trifling with the wrong authority! I warn you! Why, sir—"

"Fabrycate? Warn me, hey? See here, Mr. Officer, or whoever yew be, it's the livin' truth, I swar!"

Old Rowe had gone quite purple. His grizzly beard wagged with the vehemence of his protestation. Walcott's mouth twitched nervously, but he merely coughed behind his palm.

"The livin' truth, so help me! He said as how a man named Hawkins, Wilfred Hawkins, had died an' ben creamery-ated, an' his ashes put in a box to be thrown in the ocean, an' how his widder—"

Walcott sprang up so suddenly that his chair fell backward on the shell-strewn floor.

"And you believed him?" he roared, banging the table with his fist. "You—believed—that? That stupendous bare-faced lie, the like of which only the Bull-buster could invent?"

"What else could I do?" almost pleaded the old man. "What reason did I have fer to call him a liar, when I didn't know him from a low-tide barnacle?"

"But, fool!" the other expostulated, leaning over the table with an air of almost horror, "is it possible you haven't heard of the Vanderpool blackmail case? Why, the metropolitan papers are full of it!"

"Vanderpool blackmailin' case, hey?" asked the lobster-man in blank astonishment. "Nup. I ain't read

nothin' 'baout it. What time do I git t' read, anyhow? What is it, mister?" Though still all at sea, on an uncharted course and with every beacon-light extinguished, he somehow breathed easier. There might now exist some possible course through the shoals and reefs, to safe moorings. "What it is? Tell us, mister, will yew?"

Walcott only laughed a short, dry, mirthless laugh.

"As I live," he exclaimed, "if ever a man ought to be indicted for criminal ignorance, you're that man!"

"Wall, what harm's done, arter all?" ventured the old fossil, eager to turn the subject from himself to the fat rascal who, it seemed, had duped him.

"Harm? Listen!" Walcott picked up the fallen chair, seated himself again, and drew up close to the table. His expression was more friendly, now, less official and austere.

"Go on, mister. I'm listenin'."

"Try to understand, too, as well as listen," admonished the mollified detective—for that he might be otherwise old Mellen could by no human possibility doubt. "Your mistake has made trouble enough, already. Maybe there'll be a fearful tragedy as a result. But still, you're not directly to blame."

"Tarnation glad to hear yew say that!" breathed Mellen with relief. "So, then, yew can't do nothing to me, hey?"

"Why no, and there's no reason for prosecution—yet. In fact, there's a chance for you to pull out of this scot-free, or even—"

He paused, knitting his brows in thought.

"Wall?" queried the lobster-man eagerly.

"Or even, if you'll take hold and assist me now, to get a bit of a reward. You've helped to do me out of a handsome sum, already; but after all it wasn't your fault. There's a chance yet for me—for you—if you're game, made of the right stuff and with pluck and nerve—and above all, if you can keep a secret!"

Old Mellen, his pride awakened and his cupidity stirred, gazed with brightening eyes at the detective. A furtive glint reflected there.

"Try me, an' see b'gosh!" he exclaimed almost with emotion.

"Hanged if I won't!" the other assented as though swayed by an impulse of magnanimity. "I've knocked around the world too long and dealt with too many kinds of men, not to know the good old reliable stock when I see it! Mr. Mellen, I beg your pardon, sir, for whatever hasty words I may have said, and—"

"That's all right, mister, all right!"

"And I'm going to prove my trust and confidence in you by telling you some facts that hundreds, yes, thousands of men all over the country would give their eye-teeth to know. Facts that may put both you and me—well, on Easy Street—you know!"

The detective's voice lowered and his tone became most flatteringly confidential. Mellen's eyelids quivered. Nervously he licked his bearded lips. The lust for money, for sudden unearned wealth had got its strangling grip on him, choking out every other thought from his small, grasping mind.

"Go on, mister!" he exclaimed in a voice which he tried hard to render steady. "Go on—I'm listenin'!"

CHAPTER V

WALCOTT gave the old lobster-man a long, searching look, then with sudden decision drew from his pocket a couple of newspapers, opened them to the "Personal" columns, and laid them on the table before Mellen.

Squinting by the dim, cobwebby light of the window at his left hand, the greedy skinflint saw two items marked with blue pencil. The first one read:

V. Papers. Return at once. No questions. No prosecution. Fifty, currency. Communicate 26 Broadway, or 19 Congress. H. & W.

The second:

Nothing doing. You know terms. Sixty to-day and ten more per day. One box now where never found. Other goes soon. Better come down. Whip Hand.

Twice he read them through, with Walcott narrowly watching him; then he looked up, blankly puzzled.

"It beats *me!*" he exclaimed. "Seems like I kind o' see suthin' in it, an' yet I don't nuther."

"Naturally. It's *meant* to be impossible of solution by the public. Those ads, and others of the kind, have been for the past week appearing in every important paper east of Pittsburg." He smiled slightly at mention of this name, then continued:

"Suppose," said he, "that a rich man, a *very* rich man, a great capitalist in fact, should carelessly leave on his desk two boxes of railroad bonds. Just for a few minutes, you understand. And suppose that in those few minutes some party or parties unknown should steal those boxes and make off with them—bonds, mind you,

worth upward of two million five hundred thousand dollars. And—”

“What! My land o’ livin’ glory! When did *that* happen? An’ what was the name o’—”

“Hold on, no questions!” commanded Walcott. “I’m just making some suppositions to you, understand? I’m under oath not to betray names, dates or places. But that doesn’t hinder my telling you a sort of little story, you see.”

The old man nodded comprehension. His vanity was wakened by this method of communication. “Yes, go on, mister!” he exclaimed.

A slight noise, as of a step on the wharf, sounded outside. Walcott got up, went and looked out. He closed the door carefully, came back and sat down again, apparently satisfied there was no eavesdropping. Bending close to the lobster-man he continued in almost a whisper:

“And suppose that the thief or thieves knew these bonds were absolutely essential to a big trust deal. Knew that their value was thus far greater than just their market price. That the bonds must, positively *must* be back in the owner’s hands on or before a certain date, eh?”

Mellen nodded. He had almost forgotten to breathe.

“Imagine also that, if the knowledge got out of the loss of these bonds, the millionaire owner’s interests would suffer, that he would be ‘raided’ and run into bankruptcy—crushed, annihilated. In such a case you could easily see—”

“Why, thar couldn’t be no out-an’-out work, no arrests ner nothin’?” queried Mellen.

“Pre-cisely! The inference does your intelligence the

greatest credit. Suppose, also, that the thieves knew this fact, and demanded a ransom for the bonds. Not a fixed sum, but twenty-five thousand dollars to begin with, plus ten thousand dollars each and every day that their demands were not complied with—said demands including immunity from prosecution at any time. You see the situation that would arise?”

“Sure I do. She’s a hellion, ain’t she? The owner must be purty nigh crazy! Willin’ to give up most any old sum fer to git his papers back agin, hey?”

“That’s the exact idea. You see here, in this ad, he offers fifty thousand. But that’s not enough. To-day’s ransom has risen to sixty. To-morrow it will be seventy, and so on. A most distressing situation, most infernal! And on top of it all, the thieves or their agents have contrived this other scheme of putting first one and then the other box in a place where they never can by any possibility be found by anybody but just themselves—and even by themselves only with considerable difficulty and loss of time, always at \$10,000 a day! Could man’s perverted mind have conceived a scheme more devilish in its complex security, more criminally ingenious to outwit, defraud, bunco and generally ravish the loot of the unsuspecting?”

“A hellion!” repeated the old man with amaze. “But, why did they choose to drop the stuff at sea? Why not hide it on land, some good safe place?”

“No place on land,” Walcott replied sententiously, “is safe, while modern detectives are at work. And, beside, imagine the stunning effect of a letter to the millionaire, saying: ‘Your papers are at the bottom of Casco Bay. Only I know where. Come across with the coin, or there

they stay. Prosecute, and there they stay. Do anything but just what I tell you, and there they stay. Find them yourself—if you can!”

“*I see*,” Mellen exclaimed in admiration. “Oh, she is a harker, this here scheme! Must ha’ been some darn slick brains back o’ this!”

“There were,” answered Walcott. “The slickest in the country. You see, the rascals have their victim almost at their complete mercy. Nobody knows where these papers are but just the Boston Bull-buster and you; and *you* can’t inform the police without exposing the whole plan, utterly losing all hopes of reward, ruining the magnate, bringing down the savage vengeance of the thief-gang on your head and—”

“Stop! Stop! Ain’t that enough, for pity’s sake?” cried Mellen.

“And laying yourself liable to prosecution, also, for aiding and abetting crime. No judge or jury would listen a second to the plea of ignorance that you made to me. I tell you this for your own good, that’s all. You can’t escape from this affair, now, Mellen. You’re in it, and in it to stay till the finish. You can’t go back, or stand still, without grave risk of ruin. You must go forward. If you go wrong, it’s all over with you. If you go right, you stand to win—well, just how much I can’t say. But if you knew Mr.—I mean, the millionaire, my employer in this case, as *I* know him—”

“Reward, yew mean?” tremulously queried the lobster-man.

“Precisely. The magnate I refer to never thinks in less than tens of thousands. My own fee in this case, if I succeed, will be certainly equal to your entire fortune.”

"Yes, but what dew I git out of it?" exclaimed Mellen with eager haste, his pulse running at fever heat.

"Listen, and I'll tell you." Walcott drew his chair still closer. With his pencil-tip he emphasized each point. "Listen, while I inform you what you must do to help me and to insure your own tremendous gain. First, you must swear entire and complete secrecy from now on for at least one week, *no matter what happens!*"

"I dew, I dew! Go on!"

"Next, you must promise to go out in your dory, tomorrow, and drag for that box. Find it. Bring it here."

"Yes, sir! What then?"

"Thirdly, you must help me recover the second box. Do these three things, and, by heavens! I'll not only see to it that you get a thundering haul from Vanderpool, but I'll add my own personal check for five thousand dollars, spot cash!"

"Five—thousand—dollars?" fairly gasped the old man. His brain seemed to reel. He clutched the edge of the table with his miser-claws of hands, hard as the nippers of the lobsters wherein he dealt. "Five thousand dollars, besides—"

"Beside what Vanderpool sees fit to give. And I'll take care to put in an earnest personal word with him, for you. The fact is, Mellen, this whole case hinges absolutely on you. You stand as the keystone of our whole arch of evidence and information. With you, we succeed. Without you, we fail. *No* reward could be too great. I congratulate you, sir, on your near and certain entry into large material wealth."

Walcott extended his hand. The old man was too dazed even to see it.

"Go on, fer Gawd's sake!" he pleaded huskily, by reason of his dry lips and all but palsied tongue. "Go on—tell me what I've got to dew! Tell me! Tell me!"

CHAPTER VI

"I WILL," said Walcott with decision. "Follow me closely, now; every word is vital.

"You know the first two conditions—secrecy, and the recovery of the chest you saw put overboard. The third is to help me recover chest number two. You agree?"

"Yes, yes! How shell we dew it?"

"Listen, and I'll tell you. This Bull-buster, so-called, is a clever crook in his way, but shallow and lacking originality. He's commissioned to dispose of both chests, in case the terms are not satisfactory. One chest he's already got rid of. The other, I feel convinced from what I know of the man, he will come to you with, also."

"An' then?"

"Then he'll probably tell you some mistake was made and that he didn't get the box with the dear departed ashes, after all. That he'll have to try again. Or that there were two boxfuls. Or he may make no explanation, but merely ask the hire of your boat once more. Or, now that he's made you (as he thinks) a party to his crime, he may just blow and bluster and try to force you with threats to take him down the Bay."

"Yes, I see. But how'll I git the box, ef he does come? An' how'll I be safe from him an' his gang, when he finds

out I've tricked him on both boxes!" The old man's native cowardice, even in prospect of the golden flood awaiting him, could not but reassert itself.

"Oh, that's all right," Walcott assured him. "You'll be protected, safe enough. We'll take good care of you! But as for getting the box, there's the real nubbin of the case. Let me see. Ah! I have it! Nothing easier in this world!"

"How?"

"Buy it."

"*Buy* it?"

"Surest ever. Come across with the ransom money for the remaining box. We can arrange, later, about the other one. Submit! Capitate! Do it quick, and short, and sharp. Cash up. End the case. Save Van-depool. Reap the reward. Anything easier?"

The old man's jaw dropped with astonishment. "Easier?" cried he. "Why—why, haow much—haow many thousan' dollars will it take, as things stand naow?"

Walcott made a hasty calculation. "Sixty thousand, to-day. That's right, sixty. To-morrow, seventy. Next day, eighty. Why?"

"*Whose money?*"

"Mine, of course! Ha! ha! Why, did you think I was going to ask *you* to put up anything? You old lobster-walloper. That's a good one! Why, this is a big game—out of your class entirely. Your whole business here, sheds, floats, dories, business, good-will and stench all lumped together wouldn't pay traveling expenses on a case like this. Guess again, Mellen—you're out of your class, here!"

The lobster-man, wounded in his most vital spot, flushed dully under his tan.

"See here, mister," he protested, "I cal'late yew think I'm a pauper, hey? Wall, let me tell *yew* I've got fifteen—"

"There, now, no matter. I'm not interested in what you've got in some jerkwater bank or—"

"Bank nothin', mister, I'll hev yew know! *My* money's as good as yourn, what thar is of it, an' it's cash money, too, right—"

"Please don't, I pray you," Walcott interrupted with real dignity. "This is *my* game, if you please. Don't bring in trivialities. You come into it only as my agent—and Vanderpool's. After it's over, you get your reward, so-and-so thousand, plus my five, and that's all. We're through, then, see? All through. Please don't butt in with irrelevant remarks about your absurd financial condition, which doesn't interest me in the least!"

Walcott's tone was thoroughly congealed, formal and business-like again. It even showed a trace of anger. The old miserly fellow, alarmed lest he might have given offense and jeopardized his chances, came down quickly.

"Excuse me, mister. Nothin' meant by what I said! So then, I'm to buy the boxes with your money, yew was sayin'?"

"Vanderpool's, really," answered Walcott, leaning back in his chair. "I can draw on him up to \$100,000, at discretion. Why, does that seem much to you? Guess you don't know city ways, nor city millionaires!"

Then, while Mellen watched him with astonished eyes, he drew from his pocket a check-book, the worn covers of which indicated long usage on many a strenuous cam-

paign, and, taking a rusty pen from the table, wrote out and signed a check.

This he tore off, nonchalantly, and handed over to the lobster-man. Mellen's awed gaze took in at a glance, even by that fading light, the words: "National Trust Syndicate . . . Sixty Thousand and $\frac{0}{100}$ Dollars . . . Henry H. Walcott."

"Sixty—thousand—dollars," he murmured, as though stunned. "All in one check! My Gret Horn Spoon an' Little Fishes!"

But Walcott brought him quickly back to the realities of life.

"Come now," said he briskly, "don't sit there mooning over that check! There's work to do, and plans to be made. See here!"

He rapped sharply on the table to enforce attention.

"Wall, sir?"

"He may come to-night. If he does, give him that check, get a receipt, take the box and then tell him to go—further."

"But, s'posin' he won't gimme it?"

"Oh, he will, all right enough. The sight of that check will bring him to terms. He won't try to steal the check on you, or keep the box back, because if he did I'd simply have payment stopped, and he knows it. Even though he's a dangerous chap—"

"Won't there be *no* danger, hey?" quavered the lobster-man, his nerves and senses all unstrung.

"Well, it wouldn't hurt anything to have a gun handy. I don't imagine you have one, or would know how to use it, either," Walcott answered, with a savor of scorn in his voice.

For reply, Mellen pulled out the table-drawer and showed the weapon lying there.

"I kin hit a clam-shell on the beach at two hundred feet," said he. "Wouldn't stay here alone with all my—well, alone, without it."

Walcott leaned forward, took the weapon, inspected it casually and dropped it into his pocket. "Just to pull that, even, much less threaten the Bull-buster, would mean *your* finish!" he remarked warningly. "No, on second thought, you'd better not. I'll keep this till we're through—for your own sake, old man.

"And now," he went on briskly, "now for the last few details. The rascal may come to-night, or to-morrow night, or the night after. That he'll come on one of the three nights, with the second box, I'm positive. I haven't been in this business for twenty years without having learned something of the psychology of crooks in general, and of the Bull-buster in particular.

"We'll catch him between now and Saturday, and catch him right here, believe me. But it'll mean some loss of sleep. Are you willing, for the sake of the reward, to sit up for possibly three nights till midnight?"

"Am I willin'?" echoed the lobster-man. "Three nights? Say, fer just one-tenth o' the reward I'd—I'd—"

"All right. Agreed, then. You're to sit up, here, pretend to be working at something (to avert suspicion) and wait for our man."

"Where'll *yew* be?"

"Haven't you got some corner or other where I could hide, and watch him? I'll be a reserve force, with the revolver, in case any trouble rises, or he threatens you,

or the like. I can signal you, too—one knock for ‘Go slow,’ two for ‘No,’ three for ‘Yes,’ and four for ‘Close the deal, quick.’ Got it?”

“I reckon so,” the old man answered. “But how about the check? Ter-morrer it won’t be enough, an’—”

“To-morrow I’ll tear it up and write another for \$70,000, provided he doesn’t come to-night. Next day, \$80,000. If we don’t land him by then—well, we’ll have to think up some way of locating him and pushing things along, that’s all.

“Everything’s understood then, is it?” he continued, as though recapitulating the situation in his mind. “You serve me, you keep mum, you buy back the box. I hide, I watch, I prompt you. You get a reward from Vanderpool, plus \$5,000 from me—it’s worth five times that to me to end this case quickly. All understood?”

“Yew bet yer boots an’ resk it!” answered Mellen with returning spirits.

“Very well, then. You go to supper now, and so will I. Be back here by eight, ready for business. There’ll be business for us both—never you fear!”

CHAPTER VII

AT eight, sharp, old man Rowe was back in the lobster-shed, quivering with eagerness to put through the deal which meant sudden fortune of the most amazing. A few minutes later, the detective also returned, for final instructions and for concealment as agreed.

Mellen stowed him in a corner, behind a pile of malodorous herring-kegs, near a vertical trap-door in the

wall—a door which led out upon the wharf. Through this trap, on occasion, lobster-pots and other paraphernalia were passed. Here Walcott sat him down on a box, with some complaints regarding the aroma, to keep vigil against the coming of the Boston Bull-buster.

“Remember the signals, now,” he directed. “One knock, ‘Go slow’; two, ‘No’; three, ‘Yes,’ and four, ‘Close the deal!’ Got ‘em?”

“I cal’late so.”

“And you’ll abide by them, in case your judgment conflicts with mine?”

“Huh?”

“I understand this case better than you possibly can. You may think you should delay, or not come to terms. I may *know you-should*. I’ll direct you, so you and I can win out and connect with the big money. Get me?”

Mellen nodded assent.

“I reckon that’s right, too,” he admitted. “Now set still, mister, an’ we’ll see what we shell see.”

Leaving Walcott lying perdu, he returned to his desk, and made pretense of busying himself with some old account-books, though in reality he could neither have told you the dates of the entries he was working on, nor their amounts.

Half an hour passed, three quarters, then almost the full sixty minutes. But just before the stroke of nine, a heavy footfall creaked the planks at the door of the shed, and the door swung slowly open. Furtively a fat, red face peered in. A pudgy finger was upheld, inquiringly.

“All right?” whispered the Bull-buster, hoarsely. “Lights set O. K. for me to cruise in?”

Mellen nodded.

"Come in, ef yew want to," he replied. "But what in tarnation yew want *now*, blamed ef I know." Despite his efforts to render his voice hostile, it quivered with eagerness.

The Bull-buster, making no answer, closed the door and with a glance or two of apprehension about the dark interior of the shed, approached the table where Mellen was sitting under the glimmer of his lamp.

"Say," he whispered, "I—I'll need that boat o' yours again, in the mornin'. I got the wrong box! There's another one to be slammed in the briny. Could you use a ten-spot?"

Mellen peered up at him with emotions which almost choked the breath out of his lungs. So then it was all true, what Walcott had told him. So then, the Bull-buster really was coming back, with some absurd cock-and-bull story; there were two boxes; the vast reward lay close at hand. Incredible, yet true! The old man gulped back his terrible money-lust, forced himself to be calm, and answered:

"See here, mister, instid of throwin' it overboard, would yew sell it to me?"

"Would I—*what*—?" The Bull-buster's broad face grew blank with astonishment, but Mellen thought a certain welcoming gleam lurked in the keen little eyes. "Would I sell you them ashes of the late lamented Wilfred—"

"Say, now," interrupted Mellen, "that might go with a greeny, but I ain't no sech a flat. I'm well ripened to all kinds o' this world's business. Mebbe I know suthin', an' mebbe I don't, but ef a proper offer was made yew, would yew consider it?"

"Consider nothin'!" the Buster exclaimed. "I got a job to do, buryin' these here ashes, an'—"

"Ashes your grandmother!" interrupted Mellen. "Yew can't put that over on me. *Will yew sell?*"

"Sell what?"

"What's in that 'ar box. See here, mister, I'm onto the game. Let's talk sense. Yew want money, don't yew?"

The Bull-buster grinned broadly.

"Somebody's been passin' you the wig-wag, all right," he answered. "You've certainly hooked up to somethin' solid, the way you slam it at me. Well, I'll be as open as you are, Unk. I sure could use some collateral; but it's got to be the right amount, or nothin' doin'. What's the offer?"

"Show me the box, fust," demanded Mellen, with native shrewdness. "I don't fall fer no gum-games ner confidence-rackets. No gold-bricks ner no other kind of bricks can't be sold *me*. Go git the box, an' I'll talk money."

"Cash? An' no belch, afterward? No one doggin' me? This ain't no plant, nor nothin'?"

"Cash, an' no come-back, mister. I'm a hard man, mebbe, but square. This is a business proposition. Go git it, an' come back here as soon as yew can, an' we'll git down to tacks."

"By God, I'll go you!" the other replied, with sudden decision. "It isn't just what I expected. Never thought you'd tumble, but since you have—" He paused a moment, then fired a question: "Has a slim guy, with glasses—very smooth, kind of a gabfest artist—been blowin' in here to see you?"

"Never you mind who's ben here or ain't ben here! 'Tain't nothin' to *yew*. All that consarns yew, now, is that I'm willin' to buy that 'ar box, an'—"

"I get you, Unk," the Bull-buster admitted, convinced. "But I got to have a guarantee I can duck it, O. K., an' that this ain't a pinch. After the deal, me for a fade-away. If not, I'll see that you get yours, old man; an' I'm the boy can do it, too. See?"

Mellen quailed before his menacing frown, but held firm.

"I tell yew it's all right, every way. Go git the box, an' come right back. Will yew?"

"You're on!" As with sudden decision, he turned and left the shed. Rowe peered after him with fast-beating heart, well-nigh stunned by the close approach of Dame Fortuna. When he was gone, Waldron's head peeked up over the pile of kegs.

"*Pssst! Pssst!*"

"Huh?"

"You've got him going, now. Hang to it! We'll all walk in on velvet, now, in half a jiffy!"

"Shet up an' set daown!" commanded Mellen, sternly. "Ef he sees yew here, it's all off—he'll git scairt, an' run away. Set daown!"

Walcott subsided, and again old Rowe kept vigil by the disordered desk. After what seemed to him an eternity, the door again creaked open, and the Buster reappeared with a parcel neatly wrapped in newspapers.

"Anybody been here?" he whispered, approaching the desk. "Anybody tryin' to peg me?"

"Not a soul," answered Mellen. He went to the door,

carefully locked it, and then returned to his table. "Got the papers?"

"The bonds? Yep." He deposited the package on the table, unwrapped it and disclosed a tin box, the exact duplicate of the first one, and like it sealed with red wax. "Now then, Unk, be quick. Time's pressin'. What's the offer?"

"Lemme see them papers, fust."

"Show up your kale!"

Mellen produced the check for \$60,000. The Buster examined it, nodded and smiled.

"It's genuine, O. K.," said he. "I'd know that signature in the dark. Good as gold. Only it ain't enough."

"*Ain't enough?* Sixty thousand ain't enough? Why, he—he said it was six days, at—"

"Seven, beginning at 8 sharp, to-night," corrected the Buster. "There's \$10,000 more comin', on these, or nothin' to it."

Mellen gasped with wo. Could the Lady Fortuna thus be winging away from him, at the very last moment? It should not, must not be!

"That's flat?" he inquired, tremblingly.

"Flat! I ain't glommed this stuff, an' risked goin' to the Big House, to be trimmed at the last minute. Not much. Seventy takes 'em, but not a rupee less."

"An' they're genooine, be they?" quavered Mellen, his suspicions not yet quite etherized. From behind the kegs, three faint but audible knocks said "Yes!"

"What's that?" demanded the Bull-buster, reaching for the box.

"Oh, nothin', nothin'—Jim Trefethen, workin' down

to his wharf, that's all," lied Mellen with great earnestness. "Lemme see them bonds, mister, an' I—I'll—"

"You'll make up the diff'rence, if satisfied?"

"Mebbe."

"Mebbe *Hell!* Will you, or won't you?" The Buster was obviously more and more uneasy. "I'm liable to get sloughed in, any minute, now, an' I don't like the lay o' things, round here. It looks as fishy as it smells. Guess I'll be on my way."

"No, no, wait!" entreated Mellen. "Everythin's all right, I tell yew. Just lemme see 'em, wun't yew? I ain't never bought no pig in a poke, yet, an'—"

The Buster ripped out an oath, drew a knife from his pocket and quickly crumbled off the sealing-wax. Four knocks from the corner commanded: "*Close the deal at once!*"

Again the Buster raised his head, listening with alarm.

"*That* ain't no man workin' on no wharf!" he exclaimed. "That's a signal of some kind. Is this a plant, you rat?"

"No, no, no! Jest lemme see—"

"Oh, all right, if you're so infernally set on it. But if you have 'em peg me, God help you! Fat chance you'll have, to live a week!"

Angrily, yet with obvious fear, he threw up the cover of the metal chest. Mellen beheld thick bundles of papers, covered with fine engraving—bonds, stocks and legal documents, if any ever existed. His last vestige of doubt disappearing, he reached for the box and closed the cover.

"Done!" cried he. "Take the check, an' ten thousan' in cash, an' git out!"

He jerked open his table-drawer, fished far at the back of it and drew out a canvas sack tied with a leathern cord. This he opened with shaking hands, his breath meanwhile coming almost in gasps. Then, while the Bull-buster hung over him with eager trepidation, he hauled from the bag a goodly roll, counted off \$10,000 in bills of large denominations and shoved them into the fat, waiting hand.

"Git!" he exclaimed, with passionate eagerness.

Came a sudden loud knocking at the door. A stern voice cried:

"Open, in the name of the law!"

"Stung!" spat the Buster, passionately. "It's a frame-up, after all—damn you!"

"'Tain't nuther!" gulped Mullen, terrified. "I'll save ye!" He shoved the tin box into the drawer, closed and locked it, then grabbed the Buster by the arm.

"This way!" he exclaimed, pulling him toward the pile of kegs, behind which he thought Walcott was crouching by the trap-door that led out upon the wharf. "I'll git ye out! Come along!"

Swiftly he propelled the Buster round the kegs.

Bang, bang, bang! went the knocking. Again sounded the cry:

"Open this door, in the name of the law, or I'll break it in!"

"Thar—through thar!" directed Mellen, pushing the Buster against the trap-door. To his astonishment he saw that Walcott was no longer crouching behind the kegs. Where in Tophet could he have gone? What did all this mean? As the Bull-buster crawled through the trap and vanished, the old man—his brain awlirl, his

heart pounding like a trip-hammer—scuttled toward the door.

“Comin’, comin’!” he quavered, in a falsetto of emotion. “Ain’t nobuddy here, Mr. Officer—not a soul, so help me!”

He reached the door, unlocked and flung it open.

“*Huh?*”

Nobody there. The dark wharf loomed cold and still under the December stars.

A sudden pang of suspicion transfixed the narrow breast of Mellen Rowe. With a gasping cry he ran back to his table. Open came the drawer, out jerked the box, up slammed the lid.

Thank God! There were the bonds, after all! Yes, he really had them in his keeping. Walcott must have vanished, as part of some plan to coöperate with the officer in catching the Buster. He, Rowe, need only wait till morning. Then Walcott would come back and pay him the reward, plus the \$5,000, and his own \$10,000, and—

What was this?

As he tried to think the thing out, Mellen took up one of the beautifully engraved papers and held it under the light. Certain tiny perforations became visible. Speared by awful apprehension, he held the paper up to the lamp. Fatefully, like the judgments of doom, he read in pricked-out letters the one terrific word:

CANCELED

Madly scrabbling, his knotty fingers caught up another bond, a third, a fourth. All, all alike bore the same ghastly word.

Then realization dawned. With a wordless cry, the old lobster-man fell forward on his table, in a dead faint, amid the wreckage of his shattered Castles in the Air.

Coincidentally Pod Slattery and Pittsburg Bender, their pockets lined with ten thousand comforting bucks, all in large denominations, were making tracks for the Union Station, there joyously to purchase tickets for some point or points unknown.

XII

THE SUPREME GETAWAY

*Wherein the Pals Dodge the Most Perilous of All Known
Dangers*

CHAPTER I

“**S**ERENE, indifferent to fate,” Pod Slattery leaned back with a sigh of almost perfect bliss in the huge, padded morris chair, and drew at his panetela. Dr. Bender, in the depths of a leather rocking-chair, his slippered feet on the table, smiled with beatitude. For their rooms in the extreme privacy of the neat little Hotel de Luxe (whither they had retired for a long rest after the clean-up of old Mellen Rowe), were marvels of bachelor comfort.

On the table reposed a tray with fragmentary remnants of a delectable feed—always including Pod’s ultimate joy, rich rice pudding with lots of butter and cream, and with fat raisins of the juiciest.

“Pretty smooth dump, this,” grunted Pod, with another sigh. During the past weeks of inactivity and gorging he had put on a trifle of forty or fifty pounds.

“Me for the De Looks, every time! Ever since the big gilt dropped into our kicks, after our brush with lobster, an’ we stowed away, I’ve been strong for the resher-shay stuff they hand out here, which clicks the

cheerful code to me. The way they act certainly makes me sing a joy-song!"

"And no fly-cops butting in, either," added Ben. "I tell you, Pod, this con-throwing isn't such a much, beside the real refinements of a home like this. Now that we've brought back the bunting, me for a bundle of A-1 bonds, and some retirements."

"That's my dope—that, and a continuation of this chow, with a little something dry on the side, to put a strangle on any stray repinings. What more could a couple of honest, retired con-gents require?"

Pod sighed again, still more deeply; but this sigh held less of happiness than the first.

Bender's reference to "home" had stirred the smoldering coals of a new sentiment in his huge heart—love-coals, now being blown upon by Birdy McCue. And in Pod's disturbed mind visions began to rise. Not even the memories of rice and raisins could quite smother the growing flame.

Birdy was the pals' own particular waitress. Her complexion was of cream and rose-petals, her eyes a May-sky blue, her luxuriant hair a yellow wherein no H_2O_2 had ever mingled its corrupting influence. Birdy's bare arm was firm and rounded and very white, also her V-cut waitress's shirt-waist disclosed a full throat, and her apron-straps rested over a more than Juno-esque bosom.

In addition to all this, an occasional glimpse of her ankle as she swung in and out the double-doors of the dining-room disclosed it to be of that trim and silk-stockinged variety which oftentimes leads to reveries. In fine, Birdy was one buxom, healthy, beautiful young

woman, full of life and the joy of life, weighing one hundred and forty-two, age twenty-five, ripe and fair—yes, some swell Jane.

Pod sighed for the third time, very heavily, and forgot to smoke. Had his rubicund face been capable of it, he would have paled slightly.

Ben shot a quick, keen glance at him, by the mellow light of the frosted electric table-lamp. His brow wrinkled. Did he, too, sigh; or was it an extra deep inhalation of the cigar smoke he loved so well?

Pod noticed neither the look nor the possible sigh of his running-mate. For he was thinking—of Birdy; pondering on the blissful existence of the past few weeks, so warm, well-fed and secure, disturbed only by the gnawings of the insistent love-bug which, its period of incubation now past, was beginning to bite in real earnest.

He was mentally reviewing the situation. He had, well he knew, made no false step; he felt himself in favor with his Juno. The first day at the De Luxe he had slipped her a five-spot, from an obese roll.

"This is just kind of a starter, kid," he had remarked nonchalantly. "I'm an extensive feeder, an' I want you to remember me. I can talk to a chicken *eng cassy-roll* louder than any man in Manhat. I can reach further an' stab a pie deeper than a Mafia knifing a snitch, an' I hold the international rice-puddin' long-distance record, bar none.

"Crab-meat is where I live, see? I'll stow away grouse and truffles against all comers. Are you on? You be the fixin' kid and keep things comin'; shove a little *chic* lunch up to the room every P. M. about eleven;

let me do the bill o' fare through, an' repeat, an' you'll gather. Got it?"

"I'm on!" she had smiled, with a dazzle of white teeth. "And your friend?"

"Oh, him? Say, he's dyspeptic. A good fella, you know, but— It's me that's the bear on eats. So chase 'em in lively, kiddo, an'—you know!"

Birdy had remembered, and had chased 'em in. Every night, too, the tray had come up to No. 18 with succulent dainties piled; and not once had there been any dearth of sugared rice-pudding and raisins simply bursting with juice.

And the love-bug, hidden among all those abrosial dainties, had bitten deep. Now Pod was simply one vast culture-medium for the virus. Every ounce of his three hundred and twenty-seven pounds was potentially enamored of a goddess who could steer such eats to him. Which made the case extremely serious.

"Say, Ben!"

"Huh?"

Pod only shifted uneasily in the huge chair, and sucked at his smoke, which had gone out.

"Oh, nothin'," he mumbled. "I was just thinkin', that's all."

CHAPTER II

ABOUT a week after this first faint flapping of the wings of self-exposition, a wonderful May moon, full and round and golden, shone through the city haze and flooded the windows of the pals' sitting-room.

They sat smoking, lights out, with their feet on the

sill; and the magic of the spring night, the orb, the breeze, stirred Slats to confidences.

"Say, Ben," he commenced once more, embarrassed as a school-boy. He could face the world with a smile, and "con" it without batting an eye; but to open his huge heart to his pal caused the sweat to bead his brow. Uneasily he mopped it. "Ben?"

"Huh?"

"Say—you an' me—we—you know."

"Know what? Uneasy? Want to make a dash out on the pike again, and put the trimming-tools to work once more? Forget it, Bo! We—"

"Back up! You're in wrong! You an' me, we've been runnin'-mates now, off an' on, for some time. Seems like I'd ought to be able to speak plain to you, Ben, what say?"

"Well?"

"One thing we got to hand it to ourselves on, is that we've always done high-class work. No cloutin', to speak of, an' never once used the smoke-wagon. We never blew a peter, went gooseberryin' or done the mission-stiff gag. Never starred a glaze, garretted a crib or done any gully-mine work. The boobs we trimmed was always able to stand it—they *needed* trimmin', didn't they? An' as for moll-buzzin', it was always so far below our level we couldn't see it with a Lick. No heifer or doe ever was shy even one single maravedi, from us, was they?"

Ben cast a puzzled look at his buddy.

"Well, what about it?" he curtly demanded.

"Oh, I was just thinkin', that's all," answered Pod, reflectively. "We ain't so worse, after all. You an' me

never cracked a drum, pulled a badger-game or indulged in house-prowlin'. We've been some rough on the Joshes, I admit, have laid a few scratch-papers an' shoved a few queer screens, but as for breakin' a crib or doin' a dead lurk, nothin' to it, Bo! We ain't no dips, gorillas, damper-getters or hoisters, are we, Ben?"

The Doc shook his head in negation.

"No," he answered. "I don't know what you're driving at, Podsy, but it's a fact we've always been above such lays as pratt-digging, super-twisting or nicking bugs. We scorn a mere goniff, Pod; and as for flat-workers, garroters or petermen, why, we wouldn't wipe our feet on them. What are you trying to do? Salve your conscience, or how?"

"Maybe. Maybe I got other prospects in view, just at present, than this sort o' thing forever. Nothin' to it, after all, Ben, but ridin' on the cushions, to-day, an' on the rattler to-morrow. It's feathers, one night, an' doss in the Irish club-house with the green lights, the next. Fact is, I'd like to square it, permanent. An' if I do, it'll be a comfort to think I never was a jilter, a flogger-stiff, or a gopherman. No nuck, panel-worker or shark-hunter can ever claim us as ex-pals. Honest, Ben, I don't think I'm past hope." Pod sighed deeply and reached for another drink. "A guy that was never out on the gun, never pinched a bob, reefed a poke of leather or souped a box ain't beyond redemption, is he?"

The Doc frowned slightly. One might have detected a certain jealousy, even a tinge of suspicion in his voice, as he replied:

"When it comes to that, you're not the only virtuous party in this vicinity. I never played a flop-game, my-

self, grabbed slangs or twisted for sparks or fawnies. Nobody can call me a gerver, Pod, a prop-getter or a sure-thing gambler. Your remarks, to say the least, pain me. What are you driving at?"

"Don't get me wrong, Ben," pleaded Slattery, an expression of anxiety on his ruddy face. No two buddies ever stuck an' slugged any better than what we have. The things we been against an' got away with would make a best-seller. We've had the icy fin handed us by fate, together, an' together we've wallowed in darb. We've had the turn called on us, Ben, an' been so hungry we almost had to take up crust-floppin' to get a set-down or even a bit of dummy to shove into our chivies. Together we've went against the whole herd of bulls, from main guy down to tin-star Rube, an' taken all that was comin', either way. Ain't we, now?"

"Yes," assented Bender. "What about it?"

"Oh, I'm just gassin', that's all. It makes a geeze think of lots o' things, a career like ours does. No matter whether we had a bindle of toadskins to cut up, or was scoffin' in a garbage-joint, you've always been on the T-square with me, Ben." The big fellow's eyes moistened as he continued:

"You ain't never broke away from me, Ben, not once. Never ratted on me; never was anythin' but an A-One fallback. An' I wouldn't double-cross you, neither, not for all John D.'s unearned. We've broke our legs, together, been buried together in the bandhouse, done bits side by side in limbo, an' always played it right, whether we was heeled with a bolt o' scratch or whipsawed an' up against it for even eats-money. You're what I call a blowed-in-the-glass stiff, old man!"

"Thanks," answered Bender, dryly. "What about it?"

Pod drummed with his fat fingers on the table, before replying:

"Well—I'm goin' to square it, that's all!"

"Square it?" exclaimed the Doc, dismayed.

"Yes. In spite of everythin', I'm quittin'."

"No!"

"Fact, Ben. It ain't that I'm gettin' cold feet, nor nothin' like that. I ain't that kind. An' I appreciate all you been to me, Ben, whether we've been on the outside, lookin' in, or the reverse. Our little mob of two has certainly been some swell mob, an' you've been one classy side-pard, but, well—"

"Well, what?" demanded Ben, with a sharp, half-guilty glance at Pod's huge bulk. "What you got on your chest?"

"I—this— I mean, this single life proposition ain't the silky frame-up it's touted to be, after all," Pod continued hoarsely. "When a gink is young an' everythin's fallin' his way, he naturally rolls away from anythin' permanent in the skirt line. *All* right! But when the ivories begins to shy off and the noble brow begins to connect with the neck, right over the dome of the bean—aw, nothin' to it, kid, nothin' to it!"

Slats made an out-sweep with his huge fist, as though to drive dull bachelorhood away, and sighed powerfully.

"It's then a man gets ripe to tumble for some smooth cream-puff in the she-line, Ben! It's then he's the fall-guy for the cozy home idea! Say! Ain't *you* never framed it, what? Ain't you never fell for none o' this here home-sweet-home stuff, yourself?"

Ben only shifted uneasily in his chair, and grunted something unintelligible. One might have thought a sudden chill of hostility had all at once fallen over him; but if so, Slats took no heed. Instead, with a rapt smile and a new timbre in his mighty voice, he went on resistlessly:

"Love, ah, love! It's some best bet, believe *me*. It's a right steer, an' no come-back! Love builds the cottage where the birds do a warble an' they's ivy round the door, like in them illustrated songs, Ben. Love comes across with the prattle of innocent voices an' the patter of feet that ain't never hiked on no White Ways. Love greets you at the door with a glad fin, after you've had the rough toss outside.

"It bats you on the knob with baby mitts an' whispers 'Dad!' in your receiver. It sets on your knee an' hands you a kiss, front o' the fireplace when the snow is blowin' outside. Oh, it's the smooth proposition, kid, surest thing you know!"

"Uh-huh?"

"Nix on this rovin', Ben! Nix, not, no more! No more raw deals. All it means is, even hidin' up like here, always afraid somebody's goin' to cook us, after all. It means stir, in time; a slip-up, somewhere, some day; and for a finish, maybe doin' it all, or even the shock-house, the slab an' the table. I been thinkin' kid, thinkin' long an' hard.

"Me for the happy home, the family, the peachy frau, the lawn-mower, hose, garden, an' all thereto appertainin'. An' when it's time to blow my light out, no crocus carvin' me an' no pine board, but a right pebble over me, plumb respectable, Ben—past all squared an'

forgotten—Al turn-out with a dozen hacks, an' the 'Sacred to the Memory of' just as big as any of 'em!"

Pause. Silence. In the moonlight a close observer could have perceived the huge fellow's Adam's-apple working convulsively, while a tear gleamed in his blinking eye. Ben seemed pondering. Up to the pals, from the asphalted side-street, rose a clack-clack-clack of hoofs. A trolley-gong clashed on the avenue, and, farther off, the roar of an L train broke the evening calm.

Ben, his face very grim, yet with a certain air of relief, tossed his cigar away and turned toward his side-partner.

"Straight dope?" he demanded sternly. "No phony gag, but the real thing?"

"Realest ever! I got the love-bug, kid. It's put this con life of ours on the fritz, for fair! I'm goin' to square it, an' be a hick, myself. Why? You ain't peeved with me, are you?"

"Peeved nothing! Delighted! Here, let me mitt you, old boy. Go to it!"

Ben thrust out his hand, which Pod wrung with a sudden burst of gratitude and affection.

"That's the way to pass it out!" exclaimed the big chap, in a choking voice. "I been some leary of pullin' it on you, kid, 'cause I didn't know but you'd sit up and howl. But I see now—"

"You're on. Congratulations! Fact is, old boy, the same idea has been flagging me, too, some time past. Only I didn't hardly dare to spring it on you. But now—"

"You?" blurted Pod, gaping. "You stung, too? My Gawd! So then, if we split, it'll be O. K. on both

sides, an' both of us in the clover-bed? Fine! Who's the skirt, Ben? Who, what, an' where?"

A knock on the door interrupted this heart-to-heart. "Come!" boomed Slats.

A bell-hop appeared with the usual evening tray, neatly overspread with a spotless damask. As though well accustomed to the task, he switched on the light, and deftly spread the festive board on the pals' center-table. The two old friends and co-grafters watched the proceedings with satisfaction. Evidently, love as yet had not advanced to the stage where appetite had begun to fail.

His work done, the hop departed. Pod and Ben drew up to the bounteous feast, but something was on the big fellow's mind. He gazed on the pudding and shook his head, then glanced at his pal inquiringly.

"Ben?"

"What?"

"You didn't know I was some lit'ry best-bet, did you?"

Ben, just unfolding his napkin, stared in amazement.

"You a writer? Scratch-work, or how?"

"No, billy-doo's. Say, Ben, I—I don't feel like the eats till I've got this off my chest, like. I want you to listen to this here letter I've doped out for—for *her*, you tumble. Listen, an' then throw me the straight spiel. Is it the right goods or ain't it? Is it billed to make a center-shot an' ring the bell, the weddin'-bell, or—or is it a frosty freeze? Is—"

"You mean you've been framing some love-stuff?"

Slats nodded.

"Just hold back on the feeds till you let this trickle into your think-tank," he adjured, producing a folded sheet of scented lavender paper from his breast pocket, left side, nearest the cardiac apparatus.

"Go ahead! Shoot!" exclaimed Ben, eagerly eying the tray.

"All right, Doc. Now, you just listen to *some* proposal!"

Hotel de Luxe,

To-day and Every Day.

MY OWN HUMMING-BIRD! MY BUNCH OF VELVET TAFFY!

Oh, you kid! This is to Wise you that you have certainly Put one over hard on Yours Forever. For many years I thought I never would Kick in on this here Love whirl, but you have Sloughed me for fair. To say you are the Goods, is putting it so feeble it's almost an insult. When I gaze upon you, I am just Filberts to tear into the Sweet Home racket, with Ivy round the door. Do you get me, Hun?

I am truly Dippy to throw my Net over you and cop you off, all for my lonesome. I've got the strong Hunch we could lope to where the Roses bloom and the robins nest again, and you would be my Dove and I would be your Pouter pigeon for life.

"Say, Ben, ain't that some poetical?"

You are my great, big beautiful Doll, believe me! This is no needle monologue, but the goods, and I have the Wad to back it. The first time I ever Lamped you, it was a knock-out, and I took the mat for ten. I could see you Coming, even then, and ever since, you've been Getting it on me, worse and more of it. Now, Dear heart, don't Crab a loving soul by no icy Mitt gag, for believe me, though I may not be such a Romeo to look at, my heart and Bundle are in the right place.

I know I could carry some class myself with you for a running-mate. When I get my front on, I'm not half hard to behold. And I'm strickly on the Level in this deal, no Phony. You tie up to me, and you'll know you've got a real man, no Shrimp half portions, but the 18-K article.

The Rose is red, the Grass is green,
You are my Queen,
The fairest ever Seen,
So be mine, or I'll repine,
Be my Love, my beautiful Dove,
And forever I'll be true to you,
With Ivy twining round the door!

Pod paused, breathing heavily, and swabbed his brow with a napkin.

"How about it, kid?" he demanded anxiously. "Is it the goods, or ain't it? Poetry, too!"

"Some literature, all right!" asserted Ben, gazing away. "But do you think 'you' and 'door' make an O. K. rime? 'You' and 'in the stew' would go, but—"

Slats snorted with disgust.

"Stew, you lob!" he ejaculated. "That shows how much poetic feelin' *you* got! Why, this here's blank verse, the last two lines. Blank verse. That's the swellest kind!"

"Oh, that's so, too. I forgot. It's blank, all right. Yes, blankety-blank. Any more?"

"Some! And it *ought* to be the hot stuff, too. Took me the best part of ten days to frame it! There's better comin'. Just take a slant at *this*, will you?"

If you think you could fall for me, Kiddo, say the word and you're on, for life! Cupid has went and handed you my whole flock of goats, that's no pipe. What do you say we bunch our play, from now on? You'd sure be some Classy pal for me! Any time you want to frame up with me, working Double harness, I'm your Pippin. Can't you see me, Dovey? If we hitch, I know we can give the Census and the course of Human events a right Sassy push, all right, so don't Shy off. But be my Molasses Bunch, till death us do pry Apart!

All I ask is your Heart and hand, and a Continuation of the swell Eats, as per this last month.

Ben started suddenly, with a quick glance at Pod, but the latter was far too absorbed in his reading to notice anything.

No use for you to be a side stem in this Hashery, when you can be the main tent in a Cottage with Ivory—Ivy—round the door. Shed that apron, kid, and I'll show you the real silks, cut on the Bias, with fringe on the circingle, lace hold-backs, tatted tugs and doll-fixings all from Paris. Get me? Cut out the tay-ta-tay confabs with that fresh new Night clerk, same as I've been wise to, the past Week, and accept a Loving heart that beats only for you.

Ben leaned forward, his face darkening, fist clenched, and eyes staring. His mouth was set in a thin line. Pod blissfully pursued the letter.

Your blue lamps and hair and the Way you Double up on the rice pudding have won my heart, Baby. The coin I've staked you to, for that stock-game, and the eats-money I've slipped you, is only a taste beside what I'll slide your way when we're Hitched. So say the word, and—

The letter was never finished, for with a wordless cry Ben started up. His fist fell on the table with a bang. The dishes rattled. A cup fell crashing to the floor. Pod, startled, dropped the letter and stared, wide-eyed.

"Wh—wh—why, what th'—" he stammered blankly.

"You—*you!*" hissed Ben, shaking a passionate forefinger right under Pod's nose. "So *that's* your game, is it, you scab? You—I—"

"For Gawd's sake, Ben!"

"Copping my girl right under my very eyes, you *rat!*"

"Your—*your*—"

"Yes, mine! For three weeks now—"

"But—first thing we blew in here, Ben, I slid her a V! Every week since, another one! An' I've slipped her coin for a stock-deal she's in—an' these here classy feeds she sends me up are all for me, and she's mine—"

"Ah-ha! So, eh?" Ben's fist shook violently in the huge fellow's astonished face. "So? But we'll see about that, we'll see! These feeds are for you, are they? Why, you poor boob, they're *mine*! Ten a week she's had from me—ten bucks per, you tumble? An' as for the deal in stocks—"

"*You* been touched, too?"

"Have I? Why, sure! But—I didn't know you—*you*—had! Why—er—see here, Pod—"

"Huh?"

Ben's fist fell, and over his pale face a strange expression passed. His eyes sought Pod's, and for the space of ten heart-beats their looks met in silence.

At last Ben spoke:

"Pod!"

"Ben?"

"Whoa, back! Back up, both of us!"

"You mean—"

Pod was leaning forward now, gripping the table-edge with a fat though powerful hand. On his brow the sweat had started thicker than ever, and his breath was coming hard.

"Ben, you mean we—we're in wrong?"

"Wrong—dead wrong, so help me! There's more behind all this soft-soap biz and all this swell night-lunch racket than we're wise to yet. Pod, we're being played against each other, both ends toward the middle! A skirt is trying to do the oceana roll over us and con

each of us into thinking we're *it*! I had it all doped to land solid with Birdy two or three weeks ago. So did you. Each of us has been passing the gilt to her—"

"Don't, Ben—don't!" Pod's eyes were leaking, and he stretched out an imploring hand. "I'm wise a plenty, so tie a can to that explanation stuff! But—it hurts, Ben; hurts like H, jus' same; when I had it all doped I was goin' to bust into married bliss—ivy round the door—"

"No more o' that now! We're both leary, now we've got a peek at the inside works. Just a throw-off she was steering us, Pod—that's all. How big a haymow of the green has she raked off you already?"

"Oh, maybe four, five hundred—on Consolidated Copper. She said her cousin in Wall Street—"

"I'm in for a thousand. Only it was her uncle!"

"Ben! An' we, *we* are—supposed to be—the smoothest con-workers in the U. S. A. or out!"

Bender stared a moment, then burst into a laugh of mingled bitterness and relief.

"I thought it was my feed all the time!" he ejaculated. "You thought it was yours. Both wrong—just as wrong as in our size-up of Birdy and her affections. Who's nuts now? Pod, Bender & Co.! And the answer is—"

Pod Slattery arose, with all the dignity of his three hundred and twenty-seven pounds, and faced his pal. In his eyes still gleamed the dew of heartfelt disappointment, but his lips were smiling as he spoke.

"Ben, old hoss," said he, "the answer is, a new deal and reorganization of the firm on a long lease. Birdy's smooth, O. K. We've let a skirt near-trim us, and if it

gets out, our rep ain't worth a celluloid cat chasin' an asbestos mouse through Hades. She's no ordinary poke-getter or cold-hand worker, Birdy ain't. No, this was no penny-ante game she was up to; she was stakin' to make a kill, what with all them kind words an'—an' juicy raisins an' cream—

"She's one classy hex, all right, aimin' to fetch down a big bundle when she had us hog-tied right. In a while longer she'd had our whole roll an' us spoutin' our sparks for pad-money! Oh, a lemon, kid! But now we're hep—an' it's one big hike for ours!"

"Hike!" echoed Ben enthusiastically. "The quicker, the sooner—far, far away!"

"Pack your keister!" Pod directed dramatically, with a sweep of his arm. "This very night we flit. See her again, after all them ivy visions? Nix! Us for the big getaway, P. G. Q.!"

"I can't pull much of this here sentimental stuff on friendship, kid; but you know what I mean. That time you dug me out o' Sing Sing I ain't passin' up. No, nor the other times, some velvet, some sand-paper, we been through together.

"What? Let a see-more waist and a ruffled skirt pry us apart? Nix, not! We must ha' been pipes, Ben, you an' me, to even think of it! All over, kid! It's you an' me again, with no Buttinskies, to the finish! An' my mitt to bind it!"

In silence Ben took the huge and generous hand. For a minute their eyes met. Then Pod turned away.

"Ivy, Hell!" he whispered under his breath, and with a kind of savage joy began routing his effects out of closet and chiffonier and hurling them into his suit-case.

Untouched, the tempting night lunch stood on the table. The savory pot of tea grew cold, the sherbet melted, the fat raisins oozed out their juice forsakenly into the thick cream, which now had lost all its charm.

CHAPTER III

HALF an hour later an envelope lay on the table, addressed to the hotel management. Within it reposed coin of the realm to pay the bill up to and including the following Saturday night.

Down the fire-escape, meanwhile, Pod, Ben and the suit-cases wended their way to the alley at the rear of the hotel. And the friendly May night received them; and the great world opened out once more ahead of them—the world of ventures and of games, of losses and of winnings, of honest grafts and touches—best of all, of friendship and the brotherhood of long-tried pals.

Damon and Pythias, David and Jonathan, Pylades and Orestes, Nisus and Euryalus had nothing on these two incomparable running-mates as they hailed a taxi on the avenue and sped toward the Grand Central in time for the Bombshell Limited for Chicago and all points West.

Midnight found them still consuming fat cigars in the luxurious smoking-compartment of the Pullman and basking in the new-found joy of freshly consolidated partnership.

"Some getaway this time!" murmured Ben, lighting another panetela. "Speaking of narrow cracks, this latest raffle sure has all past performances riveted to the post. I *seem* to be sitting on a leather cushion, Bo;

but really I'm down on all fours, thankin' my stars!"

Pod smiled, drew from his pocket a scented, lavender sheet of paper, set it afire with a match, and with it lighted afresh his smoldering cigar. He held the paper carefully till it was but a crinkling bit of black, run through with crawling sparks.

Then with great precision and gusto he dropped it into the cuspidor. Leaning back with a huge sigh of comfort and relief, he exhaled a cloud of smoke and cheerfully contemplated the roof in eloquent silence.

The pals' great joy would without fail have leaped up one thousand per cent. had they known this simple fact, viz.: that in the rice pudding on the table, back in the De Luxe, reposed at that moment enough chloral hydrate or knock-out drops, to have put them sound asleep for many hours.

The drops had been considerably added unto the pudding by said Birdy McCue, in view of a large prospective reward from the new night-clerk, who—let me tell you confidentially—was none other than William J. Shearns of the Cosmos Detective Agency, which had long "wanted" them for several little matters.

"Where ignorance is bliss," eh?

You're on!

XIII

KNIGHT ERRANTS UP-TO-DATE

*Wherein Chivalry and Honest Graft Thrust Themselves
Unbidden in Our Travelers' Way*

CHAPTER I

CALM was that fair May morning, contented and at peace with all the world at large were the souls of Pod Slattery and Dr. Bender, as they swung down Logan Boulevard, Chicago, absorbed in pleasant conversation.

A vitalizing lake breeze put just a tang of ozone into the air—not enough to banish nursemaids and infants from the boulevard, but sufficient to put the blood a-tingle in the partners' arteries, to make them step out briskly, and to set their canes a-swinging. A jewel of a day, with Chicago at its best.

"Gee, Ben," Pod was saying around a thick cigar, "we certainly blew just in time from Manhat, to save us from takin' the count. That frisky friller certainly almost had me tagged! Another couple of days and I'd have squared it, jingled the weddin'-bells, and be trottin' in double harness this very minute. *Some* getaway, believe me!"

"You're on, Bo," the dapper Doc assented. "Our

teamwork had two wheels over the precipice, all right. But forget it—for-get it! That's all in the discard now, and we're still running well ahead of the bunch. Back to the decent graft again, Pod, back to the really-real, with an A1 prospect out in Oak Park and swell apartments at the Auditorium. The pickings ought to be pretty classy, here in Chi. Here's where they have the choicest, top-o'-the-basket goods. What more could a couple of respectable operators want?"

Slats blew a cloud upon the vitalizing air and inflated his huge chest. Spite of its seeming comfort and content, the inaction of the past weeks, lapped in the luxury of the New York hostelry which had almost been his Waterloo, had palled on the big fellow. He hungered and thirsted for real action once again, the give-and-take of the world, its triumphs, even its perils. And with a smile of vast content he replied:

"What more? Search *me!* Say, Ben, after we get the jacks under that Oak Park investor's roll—hello! What the —? Lamp that—will you, kid? Say—"

He stopped and stared. Ben stared, too. At the curb a long, smoke-hued limousine was standing, its engines swiftly throbbing, a chauffeur at the wheel, with hand on gear-shift and foot on clutch. About fifteen feet away, on the sidewalk, a man with a moving-picture camera was turning the crank, *click-click-click*, while four or five spectators frankly rubbered.

Others, in the line of vision, were being angrily warned away by a policeman: "Beat it out o' here, you dubs! Want t' spoil the film by buttin' in? Roll, I tell you—skate!"

But not at these factors of the swiftly developing ex-

citement were the pals now gazing. Such alone had not been enough to side-track them and bring them across the boulevard. No. Other and more heart-thrilling events were taking place "up-stage," to call it so.

For on the steps of a magnificent residence, an elaborate yellow-brick house with granite trimmings, a lively struggle had suddenly developed, and shrill screams rent the spring air—screams so powerful in their realism, cries of such piercing terror, that one might actually have thought in peril the strikingly beautiful girl who was uttering them as she fought the two huskies now dragging her toward the machine.

Pod and Ben caught vivid bits of action. The house door opened and a maid appeared in cap and apron. She gave a screech and fainted. A window flew up, —*Bang!* A gray-haired lady peered out. She, too, shrieked and vanished, but whether in a faint or on her way down-stairs they could not tell.

The two men, meanwhile, had bodily lifted the beautiful young woman, and had already borne her, kicking and struggling, as far as the sidewalk.

The pals now elbowed through the fringe of interested spectators.

"Beats a royal flush what these movie men will frame!" growled Pod. "Now—"

"*Help! Help!*" entreated the woman, as they fought to thrust her into the car, while all the time the cameraman kept shifting his machine to cover the drama. "Save me! Oh—for God's sake—*save—*"

A hand over her mouth choked further utterance. But at the door of the limousine she balked them, catching at the woodwork, clinging, fighting with a strength

one never could have credited to that slim, graceful body.

"There, there, don't rough it so hard!" ejaculated one of the men, while the cop still fanned all and sundry away from the field of focus. "That'll do, now—leggo, will you? This ain't—"

The sentence never was spoken, for of a sudden Pod Slattery's back stiffened with a jerk. His blue eyes goggled out farther than ever as his head went forward. He caught a sharp breath, his huge face paled, and his fists gripped tight, as formidable almost as they once had been in his ring days.

"*It's Chicken Charlie!*" he bellowed. "Ben, at 'em! *Go to it!*"

Then he sprang.

Just as the "Leggo, will you? This ain't—" was being sputtered by one of the puffing, struggling men, Pod's right fist landed, with three hundred and twenty-seven pounds of beef behind it.

The man sprawled backward against the mud-guard, rolled into the gutter, and lay still. Before the other could strike, Ben had leaped and jiu-jitsued. Something cracked dully.

Man No. 2, with a yell and a curse, his left arm dangling oddly, his face ashen, turned and with marvelous speed darted through the fast-gathering crowd. Round a corner he whipped, in the direction of the L, a block to southward.

The chauffeur, leaping from his seat, ran right into a left hook from Pod that sent him on the flat of his back into the boulevard.

Crack!

Pod grunted as the policeman's billy welted across his occiput. Only his fat saved him, for the blow was murderous. No second wallop ever fell, for Ben got the "bull" square in the plexus with a vicious swing. The officer doubled up and became oblivious.

The girl meantime had fallen forward, half in the machine. Down the avenue sounded a thrilling whistle. Two blocks away a bluecoat was marathoning for the scene of action.

At sight of him the camera man flung his machine violently away, and dusted. The camera split open, revealing an absolutely vacant interior, innocent of shutter, films or mechanism of any sort. Its erstwhile operator, with a savage oath, streaked toward Palmer Place.

From the house door erupted domestics and others with loud cries.

Again the whistle sounded.

"*Bulls!*" gasped Pod. "*This ain't no place for us!*"

As Ben scrambled into the limousine—into which the half-dazed girl had crawled for refuge from the storm—Pod made one leap to the chauffeur's place.

The car was a Stewed-Baker, familiar to Pod from certain other days when, down and out, he had temporarily accepted the humiliation of toil as a chauffeur. His hands and feet got busy with instinctive skill.

Off jerked the brake. The clutch kicked in, savagely, the throttle and spark jerked open wide.

With a racking roar of strained gears, a panther-spring of power, a volley of crackling reports and spurts of smoke, the car surged ahead.

"Squash!"

It spurned Pod's silken tile that had fallen in the fray, and left it there in the gutter, a melancholy ruin.

An eye-wink later, just as the cop skyhotted past the lamp-post on the corner, the gaping crowd, distracted house-folk, officer and all beheld a smoke-colored car skid violently round the next turn.

With a spattering rapid-fire of exhaust it vanished, leaving only a drifting trail of thin blue vapor, a few nursemaids with near-heart-failure, and a pursuing trail of yelling individuals, not one of whom understood anything of what had really happened in that lightning-like eventuation.

Before the first of these individuals had reached the corner, the smoke-colored car had utterly vanished into parts unknown, bearing with it three of the most completely thunderstruck human beings in the entire history of the world.

CHAPTER II

WORDS remained unspoken for a few moments, because none in the vocabulary of the English tongue seemed at all adequate to voice the astonishment of all hands concerned. The girl, pallid and shaking, hid her extraordinarily beautiful face in both hands and crouched in a corner of the luxurious limousine. Only five minutes before, she had been writing a letter in the security of her home. Summoned to the door by the maid, who had told her a photographer wanted permission to take the house, she had run square into the ambush; and now, understanding nothing of the quick-change transformation scene or the fight at the curb, she cowered half-fainting in the hands of involuntary

captors who hadn't the slightest idea in the world what to do with her.

The pals, but a few brief minutes before, had been striding largely down Logan Boulevard, communing with Saint Nicotine and rosy-hued hopes, their thoughts disturbed by nothing more serious than some last details anent the trimming of the prospective Oak Park victim.

Now, what a change! Pod, incongruously dressed in a frock coat, light striped trousers, tan spats, patent leathers *and* the chauffeur's cap—which he had found on the seat after that masterly wallop—was humming the big Stewed-Baker along at law-defying speed, putting unnumbered corners between the car and any possible pursuit. His jowls were pallid, and big gouty drops of sweat, despite the cool May breezes from the lake, beaded his lumpy brow. Eyes staring, lips tight—with still the wreck of his cigar jammed, dead, between them—he drove.

Whither? He knew not, nor cared. Only away, away, till he could think. Away, away, away!

Ben, struggling hard to get some grasp on the situation, crouched on the seat beside the girl, nursing a beautiful "shiner" that was beginning to paint his left eye the tender hues of a Futurist riot-scene. His sky-piece was deeply dented and one wing of his collar jiggled about his ear. How he had come by these notable damages he neither knew nor cared. Far other and more weighty matters occupied his mind.

"Pod!" he ejaculated at last, through the speaking-tube.

"Huh?" grunted the big chap, without turning his head,

"Where we headed? Where you driving to?"

"Search *me!* Any old place looks good to me, that's far enough from Logan Boulevard!"

"Yes, but—the lady?"

"Let's dump her an' beat it!" Then, his chivalric sense upblazing: "Nix on that, after all! An' we can't go back! An' if we're run in, it's kidnagin'—a long bit in stir! An' about eighteen million back-number roars bawled out against us—good *night!*"

"Pod, this has *got* to be a getaway! Haul up, and we'll jump a trolley or the L. By now there's a call out all over the burg for this smoke-buggy. We've got no look-in at a blow, in the machine. The L for ours!"

"With me in this chuffer's cap, an' you all to the bad, that way? Forget it! It'd mean a pinch in five minutes. You stay in that there limmyzine, kid. I'll stick here. My coat don't show much, an' this here cap's got a license-tag on it. Our one best bet, Ben! A slim one, but nothin' else in sight!"

Ben subsided into moody thought, glancing back from moment to moment at the speeding street, behind, through the little window in the rear of the car. Pod, deftly handling the machine, dodged trucks and trolleys, carriages (horseless, pleasure and baby), and pedestrians. Honking loudly, with an aggressiveness that inferred innocence, he swung westward into a broad thoroughfare.

A corner flashed past. Ben read the sign, "Washington Boulevard." Then he had ideas.

Something, he realized, would have to be done, and done right quickly, or absolute catastrophe would over-

take them both, ending with a whacking term in the pen. Their previous record, piled on to a kidnaping charge, plus the grand larceny of auto-theft, might get them even "Track 13 and a washout," or a life sentence.

The situation into which, by their own chivalry, they had now so instantaneously been flung neck and crop, was by far the most serious they had ever faced in all their jovial gentleman-adventuring together.

Under his breath Ben cursed the evil chance that had sent them down Logan Boulevard at the precise moment to run square into their old-time foes and snitches, Chicken Charlie, Nuts Rourke, the camera man, and Dingo McLane, the phoney harness-bull, and that had projected them into the midst of so villainous a crime that their very manhood had perforce leaped to the rescue.

The crime now seemed to have shifted utterly to their own shoulders, and heaven and earth could never lift it off, once the law had them. Ben knew right well the Chicken Charlie gang would manage to job them, even should any loophole offer through the police net. Not hardly an even chance in a million existed.

"Washington Boulevard!"

The sign looked good to Ben. A new light flashed in his one intact lamp.

"Pod! Hey, Pod!"

"Huh?" And Slats just grazed a truck loaded with steel rails, then honked an old maid hastily back to the curb. A policeman raised his hand ahead. The pals' hearts went on strike, and everything seemed crashing down; but—oh joy! the signal only meant a moment's

wait, to let the north- and south-bound traffic pass; then the cop signaled "Go ahead!" and once more the way was clear.

Ben blessed the sheltering walls of the limousine that hid the cringing girl from view. He blessed also her extreme terror of sudden death, which tied her tongue from screams. There might be salvation even yet!

He bent toward the girl and in a hard voice growled:

"One sound, and it's all off! Keep quiet and let us manage this affair, and nothing shall hurt you. By night you'll be back home. But if you scream, God pity you!"

She gave one panic-stricken glance through her tears, covered her face again with her hands, and crouched still lower. With a stab of pity, Ben saw that she was very young, certainly not over eighteen. His instinct was to condole, to reassure, but policy forbade. For the time being she must fear—and keep absolutely quiet.

The girl safely intimidated, Ben once more hailed his pal through the tube.

"Hey, Bo!"

"What is it? Got somethin' to offer?" Pod throatied back at him. "Or is it a case of Omaha, Denver, an' all way-stations for ours?"

"Pod, listen! This street runs plumb to Oak Park, direct bee-line."

"By— That's so, too. You mean Hochheimer?"

"You're on! If we can make it before the pinch—"

"But how? When he sees us blow in with—"

"Cut it, kid; cut it! Leave that end to me. But mind, *don't gas!* Not a word out o' you! Savvy?"

"I gotcha! Gee, Ben, but you're some warm member

of the Win Out Club! Hochheimer for ours! Go to it, Stewed-Baker!"

A clear stretch opened out ahead. The car leaped forward.

In widening circles, from Police Headquarters to ever more and more precinct stations, the alarm was leaping, too. Swiftly it spread, but still the long car was ahead.

"Go on, go on!" Pod whispered, nobly jockeying the engine. "If you strike now, it's the rough toss for ours. Once they mitt us, for a finish we hit the long-time cells. Go to it!"

Ben, meanwhile, had opened negotiations with the girl.

"Listen!" he commanded. "Get what I say, and get it right. We're plain-clothes men, he and I." He jerked his thumb at Pod's vast back. "We knew about this kidnaping in advance, and let it go on so we could catch the crooks. Understand?"

The girl, staring, made no answer. Ben shook her by the arm.

"Do—you—get me?" he demanded.

"I—yes—I guess so," she answered brokenly. "Oh, please, *please*—"

"No, we can't take you home just yet. Not *just* yet, you see. Maybe you'll have to go home alone. Your house-number's 1308, remember. And—"

"Thirteen-ought-eight?" she stammered. "Why, no, it isn't! It's 2732!"

"So? Then you're not Florence Baird?"

"I, Florence Baird? Why, of course not! I'm Helen Butler, and—and won't you take me home *now*, please?"

Ben seemed to ponder a moment.

"There must be some mistake here," he judged. "The buzzard—Chief of Police, I mean—understood the name to be Baird and the telephone number Maplewood 235-3. That's the right number, anyhow, isn't it?"

The girl was now sufficiently recovered to smile faintly.

"How stupid!" she exclaimed. "I don't know what it all means, or anything, but every single piece of information you've got is all—*all* wrong. Our number is 1926-11!"

"Possible?" growled Ben. "Sullivan must have botched things, after all. Hm-m-m, let's see!"

He relapsed into a silence that simulated deep thought, but which really served to let him impress upon his memory the vital facts that he had extracted from the girl. Presently he noted them in private on his cuff with a lead-pencil.

"No use slipping up at the last minute," he reflected, "just because I happen to miss a number."

Pod rapped sharply on the glass and pointed.

"Oakwood already!" Bender exclaimed. Then to himself said he: "We'll be at Hochheimer's in a minute now. Safe so far, anyhow. Now for action!"

CHAPTER III

HOCHHEIMER was a very well-to-do coal merchant, dealing also in coke, lime, cement, oil, gasoline, and automobiles on the side. The pals had met him a year or so ago in a Pullman on board a New York-Boston train,

and had played a few hands of poker with him—square poker, as a novel diversion. He had liked their style. They had liked his—as a “prospect.”

Since their arrival in Chicago, ten days ago, they had visited him a couple of times. The friendship had now got to the wire-tapping stage. Any port in a storm looks good to a distressed mariner. Hochheimer looked AA-double-one to the pals.

“Drive right in, through to the back yard,” directed Ben.

As the big limousine trundled in through the coal-yard roadway and rounded the corner of the chutes, out of sight of the street, the partners felt as though Ossa and Pelion had suddenly been tumbled off their souls. Their deep-drawn sighs were eloquent of most profound relief. Only to get off the street at last with that long, smoke-colored car was blissful!

“Remember, Miss Butler,” Ben cautioned the girl as they drove into the yard and rumbled into Hochheimer’s little garage—“remember, you’re my cousin, and your name is Miss Smith. Whatever happens, Smith and my cousin. My name is Wentworth—E. J. Wentworth. You won’t be called upon to speak, and inside an hour you’ll be on your way home. *Provided* always, you remember you’re my cousin. Got it?”

She nodded tearfully, yet with that smile again.

“Oh, I’m so glad!” she murmured. “So glad I’m going home. It might have been terrible. Those men—”

“There, there, forget that! Our business is to deal with just that type. They’ll get theirs, you may be sure!”

"So glad, for father's sake, and mother's. Father's an invalid, you know. He and mother must be in a terrible state by now. They'd give just—just *anything* to get me back again safe and sound."

"They would, eh? H-m-m! Well,"—and now, as the car stopped in the garage, Ben opened the door of the Stewed-Baker—"well, just sit still a few minutes longer, Miss Butler, and everything will be all right." To Pod he whispered: "I'll get Hoch. You stay here. And remember, no butting in. Also, *she* is my cousin. Are you hep?"

Slats grinned.

"Go to it, kid," he murmured. "But make it mighty sudden. Somethin's liable to start any old time, and if we're caught with the goods on here we'll get ginger. Pull a good one over on him, and let's be climbin' across the horizon."

Ben waved a confident hand and vanished through the little door that led from Hochheimer's garage to his office. Pod, left alone, began to stew again with apprehension. He mopped his brow; gnawed his stubby nails; turned and peered at the girl; wondered if he could make talk with her; decided he'd better not, and then relapsed into uneasy thought.

Every slightest sound made him wince. The shuffling of a workman in the coal-yard; the sudden roar of an emptying chute; the cry of a foreman, all sent shudders through his soul. Each second he expected to see a harness-bull heave round the corner or to hear a gruff voice shout: "Got 'em, by God!"

Many a hard ordeal he had already faced, but this thing of sitting still on the driver's seat of the much-

wanted smoke-hued car and trying to seem well at ease opened the gate of his goat-pen and stampeded his whole drove of goats in a bunch. For a minute stern temptations and suspicions assailed him.

What if Ben, after all, had used this plan only as a blind, and had ducked? Why should not Pod, too, slide away while time still remained? Why wait—why run the risk of twenty years, at the inside, in quod? Why—Slats shook himself with a grumbled oath.

“Leary of Ben?” thought he. “Even *thinkin’* of double-crossin’ him? Wake up, you big, fat slob! Whatever this team has been, an’ is, an’ will be, it ain’t no rat alliance!”

His conflicting thoughts were sharply interrupted by the return of Ben with Hochheimer.

“And so, you see, we’ve been having one hot time all round,” he was saying. “When I fired my cousin’s chauffeur he knocked off Harrison’s hat”—with a gesture at Pod—“and trampled it. I swung, but he got to me here,” indicating his eye. “Then we turned him over to the police. Harrison kept the fellow’s cap as a souvenir. Well, no matter about that, Hochheimer. We’re here, anyway. That’s the main thing.”

The German laughed and rubbed his hands together.

“Dot’s right, too,” he assented, extending a palm to Slats. “Glat to see you again. Your car?”

“We—I—” began Pod, but Bender interrupted quickly:

“No, no! Don’t you understand? *Her* car, as I just told you—my cousin’s. Helen, I’d like you to meet my friend, Mr. Hochheimer. Hochheimer, Miss Smith.”

Interchange of bows and murmurs.

"Gad!" thought Ben. "Some girl! Good little actress, all right. Catches on O. K.!"

Pod glanced about nervously. What if a fly-cop should just happen to heave round the corner?

"Draft here," he complained. "I'm all sweaty with—with the mix we had, Hochheimer. Slide the door shut, will you? No colds for mine!"

Ben shot him an appreciative glance and shut the door. Then he returned, thrust both hands deep in his pockets, and teetered judiciously on his patent-leather toes.

"Let's come right down to tacks," he opened. "Your time's valuable, and so's ours. We're here this time to talk auto. You do a little in that line—eh?" And he glanced round at the half-dozen cars in the garage.

"Cars? Vy, of course. Now, vot—"

"It's this way. Helen's been thinking of making a change for some time. Machine's too big for her. Wants a runabout. Nobody to advise her and do it *right*. Asked me to help. *I'm* shy on cars, too. Don't really know the first thing about 'em. Got that?"

Hochheimer nodded, and a certain gleam developed in his eye. His smile became broader.

"So you vant me to advise you? Iss that it?"

"Exactly! When Helen put it up to me, of course, the very first man I thought of was you. None of these big agencies or companies for mine, Hochheimer, when I'm buying or exchanging a boat. They'd have cheated the eye-teeth out of us. No, this is a matter for strictly personal, friendly advice. To be frank, *have* you anything here in the runabout line that you'd swap for this machine? Either with a little boot or even? How

'bout it, old chap? We're in your hands entirely. Do the right thing for—for Helen, eh? And we'll be eternally grateful, old man—eternally!"

Pod grinned inwardly, despite his sweat of apprehension.

"Oh, you Ben!" he proudly murmured.

Half an hour later the smoke-colored car had become an inmate of Hochheimer's private garage, and a thirty H. P. runabout, red and shiny, with great potentialities of speed, was flickering up Washington Boulevard. Bender held the wheel.

In the garage Hochheimer stood, with joy-tears hardly suppressed, gazing upon the trade which, despite the two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar boot he had given, stood to net him a clean thousand.

"*Ach du lieber Gott!*" he murmured with beatitude, "who says now friendship don'd pay?"

In the runabout, entirely concealed behind its close-buttoned curtains, Helen and the pals were rapidly approaching an L station.

The car ground to a stop close beside the foot of the station stairway.

"Now, Miss Butler," Ben informed her, "everything is clear for you to return home at once. You can easily make it in an hour and a half. We'd take you ourselves, only the case demands our immediate personal attention. The crooks must be run down at once, reports must be turned in, and—and all that. We'll interview your family this evening and take their testimony. In the meantime, talk to no one about the case. *No one*, if you please. Your complete silence regarding everything is most important."

Helen, all girlish joy and smiles, grasped Ben's hand and squeezed it, then Pod's.

"Oh, *how* can I ever thank—?"

"I pray you, don't. Only duty, that's all. Our reward lies in—"

"In *doing* good," Slats concluded, with peculiar emphasis.

"Good-by, good-by!" Helen exclaimed. "Oh, when father sees you he'll reward—"

"You've just time to make that train, Miss Butler," Ben interrupted, as a distant roar became audible. Helen, with another hand-squeeze, turned and ran lightly up the stairs, a picture of happiness.

Before she had boarded the train the red runabout had streaked away and vanished down a side street.

"*Oi, Gewalt!*" breathed Pod. "Jerk that throttle clean out by the roots, Ben, and us for Frisco!"

"Hush, child!" Ben parried. "Not yet, but soon!"

CHAPTER IV

BEN hauled up in front of a drug-store which bore the blue telephone-bell and the word "Booths."

Ten minutes later he rejoined his pal. Once more the runabout took flight. When it stopped again it was at a clothing-store. A few minutes sufficed to acquire linen dusters, caps and goggles. The disguise was complete.

Evening found a couple of respectable tourists far on the highway beyond Streator, with Joliet their seeming destination.

As their swift red runabout devoured the dusty miles they communed with vast content.

"Two hundred and fifty is *some* boot, believe me!" one was saying. "For a few hours' chivalry, rescuing distressed beauty and all that, not so worse, eh? Especially as I'd have done the job for nothing, if only to land on that rat Chicken Charlie mob of snitches!"

"Yes, a decent wad," the other assented. "It far more than covers the keisters and so on we left at the Auditorium—to say nothing of this little car, which is clear velvet. But, say, I'd give it all to lamp Hoch, there, when the bulls blow in an' he wakes up—what?"

"Same here! Oh, joy!"

Silence and cigar-smoke, approaching dusk, and ever the rapid spinning of the road beneath the tires, like an endless ribbon toward freedom.

"Ben!"

"Huh?"

"Say—what was it you telephoned in that dope-dispensary?"

"Oh, I wised the cops to the Chicken Charlie gang. They'll be in Dutch, P. D. Q. And then I did a bit more high-financing."

"How?"

The doc laughed.

"So easy!" he exclaimed. "I just called up her old man and told him *if* he'd mail a thousand, inside half an hour, to H. J. Barnes, general delivery, Joliet, his Helen would kick back in the family bosom inside an hour and thirty minutes, otherwise not. Told him to mail it at the box on the corner. Said the box was watched, and the gang would know. The thousand to be mailed *inside half an hour*, or nothing doing. Simple—

what? I'd bet a million that letter's racing us to Joliet this minute. Well, who's brainy now?"

Pod's massive jaw fell.

"For the love o' Mike!" was all he could articulate at first. But suddenly his face contracted angrily.

"Ben!"

"Well, what now?"

"Raw deal, that's what! Knight errants, or whatever they was, never copped no rake-off for joltin' them robber-barons an'—an' restorin' Beauty to the castle. Raw! It pains me, Ben. Now, if you'd only put it up to me—"

"We'd have been out a thousand, and I knew it," retorted the doc jovially, advancing the spark a notch. "That's why I didn't give you a look-in—see?"

"Knight errantry is the goods, O. K., but me for the plush! Remember, after all, Bo, love may make the world turn round, but the mazu is very essential as a lubricant for the motor. And *we*—are practical mechanics!"

XIV

THE KIMBERLEY SPECIAL

*Wherein It Is Conclusively Demonstrated That Honesty
Is the Best Policy*

CHAPTER I

CERTAIN activities of the constituted authorities, which shall not be detailed here, caused our ingenious friends to decide—soon after their unpremeditated whirl at knight-errantry—that the American constitution disagreed with their own. Therefore they hiked to distant places. See, now, what befell there.

Sad as the evening gloom which settled dunly over the velt at Bloemhof, was the large and ruddy face of Mr. Pod Slattery, bold gentleman rover, as he peered through the mosquito-netting at the dried-up "garden" in the rear of the Orange River Hotel, from a second-story room.

"Nothin' to this lay, Ben," he remarked dejectedly to his running-mate, who was sprawling in the long wicker chair by the table trying to smoke. "It's a dead one from kick-off to goal. It's the deadest that's breezed our way in a dog's age. Any one with an idea of doin' the smoke-room poker-game racket on a London to Cape Town P. & O. liner, or of toyin' with stacked decks and fixed flushes up through Cape Colony, had better con-

sult us first. Then they'll quit before they even front up to the post, what?"

He swabbed a broad and crimson brow with a damp shirt-sleeve, for the mercury stood at 102, and batted a zooming *ibungani* beetle that careened at him in the dusk. Ben grunted. The end of his cigar glowed a moment. Then he made answer.

"We're in wrong, that's a fact, old kick," admitted he judicially. "With five hundred miles between us and the Cape, at that—and about six thousand to Broadway. Now, if we don't frame something to pass the pep stuff pretty quick—hello, what the devil *now*?"

His exclamation of surprise was occasioned by the sudden appearance of a tiny shaft of light under the center of the table in the floor. Stooping, he examined this phenomenon.

"What's the row?" queried Slat, wearily. "Another of those fifty-seven varieties of cockroach down your back, or only an *ufezela*, a scorpion in your vest pocket?"

Ben made no reply. Already, with the instinct of the finished artist in his line, he was on hands and knees under the table, squinting down the narrow crack of the ventilator-hole into the room below. Ofttimes fortune calls through just such tiny apertures he knew; and no faintest chance ought to be neglected in such desperate straits of penury.

Pod, astonished at this conduct, arose and lumbered over to the middle of the stuffy room, majestic in all the dignity of his two hundred and eighty-seven pounds.

"Well, I'll be reformed!" he puffed. "What—"

"Sh-h-h!" warned Ben, and waved a cautioning hand

as he peered down around the ill-fitting cover of the ventilator. A moment's silence, then the hand beckoned. Pod, understanding not, yet instantly growing keen, knelt also and—pushing the table noiselessly aside on the smooth matting—also applied an eye to the aperture.

His pursy lips formed as though to whistle, but no sound came. Instead he gave Ben a delighted dig in the ribs. Both pals needed no guide-book, lexicon or *vade mecum* to inform them that a frame-up was in process of construction immediately below.

In silence, hardly breathing—though the sweat steadily collected on their brows and trickled down their noses—they watched and waited. What was the lay? They knew not, as yet. Could they turn it to their own advantage? Impossible to tell. All they could do was to pipe the deal and see. So they piped.

Directly under Pod's eye stood a table with a lamp on it. Pod's gaze plunged down the lamp chimney; he could feel the hot fumes of the oil upon his optic, which added to his discomfort; but not for worlds would he now have abandoned his post of observation. Not that a table and a lamp are, *per se*, evidences of guilt, but rather that the other objects thereby lying furnished indisputable proofs of some extensive poachings on the domain of private property.

For on the table, under the circle of lamp-light cast by the shade of tin, the pals plainly saw tools whereof they knew both the names and the uses—tools such as no honest workman ever carries in his kit—a “drag,” a “spreader,” two jimmies, an oxyhydrogen blowpipe for drawing the temper of a safe, and a variety of drills

that would have made a bank-president's blood run cold. There was also an open packet of that grayish-blue powder known as "thermit," which, when lighted with a bit of magnesium tape, burns steel as easily as though it were a tallow candle.

Taking all these factors together, the partners may have been justified in their deduction that somewhere or other in the immediate vicinity now were to be found men who both could and would, on occasion, "snuff a drum" or "soup a keister" with artistic celerity.

"There's the kit to pull the yegg stuff, O. K.," murmured Pod, winking with the up-draft of smoky air from the lamp, "but I'd like to know where's the petermen? And what—"

Ben pressed a hand over the big fellow's mouth. Already sounds of life were rising from below. There came a slight swish, as of a coat being thrown on a bed. Then a voice grumbled—sounding strangely hollow and unnatural, on account of the pals' position.

"Where's Hawkins? Blawst 'im, 'e's always late! And we've only an hour and a hawf at the outside!"

A chair creaked. Another voice, eminently British:

"He'll be here, right-o, don't you be so bloomin' uneasy! He won't let *this* slip through his fingers, never fear. Got that blue-print, handy, eh?"

"Heah!"

A paper rattled. Then all at once the pals saw a man approach the table. Into the narrow limits of their vision he strode, spread out a large blue-print on the table, and weighted it with two of the cracksmen's tools to prevent it curling up again.

The partners had the most peculiar possible view of a

human being—directly from above. As the man now stood there underneath them, with the smoke of his cigar mounting to their nostrils through the ventilator-hole, they could see that he was middle-aged and almost bald, with a sweeping mustache and broad shoulders.

His dress was impeccable, even unto riding-breeches and leather leggings; it seemed rather that of a gentlemanly mine-owner than of a consort with yeggs. The pals could make out his gold-mounted eye-glasses, and could hear the slight jingle of the sovereigns in his trousers pockets as he stood there agitating the coins, while he studied the print upon the table.

Suddenly the man spoke.

"The—aw—the safe rests directly on the floor of the carriage, eh? You're positive it isn't set up on I-beams, or anything of that sort? If so, it would be most embarrassing, y'know! Deuced awkward—what?—to poke one's bloomin' head into an open space and get it shot off by a guard, my word!"

"No danger, guv'nor," began the other, still invisible to the watchers. But before he could explain they heard a rapping on a door below; three raps, then two.

"'Awkins!" said a voice. A lock creaked and hinges complained. Footsteps sounded, then the door was closed again and once more locked.

Confused sounds followed. The man at the table moved away. The pals conjectured hand-shaking. A little general conversation ended in a clink of glasses. Then two men once more approached the table and a third joined them. Shoving back the tools they drew up chairs, began to smoke, and started to discuss the diagram before them. The newcomer threw off his coat.

With a start, Ben and Pod observed that his waistcoat-buttons were of brass.

Silently Ben got up, tiptoed to his Gladstone bag, rummaged out the marine-glasses that had helped maintain the illusion of their being Cook's tourists, and—once more kneeling—quickly adjusted the binoculars for short distance work.

Eagerly he peered. Despite himself he gave a little gasp of surprise.

"What's doin'?" whispered Slats.

"He's got Colonial Railways buttons on!" breathed Ben. "This here's a railroad touch, some way!"

"That's right! Lamp the blue-print—a car, so help me! An' the brass-button gink is in on it! Say!"

Ben made no answer. Already he was studying the print. The hands of the men, huge and brightly lighted in the circle of the marine-glasses, pointed here and there, or traced lines with finger-nails and pencils.

All the while both pals were absorbing the conversation from below. While Ben looked, Pod—his fat ear to the end of the crack—drank in every word.

Fifteen minutes later Pod tugged at his side-partner's sleeve.

"Come on, let's skate out o' here!" he whispered. "We've got enough to go on, already. Time's mazu, now! Let's duck!"

"Duck's my middle name, *Ibaas!*" agreed the other, backing away from the ventilator.

Five minutes later, leaving all their baggage, and in light marching order, the pals silently departed from the hotel. They headed down King William Street in the general direction of the barracks and the confused web

of back streets beyond, where second-hand shops abounded. But the precise nature of their errand will not be made plain here.

CHAPTER II

THE weekly shipment of uncut diamonds from Kimberley to Cape Town, about five hundred and fifty miles, is made over the trunk line crossing the Orange River at Hopetown, traversing the desolation of the Middelveldt, rounding Spitz Kop, and thence, in a southwesterly run, slanting down past Ladysmith to tide-water.

No ordinary express service suffices for these shipments, the value of which sometimes runs up to half a million pounds. The rough gems, *en route* to the deft fingers of the Amsterdam cutters, are packed in stout canvas bags, sealed, boxed in iron-bound chests also sealed, and locked in a safe which itself is protected by a special steel car. This car, known as the Kimberley Special, forms part of the Cape Town express, leaving Kimberley at 8.05 P. M., and due to arrive at the terminal at 11.20 A. M.

The latter part of the run, through the Nieuwveldt and Roggeveldt ranges, is slow; but from Kimberley as far south as De Aar Junction, the train splits the night like white lightning.

On the Friday night whereof our story deals, the express—with the diamond car attached—was eight minutes late in getting out of Kimberley. In the safe lay pebbles to the value of £436,950, or in American money, some \$2,185,000.

Guarding the safe in the steel car were four men,

ex-members of the Rhodes Constabulary, all armed with rifles and automatics and all crack shots. At Kimberley they had been locked into the car, which contained comfortable sleeping and cooking accommodations. The car-door lock had also been sealed. Not until the express should cough into the Northeastern Station at the Cape could they be free. All were heavily bonded. Two, at least, were required to keep constant watch on the safe at all times. For the most part all four sat on collapsible iron chairs, rifles across knees, eying this incredibly precious object, whereof not one knew even the elements of the combination.

The interior of the car was like an arsenal. On racks along the windowless sides of the twenty-five foot compartment where stood the safe lay rifles aplenty. There was ammunition by the hundred gross. The car, to all intents and purposes, was nothing but a traveling fort. It might almost have withstood a siege with field-guns. Every plan of attack that had occurred to the builders or the Rand Syndicate people was most adequately prepared for.

Yet, strange to say, there was still one possible way of approach to the vast hoard. One possible loophole existed in the defenses. Like the heel of Achilles, otherwise invulnerable, one single line of attack existed. And this, as you have already surmised, ~~was~~ ^{was} up through the floor of the car, through the safe ~~itself~~, and directly to the four-by-five cavity harboring the iron-bound boxes so incalculably precious.

If you had been standing in the railway yard among the strings of "goods-vans," or, as we should say, freight-cars, just below Bloemhof station—if you had

been there, I say, in the gloom of the South African night, at eight-thirty-two of the evening about which our story centers, you might have observed some singular proceedings.

As the Kimberley Special toiled slowly up the grade toward the viaduct, its engine exhausting with staccato snorts, or now and then slipping its drivers so that long sheaves of sparks burned into the dark, three men boarded her.

These men had no tickets, neither did they jump upon the running-board of the passenger-coaches. On the contrary, they waited, well-poised for the leap, till the steel express-car, windowless and grim, came trundling past, then sprang for the rods.

Had the car been the usual British type these could not have been reached; but it was of American pattern, with end doors, and the rods were easy of access. Deftly and with the determination born of a great game to play, all three made the jump in safety. This, despite the fact that they were heavily loaded with knapsacks.

Once secure, they set to work methodically as the long and heavy train gained speed up the incline. Though the next stop was De Aar Junction, one hundred and fifty miles down the line, they had no time to waste. The three hours and twenty minutes of the schedule would, at best, allow more than suffice for the terrible grueling of the task that lay ahead. With a certainty and an assurance of position, measurements and lay-out that implied previous familiarity with the construction of the car, they got down to business.

Each took from his knapsack a specially constructed canvas hammock, with stout steel hasps at its four cor-

ners, of exactly proper dimensions to hook and clasp over various struts, angle-irons and other structural pieces of the underbody. These hasps were all numbered with tags. The men, working by the intermittent flashes of their electric lights, made sure that each hook was exactly in the planned-for place. The hammocks all swung side by side, about a foot and a half above the roadbed. Into them the three men quickly clambered, and there proceeded quickly yet methodically and with absolute coolness and precision, to lay out the drills, jimmies, spreaders, grippers, and other paraphernalia—never forgetting the blowpipes and the thermit—soon to be needed in active operations.

Buckled around each waist was a well-filled cartridge-belt. In three holsters lay three British army service revolvers, long-nosed and extremely ugly.

While all these events had been taking place, activities had been going forward in other directions.

We left Pod Slattery and Dr. Bender, always ingenious and inseparable, headed in the general direction of the Bloemhof police and constabulary barracks.

As the Cape Town express trundled under the viaduct that—as you will remember if you have ever visited Kimberley—carries Dominion Street over the railway about a quarter of a mile up the grade from the station, two rangers made a daring leap from the transverse stringers of the southern, or down-line end.

For rough riding and quick shooting, long odds and a stiff fight at a second's warning, His Imperial Majesty's Veldt Rangers take a back seat by comparison with no body of men on earth, not even excepting our own Western cavalry.

The jump that the two men in the olive khaki, puttees and broad felt hats made to the top of the treasure-car would have done credit to professional athletes. Squarely they landed, while the train was making all of twelve miles an hour, if not fifteen. One fell on hands and knees, slid, caught a ventilator and clung. The other gripped the little steel stove-pipe of the cooking-range projecting through the roof. Though it blistered his hands, he hung on till his balance was assured. Then, crawling along the top of the car, he joined his comrade-in-arms.

Both rangers now lay down flat on the metal roof and took a firm hold on the ventilators. Though they could at present easily maintain their position on the curved surface, they knew that once the express should have passed the Riet River and should have begun the downward drop toward the Middelveldt, they should both need all their strength and agility, coupled with a well-braced position, to keep from being hurled off into the night to death.

Through the baked heat of the African night the express gathered speed. Louder now and louder began to roar the rushing, drumming wheels. From time to time the shrill screech characteristic of all Old World locomotives skreeled across the black and rolling prairie, where here and there some fleeing light betrayed the presence of a farmer's krall, British or Boer.

Atop the car the two rangers, flat to the metal roof, hung tight. No word passed between them. In grim silence, clinging like bulldogs, they sped through the night. Under the car, close to the clattering wheels whose racket masked such slight sounds as even their

wondrously trained operations could not avoid, the three British yeggs were burrowing, ratlike, into the vitals of the steel that alone stood between them and the tremendous hoard. Within, the guards sat, rifles on knees and eyes fixed on the safe. Cigar-smoke and pleasant conversation whiled the hours away.

Thus the car was freighted with more and deeper cross-currents of human passion and potential tragedy—dangers unknown to some, complications impossible to figure—and with profounder elements of war, than any other that for many years had whirled along two rails of singing steel.

CHAPTER III

CRAMPED, numb and sore, yet with hot-beating hearts, the two Veldt Rangers cautiously crawled to the end of the car, toward the little iron step-cleats, as the locomotive at length ceased its roaring exhaust and the air began to grind.

"The junction!" whispered one, hoarsely. "Thank God, Bo! *I'm* next door to all in!"

Far over the flat and inky plain, tiny lights had begun to wink into view. These rapidly brightened and enlarged, till they outshone the diamond-sprinkle of stars in the strange South African sky. Came a sharp and rattling clatter of "points," as switches are called down there; a red bull's-eye flicked past, and long strings of freights began to hurl bombarding echoes against the slackening express.

The wind died down—that wind which for three hours had whipped the breath almost out of the rangers and had peppered them with burning sparks from the en-

gine, had filled them with dust and cinders, and had tried to snatch them from their reeling perch.

Ahead, the junction station-lights glowered angrily; more harshly the brakes gritted; from somewhere in the town a church clock chimed the half-hour.

"Eleven-thirty, kid!" hoarsely grunted the other ranger. "On time, O. K. The next half hour sees some doin's, believe *me*! Come on, skate!"

Already the first one was clambering stiffly down the hand-holds. The second followed. As the express boomed over a bridge and slid on a long curve on to the last lap before it reached the station, they leaped. One after the other they sprang, in a manner so deft as to denote previous experience with trains. One, being lean and agile, kept his footing. The other, far heavier, fell and rolled down a cinder embankment, but instantly was up again unhurt.

Panting, they met as the last carriage ground past them. An instant the ruby tail-lights flashed in their blackened faces; then the friendly dark hid them once more.

"Come on, go to it!" growled the smaller. At a stealthy pace, revolvers swinging free in hand, they approached the station where now the train was in the act of coming to rest. Their eyes, accustomed to the gloom, perceived a darker shadow detach itself from beneath the treasure-car and silently duck under a string of empties on a siding.

Two other shadows quickly followed and joined the first.

"After 'em, kid!" puffed the fat ranger. "These local dubs are strictly—"

The sentence was not finished.

For suddenly, from the other side of the string, a sharp cry rose.

An oath—a shout—a scuffle! Then sounds of rapid feet running for dear life on cinders flashed past.

"*Crack! Crack!*" two revolver shots punched holes in the night.

Another pistol spoke, then a report from a third.

Confused noises intershocked. A fusillade crackled. Came a curse, a groan—and now many feet played a tattoo somewhere in the darkness.

A groan burst from the rangers. The larger started to run forward, but the other plucked him back. For already carriage-doors of the express were slamming open, and all up and down the length of the train bright oblongs of light were forming as the eyes of the compartments winked to full gaze.

"Lemme go! I—"

"No you don't! In about one minute Hell will be an ice-box side o' this locality! And—"

"But—"

"Cut it, and trek! The local bulls are on! If they lamp *us*—"

"Damn you, lemme in on this! We—"

A stinging right-hander full on the beefy wattles brought sense back to the larger of the two veldt rangers. Then the other, with surprising strength, forced him to stumble across the main track and into the shelter of a freight-shed—just in time.

Just in time, indeed! For now more footfalls, rapid and violent, mingled with the sounds of war, and sev-

eral lanterns began to dance up the track directly toward their temporary hiding-place.

"Come on, Bo!" panted the thin one. "If they get their hooks on us it'll be no friendly collar, you hear *me*! It'll be the inside of stir, all right, and all wires down! Beat it!"

The approaching lanterns and the continued fusillade decided the big one. Silently, all hopes now abandoned, they slunk away in the dark, directly eastward from the line through some weed-grown, vacant land. They rounded a shed, struck into a road, and—at a smart run—vanished from the scene of war. Ten minutes later they were out of the town hiking still eastward, on and on over the flat and dismal veldt.

"Our only show, now," said the smaller of the two, as he wiped a sweating brow, "is to make Naauw Poort and the branch line to Port Elizabeth. If we're run in anywhere inside of twenty miles of these doings, it's good *night*!"

"How far to the Port?" panted the other, already lathered with toil and heat.

"Thirty miles. Is your will made, Podsy?"

"My—huh? What for?"

"Oh, you might happen to step on a *spinnekops*, or one of those big green *mamba* snakes, that's all. But buck in, buck in! It'll train you down a few, and you need it, believe me! Once we breeze into the Port we're safe. Till then—hike!"

They continued to push down a spruit, steering by the Southern Cross that sparkled in the velvet heavens. Over kopjes and through gripping thorn-bush tangles

that tore at them relentlessly; over the rolling, rattling pebbles of dried-up vleis; and across endless expanses of open levels, they plodded, panting, spent, routed.

In a puff of illusion, certain treasure-dreams had vanished instantly; but liberty still remained, and life was sweet under the sky, and dungeons threatened.

On, on, still on, toward the beckoning safety of the far-distant branch line! On, ever on, till human flesh and bone could do no more. On, till even fear could spur no further. Then they camped down in a kloof, to think and smoke and rest a while in the wilderness, under the enshrouding arch of stars.

Presently the aroma of cigarets perfumed the African night-wind.

The thin ranger cursed bitterly as he smoked. As for the fat one, he was weeping.

CHAPTER IV

ABOUT 4 A. M., a little recovered from the exhaustion of their forced march, the pals resumed their weary way. And all at once, no more than half a mile beyond their resting-place, they became aware of firelight, distant yet unmistakable, in the gloom.

Pod seized Ben by the arm.

"Gee! Pipe that, will you?" he hoarsely grunted—for dire thirst was now assailing him, and his usually fluent tongue clave to the roof of his mouth, a roof seemingly shingled with dry pine.

"That's right, a fire! Kafir *kraal*, or *umuzi*, maybe. Bushmen, or something. Us for a loop-the-loop round it!"

"Nix on that! Beer! Anythin' wet, kid—even water. I'm dyin', I tell you. We've still got a few maravedis rattlin' in our kicks. We can stall 'em off with some kind of a gag, an' slip over the high sign for some drinks! Me for the *crawl*, or whatever you call it!"

In vain did Dr. Bender try to dissuade the two hundred and eighty-seven pounder. Slat's mind was made up at last. That settled it.

Ben yielded, in part.

"Well, we can gum-shoe up somewheres near, anyhow, and take a slant at the lay, I suppose," he conceded. "But I warn you now—"

Unheeding, Pod was already on his way drinkward. Ben was following closely. Five minutes later their astounded eyes, popping with amazement, beheld a sight such as caused their hearts to do a tarantella, their breath to come in the proverbial short pants, and their fingers to clutch convulsively at their artillery.

For, as with great caution they raised their heads in the darkness above the shelter of a little kopje, an incredibly wondrous vision met their gaze. At the bottom of the slight depression crackled a fire of ironwood thorns. Beside this fire squatted two men. One of these men, despite his draggled and exhausted disarray, the pals instantly recognized as the tall and elegantly dressed gentleman with the sweeping mustache, who had studied the blue-print in the room underneath their own at the hotel!

Gone now were his glasses and torn his raiment; but they knew him just the same. The other was none other than he who had worn the brass-buttoned railway waist-

coat! How these two had come thither, or what had become of the third neither Ben nor Pod even thought to conjecture. It mattered not, for still greater wonders held them breathless.

There on the bare and sandy ground beside the fire lay five canvas bags! By the firelight the men were engaged in dividing the contents of one of the sacks. Ben and Pod could see the motions of their arms and hands as they counted and laid in separate heaps the wondrous pebbles of the hoard!

"By—" Pod started to exclaim, but Ben clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Gatt 'em, Bo!" he whispered. "One dose of the old puffing-rod and their goat's ours!"

"Croak 'em off, you mean?"

"Nix on the croak! Wing the blaze—that's all!"

The revolvers spoke almost together. Live coals and ashes flew wide, in clouds of sparks and smoke.

"Hands up! *You're it!*" roared Pod, charging like a mad bull, with Ben a close second. Before the two men by the fire had more than jumped to their feet, other leaden pills, zooming dangerously close to their "beans," had warned them there was no come-back.

"Fins up!" howled Pod again. "Thought you'd sidestepped His Imperial Kink's Felt Rangers, what? Guess again—an' keep them flippers high!"

Four hands pointed starward. The pals closed in.

To the panic-stricken eyes of the silk-stockings yeggs now appeared, from the outer gloom, a couple of rangers in disheveled olive-hued khaki, puttees and slouch hats. One was tall and spare, the other a true Quinbus Fles-trin; but each presented to the malefactors' gaze the

little round "O" of a revolver-muzzle that looked big as a cannon to their affrighted eyes.

The pals halted, embarrassed. Now that they had caught the yeggs, what next?

"What can we do with 'em, kid?" whispered Slats in an agonized aside. "We can't pick 'em up—"

"Can that! Leave it to me!" breathed Ben. Aloud, and in commanding tones, he dictated:

"Throw your guns down by the bags! Quick! And no funny business, mind!"

Two service revolvers thudded to earth. "Now, trek!"

The yeggs hesitated.

"Aoh, I say," Long Mustache began, "this is deuced awkward, y'know. Now if you chaps would be reasonable, and—ah—"

"Silence! No use trying to corrupt secret service men in his Imperial Majesty's employ. March!"

"But, I say—"

A bullet close to his ear interrupted the attempted bribery.

"Nothing doing! Over that kopje you go, northwest, toward Hout Kraal, where our reserves are waiting. You're in for twenty years, my boys! *Trek!*"

Reluctantly, still expostulating, shaken and panic-filled, the yeggs trailed up the slope.

"Cop the guns and sparks, Ibaas!" whispered Ben. "And when I say mosey, you *dust!* Are you on?"

Ben drove the malefactors over the brow of the ridge.

"Faster!" he directed, in venomous tones. "No stalling, now. And the first man who looks round gets it!"

As they quickened their pace Ben lagged, then finally stopped altogether.

They vanished in the gloom. Ben turned and ran for the camp-fire. Down the slope on the wings of the wind he sped. Slat saw him coming, and needed no further explanation. Hastily stuffing the last of the treasure into his bulging pockets, he, too, with extreme elation, hit the gait.

The pals departed thence as though exhaustion, thirst and hunger existed not in this world. At a Marathon clip they hit only the high places, eastbound. And night, friendly in its enfolding concealment, received them into its vast, oblivious bosom.

But when the yeggs, after a while awakening to the fact that no man followed them, stopped and held parley and woke to realization, some lamentations of men crazed with grief and wo were wafted down the vacant wind-swept spaces of the Middelveldt.

Had you searched the British Empire through and through from Scotland to Van Dieman's isle and from the Strand to Bombay, including all the lands and seas, the straits, estuaries, bays, harbors, plains, peninsulas, islands and archipelagoes of that realm whereon the sun never dares set, you could not have found two Britishers giving vent to more language, in a shorter space of time, than those two gunless, ravished yeggs upon the plains of old Cape Colony.

Neither in all this world could you have discovered more elate Americans than those who, contemporaneously, were now making a bee-line toward Naauw Poort and the branch-line terminal there, laden with treasures beyond all computation.

CHAPTER V

IN the gray of early dawn two battered and exhausted members of the Veldt Constabulary boarded the mixed goods-and-passenger that, at four-eighteen, slowly creaked out of the Naauw Poort station, bound for Port Elizabeth. These military gentlemen showed every sign of terrible grueling recently undergone; yet withal, as befitted their sworn duty, they kept quiet about the job in hand and put a good front to what was evidently a bad situation.

It was to be noted that they traveled third-class, along with Kroo-boys and Kafirs, and that they held no speech together, but dozed—or seemed to—smoked many cigarettes, and at every station turned their backs to the windows. Their nervousness was extreme. Every pocket of their torn and disreputable uniforms as well as the pouches of their cartridge-belts, seemed stuffed to capacity. But as no white man entered the malodorous third-class carriage, and no native dared address them, this mattered little.

Dozing and waking, fasting—because unwilling, as it seemed, even to summon the buffet-boys at the divers stations—the two rangers passed an interminable and ghastly time of it, till at last, toward noon, the train rumbled across Sunday River, and soon after the broad turquoise sheet of Algoa Bay opened out on the left. Twenty minutes later the train was at the Victoria Square station, and the two rangers, passing through the gates, found themselves walking down Hallowell Place. If pallor, an unconscious quickening of the pace, and an involuntary turning of the head betoken a disturbed

nervous system, then we may infer that our military friends were not entirely at ease.

All at once Ben turned paler still and clutched at Pod's arm.

"For God's sake!" he gasped. "Into this doorway, quick!"

The other obeyed, his face all beaded with glistening gems of sweat. One or two in the passing medley of black and white cast a curious glance their way; but Rangers on a tear are no novelty. "Plain drunks," the citizens decided, such few as even gave them a look.

"What is it, kid?" stage-whispered Pod. "Some real bulls headed our way to call us cold?"

"Look! Flash that sign, will you?" He nodded toward a poster on a hoarding opposite the door.

Pod looked and his eyes widened. His lips formed for a long whistle, but none came. Astonishment had stricken him absolutely dumb.

The poster, surmounted by the imperial lion and unicorn supporting the crown, stated in bold type:

£20,000 REWARD!

The Above Amount Will Be Paid In Cash,
And No Questions Whatsoever Asked,
Nor Any Prosecution Be Instituted,
For the Return of the Uncut Diamonds Stolen from the

KIMBERLEY SPECIAL

Last Night, September 11, at De Aar Junction,
Or for Information Leading to the Recovery of the Same.
Privacy and Immediate Cash Payment Guaranteed.

Apply:

WITWATERS RAND SYNDICATE,

**32 Regent Street, Cape Town; 12 High Street, Kimberley;
or 146 Kensington Road, Port Elizabeth.**

The human mind, psychologists say, possesses inherent qualities enabling it to rise and meet sudden stresses without collapse, when supreme crises are suddenly thrust upon it. Even before Pod had finished reading the lines which seemed to quaver and dazzle before his eyes, Ben's plan of campaign was settled.

"Pod, old top," said he, in a low, well-modulated tone, "here's where you and I get off. To peddle uncut sparks, in any country on earth, or to frame a way to get 'em cut, would put the little gray fringe all round our thinkeries. Twenty thousand pounds is one hundred thousand beans, and it's all ours.

"One-forty-six Kensington Road looks like our present port of call. Also, there's a P. & O. liner out of here at 4.30 this p. m., for Calcutta, Hong-Kong, and all points in the direction of Broadway. Hay-foot, straw-foot, forward *march!*"

Gasping, Pod obeyed. A film glazed his protuberant blue eye. He moved mechanically, like one in a trance. As he went he murmured to himself with pallid lips:

"Pinch me, kid! Pinch me hard! Wake me up, quick—I can't stand such a pipe as this—oh, what a head it means in the cold gray!"

CHAPTER VI

CLAD in white flannels, absolutely new, with white canvas shoes on their weary feet and the latest thing in nautical caps on their still fevered brows, two reposeful persons lolled in wicker deck-chairs on the first-class promenade of the *Emperor of India*, as that most luxurious, triple-turbine eighteen-thousand-ton wonder churned

the waters of Algoa Bay, rounded Bird Island, and took her long slant for the far coasts of India.

Cooling drinks, costly smokes and delicious fruits reposed on inlaid taborets at their hands, and several brown Lascar-boys with embroidered caps and tight cotton trousers obsequiously did their bidding.

"Grand scenery, what?" remarked the smaller of the two men—the one whom his companion addressed as "doctor." "To see the lawst—ah—of this bloomin' Awfrican coast—er—it's bally agreeable, eh?"

Lazily he reached for a siphon. While the soda fizzed, the fat one contemplated an equally obese cigar.

"What bothers me, Doc," said he reflectively, "is—well—"

"Well, what, Bo? We've got the captain's suite, haven't we? Copped the seats at his left and right, what? And in the purser's safe—"

"Yes, I know," said the larger man, "the stuff's there, O. K. And what you push out is certainly the correct goat-getting jab. But, after all, what puts a crimp in my gears—"

"Well?"

"It was all so damn *honest*, kid! Not one crook or twist in it from kick-off to score! We only restored stolen rocks to their rightful owners, an'—"

The other interrupted with a laugh as he raised his glass.

"Here's to the best policy, Slaty, old kick!" he toasted. "What the hail Columbia do you care how we got it, just so it's here?"

"It ain't regular, kid. Somehow it—"

"Forget it, and drink up!" Ben ordered.

And as their glasses chinked, Pod's old good-natured grin dispelled the last faint, wavering gloom cast by inadvertent virtue upon the glad horizon of their mutual joy.

XV

A PASSAGE AT ARMS

Wherein Greek Meets Greek

CHAPTER I

AFTER this famous clean-up, the pals, being well heeled with fall-money, thought it reasonably safe to head for Broadway once more.

Now, the fate which presides over the just and the unjust with strict impartiality, so ordered that at Yokohama our friends encountered a delay of six and thirty hours, due to a flaw in the cross-head of the port high-pressure unit of the liner's engines.

"Well, Bo," remarked Pod, lighting his cigaret after a gross gorge in the Occidental Hotel on Ohashi Road, "well, old gink, here we are, ain't we? Nailed down in this Chink burg, for fair! What shall it be? A brush with some of the open-vested gents in the card-room and a quiet little game of cut-throat, a whirl at the rickshaw rubber-neck buggy stunt, or a hoof down-town—if there is any down-town in a joint built of rice-paper and bamboo? What's your one best bet?"

"Me for the hoof," judged Ben reflectively. "Nix on the pasteboards; we had enough o' that honest toil on the *Emperor of India*, wafting hither. Rickshaw? Nothing to it! We both need a brisk canter to take the tucks out. Let's hike! But mind, now, no Buddhist

temple dallings, to pick up a little extra dust—no jacking gems out of idols' optics on the Q. T. It's to be strictly on the sight-seeing line—no quaint cut-ups with the cagy brown brother. Are you on?"

Pod grunted assent.

A few minutes later, sublime in their white flannels and with costly tobacco burning, they were strolling arm in arm down Midzukawa, the great life-artery that splits the town from north to south, observing and observed.

The pals loitered along aimlessly enough, here stopping to stare, yonder to buy a trinket or two with a bit of copper, taking in change whatever *sen* the astute brown brother aforementioned chose to give, and found themselves, on the whole reasonably diverted.

"Though, after all," said Pod, puffing smoke at a goggle-eyed statue of Jimmu Tenno in an image-maker's stall, "though, after all, it ain't Forty-second Street, not by one damn sight!"

Ten o'clock found them aweary and mindful of two good beds, for they had traveled far since having left Cape Colony, and would fain have one sleep revel again upon the good and solid land. Hence they turned back, and, still loitering, began to make way once more toward the hotel.

Half a mile from this haven it was that they found the Beacon Light Gospel Mission. The real story begins right here, so listen.

CHAPTER II

IT may seem strange that a sailor-men's mission, such as you have all seen in our home ports, should have been

located on a cross-alley giving upon the Midzukawa, in Yokohama, Japan, but none the less the mission was there.

A sign over the door, lantern-lighted, proclaimed that salvation was free, and voices, indubitably exhorting in the English tongue, penetrated even the buzz and hum of all-pervading Nipponese. Pod started as though a bee had established connections, and clutched Ben by the arm.

"Say, get that!" he exclaimed with more real pleasure than he had shown in the whole evening's pilgrimage. "If that ain't U. S., I don't know my own lingo! Listens good to muh, kid. Come on, let's drift down and lamp the only genuine Bowery olio we've struck in four long months!"

Ben was willing. Together they approached the mission, lingered a moment at the door, then shouldered in, for the sound of their own vernacular was good.

The room was small and stuffy. On the four or five benches a few beach-combers and listless down-and-outers sprawled. The little platform, overhung with banners of hope and love, supported a melodeon, a rather comely girl to play the same, a rescue worker in Salvation Army garb, and a penitent—the whole feebly illuminated by the cheapest of all lights, the ubiquitous paper lanterns of the Orient.

It was the penitent whose loud self-denunciations had caught the pals' ears and drawn them hither, and who was now just reefing for a new tack on the sea of confession. A pretty husky looking sinner he was, at that, in sailor's garb, albeit torn and greasy, and with a voice which might have shamed the bulls of Bashan.

"So the devil tempted me again—oh, my brethren," he was roaring, as Pod and Ben sank unostentatiously upon the rear bench, "an' I yielded to sin, an' done as he told me. Y'see, it was this way. After the *Kaishen Maru* struck, she went down by the head in less 'n twenty minutes, so help me! Well, jest afore she goes, I done that deed, my brethren. There was No. 8 starboard boat, with her falls loosened, ready to lower away an' me in her, to fend off and cast off tackle when she struck water. Room fer one more, an' I knowed it, mates, room fer one more! Oh, glory, glory! Soon it'll be off my conscience, brethren, I'll be saved—saved—"

"What the devil and all is he raggin' about, I'd like to know?" whispered Pod, his eyes gleaming with real interest. "Seems like he's carryin' about three hundred pounds o' guilt pressure to the square inch, with all valves weighted—"

"Then up skurries that poor, tremblin' sinner in the dark an' rain," bawled the sailor more vociferously than before; "up he scurries with that 'ar flat package under his arm, all shakin' an' tremblin' with the fear o' death upon him.

"'Fer God's sake, men,' says he, 'lemme in! I—I can't go to my Maker with this load o' guilt on my immortal soul!' says he. I jest barely hears him, oh, my friends, because that there wind's a blowin' forty, fifty mile, an' the old *Kaishen's* siren rippin' things wide open. 'I stole it,' says he, shiverin' all over, 'an' I gotta make restitution. Lemme in, friend—lemme in!'

"It's jest that minute the devil whispered in my ear, brethren. In the dark he come, quick as fire, an' told

me what to do, an' I done it. With hopes o' treasure an' great riches he deceived me, an' I fell.

"I grabbed that 'ar package, in the dark an' confusion, with only one blue flare a burnin' on the starb'd side. Grabbed it an' flung it in the bottom an' shoved him back.

"'Full up!' yells I. 'Lower away, you sons o' guns!' And they lets go—the shiverin' sinner at the rail, he grabs, an' yells—too late. All over! An' me an' my sin went down into No. 8 boat together."

The pals on the rear bench were leaning forward now, intent on every word. The sense of the dramatic quality of this rough man's heart-wrung confession, there in that dim and smoky mission, weighed on them less than a quite other and less creditable emotion. Pod's eyes were blinking; Ben's keen, eager face had perceptibly sharpened. From time to time he licked his lips.

"So down the ship goes, my lads, down, down to Davy Jones, that black twenty-second o' last January, in 122 deg. 16 min. west, 19 deg. 12 min. north, in the China Sea. The last we sees o' her is the flare on her poop, with them poor wretches yellin' murder till the water strangles 'em. We was picked up next day but one off Macclesfield Bank, by the *City of Manila*, southbound, with the flat package an' all, which I hid it, sinful, in the night, at the back o' the st'arn locker. I got it safe aboard, mates, an' with the devil's advice an' guidance, kep' it till I reached Saigon. There in Portugee Jake's place I opened it, oh, my brethren, an'—an'—"

Pod nudged his pal sharply in the ribs. Ben growled a curse.

"An' found no gold, no diamonds to pay me fer my

sin, mates—no, only a leerin' painted woman, her hands folded an' a grin on her lips, to mock me. Only that, with some words on the back, in French or some other dago talk. Only a piece o' paintin', my brethren, worth next to nothin'—an' me with murder on me soul, to get it. Oh, mates, how the devil must be laughin' at me now!" The penitent grew more uproarious; one might have thought he had been looking on the grape not long ago. "But I—I'll fool him yet! I'll leave the Old Boy in stays, brethren—on a lee shore I'll leave him, with all anchors draggin'! This very night it goes up in smoke. I've got grace—I'm saved—the gates o' Hell shall not prevail ag'in me! I—"

Ben arose and made a casual yet a quick exit. Pod, realizing already something of the magnitude of the game, followed him. No more they cared to listen to the divagations of the tipsy, religion-crazed sailor. They found no further interest in the groans of the auditors, the "Amens!" of the mission worker or the rapt, exalted vision of the lassie at the melodeon.

"Saved! Saved!" drifted out the door after them, but they cared not a hang. For already they scented the kill, and would be alone to frame it right.

At the first dark corner Ben clutched Pod so tightly by the arm that the big fellow winced.

"You fall for what that stewed mutt's got?" he whispered, his voice tense as a banjo-string. "Are you in on it?"

"Search me! What is it, kid? Wise me up, can't you?"

"He's got 'Mona Lisa,' Bo!"

"Moan Eliza! What's her monniker—who's her—?"

"Boob! The painting some touch artist glommed out o' the art gallery there in Paris! The world's been upside down over it ever since. And he don't savvy her from a chromo! She means no more to him than a Mutt and Jeff picture! But if we can beat him to her, and keep him from burning her—"

"A thousand in it for us! Ten, maybe?"

"Ten thousand? Oh, you poor gink! A million!" panted Ben, in a dry, choking voice.

CHAPTER III

POD blinked rapidly and reached for the makings of a cigaret. As he rolled it he eyed Ben with suspicion.

"You ain't been out in the direct rays o' the sun much lately, have you?" he inquired soothingly. "For if you have—"

But his pal only shook a fist in the rotund face of Slats.

"You human wart!" he hissed. "Here's a lost art work that kings' ransoms have been offered for, kickin' around loose, and you don't fall for it! Here's a million, if it's worked right, just drivin' right up to you in a touring-car, and you can't even signal it to stop! You—"

"What d'you want me to do? Get excited an' run my pulse to a hundred an'—"

"A thousand! Why, Pod, you don't get me, that's all! Now, if we work this right—"

Into deeper shadows they retreated. Leaning against a whitewashed wall, they held council. Their smokes

glowed in the dark. Now and then they peered around the corner to make sure the gospel meeting was not yet over. On no account must the alcoholic and repentant sailorman escape them now.

At last, after an interminable wait, they saw a straggling knot of wastrels, sailors and social jetsam drift out of the mission and aimlessly scatter in the direction of the Bund.

"Psst! Come on!" whispered Ben. "There he is, that tall geeze just crossing over—see? If we lose him now, we're done!"

Cautiously, yet with the consummate skill acquired by long experience both in trailing victims and evading sleuths, the pals hunted their quarry. Forgotten now their every resolve, made when leaving the hotel, that this should be strictly a sight-seeing evening with no professional interests. Unheeded the strange and wondrous night-sights of the Japanese port.

For about ten minutes they shadowed their man, loitering when he, with characteristic tipsy indecision, stopped to gawk at some oddity, then hastening their pace when he pressed forward, but never for a second losing sight of the tousled black head under the dirty sailor-tam, that projected over the short-statured crowds.

Out of the Midzukawa he passed, turned to the left into a crooked way, followed this the equivalent of about two American city blocks, and once more turned, this time to the right, down a reeking alley.

"Time to brace him," whispered Ben, quickening his pace. "We mustn't lose him in this rat-hole. Come on; hit it up lively now!"

Down the alley they pursued their prey. Now they were close. Ben, judging an immediate attack most judicious, hailed the tipsy tar.

"Hey, Jack! You, there—look here a minute!" called he.

The fellow paused and turned.

"Huh?" he grunted stupidly. "Want me?"

"How d'you get to the Midzukawa?" inquired Ben. "We're lost, I guess. Can't make these idiots catch a word. Which way?"

The sailor stared.

"Why, you're navigatin' plumb on the wrong tack," he answered civilly enough. "Come round an' stand back. First left, then a fair course to it, that's all."

"Thanks," said Ben.

He glanced sharply at the man's bearded face, half-visible by the light of a yellow lantern that, like a great golden shell of glowworm radiance, swung in the night breeze under a malodorous doorway.

All at once he started, with well-simulated surprise.

"Well, I'll be damned!" ejaculated he. "Say, Jack, you're the mission-stiff, eh? I guess we know you already! My friend and I"—he nodded at Slat—"were in at the Beacon Light this evening. You saw us, eh? No? Well, it was dark, that's a fact. We sat on a dark bench. We heard—"

The sailor frowned with an ugly, hard look.

"What you lubbers want o' me, anyhow?" he queried suspiciously. "I don't owe you nothin', I reckon. You're sailin' mighty free, seems like. If you're after squalls, you can get 'em, an' quick, too—you lay to that!"

Ben smiled with his most ingratiating manner.

"See here," said he. "We don't mean any trouble at all. On the contrary, we're ready to do you a good turn. I'll be frank with you, my man. We heard what you said about that—that—"

"What?"

"You know, that picture in the flat package, and—"

"Well, what th' devil about it? It's mine, ain't it? I'm goin' to make payment fer my sin, ain't I? I don't reckon either o' you men owns it, hey?"

"No, but we'd like to. Look, now, how much will you take for it? That's plain enough, eh?"

"How—much?" The sailor gulped. "Take fer it? Why—why—"

"Well, set your price!" Pod butted in. "Name your figure, cul, an' it goes! We—"

Ben checked him with a kick in the shins.

"We're asking you to sell it, that's what!" he exclaimed. "Let us look at it. Let's talk it over. If satisfactory, let's buy it. What's the matter with that for a fair offer?"

The sailor stared, and shook his unkempt head.

"Naw!" he grunted. "I got to burn it to clear my soul from sin. I'm converted, that's what! I left the devil an' all his works—"

"To Hell with that!" cried Ben, irritation fast gaining on him at this stupid hulk of a brute, smelling of rum, who persisted in blocking their road to fortune. "Cut that part out, and come down to tacks! Here, Jack, there's money in this for you. Only a blistering idiot's going to burn up real money!"

Shaking with eagerness and apprehension, Pod wiped

his forehead. He seemed stifling there in the dark and tortuous ill-smelling alley. He longed to land on the sailor and by main strength rend from him the secret of the whereabouts of Mona Lisa. But he restrained his emotions.

"Real money?" drawled the seaman, a dull light creeping into his liquor-deadened eye. "Yuh mean somethin' big? Five hundred, maybe?" His religious scruples now seemed fading fast.

"Five?" blurted Pod. "A thousand, at the inside! Say, Bo, lead us to it, quick!"

"Don't pay any attention to him!" exclaimed Ben. "He's loose in his top hamper, mate. But there's a package of the good old change in it, just the same. Come on now, be a sport! Let's have a slant at it, and then we'll see. I promise you one thing, you won't have to sign articles again for one while, if it's as represented. No more dunnage-bag for Jack, over the rail, and a kick into the fo'c's'le, matey! Not by a damn sight.

"No, it'll be *saké* and geishas, and the tinkle of samisens, and wistarias and the little glowing lanterns down 'The Rag' for Jack, a while. Wake up! Come out of it, can't you? Here's opportunity knocking at your door."

The sailor stared a moment, then his eyes flared suddenly. He swore a low, villainous oath.

"Come on, you lubbers!" he shouted hoarsely.

He pivoted on his slipshod heel, and at a round pace, almost a run, led the rejoicing pals down the crooked alley through the dim and somewhat malodorous Eastern night.

CHAPTER IV

BEHOLD now the pals, quivering with the lust of the hunt, staring by the light of a guttering candle as the sailorman rummaged from beneath a broken plank in the floor of his room a large flat package tightly lashed in sail-cloth.

Pod was breathing hard, both from the effects of the run and of his powerful emotions. Ben's keen, black eyes glittered uncannily in the wavering light. Between his lips a badly chewed cigar drooped, extinct. At most crises of his life he had been able to simulate indifference, but now human nature rebelled. This was too much.

The seaman, indifferent to his guests' excitement, and wholly absorbed in his own, now with fingers that shook both with eagerness and rum, ripped off the lashings and the sail-cloth.

"There she is!" grunted Pod involuntarily, as the contents began to show, in the candle-light. "Now then!"

Inside, oiled silk became visible. This the man's crooked fingers unwrapped. And now, as the pals stared, a picture took shape, a face aloofly smiling, with inscrutable eyes.

Ben gasped. His head swam lightly, and he clutched the back of a chair for support. As for poor old Pod, he swore.

"Mona Lisa! There she is, all right enough!" thought Ben. "Some smooth gazer, believe *me*!"

The slim and folded hands, the parted hair, the smile, the quaintly fantastic background, all were there.

Though not deeply versed in the mysteries of art, save as it concerned the pictorial masterpieces on Uncle Sam's paper, the pals felt a certain awe at sight of this lost treasure. But the awe faded quickly. There was work to do.

"And you were going to burn that, you fool!" snorted Ben, stalling for time. "Burn good money! Huh!"

"Well, if it's good money, how much?" demanded the sailor, with an ugly glance. "Maybe you guys will pay my price, huh? I'm on! I'm wise, at last! Strangers don't take all this trouble for the love of it! That askin' the course to Midzukawa was all a fake. I see it now, you can lay to that! You was trailin' me all the time. Wanted the picture, an' want it now—bad. I see now it's no cheap stuff. It must be big, or two swells in white clo'es wouldn't be sailin' down no alleys after it. You've opened my eyes, all right. I—"

"How much, you idiot?" blurted Ben, stung by the insolent tirade. At a pinch both he and Pod could handle their dukes right lively; and in his hip pocket lay a six-gun. "How much?"

"Five hundred?" insinuated Pod. "Five, spot cash?"

The sailor glared.

"Ten thousand!" he vociferated, dealing the table a smash.

"Ten—" stammered Ben.

Then he stood there gaping, unable to get out another word. His cigar fell unheeded to the littered floor. Pod wheezed and turned almost pale.

"That's what I said!" exclaimed the seaman vehemently. "I know now I got a treasure here. A find,

so help me! Well, if I'm goin' to freight my soul with—"

"Oh, can the hot air! Drop that part, you deep-water hobo!" And Ben, with an almost preternaturally keen eye, stabbed an all-inclusive glance at the sailor's face. He started slightly, then seemed to recover himself and smiled. "That's your rock-bottom price?" he inquired once again, suave and cool. Pod, meanwhile, was sponging sweat from his brow, rocking his huge body slowly and groaning.

"You—we—" he began, but Ben flashed a glance that sealed his puffy lips.

"Rock-bottom!" asseverated the sailor, beginning to pack up Mona Lisa without ceremony. "Take it or leave it; but if you take, it's pay on the nail, see? If not, I know a man—"

"Done!" said Bender, as coolly as though he had just bought a beer. "Done, on one condition. Otherwise, all off."

"One condition? What d'you mean?"

"Why, this, that's all!" He reached over and tapped a ring the sailor wore on the third finger of his left hand. "Now that's a tidy hoop you've got there, my man. Looks almost like a real ruby. Probably picked it up somewhere in some of your travels, eh? All right. Throw her in, and you get your coin and it's all over, all but 'The Rag,' eh? Otherwise—"

"The ring, you say? Want this ring?"

"I sure do!"

"Set on it?"

"Like iron! Now you know my terms. It's up to you!"

For a minute there came silence in that malodorous little den. Eye met eye, and held firm. Only the heavy breathing of the three men and the sputter of the un-snuffed candle broke the stillness. Then the ruffianly sailor spoke.

"Take 'em!" he grunted. "Picture an' ring, O. K. Show us your stuff!"

Calmly Ben pulled out a fat wallet, opened the left-hand flap, and counted out ten one-thousand-dollar bills on the table, right among the dirty dishes, the empty bottles and the scraps of food.

The sailor snatched them up and counted them again.

"Here!" growled he. "An' now—get t' Hell out o' here, you lubbers!"

Ben took the ring he tossed upon the table, fitted it upon his own finger, turned it a moment to catch the play of color, and smiled. Then he gathered up the painting and tied it securely.

"Come on, let's get out o' this rotten dump," said he to Pod.

At the door Ben faced round.

"My friend here," said he, "once walloped Spud McShane in three rounds, and he's put others to the mat, too. Don't let's ever see you again or there'll be doings. We'd pulp you now, you son of a seacock, if you weren't too dirty to lay hands on. Ta-ta!"

Leaving the man agape with mingled sentiments of joy and rage, they descended the stairs in good order and once more gained the street. A chance rickshaw bore them back to the hotel.

Thus ended their encounter with Fate in the guise of a deep-water A.B.

CHAPTER V

IT were jocund, could it be written that, in due time, the pals returned Mona Lisa to her bereft guardians in the good city of Paris, and received a reward of francs reaching into seven figures. But such is not to be. Truth vetoes it. Instead, let two missives speak for themselves. Here is the first, received next morning at the Occidental Hotel:

YOKOHAMA, To-day.

POD SLATTERY, DR. BENDER & Co.,
YOKOHAMA.

DEAR BROTHER WORKERS: Let me advise you to pull in your shingle and quit the graft. You gazebes had better square it, and get a job tending the umbrella stand in a ladies' lunch-room. As E. Z. Mutts, I hereby award you the gold medals, with blue ribbons attached to hang 'em on by. In all my arduous career, I never stacked into anything quite so soft. Do I blush for the profession? Well, some!

If you don't know, by this time, that you pushed over good 'zu for a phony, let me wise you. Three-fingered Jake and I were onto that clean-up you made in Cape Colony, and trailed you for a slice of it. We got our slice, all right, and then some!

Of course, the mission was a frame-up, filled with supes. The skirt was Katy the Kid. The parson, if you could have lamped him close, had only three prongs on his left fork. I think the confession was rather neat. But neater far was the way you "professionals" gorged it. You were our meat, anyhow, no matter how you looked at it. If you hadn't drifted in, as you were fairly sure to, you'd have been steered to it in certain ways. You couldn't possibly have missed it—neither could we.

The ring was O. K., I admit, but even so, and deducting all expenses, we're ahead about eight thou. For three weeks' work, not so worse, eh, old sports? I reckon that's all, only I missed my real lay when I didn't get a job as an actor. Also, let me advise you ginks not to let this leak on Broadway, or your reps are done for life. A fond farewell from

Yours for a touch,

BUTCH HUMMELL.

P. S.—If you feel like congrats., shove 'em back by the Chink boy, who bears you this message of affection.

Here is the second:

Same Place, Same Date.

BUTCH HUMMELL, T. F. JAKE, ET AL,
YOKOHAMA.

BEST BELOVED COME-ONS, GREETING: Your welcome letter shall be duly answered via said slant-eye saffron. I admit, right now, you had us on the toboggan there for a while. Unfortunately, however, your whiskers slipped in the room while you were sweating so hard to put the deal over. One flash of the bull's-eye and it was good night! Let us advise you to use a better quality of glue for your make-up next time you kick in against the profesh.

After that we were hep to the phony, all right. But the ring still looked good. A jeweler down on the water-front has just slid us 2,000 yen for the ruby, which he calls a pigeon's-blood. That's about 1,000 of the U. S. scads, and will get us home very nicely, thank you, without any expense on our part. Point number two is: Never sport a genuine spark of any kind while dallying with the rôle of a jolly Jack. No charge for advice.

In closing, let us advise you to examine the wad you pulled down. Take a glass to it. Rather neat scratch-work, we think. We usually carry a little for some such contingency as this, when amateurs try to butt in on the Professional Speedway.

You may well say the bundle we ragged from you was no staggerer. But even so, it's a decent package, and we're satisfied if you are. Better slide back to the old home farm, you rubes, and mow the meadow sweet with hay. It's not safe for you to be at large in the same pasture with

Ever serenely yours,

POD, BENDER & Co.,
High-Grade Specialties Only.

XVI

FLY-TIME

Wherein Is Demonstrated the Importance of Close Attention to Details

CHAPTER I

IN the back room of the Glad Hand bar three men at a table were consuming drinks and framing something. Stale smoke and the cries of busy waiters mingled with the hum of fans on the ceiling, for the month was September, and the mercury loitered near ninety-four.

"Baldy" McShane was speaking to a little rat-faced fellow who sat facing him. His earnestness was epic.

"But, you poor boob!" he was insisting, "all you gotta do is just swap cans. Both Pod and Ben are strong on Mobiloil; they'll stick to it at the race sure! Glom their can, an' slide ours to 'em, and you pull down a clean thousand!"

Rat-face shifted uneasily and drew at his limp cigaret.

"Wot's the lay?" he quizzed suspiciously.

Baldy squinted keenly at him. "Get this!" he commanded. "Ever since Pod an' the doctor bunted in from their big swing around the world they've been rotten with ducats, and nuts about the racin' game.

"They think their 100 H. P. car—it's a Howard—has

got everything in the United States riveted to the post, and they're goin' to back it in the Vanderpool race with a stack higher 'n the Woolworth Buildin'.

"She certainly is *some* car, at that! Eats a pail o' gas everytime she coughs. Takes two men to crank her, an' her minimum on high is thirty per. Maximum? Search *me*. Andrassy, the shuffer they've hired, claims she did a flat mile in $21\frac{3}{4}$ on the Old Orchard Beach last spring. Oh, she'll tow the field home all right, if—"

"If I don't hand 'em that can?" asked Shifty the Rat.

McShane nodded. "This is no penny-ante game," said he. "It's *some* pretty speedy financial operations. Pod an' Ben are slated to be the fall guys this time, sure! Just what Heiny an' I stand ready to take up against that Howard is nobody's biz; but it's more'n a plugged nickel. Are you on?"

"You're goin' to hand 'em some oil wit' metal-filings in it?"

The twain laughed heartily. "Roll back to the kindergarten, kid!" ejaculated Heiny, the other member of the trio. "Back to the A B C for yours!"

"You mean it'll be a gen-u-ine can o' Mobiloil?"

"A genuine Mobiloil-can," asserted McShane, "an' they open it themselves, personal, at the pit. They load their motor with it, with their own hands, if they want to. All you do is frame some way to rag their can away and slide this into its place—they're all alike—and then stand paws off. And—"

"When do I get my hooks on the iron men?"

"Hunt us up after the race, kid; right after we're through gatherin' the sheaves. We can't back-fire on the deal after what you know. We'll be at the Stanlaw,

with the bells all janglin', and we'll fix you right. Oh, yes, we'll teeter to the front with the thou, you bet! Just follow us, Shifty, an' you'll wear ice on your front, nothin' less than carat size. A little baggytell like a thousand won't seem no more to us, about that time, than—than that fly you just drunk in your Pilsner; an' it's fly-time now—they're plenty!"

CHAPTER II

ARDENTLY the August sun scorched down upon the bricked mile oval of the Glendale race-track. It shot fierce arrows over the "pits"—the flimsy structures where the various contesting cars, each surrounded by owners, backers and mechanics, were getting a final grooming—over the serried rows of autos parked in the central green, the moving masses of humanity inside the oval and outside, the packed multitude in the huge grandstand, and all the indescribable hurly-burly of the tremendous meet.

Noise—everywhere noise. Sirens wailing, horns honking with blatant insistence, yells, cheers, angry shouts, the booming of megaphones, the snappy orders of the management clearing the course, all mingled in a weltering pandemonium.

Now and then a swift shadow slid athwart the hundred thousand or more excited humans that strained at the barriers or stamped impatiently in the stand. For, 'way aloft, Delmar was doing spiral glides and dips of death in a Paul-Willard monoplane. But he got no more than scant attention.

For this was the Vanderpool cup race, now being pulled

off; and perhaps a million might change hands—also, the speed-devils had promised sensations, perhaps including a rip through the fence into the crowd. Who could say? Possibly a driver or two might “get his,” along with a dozen or a score of the proverbial innocent bystanders. The chance was calculated to thrill even case-hardened sports. Impatience stood a-tiptoe, peering through binoculars.

About fifty yards up the stretch from the contrôle, where already the referees were taking their places; where stop-watches that could split a hundredth of a second were being adjusted, and the checkered flag was flying in the hands of the all-potent manager, Hazelton, Pod Slattery and the Doctor issued, content, from their hangar.

Cigars burned in their mouths. Their impeccable raiment and the sensation they created as they made their way toward the contrôle, thrilled them like heady wine.

“That’s them! That’s the guys backin’ the Howard! Gee! Some class, eh?” Such comments, from many lips, penetrating their consciousness, told them they stood to-day, at least, on the high pinnacle of fame.

Moreover, their whole wad, as previously hinted at, now reposed on said car. True, they had been obliged to give massacring odds; but if the Howard only made good, only forced the field to eat dust in its wake—well, the pals’ arithmetical tables staggered in any attempt to calculate the harvest.

“*Crackety-crack-crack-crack!*”

Something swift and yellow catapulted down the bricks. A roar went up. Through the smoke-blued air a vast tumult of sound affronted high heaven.

First on the track, with Andrassy at the wheel—lounging back easily in the low seat, cool, confident, almost insultingly assured—and with the mechanician crouching at his left, the space-devouring Howard was running up to the start.

Competitors, ugly and misshapen demons, sharp-nosed and underslung, followed irregularly. Each bore a huge number on its hood. And each, looking more freakish and formidable than the last, flung up a froth of enthusiasm from its own clique and backers, as it ripped and snorted chattering up the course.

Half-way down the tangent of the finish, in a swift six that stood among the tangle of others close to the fence inside the oval, sat Baldy McShane and Heiny, his side-partner. Heiny, in a blue funk, was swearing round the butt of a badly used cigar.

"Bet you a dollar the rat's double-crossed us!" he was growling. "He's put us in wrong, that's what! See what we get handed us now by your stackin' up against—"

"Oh, can that!" interrupted Baldy, with a nervous glance hither and yon, to be sure no one was eavesdropping round the car. His wall-eyes blinked excitedly. "You've got the wrong dope, Heiny. *He's* all right, if fixed proper. You can go to sleep on anythin' he says. He—"

"Looks that way, don't it, by the lightnin' scoot that infernal car o' theirs just done? See? They're turnin' now; they're jockeyin' for posish. In a minute they'll be off—an' where'll *we* be? Off, too—'way off! An' all on account o' Shifty. Say! Here's my goat. Take it!"

He blatted scornfully; but Baldy remained unconvinced.

"You can't tell nothin' yet, you boob!" he ejaculated. "That Howard is a splash-lubricator. The cranks dip in the case an' throw the oil up into the cylinders, see? It won't take hold, anyhow, for a few minutes. That's why I thought of it. Maybe the car will reel off half a century before she—"

"Oh, that's how it is, eh? Well, that's different. But I don't believe Shifty ever got to 'em, nohow. If he had, we'd heard him bellow before now. An' if he *ain't*—well, we get it where the baby got the beads, that's all!"

Baldy's reply was cut short by the rodent face of Shifty, suddenly peering into the car. The fellow was very pale, and his unsteady eyes held fear. His garb was that of an expressman.

"Gee!" he panted, holding to the top of the door, "I—I sure have had *some* time! I thought they had me jammed, there, two or three times, but—"

"Put it through?" snapped Baldy with feverish intensity. "Did you put it through?"

"I sure did! An' it was no duck soup, now take it from me. First I had to—"

"We don't give a damn how you worked it! Cut that part. *Did they use that can?*"

Shifty nodded.

"I seen the fat guy pour it all in, myself," he declared, between gasps for breath, for the heat was stifling. "Right down to th' last drop, cull! He wasn't takin' no chances wit' nobody. He done it himself, an'—"

"Are you sure, bang to rights, it was the can we give you?"

"So help me! There was a little white mark—"

"All right. Now, beat it, Shifty. Go on, put the rollers under you, an' skid. I ain't takin' no chances this P. M. See us to-night at the Stanlaw, an' you gather. Now, slide!"

Rat-face still clung.

"Say!" he puffed. "Say, can't you slip me half of it now? G'wan! Come across wit' five hundred beans!"

"Nothin' doin'! Blow!"

"Gimme a couple, anyhow. I got a skirt waitin'—"

"You get t' Hell out o' here!" hissed Baldy, clenching his fist, which was by no means a light one. "I said to-night, an' that goes! Get me?"

"Aw, you got at least a hundred in your kicks what ain't workin'. Come on—"

Baldwin aimed a blow at the fellow, who ducked cleverly, and, now convinced there was indeed nothing doing, slid away into the crowd and vanished.

"Damn his nerve!" gulped McShane, swabbing his bald dome, that glistened with sweat like a dewy billiard-ball. "If he butts in again before—"

Crack!

Far up the course a pistol-shot punctured the tumult on the heat-quivering, dust-laden air. Suddenly the intermittent crackle and spatter of the motors roared up to a shattering turmoil of concussive violence. The mob along the fence surged forward into a dense, yelling pack. The grand-stand rose, aflutter with gay flags and emblems.

Over the vast assembly an electric thrill of tense excitement swept.

"*They're off! Off! Off!*" bellowed a hundred thou-

sand throats in a thunder of frenzy. The Vanderpool cup-race was on.

CHAPTER III

AS the cars flashed past in a burst of speed, bounding and terrible with the exhaust-fire streaming from their pipes, and a racket as of a hundred giant pneumatic riveters gone mad, the precious pair in the auto by the fence noted with relief that the long, yellow car was running third.

Ahead of it, both Vanderpool's own Versailles and No. 5—a Mercredi entered by some unknown contestant—were eating space.

The pals thought they detected trouble in the Howard, but it ripped by at such a clip they were not certain. Baldy unswung his glasses; so did the other. They got busy at once, following the fortunes of the yellow streak now rounding the far turn, sharply banked to guard against a capsize.

"Too soon yet for it to grip," muttered McShane, chewing away on his cigar-butt. "Hundred-mile run; two-mile course. Fifty swings round for the winner. May take the best part of an hour on account of not bein' straightaway. Fifteen minutes'll fix him, O. K.—maybe ten, or five. Hold on—just lamp him steady, old boy. You'll see!"

"Hope your dope's correct!" growled Heiny.

"Sure it is! Shifty saw Pod himself turn the trick on his own machine. Oh, he'll have a sweet time now in a jif, Andrassy will. He's booked for it—a sweet time, ha, ha! It'll be sweet all right! Say! Looka there, will you? Fallin' back already—he's fourth now!"

Baldy spoke the truth. As the bulleting cars skidded the turn, and the bunch of dust revealed the source of the crackling, gun-volleyings of the exhaust, the hurtling yellow body was certainly next to the last car. All save E. K. Harrington's Facto were now leading the resourceful Andrassy.

A complex roar burst from the waiting multitude, though to unravel it passed human powers.

"Go to it, you petrified snail bunch!" shouted Baldy. "Drop that saffron pup so far behind she won't limp home till Sunday! Go to it!"

Suddenly the leading car swerved, slowed, and dropped out of the race, almost directly opposite, across the oval. Little running figures crowded toward her, and a flag was hoisted.

"Tire!" murmured Heiny. "No matter; they'll jack another on in half a minute. An' there's three ahead o' the Podslat-Bender still!"

Now already the field, well bunched, was thundering round the second turn. Through the glasses the pals could plainly see the terrific rip and skid of the lunging machines as they leaped, like unleashed meteors, up the banking, and, jockeyed by their chauffeurs, slewed at a ghastly clip into the tangent once more.

It seemed but a second, and the cars were racketing past again. They had become mere fire-trailing streaks. Volleys of smoke swirled after them; the bombardment of the flaming pipes pained the ear-drums and shook the body.

Zip! Zip! Zip! and they were past, in a hurricane of yells, cheers, gibes and taunts from the raging audience. The pals breathed deep.

"Andrassy's last!" cried Baldy McShane. "It's beginning to drag already! Oh—"

"Us to the clover, cul!" jubilated the other. "Do we get it in cart-loads? *Some!* Then us for a quick fade. They'll sure bleat a kick when they tumble. They'll put up a roar you can hear to Cheyenne—an' if they 'make' *us*—"

"How th' Hell *can* they? Didn't Pod dope his own engine himself? They never piped Shifty in their lives, an' never will again! They— Gee whiz, slant *that*, will you!"

Far down the track, at the half, a confused jumble of machinery, fence, people, splinters, dust and yells seemed to have exploded. Then, as the remaining cars skyhotted on, men went running. Afar, the clang of an ambulance-gong punctured the uproar.

"Aw, only a smash!" ejaculated Heiny in disgust, deigning hardly more than a glance through the glasses. He turned them once more on the whirling dust-cloud now descending the straightaway on the opposite side of the track.

"They've got a spare wheel on the Versailles," announced McShane with satisfaction. "That makes us surer 'n ever to pull down the package. She'll jab into the mix, now, P. D. Q. Andrassay—huh! a never-happened! Lost in the discard, that all!"

As the speed-demons roared past for the third time, only the Versailles tailed Andrassy, and the pals could see it was fast eating the lead.

"Well," remarked Baldy, lowering his glasses as though further observation were necessary—"well, it's as good as over already. It's a kill, that's all—just a gory

slaughter. Nothin' to it now but to annex an' roll in it. Aw, this is *too* easy. It's like coppin' the bell off a lost lamb. No sport to *this*! Say, never again for mine, Heiny, on this kind of a cinch, even if the roll does look good. I like a decent run for it, anyhow!"


With some disgust, as though inwardly ashamed of the puerile character of the kill, he lighted a fresh cigar and sat down at ease in the machine to await the inevitable.

"Gee, but it's hot!" he ejaculated. "An' blank these blankety-blank flies!" with a vicious slap at one that had set up its derrick and sunk its drill deep in the top of his dome and was industriously boring for oil.

"What are flies good for, anyhow? Where do *they* fit, I'd like to know?"

He puffed in luxurious repose. Heiny joined him. The multitude might yell, hoot, cheer and throw fits, for all they cared; the dust might rise, golden in the August sun; afar, then near, then quickly gone again, the racing bullets might chatter and flare, leap, sway, bound and skid like insane Titans on a drunk—the two pals cared not. For their faces, wreathed in smiles, bore testimony to the delicious dreams they beheld in the curling perfecto-smoke, which rose like incense on the dust-yellowed, fervid air.

Pod Slattery and Dr. Ben, all this time, were viewing the speed-battle from their own hangar on the track-edge, where their mechanics crouched with spare tires and parts in case of any break, ready at a moment's notice to fling themselves into furious activity. The two running-mates, like those in the car up-track, were also smoking; and they, too, looked serenely happy, albeit their own car was now last of all—a fact which McShane



indifferently noted as for the fifth time the field whirled past.

"Next time round?" asked Pod, shifting his cigar in the corner of his obese mouth. "Or shall we give 'em a little more rope? The longer it is, the harder it'll jerk when they fall!"

"That's right; but don't make it too long," Ben answered in his ear. "Something might slip, after all—you never can tell. Better let go next time."

"Next she is, then!" Pod declared. He picked up a red flag with a big "4" in glaring white. This he held high in air as the thundering monsters for the sixth time slewed the far turn and skittered down the tangent with a clattering *Brrrrrrr!*

The flag fell sharply. Did Andrassy's arm signal? Impossible to tell—for the long yellow machine and its hooded Mazeppas, low-crouched, flashed by too lightning-like for close observation. But Pod and Ben nodded and smiled a trifle, and their eyes met for a second.

"He's on!" muttered the big fellow. Ben made a gesture as though scooping in something. And after this they merely watched.

The seventh time round, a vague, uneasy apprehension began to dawn in the mind of Mr. Baldy McShane. For Andrassy, instead of having fallen still farther behind, had now crawled up a few laps, and was leading both the Versailles and the Mercredi.

"Huh?" grunted Baldy, leaning forward from the depths of the luxurious upholstery. "Say, Heiny—I—what the—? Why don't it take hold?"

"Search me! Maybe—"

"No; Shifty turned the trick, all right. But—"

They proceeded to get out their glasses again with a certain quaver round the region of the plexus—that emotional region which lovers and poets mistakenly call the heart.

The next time round they began to feel somewhat ill. For now only one car, the Facto, was giving the Howard any dust, and Andrassy was pushing Harrington's machine mighty hard.

A certain pallor, tinging on the greenish, began to overspread the countenance of McShane. He mopped his brow with a tremulous hand and let the dying cigar loll in his mouth. Heiny tried to moisten his lips with a dry tongue, and shivered. He crossed his fingers and muttered something, and again peered through the glasses; then he, too, paled perceptibly. The heat, all at once, seemed to have overcome him.

Still another round, and now Andrassy was roaring clean abreast of the Facto, while the other cars trailed down the tangent.

Next time fifty yards of dust-blown bricks separated the Howard's whirling rear tires from the bounding front wheels of Harrington's flaming car.

The pals in the auto by the fence felt very sick—sicker than ever before within the memory of man.

"You—you don't suppose Rat-face could ha' double-crossed us?" shivered Heiny. "This game's wrong, somehow! He couldn't ha'—"

"How could he? His own wad depended on it!"

"Yes; but he might ha' snitched for a bigger one!"

"Wouldn't ha' dared! When we've got what we *have*

got on him! If I thought so I'd spring some artillery on the skunk! He can't put any rough-and-high over on us! Now—"

Again the clattering rush swirled past them.

"The Podslat Howard!" groaned Baldy. "All the rest lost in the shuffle. Oh, my Gord!"

Howard it was, and Howard it remained; yea, till the bitter end.

Time elapsed, but Howard hung true. Howard became a crackling yellow comet; Howard simply gulped the miles as you, perchance, gulp oysters when the "R" permits.

And at the end, in view of a hundred thousand yelling madmen, standing up on the concrete benches in the grand-stand, on the fences, on the parked autos, even on each other, Howard whirled across the final tape, and the flag fell, and in a shoving, howling, pandemoniac tumult the Vanderpool cup race came to its disorderly end.

Baldy and his friend did not witness the final agony. No; a while before it became inevitable they succeeded in clearing themselves from the tangle, sought the underpass to the outer side of the track, drove from the grounds, and at a furious clip hiked for Manhattan.

Thus, even thus, did Napoleon ride from Waterloo when all was lost save dishonor.

And the Vanderpool cup—if this was not Waterloo for them what could be?

CHAPTER IV

POD Slattery and the Doctor shoved back a few of the superfluous rolls and sheaves of currency from the table

in their luxurious little rooms over on West Twenty-ninth Street, and prepared to write.

Weary were they with the day's laboring in the vineyard; but a compelling sense of duty forced them to just one more task ere they sought their Oyster moors.

"Make it short, kid," Slat's was saying. "We can't waste even an extra drop of ink on four-flushers like *them!*"

"I'm on!" And Bender, dipping his pen in the handsome bronze well, wrote on the fine bond paper in a hand that had ere now caused exceeding anguish to many bank-people, as follows:

CAMP POD-BEN,

2 A. M. of the morning after.

MESSES. MCSHANE, BALDY & Co.,
The Stanlaw, New York.

DEAR COME-ONS:

Sorry to have nicked you so deep; but how could we help it when you were bound to fly into the candle yourselves and singe your own wings? Even if we'd wanted to get up and go away and leave it we couldn't. No time for that. We aren't running a kindergarten. If a couple of roofers breeze in, with their kicks inside-out and the bundle just falling into our hooks, and if they force it on us, who can holler?

We gave you one good run for your wad, anyhow. The first few minutes you certainly had the time of your young lives, blowing our yellow-boys, in pipes. That's because we put orders on Andrassy to lag till we flagged him. Of course we couldn't let it go too long; but we handed you all the joy-tingles consistent with safety. How did we know it was you placing down so many against us? How do we know everything? Inquire of Sweeny, or a harness-bull.

Yes, you almost had us—almost; but not quite. We don't blame that phony expressman you rammed into the game. He certainly did his duty like a little man, and had us going. Be sure you square him whatever you agreed, or watch out for us! He's smooth, all right. We wanted him to make an O. K. report

to you, so Pod really poured in the stuff; but he poured it into the bottom pan, not into the oil intake. If you want it, come get it, at the Empire garage, to-morrow P.M. After that, we won't keep it for you.

You *almost* made it, kids. Let that be some comfort to you, thinking how you nearly had your clamps on the package and then slipped up on a fly. What fly? A real blue-bottle, dear friends. He happened along and slumped down on the nozzle of the can, just after Pod jabbed it open. He stayed there and lunched. Flies aren't such great huge bears on Mobiloil, so I took one (1) taste, myself. After that, oh you primary class!

We give you credit for the mixture being an A-One imitation. Some more comfort, eh? Too bad it didn't go through.

Fare ye well, boys. But next time you slip a faked-up Mobiloil can filled with maple sirup over on a couple of speed-devils, *don't try it in fly-time!*

A fond adieu,

THE POD-BEN CORPORATION,

Per P. B.

With which they rang for a messenger-boy, delivered their screed into his hands, and then, with a good conscience and great joy, betook themselves to honest, well-earned slumbers.

THE END

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