ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

Charles Alden Seltzer's

The Stray-Man

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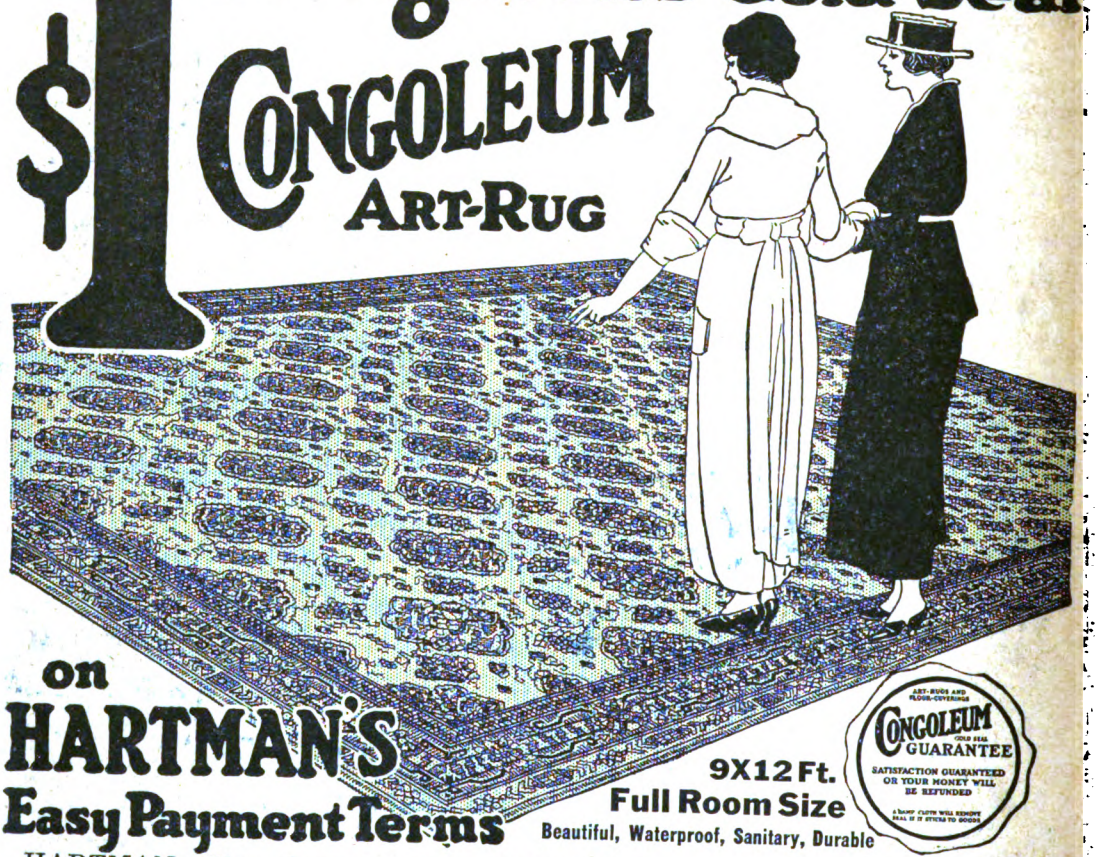

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Send Coupon Today

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CXXIV CONTENTS FOR AUGUST 14, 1920 NUMBER 2

FIVE CONTINUED STORIES

TWO NOVELETTES

FIVE SHORT STORIES

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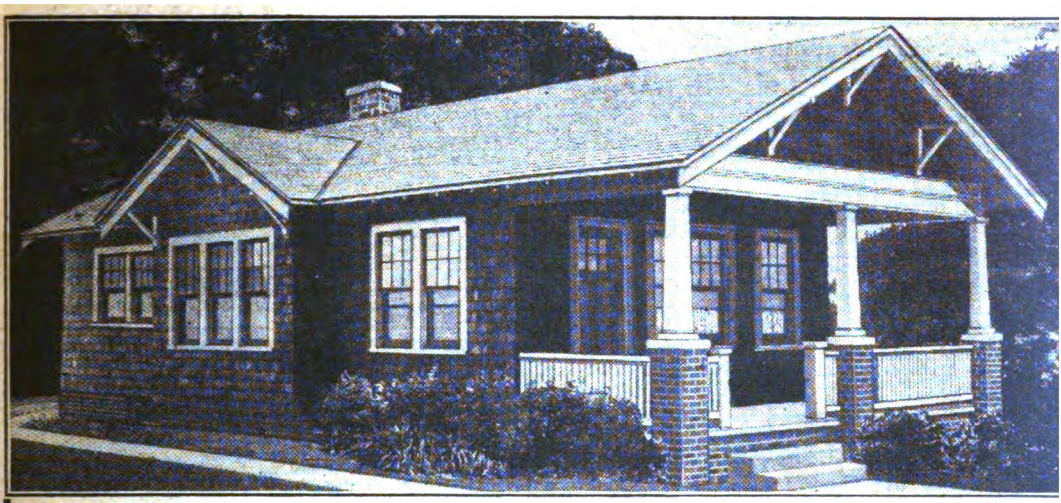

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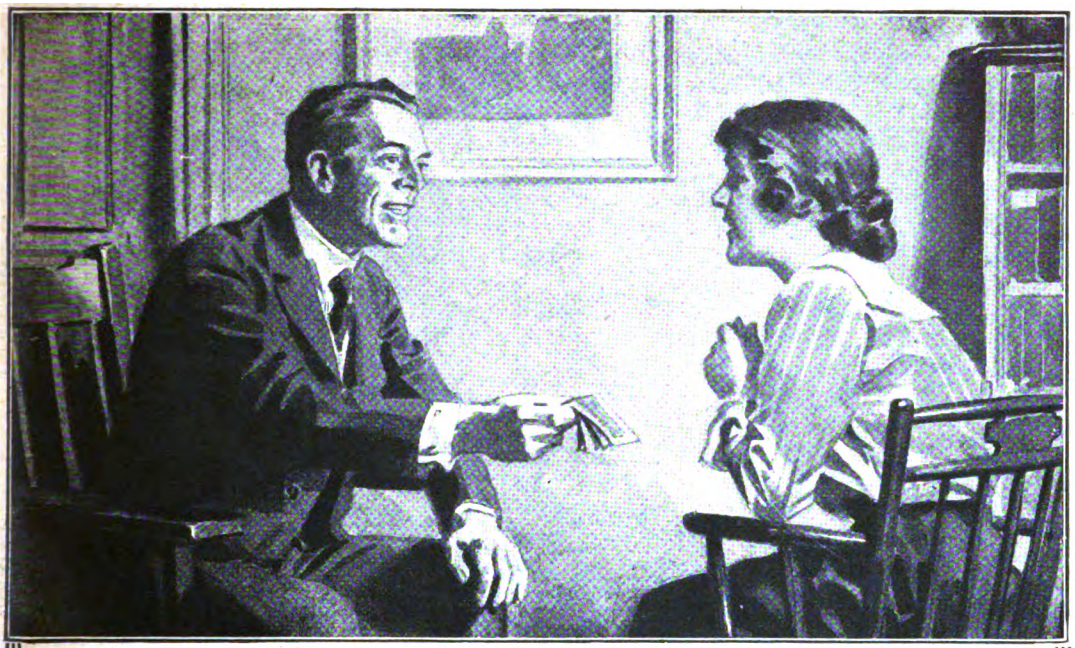

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CXXIV SATURDAY, AUGUST 14, 1920 NUMBER 2

The Stray-Man

by Charles Alden Seltzer

Author of "Riddle Gawne," "Square Deal Sanderson," "The Trail Herds," etc.

CHAPTER I.

RECALLING A TRAGEDY.

A BIG, red bay horse, with a smooth, glossy coat that shone like a flame in the clear, white light of the morning sun, stood motionless at the head of a long slope that surmounted a mighty basin. The horse was rigid, statuesque; his proportions were as heroic as the rugged lines of the primitive country in which he stood. Strength of the kind that matched the country was his; spirit which would meet and conquer the hazards of the grim, brooding, ghostly distances lurked in the fiery glare of his eyes.

The animal was facing northward. His head was raised, his ears flecked forward; and a slight plains breeze whipped his mane and forelock into fine strands that glinted like red bronze in the sunlight. His thin, sensitive nostrils were sniffing the breeze that reached him; he seemed to draw the air in eagerly, testing it expectantly. Twice within a quarter of an hour he had whinnied impatiently.

Beside the horse—leaning against him—facing east, stood a man who had not moved since he had dismounted fifteen minutes before. He had been staring eastward as steadily as the horse had stared northward, but while there had been expectancy in the eyes of the animal, the man's gaze had been level and somber.

The man was a tawny giant. Beneath the brim of his big felt hat was a mass of short, curly hair of a yellowish brown color, which looked as though it might once have been of a darker hue—a chestnut brown, perhaps, for here and there were traces of a darker color. Wind and sun had faded it, however, so that the prevailing hue was a muddy yellow.

The man's face was bronzed—but one shade lighter than the copper hue of the Indian. His eyelashes were the color of washed out flax, and the blue of his eyes was startlingly clear in contrast, though they were narrowed to slits as he squinted against the sun.

He had a lean, strong face. His jaw was slightly prominent, his mouth firm and ample, with a trick of twitching inward at the right corner, as though humor of a grim kind was being repressed.

The twitching was noticeable now; he

had not been unaware of the impatience of the big horse. He turned, moving with an ease and grace that was pronounced despite his massive proportions, and slid a capable hand along the horse's mane, caressing the sleek, sinewy neck.

The animal turned his head at the movement and gently nuzzled the man's body, whinnying softly.

"You know he's comin'—eh, Red King?" said the man. "You like me a heap, but you're dead in love with Lawler. That's it. Well, I ain't blamin' you none—there's more of us doin' the same thing—hosses an' men."

He turned again, and gazed into the eastern distance. The twitching at the corner of his mouth once more betrayed the presence of humor, aroused over the conviction that Red King thought he had ridden to the crest of the hill to watch for the train that would bring the animal's master. That, undoubtedly, was what Red King thought—if horses thought at all. And the man was certain Red King did think, for all morning the horse had acted as though he knew his master was coming.

But a desire to watch the approach of the train that would bring Kane Lawler to Willets had not been the only motive for the man's journey to the hilltop. He had come partly for that purpose, it is true, but back of the action was the impulse that had driven him to the hilltop many times before this morning—an urge to look again into the eastern distance toward a point where, some months before, tragedy had spread a somber curtain.

When he again faced the east the humorous twitching of his mouth ceased. The firm lips settled into straight, hard lines, his chin went forward a little, and the blue eyes took on a steely glint between the pale lashes. He did not lean against the horse now, but stood erect, his muscles rippling, his breath coming in deep inhalations that swelled his chest.

His steady eyes seemed to be fathoming distances not bounded by the limitless expanse of world that stretched before him; they seemed to hold a vision that was not associated with the sweep of plain that opened before him, that was not linked with the rugged crags, the lofty mountains, or the gigantic basin whose picturesque outlines were below him. It was as though the mighty picture at which he looked was incomplete, as though something were missing from it.

And as he looked he visualized a dawn that had broken some months before—a dawn of the previous summer. As clearly as though the scene were again being enacted, he watched the movements of the men that his imagination brought into the picture. But it was not all imagination, for he had seen some of it—the tragedy that had cut short the lives of some twenty men of the Circle L—Lawler's ranch—men who had been his companions for years.

Vivid in his memory was every detail of the tragedy, unforgettable were the causes that had led to it. It was all history now—a bloody page of the past which time would erase so that men would finally cease to comprehend it. But he had been an actor in the tragedy, and forgetfulness would not come.

Blondy Antrim had reached the vicinity of Willets—the little town that might now be seen through the haze of distance northward. Antrim had arrived over the Tom Long trail—that browned stretch eastward which led over the plains toward a gorge that broke the horizon—bringing with him a horde of outlaws.

The entire country knew, now, why Antrim and his band had come; and the story of how Kane Lawler and the men of the Circle L had defeated Antrim and his men was still being told wherever men congregated. Lawler's fight against the power which had set Antrim's outlaws upon him had resulted in Lawler's election to the Governorship, and had led to the correction of an evil that had been the cause of trouble in the past. And though Lawler had been supremely generous and considerate, and had fought heroically with the Circle L men, and for them, there were still haunting memories that would not die.

The tawny giant who stood beside the big horse continued to stare eastward.

Once he glanced into the big basin, where he could see the Circle L buildings. That had been where the fight had started, on the night Blondy Antrim and his outlaw horde had attacked.

The giant's thoughts leaped to that night. He had been sleeping in the bunkhouse. He had dozed off, noting sleepily that some of the Circle L boys were playing cards at a table in the light of a kerosene lamp. He became aware that something had gone wrong when he was roughly awakened by Blackburn, the foreman. He could still see the excitement in Blackburn's eyes—could still hear it in his voice, when Blackburn had shouted to him:

"Shorty! Hell's to pay! Pile out! Antrim! Stampede! They've got some of the boys!"

Thereafter, for some time, chaos had reigned. There had been the confusion of surprise; the numbing shock that had followed the realization that the night attack had resulted in the death of some of the Circle L men. And then there had come the swift pursuit and, later, the long fight on the plains above the basin.

And that fight on the plains above the basin was what Shorty was seeing now, after many months. It was what he had seen many times; it had been a haunting memory that had clung to him through many days and nights. He had seen signs of that memory in Blackburn's face, and in Lawler's. In their troubled eyes, in the paleness of their faces when the matter was referred to, as in the lowness of their voices, was evidence that they had not forgotten.

Shorty would never forget—that much was certain. Raging in his heart at this minute was a passion that equaled in intensity the bitter, impotent fury he had felt that night. It was an emotion that had endured, and the passing of the days did not take the edge from it.

The Circle L boys had been outnumbered by the outlaws that night on the plains—after the Circle L men had taken the trail of Antrim's men, and had pressed them so hard that the outlaws had been forced to stand and fight—and Blackburn, in charge of the outfit, had ordered Shorty to ride to a distant ranch for help. Shorty had gone, much against his will, and when he had returned a score of Circle L men were lying in grotesque positions on the plains where the battle had been fought.

Blackburn had escaped—had survived, rather—the outlaws leaving him for dead. For a time Blackburn had been in a delirium, but later he had been able to relate what had happened after he sent Shorty for help. What Blackburn told the rescuers had resulted in the death of several of the outlaws; for men from distant ranches had pursued them for miles over the Tom Long trail, killing some, though quite a number had escaped.

Later, continuing a relentless warfare against the outlaws, Kane Lawler had killed Blondy Antrim in a gun fight; and Shorty, who had accompanied Lawler, had disposed of two of Antrim's companions. Still later, in the Wolf saloon, in Willets, Shorty and several of the Circle L men killed several more.

But a number of Antrim's men had escaped.

Now, standing on the hilltop, Shorty was mentally repeating a thing Blackburn had told him after the fight on the plains:

"A guy named Brail Kelton killed Larry Dillon, Shorty. An' he done it from behind, not givin' Larry a show. Of course it was a free for all—both sides bein' out for a clean-up—but you know Larry was a darlin' fighter an' wouldn't take no advantage.

"Kelton must have sneaked on him—jumped him from behind—knifed him, Shorty. That's why we didn't let you see him, after. Man, it was cruel!

"When we found Larry he was lyin' on his back. His watch was gone, an' that money-belt he wore. The guy that killed him must have had the heart of a wolf. But he was a mighty defyin' wolf, Shorty; for on Larry's shirt he'd pinned a note, sayin':

"'With the compliments of Brail Kelton.'"

Blackburn's face was ashen over a recollection of the scene. His eyes glowed with a light that told of the deep emotion that moved him.

But here ended Blackburn's recital of the tragedy. Shorty could never induce him to add anything to it.

In fact, Shorty did not press Blackburn very hard. He had said little about the affair, but he went often to the hilltop above the basin, where he could look toward the scene of the tragedy.

Larry Dillon had been Shorty's companion in many of the experiences that men of their type encounter. There had been a time when the sheer courage of Larry had served Shorty well. Together the two had faced the every-day hazards that had confronted them; they had shared the last canteen of water when water meant life; they had divided their little reserve supply of food when starvation was close. In a hundred instances Larry had proved his devotion to his friend.

It was a thing that Shorty did not care to think about, for thinking always brought a strange constriction into his throat; a nameless longing into his heart.

However, he would think. He was thinking this morning as he stared eastward. Brail Kelton had killed Larry, and Kelton probably was still among the living.

Months after the fight, Shorty heard that Kelton had been seen riding the Tom Long trail, through Kinney's Cañon and on toward the Mexican border, hundreds of miles distant.

Then there had followed an interval during which he heard nothing of Kelton. But early in the spring there came a whisper to Shorty's ears—a rumor unauthenticated, mysterious, and perhaps unreliable —to the effect that Kelton had returned to a point where he was within striking distance of the Circle L.

And it had been curious with what insistence the rumor had been repeated in Shorty's presence. And invariably the rumor had been accompanied by the subtle suggestion—never couched in so many words—that if a man sought Kelton he would not be hard to find.

For Blackburn's story of how Larry Dillon had met his death had been given wide circulation in the country, and the affection that had reigned between Larry and Shorty had been a tradition. As the days passed it became plain to Shorty that his friends expected him one day to find Kelton; expected him to exact reparation for the wanton killing of Larry Dillon.

However, Shorty had waited. He could not have told why. But Blackburn, who knew him as no other man had ever known him, with the exception of Larry Dillon, whispered an explanation to Shorty's friends.

"Shorty never was much on speed," he said. "He's like one of them there large bodies that we hear about — them that move slow. Shorty ain't got over it yet— he can't realize that Larry's dead. But there'll come a day when he'll realize. Then he'll start. An' he'll move ahead. knowin' what he's goin' to do.

"Mebbe he wont move fast; but when he starts folks will know he's goin'. An' he won't stop. He'll 'get' Kelton. If I was Kelton I'd have taken advantage of the time Shorty's give him. But I reckon it won't make any difference, anyhow; Shorty will get him if he has to follow him to hell an' back again!"

Curiously, Shorty had paid no attention to the undercurrent of talk that had hinged upon his dilatoriness. If he was aware that his friends were wondering why he did not go in search of Kelton he gave no evidence of it. He knew, of course, that according to the ethics that governed a man's conduct in that country he was expected to exact vengeance from Kelton— for this was a matter which could not be called to the attention of the law — but Shorty had always governed his own actions. He would go in search of Kelton when he got ready.

He was ready now. The time had come. He might have told his friends that he had been waiting for Kane Lawler to return to the Circle L; and that because his sense of loyalty was strong he would not leave the ranch until he had formally and personally apprised Lawler of his intention.

He had waited—patiently, saying nothing to his friends. He had fed the fires of his rage by frequent journeys to the hilltop, where he could dimly see the battleground where his comrade had met his death; and during those times he had gone

over every little detail of his association with Larry, mentally dwelling upon Larry's beloved traits; hearing his voice again, noting from the pages of memory Larry's little trick of squinting his eyes when something pleased him.

In these solemn communions he had felt the tugging of impatience over the delay. But he had been loyal to Lawler. Now Lawler was coming home.

Shorty stood for a long time on the hill-top. But after a while—when he heard Red King whinny impatiently—he turned and gazed northward. Far over the vast level that stretched between him and the blot of buildings which he knew was Willets, he saw a thin skein of smoke trailing down the horizon. By that token he knew that the train bearing Lawler was close at hand.

He knew, too, that Blackburn had driven to town the night before with the buckboard, to make certain he would not be late in meeting the train. For Lawler's wife would be with him.

The big red horse was now snorting eagerly; the leathery muscles of his legs and shoulders were rippling; he turned his head and looked at Shorty in seeming inquiry.

Shorty patted his shoulder, grinning widely.

"I reckon he's in Willets about now, Red King," he said. "An' you're a whole lot eager to see him. Well, it wouldn't be fair to keep you waitin'. We'll meet him—eh?"

He climbed into the saddle. For an instant after Shorty landed on his back the big horse pranced uncertainly, trying to anticipate his rider's inclination as to direction. And when Shorty pulled his head around so that he faced Willets, the horse whistled with delight and plunged with long, smooth, undulating strides into the shimmering distance that stretched toward "town."

But the brooding expression had gone from Shorty's face. The right corner of his mouth twitched with a humor that was almost feline; and he rode with the air of a man who is facing deliverance from a bondage that has harassed him.

Once, though, he turned his face eastward, and words came through his straightened lips.

"We'll be goin' soon, Larry," he said.

CHAPTER II.

THE TIME, THE MAN, AND THE HORSE.

WITHIN a mile of Willets, Shorty and Red King met the buckboard. Blackburn was driving, Kane Lawler sitting beside him. In the rear seat, snug and comfortable amid robes and traveling-bags, was Mrs. Lawler—she who had been Ruth Hamlin in the old days, and who knew what a mighty part Shorty had played in the defeat of the Antrim band and the invisible forces which had directed the outlaws.

And it was Mrs. Lawler who first caught sight of Shorty and Red King sweeping toward the buckboard. She had seen them while they were still a great distance away, and she had clutched the Governor's sleeve.

"Look, Kane!" she directed, pointing. "Aren't they magnificent?"

Lawler's eyes kindled as he watched the approach of Shorty on Red King.

"Good old Shorty," he said. "Good old Red King. There's a pair, Blackburn. With either of them missing I should not have been able to beat the horde that tried to wreck things for me."

"An' the State," suggested Blackburn. "Don't forget that, Lawler. The State got most of the benefit from that fight."

"A big man and a big horse," smiled Lawler. "A perfect match."

"Both are unaware of the latent strength in them," said Mrs. Lawler. "Both are straightforward, direct, honest—and loyal to the last inch of their bigness. And Shorty— Oh, Kane, do you remember the night I kissed Shorty? After you had whipped Gary Warden and had thrown him aboard the East-bound? And after Shorty had got me out of the Wolf, risking his life a dozen times. I shall never forget him as he looked that night, when he stood in the Wolf facing all those men with his two guns out and his face flaming. He was magnificent—terrible!"

"I'll not forget," smiled Lawler.

"I had to jump in order to kiss him," added Mrs. Lawler, blushing at the recollection. "But I did it, Kane. I was sorry instantly, though, for Shorty was so embarrassed, and the other boys poked so much fun at him over it."

"Shorty's still embarrassed — and will be all the rest of his days," smiled Lawler. "Look at him now!"

There was no doubt of Shorty's embarrassment. He was quite close to the buckboard now, was sitting motionless in the saddle with Red King at a halt, waiting for the buckboard to come up. And his face was crimson.

Blackburn halted the buckboard long enough for Shorty to ride alongside and shake the hands of Mrs. and Kane Lawler; long enough to permit both Lawler and his wife to get out and stroke Red King's glossy sides. And then the buckboard went on again, heading toward the Circle L.

Shorty rode close. Once, at the end of a mile, he gravely looked at the occupants of the buckboard.

"Red King's been a heap impatient all mornin'," he said. "He wanted to hit the breeze to Willets. I reckon he knowed you folks was comin'."

"Red King is a knowing animal, Shorty."

This was Lawler; his eyes were squinted as he watched Shorty.

"Meanin'?" suggested Shorty, looking straight ahead.

"Meaning that Red King couldn't have come to meet us without Shorty's consent," smiled Lawler. "Are you sure you haven't been talking to him about me, Shorty?"

"Mebbe I've said a word or two about you comin'," admitted Shorty. "But I reckon Red King couldn't have knowed day an' date of your arrival."

"Shorty," said Mrs. Lawler reprovingly, "you've been on the mesa edge again; Red King saw the train from there."

Shorty's flush betrayed him. He did not look toward the buckboard.

And there was no further reference to the hilltop until the occupants of the buckboard dismounted at the edge of the wide gallery of the Circle L ranch-house, where Red King proudly underwent another inspection from Lawler. For word had gone through the country concerning Shorty's habit of riding to the hilltop to spend much time staring eastward, and letters had been received by Lawler and his wife at the capital reciting the giant's actions.

But with Mrs. Lawler standing near, Lawler spoke lowly to Shorty:

"Shorty," he said, "you're still thinking about Larry Dillon. They tell me you haunt the edge of the mesa. Stop it, man; you can't do Larry any good, now."

"No—not now, Lawler. But I reckon you know about Larry—how he had a way of lookin' at a man he liked. I keep seein' him. I've stood it almost a year—waitin' for you to come back. I'm askin' for my time now."

"Shucks!" Lawler's voice was full of regret; a regret that made his voice flat. It was as though he knew that argument would be futile.

He faced Shorty, met his gaze. In the other's level glance he saw something that made him draw a long, slow breath.

"Well," he said, resignedly, gently, "I think I understand. Your time will be ready whenever you want it, Shorty. But I wish you would reconsider."

"Larry keeps lookin' at me," smiled Shorty. "I reckon I've got to go."

Lawler bowed his head resignedly; it was evident that he realized the futility of further words. Between men there is a sympathetic bond which permits them to plumb the depths of affection that one of their kind holds for another. Lawler knew how it had been between Shorty and Larry—he measured the affection between them by his own affection for Shorty. And he had no doubt that in Shorty's position he would do just what the latter intended to do.

To be sure, the aid of the law might be invoked, the very law represented by Lawler as Governor of the State—the law that Lawler was sworn to observe. But Lawler was aware of the intense personal feeling that moved Shorty—Lawler had lived among men of Shorty's type all his life, and he recognized the elemental passion which had obsessed the man.

Mrs. Lawler, however, responded to a swift impulse that seized her. When she observed that Lawler was through—that he would argue with Shorty no longer—she moved forward and stood in front of the latter.

"Shorty," she said gently, "do you think Larry would approve of what you intend to do?"

Shorty regarded her gravely, and a flush stole into his cheeks.

"Larry was my friend, ma'am."

"But do you think Larry would want you to do what you intend to do?" persisted the lady.

"Larry stood by me when he was alive, ma'am; I reckon I've got to stand by him now."

"Shorty!" Mrs. Lawler was trying to be scornful, but was not succeeding very well. For she, too, was aware of the friendship between the two men. Still, she wished to dissuade Shorty, if possible. Her sharp exclamation was a reproach.

Shorty did not reply; he stood, silently regarding her, the flush still on his face.

"Shorty," she went on, when he did not answer, "this is positively silly! Larry is dead—whatever you do you cannot bring him back."

"That's the trouble, ma'am; Larry can't come back. He's gone—for good. But the man who killed him keeps right on livin'—as though he had a right to. He's enjoyin' himself—breathin' the air that Larry used to breathe. I reckon it ain't right, ma'am."

"No, it isn't—of course, Shorty. Something should have been done. The law—"

Shorty's mirthless smile brought her to a pause.

"I reckon we'll never get at it, ma'am," he said. "There's some things that the law can't touch. This is one of them. There's Blackburn. He'll tell you what happened to Larry." He saw Mrs. Lawler shudder, and he smiled gravely. "You see, ma'am, how it makes *you* feel. Well, you knew Larry—you've seen him around. Likely you talked to him. But you didn't ride with him for five years, noticin' little things about him. You've never seen Larry look at you with that little squint in his eyes when he was pleased with you. Mebbe you never noticed that Larry was man-lookin', an' that there was somethin' in the way he acted toward a friend that sort of made you feel like you amounted to somethin', Ma'am, Larry never went back on me."

The giant's eyes were glowing with a fire that fascinated Mrs. Lawler. She looked around at Lawler and Blackburn; saw that their faces were pale and that they stood rigid, looking downward. She looked again at Shorty, and saw that he was smiling with stiff lips. All at once she realized that any further effort she might make toward attempting to dissuade Shorty would be ridiculous—almost irreverent. Shorty's determination to be revenged upon the slayer of his friend had become his religion.

She turned from him, her eyes suddenly moist, a strange fulness in her throat. She mutely raised a hand toward her husband, then let it fall. Then, impulsively, she turned again to Shorty and grasped one of his huge hands, holding it tightly.

"Well, good-by, Shorty—God bless you," she said. Then she turned from him and walked toward the ranch-house.

Lawler followed her. When he came out again his face was pale. He walked to where Blackburn was talking with Shorty, shoved a small leather bag into the giant's hand; and for an instant covered the hand with his own, pressing tightly.

"I wonder if you've noticed Red King this morning, Shorty?" he asked.

"Noticed him?" Shorty stiffened and wheeled. And there stood the big red horse, his muzzle close to the giant's body, near the man's hip, as though he were trying to shove it under the man's arm.

Shorty's face paled. His eyes flashed; he looked hard at Lawler.

"So you didn't notice," said Lawler soberly. "Well, it's been mighty plain to me. Red King used to like me; and you tell me he was eager to see me this morning. But I reckon seeing me was all he wanted—he's got enough of me, it seems. For he didn't make much fuss when he saw me, Shorty; and since we've been here he's hung around you pretty steady. I think he understands what is going to happen. And I couldn't give him to a better man. A big man and a big horse—eh, Shorty?"

Shorty's eyes seemed to leap—they quickened with the first deep emotion he had shown. For an instant he looked hard at Lawler; then his lips moved soundlessly, and he turned quickly and threw a huge arm about Red King's muzzle—the animal whinnying at the action.

Blackburn cleared his throat and coughed as he turned his back. When he turned again he saw Shorty gripping one of Lawler's hands; heard Shorty's voice, coming with a strange hoarseness:

"Lawler, I reckon I'll never be able to tell you what I feel."

And then abruptly, as though he dared not trust his voice further, he swung into the saddle and loped Red King toward the bunk-house.

Half an hour later, when Mrs. Lawler, Blackburn, and Lawler were standing on the wide gallery of the ranch-house, Shorty emerged from the door of the bunk-house, carrying his "war-bag." He strapped the latter to the cantle of the saddle, mounted, and turned Red King's head toward the east.

As he rode he looked back over his shoulder and waved a hand at the three on the porch.

Lawler and Blackburn waved back at him—as did Mrs. Lawler. But there were tears in the lady's eyes; and she said lowly, to her husband:

"Oh, Kane—please—can't you stop him?"

Lawler silently pressed her hand.

Blackburn cleared his throat; his voice was low and vibrant:

"He's been gettin' ready for this for a long time. Only the Big Boss can stop him now."

CHAPTER III.

ACROSS THE WATER-HOLE.

IN a month Shorty was about two hundred miles directly east from the Circle L. As a matter of fact, he had traveled five or six times that distance, for his search for Brail Kelton had taken him many miles to the north and south, and he had crossed the Tom Long trail a dozen times. He had visited all the little towns that dotted the country; he had stopped at cow-camps; he had mingled with groups of cowboys he had met.

Vast distances sometimes separated the towns and cow-camps, and there had been many days when Shorty had endured the supreme isolation of seemingly endless space in which he seemed to be the only life that moved.

Shorty was taking his time. He was in no hurry. One day, somewhere, he would meet Brail Kelton. He did not know Kelton; he had never seen the man. But the name was an odd one, and if he searched long enough and thoroughly enough, he was sure in the end to find some one who would give him a hint of the whereabouts of the man he sought.

To all appearances, Shorty's mind was untroubled. He said nothing to any one regarding his errand, and he was careful to leave the impression that he was merely a roaming cow-puncher out of a job. Many jobs had been offered him, but he always rejected them for some reason or other—reasons that did not always seem to the would-be employer to be sufficient.

Always, whenever he met a man he would speak of Brail Kelton. The inquiry would not be a direct one, but when Shorty went on his way the name had been mentioned.

Not yet had he met any man who had seen Kelton.

But Shorty was convinced that Kelton was still in the country. Therefore he kept moving. And his direction was always east—until he passed through a big basin beyond Kinney's Cañon, when he turned abruptly south—still following the Tom Long trail.

Shorty had traveled the Tom Long trail about a year before, when Lawler had sent a herd through to Red Rock. Therefore the country was not new to him, and he was unimpressed by the natural beauty and the virgin wildness that spread invitingly as he rode. The country was to him nothing more than a vast hunting-ground, through which he searched with only one object in view—to meet Brail Kelton.

During the month that he had been on the trail, Shorty's appearance had changed

much. He had not traveled fast, but he had moved steadily, and there had been no days of ease such as had featured his life at the Circle L.

He had grown thinner. There had never been any superfluous flesh to hamper his movements, but he had lost some weight, and now he was a lithe, almost slender man whose grace and activity would have astonished his old friends at the Circle L.

As for that, Shorty had never been the giant his friends had termed him. He was big—huge. But it was his shoulders which had made him tower above his fellows. The shoulders were broad, heavy, muscular. They made Shorty appear massive. But many men, misled by Shorty's huge proportions, had discovered that the man could move with astonishing rapidity and grace when aroused.

Shorty's waist had always been—in the idioms of the country—"slim." That fact could be noted from the looseness of the cartridge-belt sagging with the weight of a heavy pistol at each hip.

Shorty carried a shaving-kit in his warbag; and his lean face was unmarred by any vestige of beard. And at a town north of the trail he had had a barber remove the month's growth of the faded hair. But he had not replaced the clothing which had become worn and a trifle frayed by his long journey.

The leather chaps that adorned his legs were in good shape—for they were made to withstand just the treatment he had given them. The woolen shirt, though, was threadbare in spots; the high heels of his boots were slightly run down; the blue scarf at his throat had holes that gaped eloquently; and his general appearance was that of a man whose fortunes were at a low ebb.

For two days Shorty had been heading southwestward, toward a town called Loma, which had been described to him as a meeting place for the disreputable citizens of the section. His informant had spoken picturesquely.

"Loma ain't none nice—as regards morals," the man had said. "It's likely folks in Loma never heard the word. Loma ain't a town—it's a sink-hole where all the scum in the country gathers. If you're headin' that way, you want to ride careful an' keep lookin' behind you. You want to talk soft an' polite. There's a hell-blazin' crowd in Loma that 'll salivate you if they don't like the way you hold your mouth."

Here the man looked keenly at Shorty; saw the two guns at his hips, noted the steady glint in Shorty's eyes, the slight thrust to his chin and the grimly humorous twitching at the corner of his mouth.

"H-m," he grunted, expressively; "you don't look a heap green, either. But that's a lot of hoss you're ridin', stranger—a lot of hoss. An' the folks in Loma runs strong to hosses, they tell me."

Of the significance of the stranger's last words Shorty took special note. Yet it was not so much the man's words as the way he looked at Shorty when he spoke that made the latter decide that the man meant to tell him there were horse-thieves in Loma who would not hesitate to appropriate Red King.

Yet Shorty betrayed no perturbation. As a matter of fact, he was rather pleased over the information that had been given him; for it was in just such a town as Loma that he would be likely to find Brail Kelton, if the latter were in the vicinity.

Therefore, Shorty headed for Loma. For two days he had been riding toward the town; still taking his time—slow-moving, deliberate, with a grim patience that held all obstacles in contempt.

And for two days the character of the country had been changing. Shorty had ridden out of a section of timber earlier in the morning; had followed the course of a small river through a valley which at last bore southward so abruptly that he was forced to leave it in order to keep to the trail. After climbing a long slope that led out of the valley he found himself on a level grass plain.

Again he had left the Tom Long trail; he was now following the directions given him by the stranger he had talked with—a trail that would take him, some time the next day, into Loma.

Shortly after noon he reached the end of the grass. The plains ceased; the ground began to slope, and the trail became broken and rugged. A little later he struck an-

other level, where there was no grass. He had come upon a featureless waste of world, a desert of dry, dead sand that stretched ahead of him until it was lost in distance.

The sun was going. Shorty was riding straight into it, and its level rays blinded him. He pulled the brim of his big hat down over his eyes and lifted the broad part of his loose neckerchief until it covered his mouth. For a slight breeze—heat-laden—from the south was blowing flinty particles of alkali dust into his face.

Red King fretted much. His snorts betrayed his disgust of the country into which Shorty had driven him; but he held the steady pace into which he had settled, regardless of his discomfort.

Shorty rode on, heading Red King toward the blinding disk that was now swimming low over the edge of the horizon. He had been told that Loma was due east, and that when he reached the rim of the desert he would again find the Loma trail between two hills, to be distinguished because of their similarity—"Twin Hills" the stranger had told him. Loma lay just beyond them—a distance of about twenty miles.

Shorty was not misled by the desert. By shading his eyes and squinting against the sun he could discern the shapes of the two hills the stranger had spoken about; but he knew that though they seemed close they were a score of miles away.

Shorty had no desire to endure a dry camp. So he began to scan the expanse of country to the north and south in search of signs of water. For a long time he saw no such signs, though the stranger had told him he would find water at both the northern and southern limits of the waste. But at last, at a point far ahead of him, where the country seemed to be broken, he made out several trees and some nondescript brush.

As he rode closer he observed that the trees marked the northern limit of a point of fertile land that jutted into the waste of sand—it seemed to him like a lingering remnant of virility insolently and tenaciously resisting the aggressions of death.

Shorty rode toward the point of fertile land eagerly. Red King, too, seemed eager, and increased his pace.

But water was not so near as Shorty had thought. When Red King reached the jutting point Shorty swerved him southward, following a little gully that grew deeper as it receded. Upon the leaves of the trees and brush that Shorty passed was a heavy coat of the dead, dry sand of the desert, sprayed over them by the slight breeze that was creating little whirlwinds. But as he rode farther south the leaves grew green, and presently there were no signs of sand.

But it was still far to water. Shorty had been riding for nearly half an hour before he reached it—and then what he found was merely a small pool in the center of a little basin.

The water was warm, though clear, and before Shorty could dismount Red King had buried his muzzle deep and was drinking eagerly.

Shorty got down leisurely. The sun had set; and Shorty decided he would camp here until morning. He stood beside Red King and stretched his limbs, reveling in the prospects presented by the water-hole.

After his period of relaxation he unstrapped his war-bag and slicker, carried them to the base of a small juniper-tree, and unpacked them, scattering their contents around.

From his cooking utensils he selected a tin cup. Red King was staying too long at the water-hole; and Shorty went to him, pulled him away; removed the saddle and bridle, slipped a hackamore on the animal's head, and with a rope tied him to another small tree in the midst of plenty of gramma grass.

Then Shorty went again to the water-hole. He had filled the tin cup the second time, and was lifting it to his lips with almost the eagerness he had exhibited toward its predecessor—when he suddenly stiffened with amazement.

For an instant he held the tin cup rigid, staring across the water-hole with incredulous, astonished eyes. And then the cup tilted in his hand, and the water that had been in it splashed, unheeded, into his boot-tops.

For on the other side of the water-hole—sitting on the ground at the base of a

small cottonwood-tree—was a woman. She was watching Shorty—evidently she had been watching him all the time he had been there. For she was rigid, as though afraid of him.

Her hands were on the ground beside her—they were braced, and her weight was on them, as though she was meditating arising. Her eyes were wide with apprehension; her lips half open as though she were about to speak. Her dress was open at the throat—slightly—just enough to show the white arch of chest that contrasted with the tan of her face and neck; and her hair was in a tangle of disorder, falling in heavy folds over her shoulders.

CHAPTER IV.

SHORTY RENDERS FIRST AID.

THE clattering of the tin cup on the ground at his feet brought into Shorty's mind the realization that he was permitting his customary self-possession to desert him. The knowledge caused him to blush, whereat the girl on the other side of the water-hole seemed to relax a little. It was evident she felt that any man who could blush as Shorty was blushing could not be meditating harm. She ceased bracing herself with her hands, lifted them, and began to rearrange her hair, endeavoring to coil it about her head.

Shorty did not speak—he stood watching her, feeling hugely embarrassed over the profane ejaculation that had sprung to his lips at sight of her.

The girl, working with her hair, silently watched Shorty. When he had first appeared at the water-hole, astride the big red horse, she had been dismayed at the hugeness of both horse and man. She was now amending her former opinion, modifying it somewhat in consideration of Shorty's appearance.

He did not seem a threatening figure, for all his bigness; and there were kindly wrinkles around his eyes that promised much. So she watched him with comparative calmness as she arranged her hair.

Shorty stooped and picked up the cup. The movement was involuntary, meant to cover his increasing embarrassment. But he felt that something must be done to lessen the odd constraint with which the atmosphere was charged—and so he said inanely:

"I didn't know you was here, ma'am." Then he dropped the cup again. His face was crimson as he reached down and recovered it.

The girl laughed, rather nervously, he thought. There was great weariness in the sound.

"I suppose not," she said. "Are you from Loma?"

Shorty shook his head. He had heard her question, and he had answered it; but the answering had been a subconscious action, for at the instant he shook his head he was wondering why he had not seen more women like her.

There were women in Willets and in other towns that he knew; and he had looked upon them as other men had looked upon them. But the women he had known—with the exception of Ruth Hamlin, who was now Kane Lawler's wife—had not been like the woman who sat on the other side of the water-hole interestedly watching him.

He could not have told at this minute why she was different from the others. He thought it was because he had seen her with her hair down, framing her face with glistening, golden strands. But he was not sure. That sight had made his pulses leap unaccountably; had brought into his chest a queer contraction much like that which had beset him on the night Mrs. Lawler—then Ruth Hamlin—had kissed him before all the men of the Circle L outfit.

Whatever the cause, Shorty was conscious of sensations such as he had never before experienced. He had seen that she feared him—at first. And yet he was sure that at the first glance she must have seen the admiration in his eyes. Admiration was there—he felt it; he was certain it was as apparent as the red tide that had swept over his face.

He expected, now that he had come to disturb her privacy, that the girl would leave. He waited for her to get up. He would have regretted her going; but he

knew that the strict conventions demanded such action, and he would not have been surprised.

But she did not get up. She sat there, watching him steadily; and he saw that her eyes were large, expressive, and that they were regarding him speculatively. Also, though she was at some little distance from him, he thought he could see something else in her eyes—appeal.

Instantly, aroused by what he saw, Shorty's mind began to resume its normal function. The flush left his face; his eyes glowed with grave concern and self-accusation.

"I reckon somethin's happened, ma'am?" he said.

"I—I have hurt my leg, I think," she returned.

There was no sign of self-pity in her voice; it was steady, and her eyes were direct, unblinking. Spirit of a kind that could not be conquered by physical injury was in the look she gave him. That spirit accounted for her calm acceptance of his delay in coming to her assistance while she had sat there, undoubtedly suffering.

"Hurt? Shucks! Why, ma'am—why didn't you tell me before? But I reckon you thought I'd be usin' my brain a little. But you see, ma'am—"

"Who are you?" she interrupted.

It was evident she still doubted him.

"I'm Shorty, ma'am. That's what they called me back at the Circle L." He blushed again. "My real name is Taylor Nelson."

"The Circle L?"

"Kane Lawler's ranch, ma'am; back at Wolf River."

"Oh," she said; "I have heard of it. Don't you work there any more?"

"Things got kind of monotonous there, ma'am. I rode for Lawler five years, an' I felt I had a change comin'."

Shorty had not changed his position; and the girl studied him for a time. Shorty felt that the inspection would increase her distrust of him; for at this minute he was acutely conscious of his rather disreputable appearance.

And now, aware that adverse judgment was imminent, and greatly desiring that she should decide in favor of permitting him to assist her, Shorty pretended an unconcern that he did not feel. He knew that if he betrayed the eagerness he felt her decision would go against him.

He stepped back from the water-hole, looking straight at her, the right corner of his mouth twitching a little.

"If you're hurt bad, ma'am, you'll need help. I ain't offerin' mine, because we don't seem to be a heap acquainted. But if you say the word I'll go an' rustle up your folks—if you'll tell me where I can find them."

As he expected, this ruse weighted the scales in his favor. She started, sat erect, and looked at him reproachfully.

"You don't mean to say that you would leave me here—alone?" Her voice quavered for the first time. "Why," she added, "it is almost night!"

"So it is, ma'am."

Shorty might now have made the mistake of seeming too eager to be persuaded to remain, and thus he would have aroused her distrust again.

He smiled gravely.

"But I reckon you ain't afraid to be alone, ma'am. You see, if I hadn't decided to camp here to-night, you'd have been alone, anyway."

He turned and deliberately walked toward Red King, advertising his intention of quitting the spot.

But he had not taken more than half a dozen steps when her voice halted him.

"Aren't you ashamed to leave me—like this?" The quaver in her voice had grown more pronounced.

Shorty did not turn immediately; he grinned delightedly into the western distance. Then he faced her.

"Shucks, ma'am," he said gravely; "I sure won't leave you if you want me to stay."

Whereupon, having won his point, Shorty suddenly felt his impotence. What was he to do, now that he was not to go away? He folded his arms and looked across the water at her, wondering what she expected of him; speculating as to whether there was any hard and fast rule to govern the manner in which he was to offer his services.

Would it be impertinent for him to march boldly to where she sat, pick her up and put her on Red King? That was what he would have done had he been left to his own inclinations.

But the lady settled the matter for him.

"Well?" she said, eying him questioningly. "Aren't you going to help me?"

He flashed a huge, embarrassed smile at her. The direct interrogation in her eyes made him feel like a big schoolboy, risen to recite, unprepared.

"You see, ma'am," he said, "I ain't never had no experience in helpin' women who have had their legs hurt. An' I ain't no doctor. I reckon the best way would be to get you on your hoss, an'—"

"That would be the way—if you could find my horse," she smiled rather stiffly, with a twitch at her lips which told she was suffering. "But my horse ran away—when he threw me. That was early this morning. He is probably miles away by this time."

"Then I reckon you'll have to ride Red King," he said.

"I suppose so—if Red King is your horse. Won't you saddle him and bring him around on this side—so I can get on him?"

"Why, sure, ma'am."

Shorty leaped to Red King. In a short time he had bridle and saddle on the animal and was leading him around the edge of the water-hole. He halted Red King near the girl and looked down at her. And then he saw that her face was very white and that there were tears of pain in her eyes.

"Shucks, ma'am; I reckon you're hurt worse than you've been lettin' on," he said gravely. "I'll have to get you to help mighty quick. Where did you say your folks live?"

"My father owns the Circle Star—about ten miles west of Loma. It is about twenty miles from here. I—I think I shall never be able to ride that far," she added, a sudden hopelessness in her voice. "You see, I have b-been in such awful misery all day—I—I had to walk miles and m-miles to get here—for I was so thirsty, walking so far in that sand; and the sun was so hot—and my foot pained me so, and—and—"

Shorty was suddenly down on his knees beside her. Deep lines of sympathy were in his face; his eyes were swimming pools of it.

Gone was the huge embarrassment which, until now, had been so apparent in his manner; there was in his mind at this minute no thought of sex; she was merely a fellow being in distress, seeking his assistance.

"Well, that's too bad, ma'am," he said, his voice deep and vibrant. "If you don't mind, I'll put you on Red King now, an' we'll light out for your dad's ranch. Red King will carry both of us an' not know he's doin' it."

The girl's gaze met his as he put his arms under her, to lift her up; and what she saw in his eyes made her own glow with gratitude and trust.

But at the first movement of her body she exclaimed sharply. Her face whitened. Shorty let her down again.

"It hurts terribly," she moaned. She was breathing fast, and was biting her lips in an effort to repress another exclamation of pain.

And Shorty's face worked in futile sympathy.

"I have been trying all afternoon to get the boot off," she said, her voice quavering. "I couldn't do it—the foot is so terribly swollen. I—I wonder—"

The pause was eloquent.

"I reckon it 'll have to come off, ma'am."

Shorty produced a huge claspknife. With a delicacy that softened the crimson flood that sought her cheeks, Shorty tucked her skirts in and gently seized the boot-top. The sharp knife bit into the soft leather; and with great care Shorty ripped downward until the boot came off easily. There was disclosed a foot, still small, though swollen much.

While the girl drew deep breaths of relief, Shorty, continuing his ministrations, deliberately cut off the lower part of the stocking. The ankle was revealed, red and puffed, with an abrasion of a purple hue. Despite her low exclamations of pain, Shorty pressed his fingers on the ankle, moving it back and forth carefully.

"I reckon it hurts pretty bad, ma'am,

but it ain't broke. It's sprained. An' now that the boot is off, the swellin' will go down pretty rapid."

She sat there, watching him as he wet his neckerchief with water, carefully washing the cloth to remove the dust from it. Then for a time he bathed the ankle, working with the formal and professional interest of a physician.

She leaned back against the tree, watching him; her face flushed, but her eyes plainly revealed her interest.

At last Shorty wrung out the neckerchief and bound it tightly about the ankle. Then, still on his knees before her, he looked at her and smiled.

"I reckon it feels a heap easier now?"

"It feels much better, thank you."

He sat back on his heels and regarded her with a grave smile. His hands were on his knees.

"Ma'am," he said, "I reckon a twenty-mile ride with Red King carryin' a double load will make it kind of late when we get to where your dad's ranch is. It's almost dark now. You said you got your ankle hurt this mornin'. That means that you ain't done much eatin' to-day. I was wonderin' if you'd have any objections to delayin' while I rustle some grub for us—say a couple of slices of bacon, well done; some soda biscuit, an' a tin of coffee—steamin' hot—an' made like only a guy named Taylor Nelson can make it? I reckon you'll stand the ride a whole lot better after you've had a good feed."

He saw her eyes quicken. Abruptly he got up and went to the other side of the water-hole, where he got out his cooking utensils, built a fire, and began preparations for the promised meal.

Red King had strayed off a little, and was browsing some tall grass. It made the girl hungry to watch the animal; and she suddenly felt lonesome.

For Shorty had built his fire near where he had halted Red King when he had arrived at the water-hole; and the darkness had deepened until there were black shadows behind the girl. The light from the fire threw dancing shadows on the water that stretched between her and the point where Shorty worked; and the breeze wafted to her the appetizing aroma of steaming coffee.

"Mr. Nelson!" she suddenly called, unable longer to bear her isolation.

Shorty turned toward her; she could see his face in the firelight. His hat was on the back of his head, revealing the tawny curls, matted from perspiration and the pressure of his hat-band. His eyes were squinted as they peered interrogatively at her, and there were little wrinkles and creases around them that somehow made her feel that here was a man whose impulses were warm and generous. Also, for the first time, she realized that Shorty was rather good-looking.

"Was you talkin' to me, ma'am?" he said gravely.

"Of course," she answered. Her voice was firmer, for Shorty's treatment had assuaged the pain.

"Well," he grinned, "mostly nobody ever 'misters' me. I've got so's I don't answer to that kind of a handle any more. But any one that says 'Shorty' to me can usually get an answer mighty rapid."

"Shorty, then," she smiled. "Well, Shorty, when you finish cooking that food, do you intend to bring some of it over here?"

"I was thinkin' pretty strong of doin' that."

"Don't you think it would simplify matters greatly if you were to come and help me go over where you are? I believe, with a little help, that I could walk—a little—in order to get closer to that coffee."

A few minutes later Shorty was helping her to a comfortable position on a blanket he had spread on the ground for her. And she sat there and watched him as he worked at the cooking. He had the fire blazing merrily, and its leaping tongues of flame penetrated many feet into the inky blackness that had at last settled down around the water-hole.

They were twenty miles from her father's ranch, and she was alone in the open with this big man who had come out of the desert to help her. Yet she felt no tremor of trepidation now—only gratitude for his assistance, and a devout thankful-

ness that he was not what she had feared he might be when she had first seen him as he had come riding toward the water-hole.

As for Shorty, a huge elation had seized him. He had not failed to note the anxiety she had exhibited toward him at first; he had seen the mute inquiry in her eyes, as late as when he had been working with her ankle. And he had known what she feared.

Now, however, her fear of him was gone, and she was acting toward him as though she had known him long—which was exactly the way Shorty wanted her to act toward him. He had survived the test, and she was convinced of his honorableness.

And Shorty was highly pleased.

There was little of constraint in her manner when at last the food was ready and Shorty placed it before her. There was only one tin cup, and to her went the honor of drinking the first coffee from it. Shorty squatted on the ground near the fire, eating slowly and furtively watching her.

It was the first time that any woman had sat near him in exactly that manner, in a place where the conventions seemed remote and ridiculous; and there had come to him a sort of mental intoxication that had set him to tingling all over.

She had got the disorderly hair into twisted, fluffy coils, and it gleamed in the firelight with wondrous brilliancy. He noted how the bulging waves that swooped over her ears became her; how a mass of it lay against the white of her forehead, and how many stray wisps, uncaught, nestled against the nape of her neck.

The tears had gone, and her eyes were now dancing with a keen enjoyment of the food he had given her. The bare foot was not to be seen; she had drawn it under her skirts. The booted foot, however, was in evidence—and Shorty marveled over its smallness—he could have concealed it in the palm of one of his big hands.

She was not tall; when Shorty had helped her around the edge of the water-hole he had noted that the top of her head did not reach quite to his shoulder. He could have carried her around the water-hole with almost no effort; but he had not attempted that because he had seen that she had not wanted it.

But there was about her something that Shorty could not understand. It was her manner—her way of looking at him—the way she acted. There was about her a complacence that hinted of complete self-confidence. It was as though she could trust herself to form her own conclusions, and that, once formed, she could depend upon them. That conviction was in the calm directness of her eyes; it was in the set of her head and in the atmosphere that surrounded her.

And Shorty was pleased that she seemed to have judged him, to have reached the conclusion that he was worthy of her trust, and that she purposed to trust him.

However, beneath her complacence was embarrassment. Shorty could see it. There was evidence of it in the blushes that came and went in her face; in the way she drooped her eyes at times—especially when she caught Shorty looking at her—and in the way that she kept the bare foot concealed.

Shorty wondered at that. He had held the foot in his hand; he had pressed it—gently, of course; had bathed it and otherwise handled it on terms of intimacy. And yet, now that he had finished with it, she kept it hidden.

But Shorty was pleased over the action. It betrayed the instinctive modesty he might have wished she would show; it established the fact that she considered there was a difference between his looking at the foot when looking was necessary and inevitable, and now, when looking was not at all conventional or gentlemanly.

Shorty was not inquisitive, but he was curious. She had challenged his interest, and he wanted to know more about her. Yet he knew that to betray curiosity would bring constraint between them, and he was resolved to repress his eagerness to know more.

Yet by subtly questioning her he learned that her name was Helen. When they finished Shorty deliberately set about washing the utensils and packing them away. He strapped the slicker to the saddle. Then he led Red King to a point near the fire,

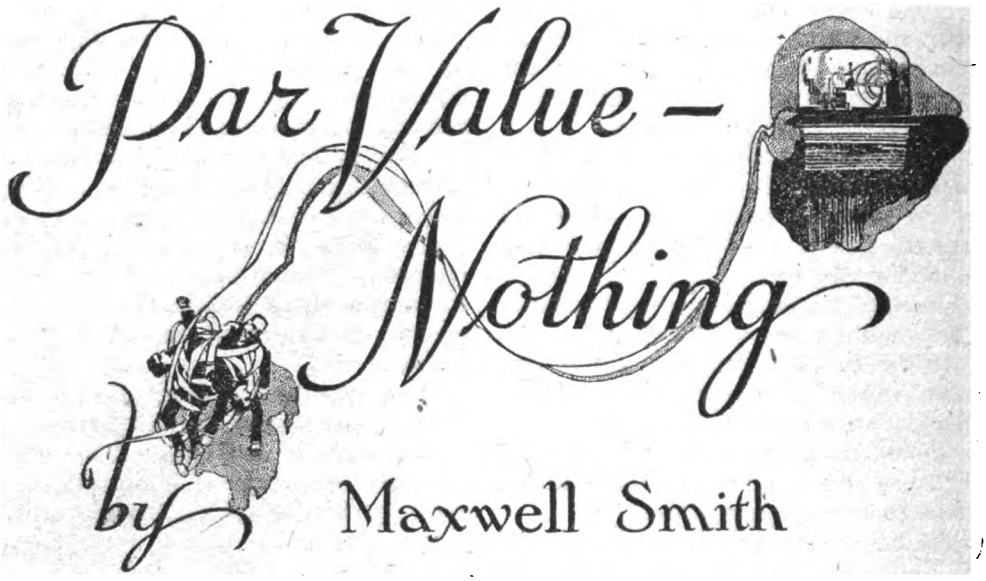
where he left the animal standing while he put out the blaze with some water. At last, all his preparations for departure completed, he smiled down at the girl.

"I reckon we can go now, ma'am," he said.

He helped her to her feet by getting behind her and lifting her by the shoulders. He was about to climb into the saddle, intending to lift her afterward, so that he might carry her in front of him, when he wheeled and faced the darkness toward the desert.

Some one was coming. Both Shorty and the girl could hear the beating hoofs on the hard sand of the slope that led to the waterhole; they could hear the creaking of saddle leather; could see, dimly outlined on the crest of the slope above them, the figure of a man on a horse.

This story will be continued in next week's issue of the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY, the consolidated title under which both magazines will appear hereafter as one.



ANNOUNCEMENT that Massinique Ore was about to declare a stock dividend caught and held the attention of Terrill T. Furlong. Right away it seemed to be the thing that he had been waiting for.

Since stopping off at Edgewood eight or nine months ago he had devoted himself to a study of the prospects there; without, he regretted, being much impressed. There was no reason for his choice of Edgewood. It was done on a second thought that perhaps it was early for him to reappear in New York City.

There were folks in the big city whose howling had annoyed Terrill T. Furlong to the point of making him go West. Not to escape the police—never; not Terrill. Just to get from under the spotlight. While there had been no tenable charge, he had come in for some deplorable publicity of the sort injurious to a man in his business. Often it turned out that way—that a howl would arise from those who had had contact with Terrill T. Furlong.

In Edgewood he had done little more than hibernate. He couldn't see much else to do. Something was lacking, even wrong, in the make-up of the town, despite its almost half-million people. Whether it was the fact that the principal business artery still labored under the rural designation—Main Street!—or that a couple of the New York-Chicago fliers didn't consider Edgewood worth entering—although they stopped at Ashtabula, Ohio—he could not say.

However the explanation might be, he was about fed up on Edgewood. It was a nice place to live in; with pretty parks

and trolley-cars; lake breezes, and Cayuga power; an impressive mileage of railroad-yards, and natural gas; stockyards that were wonderful when the wind was right, and—and bushels of other modern conveniences that weren't a bit of use to Terrill T. Furlong.

He liked Edgewood, with its absence of crowding; where apartment-houses are scarce, and most everybody lives like real folks in individual or two-family dwellings, with regular grass and trees around them.

But, not because he had no eye for the restful, Terrill T. Furlong was not given to admiring scenery unless something in the immediate foreground promised to yield him return.

Furlong had not expected Edgewood to run after him, bearing gifts. He had expected it to offer him a lead by which he might receive gifts by his own methods. All these months, therefore, he had worn an air of respectable conservatism behind the ground glass of his modest office suite in Kennicott Square.

"Investments," said the discreet lettering on his door: "Stocks and Bonds"; and there was the additional information that T. Francis Pearling was "correspondent for Morganson & Co., New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Denver, San Francisco, Seattle, London, Paris, Berlin, Petrograd."

It was a detail that the "T" stood for "Thelma" and the "Francis" would have been spelled more correctly "ces." Terrill T. Furlong was merely manager and financial expert in the establishment. On account of that not-so-aged publicity accorded him, he didn't believe it wise to erect his name too generously for the passer-by to see.

Had any one insisted upon talking with the reputed head of the concern—regarding whom Morganson & Co. on inquiry would affirm that T. Francis Pearling unquestionably was their Edgewood correspondent—that person would have come up-stage.

She was, in fact, visible to everybody who entered the offices, but she never mentioned that she was Pearling. As private secretary she did meet the infrequent clients. Invariably she informed them that "Mr. Farley, the manager, will see you," and passed them along to Furlong.

Thelma was an alluring piece of furniture, and keen. She was not a stranger in association with Furlong. When chance rather than design had landed him in Edgewood, and decided him to look round there, he had wired Thelma to come on from New York to assist in the examination and share in whatever profits might accrue.

The effort had been singularly dull and unproductive. Neither Furlong nor his personable assistant had looked forward to anything especially spectacular—the spectacular was not favored by Terrill—but they had supposed that a live proposition of some sort could be stirred up easily enough in a city the size of Edgewood. The sum total of their endeavor amounted to a few clients who risked a mild stock gamble once in a while, and Terrill T. Furlong's membership in several businessmen's organizations.

T. Francis Pearling passed from her own office, which commanded the outer door of the suite, into Furlong's. She yawned with becoming boredom, and perched herself lightly on the far corner of his desk.

"Let's call an undertaker, Terry, and catch the Empire for New York. This overgrown village only needs embalming to make it right; and a fence with graveyard chains a rattling to keep misguided strangers out."

Terrill T. Furlong leaned back, the better to appreciate her profile and the lines of her throat. Their relations always were distinctly impersonal, but he found it pleasant and helpful to his thoughts just to look at her.

There was a freshness, an ingenuousness, about her that was at once soothing and inspiriting. The complete femininity of her appearance, expression, mannerisms, was gratifying to the eye. Her ready tongue, flippant without being aggravatingly smart, gave a fillip to the brain.

"I'm so thoroughly rusticated, Terry," she laughed, "that when I hear fire-bells I remember that down there," she gestured out a window, "is *Main Street*, that it really is *the* main street, and I just know I'm mistaken! That they're not fire-bells, but cow-

bells! Makes me feel like going out on Main Street, up there by the forks at Broadway—what a Broadway!—and slumbering in the shade of the pump!"

"You said something, Fannie, but"—he was thinking of Massinique Ore—"but since we've put in eight-nine months, let's not rush on the exit."

"But, Lordy, Terry!" Her brows and lips worked together in pathetic humor. "If we stay much longer we'll become petrified. Or go woozy and race the water over Cayuga Falls! Me!" she sighed. "I'm about as excited as that mess the natives call frazzle ice that's sliding out of the lake. It's moth-eaten and falling apart, and so am I."

Though he was in harmony with her libellous portrayal, Furlong tried a question:

"What's the matter here, Fannie? Why is it so infernally barren—for us? We used to have ideas. Why none here?"

"I'll tell you, Terry," she said seriously. "This town is a way-station. It's as big as it is because somebody happened to fix geography so that this building location couldn't help but be the jumping-off place from the lakes. That made it also the jumping-off place for railroads and a canal, because they swap freight with the ships when the lakes aren't frostbitten. It's an accident, Edgewood is—that's all."

"Suppose we allow that's right," nodded Furlong. "But there's more to it. What?"

"That's a-plenty!" said T. Francis Pearling. "Let's not disturb it."

"You missed something." Furlong smiled, and his eyes, just a trifle too small in the round face, were thoughtful. "What about the people?"

"Hicks!" said the girl firmly.

Terrill T. Furlong glanced again at the announcement by Massinique Ore.

"Nope. You're wrong. They aren't hicks. Nor," he argued quickly as she scoffed, "are they big-town stuff. That's why we haven't been able to make them. They're the in-between. They've graduated from the tall timbers, but they haven't hit the heavy stride. They won't bite like a farmer—they haven't his curiosity nor his suspiciousness. They won't bite like the big-town boob because they haven't his wiseness nor his knowledge that everything's crooked anyhow."

T. Francis Pearling clasped her hands about a knee drawn up to the level of the desk. She swung her other foot, rocking her slight figure. She had respect for Furlong's judgment, although his classification of the natives did not alter her unkind opinion of the town.

"Well?"

"Well—" He sat up, his head cocking quizzically: "Don't you hate to leave 'em without taking a souvenir?"

"If they're as you say," she shrugged, "how are we going to do it? If they aren't hicks, we can't sell them their own McKinley Monument nor their stock-yards, nor—what else have they got lying loose? If they aren't big-town stuff we can't sell them the lobster concession along the Edgewood River, nor a pocket windmill that tells the time and can be used to make bread out of old newspapers provided you use an alternating current—what do you propose to hand them? They know by number every dollar they ever had. Which explains why their banks are bulging with cash."

"About the banks," interrupted Furlong. "Don't they prove it would be a shame for us to quit without getting something? This town has money, Fannie. The bank statements and all the owned homes show that. Where most all the town live in their own homes, there must be money."

"And that condition itself," affirmed T. Francis Pearling logically, "is evidence that they're in the habit of hanging onto their money."

"All the more reason why a few of them should give up some," grinned Furlong. "They've had it too long."

T. Francis Pearling shook her head. She slid from the desk.

"Then I guess I'll go before you start, Terry. You'll have to commit murder—and I declare myself out on that."

Furlong got up. His thoughts were taking shape.

"No murder, Fannie. No—"

"It 'll have to be rough," she insisted. "You can't—"

"See about Massinique?"

"Yes. But—"

"That's the crowbar we'll break in with."

"How?" She gestured enticingly. "Make me a diagram. Massinique is legitimate, and—"

"Legitimate; of course. That's why we'll make 'em fall!" He reached for hat and coat. "I'll tell you at lunch, Fannie. Come on. I'm going to New York to-night to see Borgenson."

II,

"It listens good when you talk figures," granted Borgenson. He puffed his cigar, mulling over the scheme outlined by Furlong. "It listens good in a way," he qualified. "But Dorfax is likely to squash Roxenburg all flat. Roxenburg's away short now."

"That's why we're going short. I have a sad but convincing story, Borge, for my friends in Edgewood."

"I don't know," confessed Borgenson, frowning. "Massinique is mad medicine for outsiders. Nobody's fussing with it except Roxenburg, and he's in so far he can't do anything else. How much d'you say you'll make the pool?"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand. Massinique is around 160. You'll have to carry us on about sixteen thousand shares for our quarter-million."

"You say they're hard-boiled," objected Borgenson. "How are you going to make them give up?"

"By showing them how to double their money," said Furlong airily. There was but one thing that Terrill T. Furlong could do better than that: take away what his victims expected to double!

Borgenson still wagged his head. "Bad medicine—what if Dorfax and Roxenburg get together and chase it up on you?"

"Don't make me laugh, Borge. Dorfax is after Roxenburg's scalp. Roxenburg is after Dorfax's. You know that—everybody knows it."

"But where do you get off if it does drop?"

"When anything like that starts, Borge—and it *would* be hell!—you'll have to jump like a jack-rabbit. If Roxenburg bats it down five points we'll conclude it's on the toboggan and sell actually to cover the paper sales. Then we'll buy in at the bottom, and tell our friends in the pool that we played too safe, bought too soon before it hit the bottom. Out of the difference we'll make up what we were shy between the price they think we sold at and what we really did."

"Ya-ah." Borgenson grimaced. "It's fair enough when you say it, Terry, but you admit it's crazy. With Dorfax cornering Massinique and making ready to steam-roll Roxenburg, you aim to trim your pool by selling short. I don't see it—frankly I don't see how you'll do it."

"That's a tough town, Edgewood. It makes a fellow tough just to get frozen in it. If it wasn't so damned tough I'd let it go. But it's got my goat. I'll take something out of it if I break a leg. And because I don't see any other way of doing it, I'll give them this show for their white alley."

"You'll give them some of your roll," croaked Borgenson.

"Not if I know it. If I do it 'll be a new experience!"

Borgenson remained pessimistic, though he followed Furlong's further figuring.

"It sounds good when you tell it," he repeated. "I hope you can do it as well when it comes to taking the cash."

"Wait till you see the bag," laughed Furlong, "and you'll believe it."

Back in Edgewood six hours after two days spent in New York, Terrill T. Furlong breezed cheerfully into his office. He had been to luncheon at a businessmen's club.

T. Francis Pearling looked expectantly.

"What luck, Terry?" She, too, was perked up now that something was under way after their prolonged inactivity.

"Good, Fannie—good. We'll have five solid citizens here for a conference at three o'clock."

"How many did you have to talk to?"

"Five," he grinned. "Each good for at least ten thousand dollars—probably twenty thousand. Deep stuff, Fannie, but not too deep. A quiet little pool—into which we

may permit them to bring a few friends; though of course we don't want to get so big we'll attract attention! The old bunk still goes."

"It is funny," mused T. Francis, "how fast they fall when they think they're fooling with some one else's money."

Furlong's round face beamed. "What d'you think of Main Street now, Fannie?" Personally, he didn't feel so unkindly toward the town. He intended to make it pay.

"Same thing." Her opinion was unchanged, but she, too, was willing to suffer a little longer now there was a glint of gold on the horizon. She shoved a box of candy to Furlong, her eyes longingly on the Fifth Avenue address inside the lid.

"I'd give a dime, Terry, to be going out this minute to follow the green line in the Forty-Second Street subway maze," she sighed.

"Have some candy, and tell me about our delightful associates. What do they do for a living? Have you got the right sort of fish to act as treasurer, and make sure that nobody gets into their own money?"

A brandied cherry poised on the way to his mouth, Furlong laughed heartily.

"I'm going to make a person named Lanner treasurer—Mr. Philip Lanner, who's in the portable house business. He did pretty well during the war, supplying mushroom munition towns, but hasn't done much since. I guess he'll come in fairly deep if we let him hold the bag. And—which is equally in his favor—he's excitable, and hasn't nearly as much brain as he thinks.

"We'll get him rattled at the proper moment and make him imagine he's running the situation. The others are just ordinary—department-store manager, hardware man, a bricklaying contractor, and an auto agent."

He swallowed the brandied cherry and turned into his private office, where the almost noiseless ticker in its heavy glass housing murmured the latest from Wall Street.

III.

Not the least valuable of Terrill T. Furlong's assets was an ability to pick his men. His survey of the human material at hand was closely analytical. Rather than those who had small capital and hoped to get rich quick, he choose those with a pronounced streak of cupidity.

For long, almost since he had made his beginning with the Cobalt wildcats, he had let the small stuff alone. He prided himself somewhat on that. He was not a peddler of bunk stock; not any more.

The fifty-dollar "investor" was more likely to carry his lament to the district attorney. Playing the chicken-feed route, you were sure to get some widows and orphans on your list. Toward these it has been demonstrated that juries are sympathetic enough to stretch a point and bring in a conviction. With the resultant expense of carrying the case to appeal to have it reversed, and the possibility that the conviction may stick!

The company that assembled in his office that afternoon at three o'clock therefore was selected.

Lanner got there first. Furlong had whispered in confidence that he considered Lanner the most likely member to keep his grip on the throttle.

Lanner was flattered and aflitter. He was a skinny little man, affecting a deep-chested speech to cover the scantiness of his body. Given two hundred and eighty pounds in weight he probably would have been as impressive as he aspired to be. Among strangers he might have attracted ridicule. In the bosom of his home town he stood well among his fellow citizens, who recognized him as entirely well-meaning.

Gerhardt, the hardware man, was physically the opposite of Lanner. He was Teutonic as his name, and sluggish in speech and action. He went beyond the maxim—he thought three times before he leaped.

Kennell, the auto man, was wide-awake enough, but was not overburdened with insight. He could talk you deaf, dumb, and blind on automobiles, and stock you up with a dozen cars you didn't want. But he couldn't see far into other things because all he knew was cars. This venture into which Furlong was leading him was his first effort at making money outside his own game. He was anxious to appear wise.

The bricklaying contractor, Flannigan, also fitted his name. He had made his success by shrewdness, and he believed himself able to steer clear of pitfalls, as he had done in the past.

Stanley, the store manager, was a pompous person who had not yet wholly recovered from the days when he was head floor-walker and knew everything—everything! Furlong tagged him as easy.

"The money we subscribe, if you gentlemen think well of the pool, will remain in the bank here." So did Terrill T. Furlong abruptly open the conference. He smiled on the quintette. They smiled back, and fidgeted.

"I don't care whether or not you come in," he added slowly. "I'm putting up fifty thousand dollars of my own money. It seemed a shame to let the chance go to waste. I thought some of you might like to pick up a few thousand."

His friendly earnestness reached them. The statement that their money would remain in the bank interested them.

"Quite so," boomed Stanley as the benefactor paused. "You—ah, have given us only a hint so far."

Lanner bobbed in a chair.

"Only a hint," he echoed. "You spoke of a pool to—"

"To sell Massinique short," chimed in Kennell, to show that he was conversant with Wall Street jargon.

Flannigan and Gerhardt said nothing.

"Exactly," said Furlong. He faced them deliberatively, his hands spread on the desk. "There's a fight on, as you probably know, between Dorfax and Roxenburg, with Massinique as the weapon. The stock is strong and steady at present," he became impressive, "but when the Dorfax-Roxenburg battle reaches the climax it will decline fifteen points—perhaps twenty. You perceive the possibilities?"

His hearers nodded sagely. They knew in a shadowy way how the interests work; of the mysterious ways in which these nebulous arbiters of Wall Street make their millions.

By selling "short," they also understood, Furlong purposed selling stock he did not own. That would be done on margin—the usual ten per cent. That margin would protect them against a rise in the market to the extent of ten points. Every point the stock went down would be to their profit.

Once it dropped far enough—Furlong predicted fifteen or twenty points—they would cover their short sales by buying at the low figure. Furlong explained all that in detail.

Kennell again revealed his touch. "My broker let me in on Massinique this morning," he said casually. None doubted him—except Terrill T. Furlong, who welcomed this confirmation of his declaration by a man they all knew.

"Why should you tell us?" Gerhardt stolidly asked Furlong. Vaguely he comprehended that the person with inside information on the stock market could make money. He was agreeable to share in it, but he couldn't quite see why Furlong didn't hog it. He would.

"Because—" Furlong's motion was brotherly without being overdone. "There isn't any reason except that you've been decent to me, you men, since I settled here. I have a chance to do you a good turn. It doesn't cost me anything. In fact," he was engagingly frank, "I may have a selfish idea that you in return may throw some business my way from your friends who play the market."

Flannigan put in a word: "What d'you mean, our money stays in the bank?" His sharp, blue eyes bored out of his ruddy face.

Lanner cleared his throat and swelled. This was where he came in. He prepared to accept the honor of being treasurer of the pool.

Furlong explained:

"By special arrangement with Borgenson & Co., whom I represent here, the margin put up by the pool will be held in Edgewood, deposited to the joint order of one of the participants, and my immediate principal, T. Francis Pearling. I thought of Mr. Lanner—I even broached the subject to him, and he is willing to serve. I believe you said you would, Mr. Lanner?"

"Yes!" Lanner stood up, his skinny figure puffing. "Yes. If," he smirked, "if

my friends are agreeable to have me as custodian of their—er—funds."

Nobody objected. Lanner had enough cash of his own; there was no danger of his decamping. They glanced from him to Furlong.

"Of course you gentlemen understand," pursued Terrill T. smoothly, "that it is customary to deposit a certain amount to provide against a movement of the stock adverse to the way a client is operating. Here it is no more than a formality. Under the peculiar conditions existing in this case —that is"—how truly he spoke they didn't know!—"the inside knowledge of what is going to happen having been supplied to Borgenson & Co. by this office—my principals have agreed to handle a pool formed by me among my friends without the margin being actually in their hands. I put it up to them that way," he grinned candidly, "because—well, because you men don't really know much about me."

"You are intimating, are you not," interjected Stanley weightily, "that our money will—ah, be in no danger?"

"I am," said Furlong positively.

"How d'you know?" demanded Flannigan.

"Because Dorfax intends to let Roxenburg go in to the limit before pinching him. The situation is aggravated by the imminence of the stock dividend. To save himself Roxenburg must drive the stock down. To squash Roxenburg the harder, Dorfax must let him go short every share he's willing to sell. Roxenburg must keep selling if he is to break the price. If Dorfax gets him good he'll make Roxenburg settle on the basis of one and a fifth, because each share will earn a fifth of a share when the stock dividend is declared."

They seemed to understand that. Furlong's gaze skimmed over them. He dangled the bait of big money. "If the best that we hope for takes place, and there is a drop of twenty points, we'll divide three hundred and twenty thousand dollars. Fifteen points off will give us two hundred and forty thousand. Should the worst come to the worst, and the decline be checked quickly, we can figure on sixteen thousand dollars for every point down."

Lanner exhaled noisily. Gerhardt blinked woodenly. Kennell pursed his lips knowingly. Stanley frowned thoughtfully. Flannigan peered shrewdly. Terrill T. Furlong laughed inwardly. They made a great picture for him, these five!

Finally they broke out of their semi-trance. A pertinent query commended itself. Gerhardt voiced it gutturally:

"How much you was figuring on?"

"Sixteen thousand share," said Furlong promptly. "If we can get enough in the pool to cover it."

"Sixteen thousand shares," repeated Stanley. "That is—"

"A pool of a quarter of a million," nodded Furlong, "of which I subscribe fifty thousand dollars."

His check-book came into action. He tossed the check, drawn on Edgewood Bank, to Lanner. "That opens the pot—no, it doesn't. There's one thing I've neglected to mention."

"A-ah!" Stanley leaned on an elbow and bent searching eyes on Furlong. His exclamation, smugly intoned, implied that they were about to discover the catch in the deal. The others felt something like that, too. They congratulated themselves that they were not committed.

"You are business men—all of you." Terrill T. Furlong's wave embraced them. "So am I. I told you that aside from friendship all I hoped for out of this was to expand my business. That is not quite true. There's the matter of my commission."

"Oh, is that all?" Lanner breathed relief. The check for fifty thousand dollars was very convincing. He had been afraid of some serious snag.

"Of course"—Kennell savvied commission—"that is understood."

"What per cent, d'you think?" asked Flannigan pointedly.

"Two and a half per cent up to two hundred and forty thousand; five per cent over that," said Furlong briskly. "I pay the brokerage."

"Fair," adjudged Stanley. He had been mistaken about a joker. Furlong's demand was not outrageous. "Eminently fair."

"I think so," endorsed Lanner with a

flourish that brought out his check-book, "to the extent of—er—of fifty thousand dollars. Gentlemen—there is now in the pool one hundred thousand dollars." He laid his check beside Furlong's. It would be secure enough. Wouldn't it remain in his own hands?

Lanner waited receptively. Furlong let him lead. He could not have wished for a better ally than Lanner. The little man had been well chosen.

The others, however, were not so precipitate. They glanced one at another. Lanner's action encouraged them, but they were backward chiefly because they could not afford to come in so strongly as Lanner and Furlong. Each wished that one of his companions would subscribe a more reasonable sum. None wanted to look like a piker. Each hoped that he would find it possible to outdo the other.

"Come, come, gentlemen," said Lanner reproachfully. He smiled at Furlong, who sat back apparently but little interested.

"Think on it overnight," suggested Furlong.

"I don't consider that necessary," said Lanner. "The proposition is plain and aboveboard. It calls for action. It is virtually a sure thing. I don't see how we can lose more than a few dollars should anything unforeseen occur."

The four shuffled awkwardly. They felt that they were being made to appear cheap in the rôle of obstructionists.

"Who puts up the rest of the cash?" inquired Flannigan.

Furlong looked surprised. "I thought that we could raise it among ourselves—the six of us."

The compliment he paid them was pleasing. It is gratifying, warming, to have it taken for granted that you can produce fifty thousand dollars or so without trouble. It netted Stanley.

"I—ah," he was apologetic, "I'm afraid I can't go very heavy at the moment. Money tied up in a real estate development, you know."

"There's no specific sum necessary, of course," said Furlong casually. "It's simply that the bigger the pool the bigger the returns."

Flannigan didn't bother to lie. "Fifteen thousand's my high figure," he said bluntly.

"I can't go more than ten," said Kennell.

"I imagine I have about fifteen thousand loose," added Stanley.

"One hundred and forty thousand dollars," announced Lanner. "And you, Gerhardt?"

"In the morning," said the hardware man. "I dunno—mebbe—" His features set solidly.

Lanner began to urge him.

"No, no, Mr. Lanner," Furlong objected. "We mustn't attempt to persuade any one. It's a case where each must use his own judgment. And I wish to say now that should any one desire to withdraw," he leaned over the desk solemnly, "I shall take over his interest at any time. I have a certain responsibility inasmuch as it is at my instigation that you men are going into this. I am backing my word with my money."

Lanner and Kennell openly applauded this conspicuous generosity. Stanley made a mental reservation to take advantage of it should affairs become doubtful. Gerhardt almost was won over on the spot.

"In the morning, then, we'll organize," said Furlong. "Mr. Lanner will retain charge of the money, depositing it to the joint order of himself and T. Francis Pearling. Mr. Pearling, by the way, is in New York City, keeping an eye on the situation. I'll wire him that the pool has been formed."

He stood up, watching them with a veiled keenness. He was prepared for questions about T. Francis Pearling. But none came, for, as he had hoped, his coinvestors looked upon the absence of Pearling as a further safeguard to their money. How could the cash be withdrawn from the bank if Pearling were not present to sign the order with Lanner?

"That's about all, I guess," concluded Furlong, "unless you happen to think of a friend or two who'd care to share with us. If you do, invite them to come here in the morning. They'll have to decide quickly, so that we can advise New York how far to go. The raid on Massinique may start at any moment."

That night Terrill T. Furlong had a person named Mike whom he had brought from New York, install an ordinary clattery ticker in his private office in place of the glassed-in noiseless machine. The latter was put into a third office in the suite, for which Furlong never before had found purpose. Between the two machines Mike connected certain wires.

"Get in early in the morning, Mike. You've got the idea straight?"

"I'll admit it," said Mike. "Lemme look over them wires again."

IV.

FROM Furlong's point of view Lanner continued to perform splendidly. Kennell, grasping his first opportunity to let his friends see that he had an inside track on the stock market, was an efficient second. Between them they brought into the pool a dozen men who contributed an aggregate of eighty thousand dollars. Flannigan and Stanley introduced others who subscribed forty thousand. Gerhardt alone stayed out.

By nine o'clock the entire membership met in Furlong's office. He communicated the latest information about Massinique. Seemingly that was contained in a code telegram just received.

"Here, gentlemen," he chuckled, indicating the message, "is confirmation of what I was assured would take place."

They crowded to see the telegram. It was no more than a meaningless jumble of words to them; meaningless but for the appearance in it of repeated references to Dorfax and Roxenburg, who, Furlong had explained, headed the rival interests contending for control of the stock. These were names known to every one.

Furlong addressed the company briskly.

"Both sides now are playing for our benefit," he declared. "The Dorfax people, who already own most of Massinique, are going to let it be hammered down on the initial impulse of the Roxenburg short interest. When the Roxenburg crowd have been made to believe that they have the stock smashed, Massinique will turn and knock them galleywest. There won't be enough of the stock lying loose to shake a stick at. To make settlements they'll have to borrow stock, and—Heaven help them when they try to do that! Dorfax 'll see that there isn't any to be borrowed! The stock will skyrocket, and he'll be in a position to accept settlement only on his own terms."

Furlong looked at his watch. It was three minutes to ten. He stepped to the door and addressed Fannie:

"Get Borgenson on the long distance, please." He faced his suckers again.

"If any one wants to drop out," he said seriously, "now is the time. We begin trading at the opening of the market. We're equipped to sell approximately sixteen thousand shares. But we'll have to do it fast to obtain full benefit of the decline before Dorfax calls a halt to it."

There was a rustling among the score of men. One of the more timorous voiced a thought they all were struggling with:

"How—how can we be sure we'll escape being caught with the Roxenburg people?"

Furlong laughed confidently. "Because we'll get out before the situation becomes too dangerous. You see"—his tone was easy, patient—"we're going in to take a profit. Roxenburg is in to pound Massinique. He'll see that the support offered by Dorfax is failing to hold up the stock. Dorfax himself will make it fail. With the bottom apparently falling out of Massinique, Roxenburg will push his raid until too late, when he'll find himself in far over his head. Meanwhile"—Furlong stepped to the ticker on which the opening quotations were showing—"we'll be out and sitting back figuring profits."

"But"—several joined in asking this—"how will we make our settlements? If Roxenburg can't get stock, where will we get it?"

"Where?" supplemented another, as Furlong was silent with the tape running through his hands. "And—what 'll happen to us if Roxenburg buys our offerings? He might do that, mightn't he, to reduce his own short commitments?"

"Massinique opened down one-half," said Furlong. He answered the last interrogator: "Roxenburg might do that if he's

crazy. Isn't he trying to break Massinique? Wouldn't he help it to higher levels if he bought? He'd be playing right into Dorfax's hands."

That was simple enough of comprehension. They began to explain it one to another.

"Massinique is down an eighth from the opening," said Furlong.

T. Francis Pearling rapped on the door, and entered.

"Mr. Borgenson on the wire." She surveyed the men who were about to pay for Edgewood's financial inhospitality toward Terrill T. Furlong. The fractional drop in Massinique had them bubbling with excitement. Her eyes danced to Furlong's as she withdrew.

Furlong's conversation with Borgenson was listened to eagerly by the amateur gamblers. They gathered that "the movement already was under way," and that ten thousand shares were being sold immediately for their account.

"Sell six thousand more," instructed Furlong. "There's no change in the situation since you wired? No? The Dorfax people are letting things go? Good! Keep in close touch with Pearling every minute, Borgenson. He's on the inside—he'll let you know what to do. Tell him not to take any chances. We'll be content with a smaller profit should any complication arise. Yes. We leave it to you folks on the ground. What's that? Of course—yes—we understand that there will be some fluctuation. Yes!"

That final "Yes!" was in reply to Borgenson's guarded query about whether the full quarter million had been raised.

With appropriate but subdued exultation Furlong sat up dramatically, his hand resting on the telephone.

"You heard what I said to Borgenson. It conveyed what he told me—that the Roxenburg raid is on, and that we already have sold ten thousand shares."

A huzzah was issuing from their throats when a cry from those at the ticker squelched it.

"Massinique is going up!"

Furlong did not stir. He gazed tolerantly at the alarmists.

"How much?" His calm quieted others who were pressing forward to read the bad news for themselves. They looked at him instead.

"Up to 158⅝," quoted a man at the ticker.

"A whole eighth!" Furlong was derisive. "You'll have to be prepared for worse than that. Dorfax, remember, is making a bluff at supporting his stock. He can't let it slide too easily. It might get away from him, and actually go to pieces."

Some were glancing doubtfully at Lanner. He still had their checks.

Kennel stepped into the breach. "I get you," he exclaimed. "That's what you meant when you spoke of fluctuation—just before you rang off!"

"That's it." Furlong considered Kennell's perspicuity wonderful! "And—oh, yes: somebody asked where we would get stock to make settlements. We won't need stock. We'll buy in again soon—so soon as there is the slightest sign that the downward trend is slowing. When Roxenburg settles with us—it will be Roxenburg, because no one else is selling; they're all afraid of it—we'll collect at the high mark for the reason that he won't be able to deliver. We'll get him when Dorfax gets him.

"If we can't cover ourselves beforehand we'll pay on the same basis. Understand?" Whether they did or not he elaborated: "Roxenburg will have to pay us at least the same price as we have to pay when we make good what we're short. Having bought in below our original selling price, we'll be ahead the difference between these figures. Ahead sixteen thousand dollars for each point difference."

They nodded understanding. It was simple enough. The stock market wasn't so intricate, after all.

"Now to prove our good faith," went on Furlong, "we'll put the cash into the bank. I promised Borgenson to wire him when the deposit is made. He's carrying us at present on our say-so. Ready, Lanner?"

Lanner was ready; also agitated. He felt the burden of responsibility! He had

two hundred and sixty thousand dollars in his care. These men trusted him with it!

"Any par-par-particular bank?" he quavered, his little body atremble.

"None," said Furlong. He slapped Lanner on the shoulder. Lanner's stammering had given him another shot for the suckers: "There is something else to count on. The stock dividend will be declared in two days. I'm certain Borgenson can arrange for us to cover before then. Roxenburg will be in so deep he won't be able to do as much. So we'll have him on upward of three thousand more shares! The dividend of one-fifth of a share on the commitments we hold!"

Leaving them that additional tidbit to dream over, he took Lanner by the arm. The joint treasurer needed a pilot!

"One parting word, gentlemen," cautioned Furlong. "Don't become excited if the stock moves up. Think that Dorfax has to make it appear that he is fighting tooth and nail to protect his interests. The more plausibility there is to his seeming defeat the greater will be the effort of the shorts to smash Massinique—the deeper they will go, to his benefit *and ours!*"

The door closed on him and Lanner.

Terrill T. Furlong worked snappily now. He had to. Otherwise, he might have to get a court order to release the cash. He had a constitutional dislike of courts.

Passing through the outer office, he winked at T. Francis Pearling. And she winked back.

At a bank a few steps down the street to which he hustled Lanner, Furlong got to the cashier without delay. Gently but firmly he removed the checks from Lanner's almost nerveless clutch.

"These go to the joint account of Mr. Lanner and T. Francis Pearling," he stated crisply. "It is essential that they be certified immediately. You realize that this is a matter of plain business precaution?"

Lanner mumbled that he realized.

Furlong resumed on the cashier: "How long will it take? The banks are all within a couple of blocks."

The banker knew Lanner. It was an odd transaction, but it was none of his business. He asked only one question:

"You're simply clearing this through us?"

"Yes. How soon?"

"It's ten thirty-five. Before eleven fifteen."

"That 'll do." Furlong turned them over and took the credit slip. He saw the messengers start with the checks.

"Here, Lanner," he prodded his companion, "get your fist on that signature card."

Bewildered by the pace that was being set—he didn't catch the reason for Furlong's sudden rush—Lanner put his signature on record.

"What's call money in New York?" asked Furlong. He didn't care, but reckoned the question might give a misleading hint to the banker.

"Six, and going up. Good time to get in. There's a battle on Massinique, and—"

"Yes; I know." Furlong shut him off. "My phone number. Notify me when you get the last of these checks certified. Let's get back, Lanner."

He propelled the half-dazed little man from the cashier's office. A step outside he swung back. While Lanner was collecting his wits, Furlong laid a paper in front of the cashier.

"Forgot that," he said. "Power of attorney from Pearling."

He was out and had Lanner by the elbow headed for the street ere that budding financier was aware that he had been left alone.

On the way to his office he gave Lanner hardly a chance to think, far less talk. Himself, he talked so rapidly and in such a tone of conviction that Lanner's impressions of the few minutes in the bank were hopelessly jumbled. Especially did Furlong recall and thrum into Lanner's brain that the banker had commented on Massinique. He did more than that. He made Lanner recollect that the cashier had mentioned the desirability of being short Massinique Ore!

Reentering his office, they encountered a murmuring from the inner room.

"They've been asking for you," said T. Francis Pearling.

"All right?" It was an inquiry, not an

acknowledgment. She answered with a nod.

He swept the befuddled Lanner onward. A hand on the door-knob, he pulled up.

"Say, Lanner," he laughed softly, his face mellowing with surprised discovery; and he spoke softly so that his voice did not penetrate into that inner room: "Do you know that this pool isn't committed for a dime to Borgenson & Co.?"

"Eh?" Lanner stood open-mouthed. Again he missed the significance.

"That's a real joke!" Furlong guffawed. "We're being carried for a quarter of a million dollars, and we haven't put up a dime!"

Lanner stared. Furlong was insane!

"We've put up two hundred and sixty thousand dollars," he choked. "We—"

"Sure we have," snickered Furlong; "but, man, we haven't signed the contract with Borgenson!"

"Eh! Ha-ha!" Lanner laughed feebly. It was a joke!

Furlong steered him to the girl's desk.

"Where's that contract? It should have been mailed last night. We'll get it out at once."

He took the papers she handed him.

"The usual contract, Lanner, on a margin transaction," he remarked. "Between Pearling and yourself as joint treasurers of the pool, and Borgenson. Pearling and Borgenson have signed. Read it, and put yours there."

Lanner read. It was all right. The signatures of the others were formally witnessed by a notary. He could have observed that Borgenson's name had been appended the day previous, in New York City, and Pearling's this same day in Edgewood; but he didn't.

Lanner signed. He was laying down the pen when Furlong stayed him.

"In duplicate, Lanner." Terrill L. Furlong slid the second document half-way from beneath the first, revealing the signatures of Pearling and Borgenson, duly witnessed.

Lanner signed. Furlong took the papers. He again took Lanner's arm.

"There's a notary along the hall." He trailed Lanner with him.

The notary was a woman.

"Swear the Lanner signature," said Furlong.

Languidly she drew her seal across the desk. In the act of shoving a Bible to the affiant, she halted: "Swear or affirm?"

"Any damn thing! We're in a hurry," snapped Furlong. Then to cloak his impatience he joked: "You don't mind cussing, do you, Lanner?"

Lanner didn't. Just then he was without fixed conception of his likes and dislikes. He swore to both papers.

Furlong's haste became less pronounced. His mouth was drawn tighter, his eyes narrower, as he stopped beside T. Francis Pearling. From the inner office came a louder murmuring than before.

"They've been asking for you," said Fannie.

"All right?" Again it was an inquiry, not an acknowledgment. She answered with a nod.

"Put these into the mail—eleven fifteen." Furlong dropped the documents before her. She had an envelope addressed. "Eleven fifteen," he repeated. It was eleven o'clock. "Better take them to the post-office."

As he and Lanner passed into the room where the murmuring of voices now drowned out the metallic clatter of the ticker, T. Francis Pearling went out into the corridor. She went to the bank, not to the post-office.

V.

It was an excited and nervous crew that Terrill T. Furlong and his unsuspecting aid came upon. Ten of them started talking at him.

"Wait—wait!" he begged. "One at a time."

They persisted in talking in bunches. He pushed through them to the ticker. A glance at the tape, and his eyes ranged over them. Stanley was fairly typical of the crowd. He was sweating, and looked ill!

Furlong frowned. His brows rose, then resettled into the frown. Judicially he scanned the tape.

"Um!" said he weightily.

They fell silent, breathlessly silent, packing around him.

"Um!" He dwelt another minute on this further sententious and illuminating utterance.

The latest recorded transaction in Massinique Ore was at 164! It had eased upward steadily by fractions from the low of 159½, which had been a bare one-eighth below the opening. At that moment the pool bore a loss of about sixty-four thousand dollars, assuming it had sold around 160.

In a crisis like this Terrill T. Furlong scintillated. He could talk against time with his accustomed atmosphere of confidence, although under stress. He did so now, for he had to prevent a panic already more than incipient.

"An instant, please—be patient! Lanner, put in a rush call for Borgenson." It was advisable to keep Lanner occupied. There was no sense in having him refer to the signing of the contract. Lanner did as he was bid.

Furlong's audience rustled, restive and fearful. Minutes, valuable and perhaps fatal minutes, were fleeting.

Massinique advanced another half point. That aroused fresh clamor. Furlong quelled it with a gesture.

"There is no cause for nerves," he asserted. His countenance was disarming. "I have fifty thousand dollars at stake. Am I worried? Lanner has as much. Is he worried? We—"

The resonance gone from his voice, Stanley came near to whining: "You said you would buy out any one—"

"I did, and my money always backs my word!" Furlong glared contemptuously at Stanley. "It's quitters such as you who ruin the brightest prospects. Gentlemen," he included all but the welcher in a compelling motion, "we must hang on. If we buy at this juncture we'll wipe ourselves out! Our quarter million is a trifle compared with the millions in this fight.

"But mark my words, gentlemen, it is known down there"—he waved in the general direction of Wall Street—"that interests besides Roxenburg are on the short side. They don't know our resources, but the Street does know that we are there! If we shift our course in a panic"—he had the attention if not the faith of his hearers, so, stalling for time, he slowed his speech—"if we shift our course now in a panic, instead of these temporary advances, instead of moving up by fractions, Massinique Ore will leap clear into the clouds!"

He measured gaze with them one by one. Under that half-humorous, half-pitying contempt in his face, each hesitated to be a quitter!

"We knew there would be an advance," he clicked out through his teeth. He dropped a bombshell that chilled them. "It probably would be useless to attempt to buy now," he said coldly. "If a dangerous advance is under way, I doubt whether we could get our covering orders executed in time. Our sole chance is to sit tight and pray that Dorfax hasn't decided to massacre the shorts!" He spun on the man through whose fingers the tape was squirming: "What's the last?"

A shake of the head was all he got. Massinique evidently was not being traded in violently.

The phone rang. Furlong noted the time. Eleven fourteen. His jaw hardened while he listened to Borgenson.

"The situation is O. K., you say?" he responded. "Roxenburg is still selling? All right!" It was neither an inquiry nor an acknowledgment, but an emphatic: "I'll hold this wire open so we can keep in touch."

Unhurriedly he signaled the operator, and instructed her not to disestablish his connection with New York.

A wail sounded from Stanley. "It's up again—164⅜!"

Kennell chewed his lips. Flannigan looked whimsically at his knotty fist. Lanner slouched in a chair, spineless, but endeavoring to seem at ease. Covertly they watched the others whom they had persuaded into this nightmare. With varied expression the others watched them. And despite these individual preoccupations all managed to watch Furlong! Who in turn, by some occult process, appeared to have an eye for all!

There was a mute tension in the room. It snapped when T. Francis Pearling poked her fair face into the picture. Her eyes were brilliant, her cheeks alive with a brighter color.

"All right!" said she. It was both a message and a question. Furlong nodded. She was gone.

"Yes?" Furlong rivetted to the phone. "What!" His shout reechoed. "Then cover—for God's sake, cover! You can't? Why? You're trying to, but can't! What's the last? What! 169—170—172—Wait!"

His face a clever study of amazement and unbelief, he turned to the men who were stunned by the figures he had spoken.

"The last quotation there," he commanded.

"There's been nothing for— Oh, my God!" breathed Stanley. "It's 165½ and—" Massinique Ore was coming over like a rocket. The ticker was moving faster, too. With doom hanging over them they read in sobbing unison—

"166—167—168—169—"

"That's away behind," said Furlong dryly. "It's now—" he spoke into the phone: "What? 175—177—"

Ominously somber, he put down the phone.

"Gentlemen, we're up against it," he said grimly. "Massinique is climbing into the sky. Roxenburg is rushing to cover, but can't buy. Neither can we! We're wiped out! We're lashed to the mast! We can't settle until some one sells. Dorfax has the stock cornered, and he isn't selling!"

Flannigan came coolly to the front. His fist hovered menacingly near Furlong's face.

"I've a heart to let you have it," said Flannigan. "You damned crook!"

Furlong stood his ground. He smiled pleasantly into the ruddy face with its threatening blue eyes.

"I like you, Flannigan—more than the rest, though you're inclined to be rough. You don't whine. I'll see whether we can't pull out your—what was it, fifteen thousand?"

"Fifteen thousand," grinned Flannigan wryly, "now of no par value! If you weren't a crook I'd like you."

Furlong raised his voice. Flannigan alone admired his effrontery.

"You men better start getting cash together," warned Furlong. "We're short sixteen thousand shares—plus the dividend unless we succeed in covering mighty rapidly. It's pro rata on the loss, as it would have been on the profits."

"Profits—hell!" exploded Flannigan, while the others gaped in fright over this new disaster. "There never was a show at profits."

"Ask your lawyer," shrugged Furlong. "Borgenson holds our contract. He sold short for us. He sold for our account stock we didn't own. We gave no stop-loss order. It isn't his funeral. He can recover—"

"Mebbe he can and mebbe he can't," said Flannigan. "We'll see a lawyer, sure enough—to get an injunction that 'll keep your hands off that money."

"Do that," approved Furlong. "I wish you luck. Do it—and you admit your liability. I'd watch my step, though."

Flannigan made to depart. It was futile to argue here. They trooped after him. His idea about an injunction was a thin ray of hope.

"Of course the money's in the bank," moaned Lanner. "I saw it put in. They can't touch it without my signature. I—"

"Flannigan!" Furlong sent a parting shaft: "You remember that old one?" He chanted maliciously:

> Him that sells what isn't hisn,
> Either pays—or goes to pris'n!

The office was clear of the score of disillusioned and disappointed gamblers who had believed they were in on a sure thing and had found their supposition correct—that it was sure for the other fellow!

Terrill T. Furlong and T. Francis Pearling radiated joy and contentment.

"Fetch Mike, Fannie. He has to make a quick clean-up before they come roaring up here again."

"There's no come-back, Terry, about the money?" Her brows were tracily troubled. "How about an injunction?"

"Nothing doing! There's nothing to enjoin, is there? Fetch Mike."

T. Francis Pearling summoned Mike from the third room of the suite. He carried a basket of ticker tape and the unused balance of the roll. Furlong was stripping the tape from the ticker in his own office.

"Cut out the loop quick 's you can, Mike. I knew I'd have use for that noiseless machine some day! Good stunt having you relay the prices onto it and hold them back until we got set to trim these prunes. We'd never have got them if they'd seen the regular ticker. They'd have backed out before Fannie could get to the bank—where they're finding out about now that the cash is gone."

"I'll admit it," agreed Mike, adjusting the tape he had brought to make it seem that it had come through the machine the pool had viewed during the slaughter. He unhitched the wires strung around the baseboard, cut another temporary connection, and restored this ticker to its original source. Within five minutes the loop to the hidden machine was eliminated.

"I'll admit it," repeated Terrill T., bundling the wire and batteries into a grip with the tape that bore the "slow" quotations.

"All aboard for New York, Fannie," cried Furlong merrily. "Borgenson must be counting the roll you wired. We'll see that his books are cooked right in case they make a yell. But I guess they won't when he goes after them first and calls for his—ha-ha-ha!—his 'loss' beyond their margin on the settlement!"

Terrill T. Furlong locked this office door for the last time.

"How about Main Street now, Fannie? What are the folks in this town?"

"Hicks!" said the girl firmly.

"Wrong!"

"You wouldn't call them big-town! I should say not!"

"Nope. In a big town they wouldn't have rustled the cash so quickly. Out among the timbers we'd never have got the order to take away the bankroll. No hick in these days would sign the second sheet as Lanner did, when, instead of being a duplicate contract, it was an order on the bank to deliver the boodle, already properly signed by T. Francis Pearling.

"I picked a winner in Lanner, Fannie. He got so rattled he hardly knew his name. Nope," said Terrill T. Furlong, "they're not hicks, they're not big town. They're the in-betweens."

They left the building on a back street and headed for the station. "Tell you what, Terry." T. Francis smiled deliciously. "Buy them a pump to set up out by the crossroads on Main Street!"

Caste: American Made

by Edwina Levin

Author of "Whose Hands?" "The Devil's Riddle," etc.

LISTLESSLY removing the covers from a tall glass showcase, Harry Edward Benjamin began, with the mechanical precision of long practise, to arrange a varicolored display of "gentlemen's neckwear" for the big sale advertised in the morning papers.

"Great Heavens! Another day!" He lifted a hand and vaguely passed it back over his high white forehead, as if to clear away the mists. Everything about him suggested mists and gray clouds.

An imaginative observer would have said that he was the embodiment of a New York day in mid-November; and said imaginative observer would have been promptly contradicted by some literal-minded New Yorker; for it was indeed a New York day in mid-November, and a flood of sunshine swept the street as if to welcome certain distinguished guests who had been monopolizing the head-lines of the papers for several mornings past.

"What 'd you say, Mr. Benjamin?" Sid Warren, his body half inside a big glass case, extracted a lavender mottled tie and came to surface again.

"I said another day." Harry Edward sighed heavily, the while he reversed the tops of several boxes so that the ties might be seen at a glance by persons passing up the aisle who had had no intention of buying ties a moment before. Though but twenty-five, Harry Edward was called Mr. Benjamin out of deference to his long service in the big store.

"You bet another day," returned Sid, alert and dark and dapper. He stepped back the one and only pace permitted in the narrow trenchway formed by goods behind him and the cases in front, and viewed with satisfaction the lavender tie hanging artistically against a vivid red one.

Gilbert's Emporium buzzed with the business of opening up, and everywhere men and girls were uncovering their wares; the newcomers, with chattering and laughing and dreaming of dreams, which after a while would get lost in the long corridors, or swallowed up by a gluttonous system; the old-timers, with the impersonal precision of machines.

Already the wide aisles were filling with early shoppers, and the tramp, tramp of feet had begun hitting against the sensitive ear-drums and tearing at raw nerves, where electricity took the place of sunshine and wiped out complexions, and revolving doors, standing for wind-swayed trees, sucked the lungs dry and flattened chests.

"Cash!" somebody wailed in the cavern-like reaches of the uncrowded store.

"*Mis*ter Stokes!" another voice cried.

"Young man, I'd like to look at some ties if you can take the time to show 'em to me!" snapped a voice as a scrawny feminine hand jerked a bundle of ties from the rack, then went rummaging among the boxes.

"I beg your pardon," answered Harry Edward in sodden heaviness.

"What color do you think would suit a

man with red hair?" she shrilled, appeased by the young salesman's humble reply.

"It's a matter of taste." Harry Edward spoke with unmistakable want of interest, as if repeating a line from memory.

"Of course it's a matter of taste!" she rapped out. "That's why I'm asking you which would be the best."

"This is a nice color," he suggested patiently, "and here's another good-looking one. Any of these—"

"I want somebody to wait on me that's got some opinion. I don't know nothing about buying men's ties. Here you, come wait on me," she commanded Sid Warren; then turning irately on Harry Edward: "There's no reason as far as I can see for you acting as if you was the Prince of Valesia! You're here to wait on customers. I'll report you for poor service."

Sid came forward alertly, sold the lady a vivid green tie for the gentleman with the red hair, and sent her away smiling happily.

"You've got to kid 'em along," he said enthusiastically to the gray-faced young man, replacing the disarranged ties. "You'll never rise in the world if you don't get some pep in you."

"When you've been here seven years," returned Harry Edward Benjamin, "if you've got any pep left in you, then I guess you'll do."

"Oh, I sha'n't be here seven years from now," returned Mr. Warren with the patronage of a man of large future who deigns to sell ties for the present. "Some slap she give you about acting like the Prince of Valesia. Say, how do you suppose it feels to be fed up like them guys are? I bet—" He broke off as a customer stopped before a tie-rack. "Ties, sir? Special sales. Here's a nice color for you. One or two?"

Harry Edward had been wondering about that same thing. How did it feel to have good times and not to be worn out when the day was over, and glad to get into one's hall-bedroom, or to sink down in a movie show to rest and try to get a little pleasure at the same time? These young princes who were visiting America—what a wonderful life was theirs!

William Eugenis, Prince of Valesia and heir to the throne of Romantania—a small kingdom which, by its courage, endurance, and heroism, as well as by its peculiar geographical position, had burst into prominence during the war—had come over to America to shake hands with her and be fêted by her people. He was accompanied by his cousin Luis Edward. The papers had told over and over about how the royal guests talked and laughed and danced and played with the same evident relish for fun that any other normal young man might have.

He, Harry Edward Benjamin, was a young man just the age of the Prince of Valesia, and he had the same relish for good times. Also, without bearing any actual resemblance to the younger prince, Luis Edward, he had the same fair hair, the same rather full blue eyes, the same clear complexion and upright form. But in Luis Edward these habiliments of nature suggested the brightness and color and life of court balls and festive days; in Harry Edward they bespoke gray days under artificial light, shrill, peevish voices in the ear, and evenings spent within the confines of a little room with big-flowered walls.

Was it because his mirror told him that his eyes were somewhat like those of the younger prince, or was it because of his name, that Harry Edward had so eagerly devoured every word the papers had recorded about the royal guests? Whatever it was, the heart within the clerk cried out against the inequality of things. Why should one young man be given so much, and another so little?

Harry Edward Benjamin had come to New York at the age of eighteen, looking forward to great things. Gilbert's Emporium had offered him an "opportunity," and he had "accepted a position" as salesman in the men's neckwear to temporarily tide him over his financial demands. But he had fully expected that within a year he would be floor-walker; then department manager; after which, buyer, at seven thousand.

The second year he had got a raise of two and a half dollars a week. He had waited, still confident, but more patient.

The third year would bring better things; but the third year had merely brought another raise—this time of two dollars.

By the end of the fourth year his enthusiasm had somehow become all tangled up in the men's neckwear, and slipped out into the gray streets; it had picked up the mists and lost the sunshine. So that, after seven years, the once ambitious young man found himself just a clerk in the neckwear department, at twenty-two dollars and a half a week. He could not believe that it had been so long.

In all that time he had just one little dash of life; his three months overseas, which had only made this monotony the more terrible. He had expected to get something else upon his return; but with men begging for work, and living so high, he had gone back to the position which Gilbert's had graciously held open for him. He felt, however, that he'd rather have been left on the battle-field.

How had he survived. Seven years of standing behind showcases with streams of folks, all strangers, pouring up and down the aisles like monster ants, rushing this way and that, busy about their own affairs, looking upon him as a machine to hand out ties and give advice about ties! They talked ties to him, and expected him to talk ties to them, until his world had become a great barracks of ties and ties and ties! And now they seemed to be winding themselves about his neck, choking out the youth and life within him, as they had choked out his enthusiasm.

Why, he had even got so that when he sat at home of evenings, often trying to smooth out the linings of his own inexpensive ties, which would twist themselves around into an ugly roll inside the flimsy silks and refuse to lie down or be properly ironed out, he would amuse himself by pondering over some way in which to make that perverse lining to stay put. Expensive neckwear being more or less made of heavy materials rarely had this trouble; but the great masses of men were unable to buy expensive ties. How, then, to solve their problem?

Harry Edward had a fancy for chemical experiments, and was always trying to solve every problem by chemistry. Yet he had refused to go into it deeply, lest he would become a drug-store drudge like his father.

One evening, however, he solved the tie problem. By removing the obnoxious lining and treating the ruined tie to a bath in certain simple chemicals, then drying and pressing it, he was overjoyed to find that the magic bath had given so much body to the slazy material that not only did it have the appearance of expensiveness, but the need for a lining was completely eliminated. He wore the tie for several days with a sort of hush in his heart, waiting for it to prove that he had built on a foolish hope.

The worst happened: it rained, and the tie got soft. Well, that must be taken care of. It was several weeks before he hit upon the right thing and *proved it*.

What a state he was in! No more unsightly ties for young men with good taste and lean purses. He sent his formula post-haste to Washington to be protected before some one else should hit on it. It was so simple. Already he saw himself a rich man. Some day he would find some one with money to perfect his great idea.

Always he had been like that—forever dreaming dreams! Never doing anything about it.

And now for months he had in fancy been at the head of a great manufacturing company that made the "Benjamin Twistless Ties."

Such nonsense! Of evenings he would sit with feet on the one little table in his room, staring at the dingy ceiling, working out the details, selling stock, keeping for himself a controlling interest, electing himself president and general manager. He built his factory; personally selected his machinery; engaged labor; bought materials, and watched the beautiful things as they came from expert hands and were packed for shipping. He had seen the figures in his big ledgers climb to millions of dollars—

Then came the dream-girl!

Always at this point he would sigh heavily and come back to realities, calling himself all kinds of a fool.

"Say, what you moonin' about?" asked

Mr. Warren beamingly, having despatched his customer with two ties when he had wanted only one. "You look like a sick cat."

"I guess it's got me," returned Harry Edward.

"What's got you—the cat? Say, come out of it, man. Take it from me: this is a good little old world, and I intend to get my share out of it." He inspected his highly polished nails, gave them a vigorous rubbing across his palms; then taking out a small pocket-mirror, saw to it that his perfectly plastered hair had not fallen out of place, and strove to catch the eye of a pretty girl who hurried down the aisle without seeing him.

"Some skirt," remarked Sid.

Harry Edward looked at him with mingled pity and wonder. He had once been like that. Always watching the pretty girls go by; always expecting to see *her*.

He thought of the little savings-book he'd started when he first began to work. Every week a few dollars had been added to the figures. He had then fully expected to meet his dream-girl one day and they would need money to make a first payment on furniture and a little flat. What a romantic young fool he had been! He now had seven hundred dollars in the bank; but still the dream-girl stayed away; with no prospect that she would ever arrive.

No romance, no adventure came to a tie-clerk. He would probably just pick a girl in the store—

How did one ever meet girls away from one's work in New York? Having come here from a town where his folks had been one of the best families, he had been accustomed to meeting them as a matter of course; but here, where one was a tie-clerk! There were the public dances, and also there were those girls on street corners, who were not averse to getting acquainted; but these acquaintances never turned out well. Usually they chewed gum and used "oi" where "u" should have been, had drug-store complexions, and called him "Kid."

Sometimes they stopped before shop windows and asked him to buy silk hosiery for them; and once he had been so pestered by a little thing he had talked to in a movie show that he had forever forsworn meeting girls in this way.

There was no prospect of anything ever happening to him. By eating at Fields and sleeping at Mrs. Tobin's and working at Gilbert's for seven years, he had accomplished seven hundred dollars and lost all his enthusiasm. If he stayed twenty years with the trio, he would have two thousand dollars with which he might start a tie-shop of his own. What a prospect! And then perhaps when he would be old and fat, he might meet Her. She would be one of his salesgirls. He hoped she wouldn't chew gum.

The morning dragged along. Cries of "*Mis*ter Stokes!" "Cash!" "*Mis*ter Simons!" were flung about above the increasing roar of voices, the whacking of feet. Men and women jammed and crowded against tie-cases, fencing clerks and neckwear off as if by a moving human hedge. They all demanded to be waited on at once; snapped at the clerks, and shut the air away from them.

Harry Edward worked as if in a daze. Over and over some one "called" him for inattention; a few looked pityingly at him; most of them never saw more than his general outlines as he served them.

"That clerk is all in!" remarked a tall woman moving out for air. "And young men leave the country for this!" She spoke to nobody in particular.

A quiet masculine voice rich and deep answered: "The city is a bird of prey with a sweet-noted call. They answer, and before they realize it the thing is at their throats!"

Harry Edward, writing a customer's check, lifted his head and tried to locate the speaker.

"You know who that was?" questioned a woman in a whisper. "Stanley Wilder. He's so rich he don't know what to do with his money. Lives terribly fast; but writes all kinds of books for the betterment of young men, and is very democratic. They say he's some new kind of a socialist."

"New kind! Oh, I see. Believes in giving away his ideas, but blows in his money himself," some one else answered.

"Oh, no, he doesn't," returned the first speaker, still guardedly. "Stanley Wilder spends fortunes on putting his theories into practise. Fills his house with queer people. I don't know exactly what his theories are; something about that all men are *not* equal, but that all men, if given an equal chance, would *prove where they belong!*"

"Rot!" ejaculated a small man with a large manner. "I've read Wilder. He says, 'Take it for granted that an American has got the soul of a gladiator or a prince, and he'll nine times out of ten prove that you're right.' Again I say rot!"

"Some folks ought to live in Scotland, where the law thinks the worst of man till he proves different!" sarcastically remarked the woman who had first spoken. "Americans have learned to believe the best. Take our boys in this war. We expected things of 'em, and they did what we expected. As Stanley Wilder says, 'Who knows how high a man can reach in an apple-tree if he is kept grubbing in the ground for spuds?' I'll take this tie, please."

There was a decisiveness about the way she closed the discussion which evidenced her opinion of the large-mannered gentleman.

"The best way for a woman to select a tie for a man is to grab," she advised another woman, who, because she could not decide between gray and brown, was holding up the crowd over a fifty-cent sale.

Harry Edward had left off making out his customer's check, and searched curiously for the man Stanley Wilder, *who believed in men* and understood what it meant to have *to grub in the earth for spuds;* never to get one's head in the clouds or thrill to the call of adventure in the days of one's youth.

"Will you make out my check, please?" wrathfully inquired his stout customer. "I'm roasting in here, and it takes long enough, goodness knows, to get waited on in this place, without waiting for the clerks to gaze at the scenery."

II.

THE clatter of dishes smote the noonday air like the slapping of machine guns on the battle-front. Or at least that was how it sounded to Harry Edward as he waited for his order of corned-beef hash and pie. The waitress slammed his plate down on the porcelain top of the table with a violence that smashed against his right ear-drum, while another waitress smote his left in the same manner. Men constantly got up and pushed chairs scrapingly over the tile floors; orders were shouted in the rear of the long dining-room, and heavy plates dropped every second on porcelain.

"Half of the home of the tie-clerk," thought Harry Edward, "and a hall-bedroom the other half."

He got the meal over quickly, pushed his chair back as gratingly as his fellow diners, and went out into the sunshine, a feeling of rebellion upon him. Draggingly he turned toward the bank where he kept his wealth, to deposit his weekly savings before going back to the store. He stopped suddenly.

Why should he save? Why stint himself while he was young and could enjoy things? What was there to save for? A rush of desire came over him to draw every cent he had and spend it all at once on having a glorious time! He had never had any boyhood. Even through his four years in high school he had worked afternoons, evenings, and Saturday's in his father's drug-store. Then he had come to New York in search of better things.

And to-day, every fiber of him, all his suppressed and stunted youth, cried out demanding its hour. Romance and adventure! Where were they? The golden text from one of his long-forgotten Sunday-school lessons came to him: "Seek, and ye shall find."

What a curious thing was the human brain, tucking things away like that for years, then suddenly handing them to one at some unexpected moment! Well, certain it was that nobody ever found anything but spuds if he never looked for anything else.

With quickened step he turned up Fortieth Street toward Fifth Avenue. Let the "sales" take care of themselves. Past the public library he went, searching the faces of the throngs, some bright with faith in

life, and some worn with disbelief and fear. Crossing Forty-Second, he involuntarily stopped to inspect an array of ties in a haberdashery window. How he hated them! Seven years of a man's life given to ties!

"There's the Prince of Valesia!" a feminine voice shrieked.

And Harry Edward Benjamin looked up suddenly to find the democratic young prince standing before the same haberdashery shop, staring into the same window at the same ties as himself. It astonished him. Somehow he had thought a prince would be above the small business of looking at ties. But evidently not. Also, the young heir to a throne smiled ruefully at Harry Edward Benjamin, tie-clerk—as if he too were a prince of the blood.

And Harry Edward smiled back. There was something so friendly, so boyish in the face before him that this tall young man might have been another tie-clerk who had just served a pretty girl satisfactorily, instead of having been recognized as a personage.

As if a magician had waved a wand calling up hundreds of men, women and children on the instant, the crowd gathered from nowhere, seeming literally to spring up out of the pavements. While around Forty-Second came a band of militant women dressed in mannish uniforms and carrying flaming banners. They swept the crowd out of their way with the imitation guns they carried, and came sweeping down upon the prince, in whose eyes terror was dawning.

"Three cheers for the Prince of Valesia and his cousin Luis Edward!" shouted one of the women leaders.

And the cry was taken up and echoed by the crowd.

"Isn't he sweet!" cried one.

"Let's get him to speak for us," shouted another.

"Prince, won't you—"

"Come on, I'll get you a taxi," suggested Harry Edward involuntarily, the natural instinct of the man to help another making him forget for the moment the presumption of his speech.

"I walked six blocks," the prince chuckled, "without being recognized. Thought sure I would reach my hotel." With a boyish grin he followed Harry Edward to the curb.

Fighting his way to the street, the tie-clerk managed to get the attention of the driver of a "black and white," and grabbing the prince unceremoniously by the arm, he hustled the heir to a throne into a cheap cab.

"Thanks, old chap," said the prince in perfectly good English. "Do as much for you." He gave Harry Edward a most unprincely slap on the back.

Harry Edward, in a sort of glow, watched the taxi roll away; then with a sigh turned again to the sidewalk. He was surprised to find that the crowd had not dispersed; and they were staring at him as if he too were a personage.

In a flash he understood their mistake. They had seen him standing before the haberdashery window with the Prince of Valesia. He and the prince had laughed and talked together; then he, Harry Edward, had put the distinguished young man in a cab and been slapped on the back by him in familiar fashion.

"The prince's cousin," some one said in a loud whisper.

Harry Edward recollected that while constantly coupling the names of the two young men, the papers had not shown so many pictures of the prince of a province as they had of the heir apparent; so that Luis Edward's face was not so well known as Valesia's.

"Isn't he handsome?" gasped a black-eyed girl.

"Darling," her companion answered.

A feeling of elation rose in the heart of the tie-clerk. A prince had talked to him and a crowd stared at him; not commandingly, but with ingratiating awe. They were impressing his features upon their mental picture galleries. Not only was he a prince for a moment, but he would always remain so in the minds of most of these folk; for in future time, when the name of Luis Edward would be mentioned, they would see the fair young face of—Harry Edward Benjamin.

The tie-clerk lifted his head proudly, and his full-lidded blue eyes surveyed the crowd

with a sort of friendly insolence which they clearly enjoyed. They smiled at him. How good it was to have folk seeking his favor for once! With dignified step and princely mien he turned toward Fifth Avenue.

"Pardon." The word was dropped haughtily, and the crowd parted, forming an eager human lane for him. On the corner he paused as the traffic whistle sounded, his soul swelling in ecstatic enjoyment of the princely mantle that had fallen upon his shoulders. Gilbert's! Time! Nothing mattered. This was his hour!

III.

THERE was a tugging at his right sleeve, and a voice like a breath of wind in his ear whispered:

"I've tried so hard to see you, but I couldn't for the crowd."

In one flashing glance Harry Edward took in the vision. She was just above medium height, slender and graceful, with big, luminous dark eyes in which mystery and merriment and melancholy were blended. There were dancing lights in them, like glinting sunshine.

Her satin-black hair was tucked fascinatingly under a small brown velvet hat which brought out the creamy tints of a skin that no druggist's art had desecrated. It may have been the lilting Southern voice which made Harry Edward think of magnolia petals; and the lips, parted tantalizingly over white teeth in a shy smile, reminded him of a scarlet poppy-bud just bursting into bloom. He had no notion of what she wore other than the hat; but he got a distinct impression of the rich browns of autumn.

"Tried to see me?" he questioned.

"Yes," came the soft voice with its caressing note and its drawling of words. "You are the prince, are you not?" She asked it with such hopefulness that somehow he could not bear to disappoint her. Oh, why had he not held the prince for her to see? Or better still, why was he not the prince? What was it that Stanley Wilder had said about assuming that men were princes or gladiators and they would be them.

"If you mean Valesia," he returned with an evasive smile, "no, I am not he."

"Oh, I know you aren't he," she cried. "Everybody knows he is red-headed; but Luis Edward is fair-haired."

Harry Edward put his finger to his lips mysteriously as if to say: "Don't divulge my secret."

She looked quickly around in comprehensive understanding. The crowd still trailed him.

"I'm trying to get away from them," he whispered. "We were standing before a haberdashery window, Valesia and I, when a girl recognized him. I had to hustle him into a cab to get him out of the clutches of some militant women who threatened to seize him as a trophy of war; but I'm not so important, so I decided to enjoy the sunshine."

"Of course you're important!" she exclaimed also in a near whisper, as if resentful that his cousin should have more credit than he. "You are a prince, too, aren't you?"

"Only of my own little province," he returned with an engaging smile. This, he reflected, was the absolute truth, and his smile became more engagingly boyish as he recalled the little big-flowered hall-bedroom with his few books and few pictures—his province.

No thought of it, however, could dampen the joy of this moment. Instead, he was wondering what he could do to hold this captivating girl in conversation.

"There's the traffic whistle," he cried. "Let's run and we'll lose them!"

With a gay laugh she took his hand and they fled breathlessly across Forty-Second Street, not stopping till they were squarely in front of the wide entrance to the library.

"Are you a princess?" he asked, a flood of ecstasy sweeping over him, washing the last remnants of grayness from his face and transforming it into the colorfulness of youth, accustomed to court balls and festive days.

"Of course you know I'm not," she returned with pretended ruefulness in which he caught a note of pride. "I'm just a plain American girl."

"All Americans are princes and prin-

cesses," he declared enthusiastically, his blue eyes alight, his fair complexion suffused with color.

"Oh, what a princely speech!"

"I mean it! All you need is somebody *to believe in your royalty*—"

"I hope you aren't a Bolshevist prince, if there is such a thing," she laughed.

In a story he had once read of a laugh like tinkling waterfalls. He had smiled at the time. Here it was.

"I don't know anything about them, but I imagine there aren't any princes among them. I believe," he began repeating grandiosely a passage from a library book he had been reading with great enjoyment, "that a man who tries to rise on another's dead body will never get anywhere; because the body will rot away and leave him in filth! It isn't a pretty thought; but it's why revolutionists can't be princes."

He broke off, flushing as if he had been carried away by the flood of his thoughts. As a matter of fact, he was feeling highly pleased with himself for having recollected this speech which seemed so apropos and so princely.

"How wonderful you are!" She spoke with deep earnestness. "And what a big man you must be!"

Now he was covered with confusion, for he had been made rudely to recollect his littleness.

"That wasn't what I meant to say at all. I meant that you were—are a princess. I'm afraid I'm getting all mixed up."

They laughed joyously together, and his feeling of infinitesimality passed.

"Princes get mixed up just like other folks," she teased.

"Princes *are* just other folks," he told her with the air of a man tired of being looked upon as a superior being.

The crowd which had formed itself into a court for Harry Edward had melted away; but they had left him a kingdom of adventure and romance! No past, no future, troubled him. Youth had laid her crown upon the young brow so long bent under the burden of existence. Luminous eyes were turned up to meet the blue ones which saw only her piquant face in all the pushing throngs of the great city.

Men and women slackened pace at sight of them. Old folk and middle-aged were flung back into May days long buried by the rush of New York; young men sighed enviously, and young girls giggled and looked back until the crowd blotted the two from view.

"Won't you come into Delmonico's for a bite with me?" Harry Edward was saying. "I was just on my way to lunch." He rejoiced that he had not yet got to the bank with his week's savings nor paid his rent.

"Oh, no."

"Why not?"

"I'm afraid you think me very bold," she returned, "speaking to you like this; but you see—"

"The princess can do no wrong," he interrupted, lifting his head.

"What fun it must be to be a princess if that's true!" she cried gaily. "Let's pretend I am one. I love pretending."

"So do I," he declared.

"And is it true that a prince can do no wrong?" she asked.

"No; a prince has large responsibilities. His life is not all sunshine, I can tell you." Harry Edward sighed heavily, and for the moment a deep self-pity swept him for the arduous demands upon his princely person. "But won't you brighten my poor life by your gracious presence while we supply the inner man with such viands as rich and poor, high and low, must needs partake?"

She threw back her head and laughed deliciously at his high words. "Would it be proper for you?"

"Let's pretend it is. Let's pretend that I am just a plain American, free to live my life as I please; to eat when and where and with whom I please; free to go and come at will, and to have no crowds forever swarming about me when I walk out; free to find romance and adventure as I please. Ah, young American men don't half appreciate this big, wonderful freedom of theirs. Think of a man having his wife chosen for him!"

He spoke with bitter intensity. The thought had just occurred to him.

"Oh, dear!" she ejaculated.

"Let's think of other things," he went on. "Of you." His heart was thumping outrageously. "May I know the name of the princess?"

"Mary Elizabeth."

"I always hoped your name would be Elizabeth," he sighed contentedly. "It was my mother's name. I mean," he added at sight of her astonished face, "I always liked that name. You see, it is a family name with us."

All the while he had been directing their course toward Delmonico's. Often had he wondered what it must be like to eat there.

IV.

TURNING in at the impressive entrance he suddenly bethought himself of his clothes—a neat gray mixture and well-fitting—he had invariably insisted on being properly fitted—but not always in a princely costume.

"Of course I'm not dressed to—" he began.

"Of course not," she smiled. "You are incognito. Nobody has recognized you all these blocks. Isn't it fun?"

At Field's, Harry Edward always found a hook for his hat and kept a wary eye on it. Here he was gently relieved of it and a bit of cardboard given him in its stead. An important person gave him one haughty look, seemed to make a motion with his eyes; then turned and marched away. They followed, and the haughty person drew out two chairs and waited for them to sit; whereupon he left them without a word.

Presently another person came; not so important as the first, and ceremoniously handed a printed list of food to Harry Edward. A chill struck him. Vaguely he offered the menu to Mary Elizabeth; but she waved it away, saying:

"You order!"

Did some subtle something tell that waiter that this young man was in dire difficulties.

"The oysters are very nice, sir," he said. "And the breast of guinea-hen with roasted chestnuts is excellent."

Harry Edward looked at Mary Elizabeth and she assented brightly.

"Salad?" gently insinuated the discriminating waiter.

And so the order went on, vegetables, dessert demi-tasse, all suggested by one who knew as Harry Edward, Prince of the Moment, did not, how a meal should be ordered! Meanwhile, corned-beef hash and pie hung heavy in the regions of the prince's belt.

"Shall you visit New Orleans, prince?" asked Mary Elizabeth, disposing of a roasted chestnut.

"I really can't say whether it is included in our itinerary or not." He was wishing Field's restaurant in the middle of the sea. All this delicious food! And he—but he attacked the breast of guinea-hen with determination.

"Your American visit won't be complete if you don't include the gay Creole City," she was remarking.

"I've heard it's very wonderful." The spinach made him sick, and the asparagus had a bad taste.

"It is; romance is hidden under every rose-arbor, every moss-hung tree; and tragedy stalks the very streets themselves."

"You enchant me," he said thrillingly. "Go on. Never mind about the food."

"Love and adventure are there, four hundred thousand strong," she murmured, her dark eyes aglow. "They seize you the minute you enter our gates and carry you off to a cave where you may be held in durance vile till the queen comes to release you."

"Our—"

"I live there," she murmured.

"I am decided," he cried, "whether it be according to schedule or not, I shall make a flying trip down to New Orleans. In fact, I shall go right away—that is, in a couple of weeks."

He had suddenly recollected Gilbert's. He would have to give them time enough to put a man in his place. They had held that place open for him: he couldn't leave them flat. Impatiently he shook off the thought of Gilbert's.

"You must be very proud of your country," he said gaily over the demi-tasse.

"It's a big country—it did big things in the war. You *believe* in your men, which is why they are big—individually and collectively big." The waiter had saved his life by stealthily removing that nauseating food.

"How fine of you to say such things of us!" she cried. "And how well you seem to know us!"

"I had excellent opportunities for observing the men of America," Harry Edward smiled grandly. "In fact, I might say that some of your troops fought side by side with my own men in the trenches."

"Then, of course, you saw them literally and figuratively under fire," put in the girl.

"Indeed, yes. And I might say that they always measured up. They never forgot what the home folks were expecting of them. One of your writers, Stanley Wilder, has the right idea. He says: 'Men are *not* equal, and that given an equal chance they would prove it; but all men are made better by having somebody expect things of them'; and 'that a lot of fellows are grubbing spuds'—as you Americans call potatoes—'because they have never been given a chance at an apple-tree.'"

"What a funny thing to say!"

"In other words," Harry Edward continued magnificently, "Stanley Wilder advocates giving American men a *chance to prove* themselves; and believing in them to the utmost."

He did not know that this was really what Wilder advocated, but he felt sure it must be. Anyhow, it sounded well and reasonable. He determined to get this brilliant writer's books and read them at once, so that he could tell her all about them.

"He says that a man may be a prince or a gladiator," Harry Edward went on, "and be forced to sell ties because nobody believes he can do anything else; until he gets so he believes it himself after a while."

"Did Stanley Wilder say that?" she asked.

"Well, not those words, but that's what it amounted to; and the proof of it—who fought this war? Spud grubbers, shoe salesmen, and tie clerks! And they proved over and over that it means to believe in men and make them believe in themselves."

"Of course there were others in our armies," she protested demurely, "others besides spud grubbers and the rest. We sent our princes to war with them."

"Princes?"

"Yes. In America, a prince is a man who has power."

"Meaning money?"

"No!" She spoke with sudden anger; face flushed; her words coming fast. "That's what the Bolshevists think—that money is power. It is in the hands of *a man of power;* but money can no more make the weak strong than a big club can make a man of a baby. As a matter of fact the bigger the club you put in its hands the more helpless and futile it becomes."

Harry Edward stared at her in amazement. This little thing with her tip-tilted nose and magnolia-petal complexion, whom he had thought only about eighteen—a lovely child—had a mind, and she used it for something other than women's gewgaws. She had power herself—a dominating personality and the fires of a reformer.

"Meaning what, then?" he questioned eagerly.

"Meaning the power which comes through a sense of obligation to one's fellows; determination to fulfil that obligation: initiative to strike out through unbroken woods, and daring to meet whatever comes and still push on to one's goal. An American prince is one who is disciplined and can endure everything *but stagnation.* He is a bad enemy; but a good sport, and plays the game of life with a big hand. That's my idea of a *real* prince: it's the American idea and it's big as we are!"

Her eyes were lowered, and a small hand lying on the table near Harry Edward viciously tortured a bread-crumb. Harry Edward seized the hand.

"How wonderful you are!" he cried thickly, a hammering in his ears. "I'd rather be an American prince than—"

She drew her hand gently away.

"You'd better ask for the check," she whispered. "I have an engagement."

"Oh, but I've just found you!" he groaned. "Check," he flushed as the at-

tentive waiter, having caught her movement, bent over Harry Edward.

The bill came to nineteen dollars and a half, and Harry Edward laid down his whole week's pay, wishing he had had five instead of only three dollars and a half to leave as a tip for this unrecognized life-saver.

"I can't tell you how I have enjoyed all this," she said as they rose together. "I'll always remember my first visit to New York and my meeting with a foreign prince."

"Visit!" exclaimed Harry Edward in panic. "You don't live here really? I thought you were only pretending."

"No. I came with my brother. We are going back to New Orleans to-morrow."

"And I'll never see you again!" he cried in such tragic accents as they passed out, that she burst into joyous laughter: then at sight of the real distress in his face, she grew suddenly grave.

"A prince can do what he likes."

"No, he can't!" groaned Harry Edward. "Because he can't keep the princess from running away."

"He can follow her," whispered Mary Elizabeth, so low that he barely caught her words, while a crimson tide swept her face.

Harry Edward caught one of her small hands. "May I?" He was a prince indeed; so young, so earnest, so harassed-looking that she laughed at sight of him.

"You may, your highness!"

"Who am I to look for?"

"Just me, Mary Elizabeth," she smiled.

"But I say, now—I can't go around inquiring for Mary Elizabeth."

"Of course not, but a prince will find a way." She shyly held out her hand. "Here's where I leave you."

"Oh, please don't go without telling me more about yourself," he pleaded.

"I'll give you a clue," she said playfully. "Every street in New Orleans leads into Canal; and if you stand on Canal long enough you are sure to see everybody pass."

"Gosh!" cried out Harry Edward in unprincely accents.

"And if you stand on the corner of Royal and Canal, you are sure to see *me* go by," she further confided. "You see, we all promenade on bright days after four. *Au revoir*, Harry Edward till—Royal and Canal."

With a laugh she darted away down the street and he was left staring disconsolately after the slim brown figure whose very walk was full of fire. And he felt sodden and gray again, and most unprincely.

He had at last met his dream-girl! And she lived in New Orleans; and he didn't even know her name!

His whole person drooped and his eyes were leaden. New Orleans was two thousand miles away! and four hundred thousand people promenaded Canal! Also he was a tie clerk—not a prince, to make flying trips as he pleased. He had at last met Romance, and had lost her—lost her among four hundred thousand folk. That was what she had meant when she said Adventure and Romance were in New Orleans four hundred thousand strong, waiting to seize all who entered their gates.

These two seldom came to New York. At least, they seldom found tie clerks within the confines of their little, big-flowered walls—

She turned. She waved to him. He drew himself up with a jerk and saluted soldier-fashion. He felt better after that. He was a soldier if not a prince. For several seconds he stood still, considering, then faced back toward the library. He wanted to see what Stanley Wilder said about men being princes and gladiators.

The very first words his eyes fell upon when he sat down to read were: "*You've heard the old saw that a rolling stone gathers no moss. Who wants to be a moss-covered stone? In order that it may become a part of a structure a stone must be moved again and again. Don't shut yourself within four walls and expect opportunity to come seeking you. Adventure forth to meet her and when she passes your way snatch her before some one else does.*

"*I believe all men are equal—to certain other men. Which ones are you equal to? If you are a job coward, a little man under the yoke of a little job, own up and don't whine. If you are not; get up and get out! and keep rolling until you find your own niche. Then gather, not moss, but*

mortar, and become a part of the great scheme.

Harry Edward read no further; he fished out his library-card and, having it stamped, fared forth toward Gilbert's. carrying the book with him.

V.

"MR. BENJAMIN, you're three hours late," snapped the floorwalker irritably as Harry Edward entered Gilbert's Emporium in the middle of the afternoon with a library book under his arm.

"That so?" inquired the tie clerk, indifferently.

"Yes, that's so," returned the floorwalker with fine sarcasm. "And I want to know where you've been, Mr. Benjamin."

"Mr. Stokes," returned Harry Edward with his new princely arrogance, "you force me to remind you that it's none of your business where I've been."

Mr. Stokes's black eyes bulged. Never before had a hireling dared to doubt his complete authority over his private life, nor spoken to him in such fashion. He fell back a step; his mouth opened; but no words issued therefrom. Instead, a sputtering sound totally lacking in dignity fell upon the ears of two gaping girls who awaited his initials on a "take and charge." They exchanged sly glances in which twinkled impish joy; then they turned appraising and rather awed eyes upon this fair young man who dared to give the autocrat of the department a "call down."

They thought him somebody. Harry Edward, seeing it, took courage. His eyes appraised them also, saying plainly: "I'm not afraid of any man."

"Well, Mr. Benjamin," Mr. Stokes got out at last, "you may call at the office to-night and the pay-clerk will give you your time. I've noticed that you were very inattentive to business of late and I've had two complaints against you to-day."

Harry Edward Benjamin stared after Mr. Stokes marching haughtily away. Fired! After seven years! For all that he had expected it, the thing was a shock. There's something about being fired that hurts one's vanity, and when one has put in seven years of struggle to avoid just that—

He lifted his head proudly and marched after Mr. Stokes.

"I'm calling for my time now, Mr. Stokes," he said, his heavy-lidded blue eyes resting insolently on the irate floorwalker. "Better phone your orders."

Mr. Stokes turned in bewilderment at the erstwhile polite young man whom he had not doubted would apologize and be reinstated. Harry Edward returned his glance unflinchingly, and Mr. Stokes's eyes fell eventually—a small man himself, born to serve, conquered by a superior manner.

"Go on back to work," he snapped to preserve his dignity. "I guess you're not yourself." And he hurried away from further words with the tie clerk.

Left standing alone in the wide aisle with no one to fight but himself there descended upon Harry Edward Benjamin a fearful sickness—the sickness of self-fear which gets into the blood of all men who have let themselves take root in barren soil; and who at last try to pry themselves loose. Slowly going back to his place behind the show-case the erstwhile prince gave advice on ties all afternoon. But he could not get Mary Elizabeth out of his mind. Beauty and brains! And he a tie salesman had dared aspire to her favor!

That night he tossed restlessly on his pillow, finally getting up at two o'clock to read three chapters of Stanley Wilder's advice to young men.

When he again retired he felt strengthened by this man, who promised success to all who *believed in themselves* to the extent of wresting it from life; not by blowing up factories and killing other folk; but by getting themselves from behind the walls of life; and swimming rivers and climbing mountains in the full knowledge that their kingdom lay just beyond.

Morning, however, found Harry Edward prey to a thousand unprincely questions. They flayed his soul, and fought fiercely with the youth within him, which demanded the right to live, and to feel the thrill of young manhood. More than anything in the world he wanted to go to New Orleans, and stand on the corner of Canal and

Royal, where Romance and Adventure promenaded four hundred thousand strong —where *she* would pass! But—

What if he should give up his job, get down there in that strange city, spend all his money and not see her, nor have any adventure, nor meet opportunity? He'd heard that New Orleans was the Paris of America. He might be plucked down there for a lamb. No telling what might happen. What if she didn't even live there and was just making a fool of him? Some girls enjoyed that sort of thing. She was a Southerner all right and she seemed to know New Orleans; but might she not live in New York? Why couldn't he stay right where he was, take a vacation, and find adventure? There was as much here as anywhere.

"A job coward! That's what I am," he scornfully told his shaving-mirror. "I want to stay where it will be easy to get back to selling ties; to go on living at Mrs. Tobin's and at Field's and have a nice, safe, inexpensive adventure. Gee, but I'm a poor sport! I'm just equal to the place I've got. Well, I won't be! I'll get out, and if I don't meet opportunity I'll at least have lived a little. I'll have something to think about besides ties."

Saluting Sid Warren gaily as he *passed* the men's neckwear, Harry Edward took the elevator up to the manager's office.

"Quite right," approved the manager when the young man explained. "I always advise young men to stick to their posts; but when a job fails to yield a man anything in seven years it's time for him to take drastic steps about it. I wish you luck."

"Well, that's done!" Harry Edward breathed as he left the manager's office.

But he didn't feel very sporting or daring. His hands were cold and clammy, and his stomach weak and empty. Tumultuous days followed—adventurous days in themselves had he but realized it. Going to a fairly reasonable tailor he ordered a suit for eighty dollars out of his precious seven hundred. Other accessories were added to the amount of twenty-five in cost.

Came the day of departure! And all his fears were swept away on the tide of gladsome youth faring forth into unknown worlds. He would not even yield to the habit of caution which whispered: "Better get your return ticket in case—"

VI.

"NAW 'LEANS!" bawled a negro porter. "All out for Naw 'Leans."

Harry Edward's heart stood still. It was here—his great adventure!

He was on the last step by the time the train stopped. Fairly running through the station he stared confusedly at a line of taxis, auto buses, and ancient carriages, drawn by ancient horses, and driven by ancient negroes. He chose one of these last as fitting his idea of New Orleans.

"I want to go to the corner of Royal and Canal," he informed his obsequious driver, "then to the best hotel in the city."

"Whut you say, boss?" inquired the old negro, eying his fare doubtfully. Never had any man made such a demand as this of him.

Harry Edward repeated.

"Yas, suh, boss, yas suh." Uncle Eben climbed up into his seat; then turned and looked back. "Whut co'nah, boss?"

"Why," Harry Edward looked blank—"why—there *are* two, aren't there?"

"Oh, yas, suh, all us streets got two corners, mostly fo'," returned Uncle Eben cheerfully.

A feeling of sickness came over Harry Edward. Of course—not only two corners; but four! Now this was a funny thing; she had not said which corner. Why, he might stand forever on the wrong side of the street or miss her running from corner to corner, always arriving just after she had passed, as the poor hero in the story of Evangeline had done, right down here in this land of the creoles.

"Whut co'nah, boss?" his driver persisted mildly, the reins resting peacefully upon his contented and stationary steed.

"Any corner," snapped Harry Edward.

"Yassuh, boss, yassuh," hastily agreed Uncle Eben, flecking his mare's back with the reins. She responded with a jogging trot that soon settled into a walk. Harry Edward sat up stiffly, impatient at their

slow progress, his eyes missing the old world beauty of the quaintest city in America.

It was a typical New Orleans day in early December, with brilliant chrysanthemums as big as a man's head to gaze upon, also old-fashioned gardens and sweeping terraced lawns, all green, while the balmy air rustled drowsily through palms. Weeping willows waved mournfully, and gray moss swayed from huge oaks within a stone's throw of Canal Street. But Harry Edward neither saw, heard, nor felt.

"Dis 'ere's Canal Street," said his driver after a hundred thousand years.

Harry Edward's heart fell with a thud. A street half as wide as the Hudson where it emptied into the sea—twice as wide as Fifth Avenue; with street-cars running both ways; not just two tracks, but many, with a safety zone in the middle wide enough for an ordinary street, where traffic waited and was controlled by two sets of policemen. It seemed to Harry Edward that never in his life had he seen such width. And on one side of it She had said she would pass.

Why, he could not even distinguish a person across this hiatus! And to run back and forth was impossible. Yes, unquestionably he had been made a fool of. Well, it was good enough for him—a tie-clerk trying to play prince!

VII.

DAZEDLY staring at the throngs that poured up and down both sides of Canal Street, or stood in the "neutral ground," Harry Edward Benjamin, accustomed to the New York rush hours, thought that the whole United States had poured itself into Canal to impinge upon his view-point, and shut out from his sight Mary Elizabeth.

And she had known it would be like this when she had asked him to meet her on the corner of Royal and Canal!

After jogging down the curious street for a space, his ancient driver stopped with every evidence of making an indefinite stay.

"Dis 'ere am youah co'nah, boss," grinned Uncle Eben. "Dis am Royal and Canal. See, it got two corners for shuah."

Harry Edward straightened up, staring at a street so narrow that it reminded him of Mott Street, down in Chinatown, New York. It certainly didn't matter which of these corners he stood on—he could almost reach her if she passed on the other side; but still there might be a civil war across that awful Canal Street and he never hear of it.

"Take me to the best hotel," he said.

They recrossed Canal, and presently Harry Edward was deposited before an imposing hostelry, his choice having been settled upon by the fact that a little toddy waited once a day for Uncle Eben down in the kitchen, by order of Mars Johnson, the manager.

It was early afternoon, and having taken off the train-dirt, Harry Edward strolled down Canal Street, keeping an eye out for Royal. Not yet was it promenading time for the fashion of New Orleans; but he would locate his "stand."

After walking for half an hour he came to the river, much to his astonishment, without having crossed Royal Street. He turned and walked back. He had undoubtedly missed it somehow. But upon reaching his hotel without crossing Royal, he stopped to consider. He was clearly turned around. The street he sought must be *above* the hotel; yet he had been so sure it was below. After walking about two miles he stopped a pedestrian to inquire.

"Royal Street? Oh, you're going the wrong way," said his informant. "Walk back to Rampart Street, then cross Canal and walk till you come to it. You can't miss it."

"Why *cross* Canal?" asked Harry Edward.

"Because the streets all end at Canal. They don't go through."

Harry Edward turned back with a song in his heart. How simple was the task she had set him! There were only two corners to Canal and Royal, and they were not much more than two arms' length apart. All at once it occurred to him that New Orleans was a truly wonderful city,

like a bit of old-world transplanted to the new.

It was too late for the promenade now. The electric lights were coming on, so he strolled along, feeling that curious thrill in the air which always grips the stranger in New Orleans. He felt curiously alive and young. And New York and "Gentlemen's Neckwear" were far away.

He wanted to *do* something. What? He didn't know. But Adventure called loudly to him. Hunger drove him back to the hotel, however. He had a feeling against asking questions, but seeing a sign that said "Cave," he decided to investigate. He wanted to see everything; to experience everything; to be a prince, indeed, for a little space. After that—

But he would have lived once! And descending into the cave, Harry Edward felt that he had come to the right place. A fairy bower greeted him; rocks and ferns and mysterious grottoes and the murmur of falling water; green lights that made the women in their low-necked, clinging gowns look like mermaids and sea nymphs, and the men, all Arabian knights. Ah, but it was good to be alive in New Orleans!

Harry Edward Benjamin gave his order to an ingratiating negro waiter, and then fell to watching the life, the gaiety about him; and his soul grew drunk with the beauty, the soft music, and the mingle of voices with the splashing of waterfalls—a prince who awaited the hour when he would go forth to seize his princess!

VIII.

THE spell of the evening lost in the bright glare of the morning sun, Harry Edward tried valiantly to support the hours until four o'clock; but he could not keep his hands warm; he couldn't make himself eat; nor could he keep from feeling empty and sick. Finally unable to endure the wait, he took up his stand at one o'clock. Hour after hour went by.

Came four o'clock! Unutterably, unreasonably, disgustingly ill, Mr. Benjamin, tie clerk, could scarcely stand; but Harry Edward, soldier and prince, held to his post. Thousands of men old and young; women fashionable and poverty-ridden; lovely creoles and hag-faced creatures went by. But not one escaped the darting blue eyes of the young man who stood watching.

At last the lights began to come on. Night fell. Seven o'clock — eight — she would not be promenading now.

Draggingly he went back to his hotel. Draggingly he descended to the cave. It had changed. The fountains had a spiteful sound; the music was noisy; the green lights made the women ugly and the men silly fops; the grottoes were mawkish; the ferns and palms out of place.

And his dreams that night were distorted and took from him, with their forecast of failure, all desire for food in the morning. Empty and sick he took up his stand. Breakfastless, lunchless, disheveled from being jostled all day by the crowd that poured past Royal, Harry Edward Benjamin rested his tired body against a slender iron post supporting a balcony which jutted over the sidewalk.

What a fool he had been to think that a girl with beauty and brains would keep a tryst with him! She had probably but amused herself at his expense. Visualizing her exquisite face, with its dark eyes full of merriment, mystery and melancholy, he could not make up his mind that she would be wantonly cruel. And yet, had she not clearly promised to meet him on the corner of Royal and Canal? Of course it was possible that she had not suspected him of being dolt enough to go running away from New York to New Orleans for the sake of a girl whose very name he did not know; and without even a definite date of appointment.

"Better go back to your job," whispered Caution, "before your money gives out."

"I won't!" snapped Harry Edward aloud, and so viciously that several pedestrians turned to look at him.

A big French car, nosing out of Royal into Canal, came to a stop beside Harry Edward.

"There's the prince!" cried a voice that made Harry Edward's heart drop into the

pit of his stomach, while the blood went thundering to his head.

He turned, but his blurred vision could not make her out; then suddenly it was as if a thousand veils had been lifted from his face, and his gaze went leapingly to meet her own. In the big automobile, leaning eagerly toward him, sat Mary Elizabeth! She held out her hand, and he sprang from the pavement.

"How long have you been here?" she asked.

"Three whole days," he answered, as one speaks of decades. "I waited all day yesterday, and I've waited since ten o'clock this morning." He would not let go her hand.

"And you didn't get discouraged?" she inquired.

"I *was* discouraged," he replied truthfully, "but I made up my mind to wait until the soles of my shoes wore out, and until I grew a white beard and turned beggar. I knew you would have to pass some time if you were in the city."

"That's determination for you," broke in a laughing masculine voice, and Harry Edward saw all at once the man beside her. Slender, with great dark eyes, flashing white teeth, and a clear olive complexion, he looked to the tie clerk like a Spanish cavalier.

"Prince, I want you to meet my brother, Mr. D' Hemcourt. Brother, this is Luis Edward, Prince of Valesia's cousin," she said, gently withdrawing her hand.

Harry Edward Benjamin took the hand D'Hemcourt extended; but a chill seized him. It had been one thing to make believe at being a prince all in play with a lovely girl; it was quite another matter to be introduced definitely as such, and tacitly to accept a position which belonged to another.

"My sister has been telling me about you, prince," D'Hemcourt was saying.

"And I've been watching for you ever since I've come home," she broke in. "I went up the river yesterday morning on a little visit, and I'm sure it's the only day that I haven't been here at some time during the afternoon to see if you had kept your promise."

"How good of you!" cried Harry Edward, his face flushing with pleasure at her frank acknowledgment of so much interest in him.

"Ah!" cried D'Hemcourt, "a tryst."

"Not exactly." Mary Elizabeth was in beautiful confusion. "Men make so many promises to girls which they never expect to keep—"

"You knew I'd be here," retorted Harry Edward, regardless of the Spanish cavalier, whose black eyes twinkled in great amusement.

"I thought you would." Her low tone made Harry Edward's heart pound against his ribs.

"Can't we drop you somewhere, prince?" D'Hemcourt broke in. "Or if you'll drive with us?"

Harry Edward looked at Mary Elizabeth for a seconding of her brother's invitation. And she nodded brightly. "I'll sit in the back with you." He helped her to change, took his place beside her, and soon they were being whirled along at exhilarating speed.

Harry Edward had an impression of a beautiful white shell road, and graceful limbed willows waving, with clacking palms interspersed, quaint old buildings here and there, and a wide, glistening body of water along which the white road trailed. D'Hemcourt called back bits of historical information, as do the men in the rubberneck wagons in New York, who tell the things one is not expected to remember. All Harry Edward actually knew was that close beside him sat Mary Elizabeth, her warm arm pressing against his, her poppy bud mouth uplifted now and again as she chatted to him about New Orleans. He tried to hear her; but somehow hearing was submerged by the thrilling nearness of her.

Every nerve in his body quivered in ecstatic rhythm to life's greatest harmony —love. Vaguely he had known from the first moment that he had taken her arm on the corner of Forty-Second and Fifth Avenue, when he had looked into her flowerlike face and listened to her rippling laugh, that he was in love. But never had he dreamed of such emotion as this which

now caught him by the throat and dragged him on in relentless ecstasy.

"What are you thinking of, prince?" she whispered.

"Of you," he answered, the blood surging to the surface of his fair skin. Her eyes drooped before his, but she did not turn from him; his hand found hers, and they sat close together, silent, two young things having no further need for words.

Mile after mile sped backward along the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. Harry Edward hoped they would go on forever. Once he drew her hand shyly to his lips; but she pulled it away. Young love is so diffident.

"Well, I suppose it's getting time for us to turn back," D'Hemcourt called cheerfully over his shoulder.

"So soon?" questioned Mary Elizabeth impulsively; then flushed crimson.

"So soon? You see where that sun is? And if we are going to the opera to-night—By the way, prince, won't you join us at dinner and the opera?"

With a thud Harry Edward Benjamin came back to the realities of life. He was being invited *as a prince* to be the guest of a man who was undoubtedly accepting his title as a guarantee. If he accepted he would be an impostor; if he refused he would have to spend a whole evening away from *her*. After the briefest struggle with himself he stammered:

"Thank you, I shall be very glad."

In a disgustingly short space of time they were once more in that part of the city familiar to Harry Edward.

"Where are you stopping, prince?" asked D'Hemcourt. "We'll drop you so you can dress for dinner; and I'll send over for you later."

"The Grunewald," groaned Harry Edward.

They expected him to dress for dinner! And he was wearing his only good suit. Naturally they would expect a prince to have evening clothes. Well, that settled it. He couldn't accept the invitation.

But he had already accepted. What excuse could he give now for changing his mind so suddenly? Fool! He might have known that something like this would happen. How had he expected to carry off such a pose? Why had he ever started it anyhow?

"Here you are," D'Hemcourt was saying. "It's five o'clock now. I'll send the car over for you at six thirty. We dine at seven."

Mary Elizabeth gave his hand a little pressure that left Harry Edward tingling as they rolled away. But he felt that he was the most wretched young man in the creole city, where wretchedness, like happiness, was said to go to extremes.

With leaden steps he entered the lobby of the hotel and sat down in utter dejection to think out a plausible lie whereby he could get himself excused from an evening of sheer joy.

He could pretend that he had been taken suddenly and violently ill; go to bed and all that—but what good would that do? Unless he pretended to be sick all the rest of the time, they'd invite him again the next evening, or the next; and the same problem would arise. There seemed nothing to do but to take the first train back to New York.

A great adventurer he was!

"Believe in yourself, and wrest from life the thing you want. Never turn back or stop till you've got it!"

It was as if Stanley Wilder had spoken to him.

Harry Edward stood up. America's soldiers had believed in themselves, and they had gone forward! Nor would he turn back. Several loungers, noticing the fair young man standing with a curious uprightness, his young brow heavy with a Napoleonic frown, saw him start suddenly toward the telephone booth. As if by magic the frown had been swept away, leaving his face radiant.

IX.

D'Hemcourt sitting in the lobby of the Grunewald, rose as Harry Edward stepped out of the elevator and went forward to meet his guest.

"Got dressed early and came for you myself," he said. "Didn't call for you, though; thought you might be incognito."

"Thank you," returned Harry Edward with evident relief, "I'm registered as Mr. Benjamin from New York. And by the way, if you don't mind I'd appreciate it if you'd address me as Benjamin. It really is one of my names, you see."

"I appreciate how you feel about it," returned the Southerner in ready acquiescence.

Both tall and slender, appearing in evening dress of exactly the same cut, yet one so dark the other so fair, they were in striking contrast and drew admiring eyes as they passed out to D'Hemcourt's car.

Harry Edward Benjamin had solved his problem at a costumer's where a dress suit could be rented for three dollars an evening. He had been lucky enough to secure one, not only new, but of expensive texture, it having been sold by its first owner because of a tiny cigarette burn on the left coat sleeve, which, while not going through the fabric, had scorched the color away, leaving a small brown spot almost the size of a dime. Harry Edward felt himself particularly lucky in being able to secure so smart a suit, and one which fitted him so well.

"Canal Street was once a canal," remarked D'Hemcourt when they had crossed the wide avenue; "when it was filled in, it closed up many underground passages."

"What were they for?" asked Harry Edward.

"The famous pirate, Lafitte, and his men are supposed to have excavated one of them at least to be used in case of danger. Boats were always in the canal ready to take them out to their ship." He continually recounted the history of the old city, as New Orleans folk do. "This is Bourbon and Bierville Streets, and there's the old Absinthe House, at one time famous as the headquarters of Lafitte."

They drove slowly through the narrow streets, and now and again some dark-eyed, exotic beauty would lean far over a monogrammed balcony overhanging the street.

"It's like Europe." Harry Edward sighed happily.

"Certainly like no other city in America," agreed D'Hemcourt. "Here we are." They had stopped before one of the largest of the old Spanish houses.

Harry Edward's host ascended two stone steps which led from the sidewalk to a tall door of carved oak with long brass hinges; and pulled a curious knocker. A loud gong reverberated somewhere in the distance; the door opened as if by magic. A damp hall lighted by a single old-fashioned lantern appeared; they entered and the heavy door closed, as by unseen hands. To the right, a wide stairway began, and half-way up it were double doors with a hole cut in one of them, with a flap, like that of an envelope, over it.

Harry Edward had a curious sensation as of entering some well-guarded old castle. He expected to stop at the doors and knock, and have eyes applied to the peep-hole before they could be admitted. Instead, their host pushed the doors back, and they ascended to a spacious upper hall flooded with light from a cut-glass candelabra of old design.

"Come in," D'Hemcourt lifted the tapestries, which hung over the doorway.

What magnificence struck Harry Edward's astonished gaze! Never had he imagined such splendor. The room, absolutely huge, was also lighted by a mammoth cut-glass candelabra. Dark paneled walls hung with tapestries such as he had seen only in art galleries; monster paintings like those in the Metropolitan Museum; tables heavily carved and inlaid with mother of pearl; chairs upholstered with rich brocades, vases as tall as a man and infinitesimal treasures of ivory and gold in a big case—rugs so rich, so beautiful that he wanted to walk around them—overwhelmed the tie clerk. A desire came to him to just sit down and feast his eyes; but he restrained it.

The portières over another door at the far side of the room were lifted, and Mary Elizabeth appeared.

She paused, silhouetted against the heavy garnet hangings, a dazzling figure in white silk with girdle and sash ends embroidered in pink buds. Her neck rose like marble above her low-cut gown, and one bare, rounded arm was lifted against the

dark curtain. Then she came swiftly into the room, her black hair gleaming under the lights.

"It was good of you to come to us, prince," she smiled, extending a hand.

"It was good of you to ask me," he returned with a courtly bow.

"The prince is visiting New Orleans incognito," broke in D'Hemcourt, "and is registered as Mr. Benjamin."

"What fun!" cried Mary Elizabeth. "Then we can be as informal with you as we like."

"Please, yes. I can't tell you how much I want you to treat me as if I were just—"

"An American prince?" she smiled, recalling to him their discussion in New York.

"Yes, or less."

"No less," she retorted, sinking into a deep chair, and inviting him, by a wave of her hand, to follow suit.

"I suppose you find things very different over here, Benjamin," D'Hemcourt remarked.

"Oh, yes," returned Harry Edward with an unconscious note of triumph, "very different. America is the greatest country on earth. And deservedly."

"Not very many Europeans will admit it. But in what way specifically?"

Specifically? What did he mean? Mary Elizabeth's brown eyes were eager and glowing. He had to explain somehow or appear absurd.

"Oh, in every way," parried the young man.

Where was his Stanley Wilder?

"Take the matter of—caste." (Ah, that was it!) "With us a man's station is fixed by his birth; here his place in society is fixed by his own initiative and force. He may be whatever he chooses. I like that. It spurs men to dare and do."

"You have touched the mainspring of our strength," said D'Hemcourt, with a curious smile. Was it Harry Edward's fancy or did his host and hostess exchange significant glances?

It occurred to the dazzled young man as curious that there were no old folk about—no father nor other relative—just the brother and sister in this big old house apparently living alone except for the servants. But he was too much occupied by each eventful moment to be reflective.

"Do you play cards, Benjamin?" D'Hemcourt asked casually after a slight pause.

"Oh, a little," returned Harry Edward with the indifferent air he felt to be suitable to a man of the world.

"What? Bridge? Poker?"

"Oh, poker—anything."

"We'll have to get up a little game some evening," remarked the Southerner.

"I don't really care for cards," put in Harry Edward hastily.

"Prefer roulette? I have a sort of dugout in the courtyard where my friends and I play," said D'Hemcourt. "Excavation made years ago by my ancestors when the city's history was being written in blood. They hid there from the British. I had a fancy to make it a hiding place for fun. I've fitted it up rather comfortably, and you can have most any game you choose."

"My brother is just a boy with too much time on his hands, and he enjoys gaming now and then," broke in Mary Elizabeth.

"I have about everything down there," laughed D'Hemcourt—"at least everything that's against the law."

"Are they strict here?" asked Harry Edward for something to say.

"No, everybody plays. But it seems more devilish to play in a dugout under the ground—adds zest to the fun. You must see my den."

"Glad to," returned Harry Edward, determined, however, to get into no game with this man of wealth and his friends.

The gong sounded out, and laughing voices were immediately heard ascending the stairs. The portières leading to the outer hall were parted by a liveried negro, and two beautiful girls dashed into the room followed by a fair, fat young man.

"Mr. Benjamin, may I present my friends?" asked Mary Elizabeth with a quaint old-fashioned manner. Then without waiting for a reply she went on: "Miss Granger, Miss Blackman, Mr. Stewart, Mr. Benjamin. Miss Granger would be a grand duchess if such things existed in this

country," she added with a sly smile as the young people shook hands all around. "But of course we have no titles, so she's just plain Miss Granger."

Almost immediately came the sound of chimes, and D'Hemcourt addressed Harry Edward.

"If you'll give my sister your arm, Mr. Benjamin—" At the same time offering his to Miss Granger, he led the way to the dining-room.

All the regal splendor of the drawing-room was here repeated. They were served by silent, liveried negroes, and the service was of heavy old silver, the plates alone being of shell-like china, on either side of which stretched an appalling array of knives and forks and spoons. Harry Edward had a baffled feeling as he viewed them, and realized that each one was for use—for specific use. But had he not faced the Germans smilingly? So now he turned to Mary Elizabeth, ostensibly to remark that the bolshevik tendency of the times was involving us in chaos; in reality to see what she was going to do about the tangle of cutlery surrounding her. She lifted the last fork on her left, a very tiny one, and dipped it into her shrimp cocktail.

Harry Edward did likewise, at the same time noticing that it was the last knife on her right, also very small, which she selected for cutting into her butter pat. And so the meal progressed; the appalling line being employed in their order, from the outside working in toward the plate. Like most problems which confront us it had required but concentrated attention.

"How long are you stopping in New Orleans, Mr. Benjamin?" asked Mr. Stewart, the fair fat young man.

"I can't say offhand," returned that gentleman grandly, "I'm studying conditions in America, and your city seems to present potential possibilities."

Those two words were great favorites with Stanley Wilder.

"I'm deeply interested in the problem of the young men of the cities: how to reach them with help of the sort that will develop their potential possibilities, if I may repeat myself. One of your writers has treated the subject exhaustively; but as yet Stanley Wilder has not given practical proof of his admittedly fine theories."

Harry Edward was encouraged to go on by the curious hush which had fallen on the gay little group. They were listening intently as one listens to a man who speaks words of astonishing wisdom.

Always imaginative Harry Edward as a little boy when running errands for his father had upon occasion been a policeman after a criminal, with the prescription he carried his gun; or again, he would himself be the criminal fleeing from justice with a package of rare jewels. In his imagination he had killed folk by the score and rescued all the little "ladies" of his acquaintance from burning buildings or rivers which he had created for the purpose on the instant, there being none anywhere about his home.

Most boys, not born clods, go through all these thrilling experiences, then comes the sad day when, having grown up, they are no longer the heroes themselves, but must go to the theaters, there to live with other heroes and heroines the delights of make-believe.

Harry Edward had been forced by the limitations of his finances to create his own actors even after he had grown out of being himself the principal, so that now it was not difficult for him to slip back to his boyhood, not so very far away, into the land of make-believe.

The magic wand of fancy had transformed the tie clerk into a royal person who pretended to be a commoner. No past weighed upon his spirits; no future threatened. Gay and thoughtful by turns, he drew largely upon Stanley Wilder for bits of learned conversation and upon his own gentle up-bringing as a son of one of the "best families" for his scintillating assurance.

"You seem bugs on this Wilder," inelegantly remarked Mr. Stewart when Harry Edward had definitely quoted the American writer three or four times.

"I consider him the friend and benefactor of young men; and with the young men rests the nation's future," retorted Harry Edward with the large finality of one who

would silence an obstreperous opponent with an irrefutable argument.

"I know him to be the bunk," broke in Mr. Stewart, with unmistakable malice.

There was a moment of painful silence, but Harry Edward proved equal to it.

"I believe the tenets of Americanism are *free thought, free speech.* I claim your prerogative of holding to my own opinion."

The fat Mr. Stewart ducked his head grinningly as if to dodge a blow.

Turning to Mary Elizabeth for approval Harry Edward was surprised to find her regarding his right coat-sleeve, a curious expression in her eyes. Something stabbed his heart; but she smiled up at him, speaking with an indifference which appeared not to ring quite true:

"You smoke cigarettes, I see."

"No," he returned, "but I did once."

He didn't actually say that the little brown spot on his coat-sleeve was the result of that one smoke; but the inference was plain. Then they drifted to the evils of smoking. And the fairy evening ran on. A perfect dinner, gay chatter, and at last a scurrying on the part of the ladies for their wraps.

"We can all go in my car," said Mr. Stewart.

Mary Elizabeth was breath-taking in a cape of satin with ermine. She gave it to Harry Edward to lay about her white shoulders. The blood went to his face in a warm tide as his hands almost met around her neck.

D'Hemcourt pushed the stair doors open and they descended to the street.

The overture was crashing out its final chord when the D'Hemcourt party made its way to one of the lower boxes. D'Hemcourt and Miss Granger sat in the front; then Stewart and Miss Blackman, while Harry Edward and Mary Elizabeth sank into the shadows of heavy hangings as the curtain rose on the play. And volumes of melody filled all space.

Ah, this was life, such as one read and dreamed about; but never hoped to experience! Harry Edward had sat in the galleries sometimes in New York, and stared down at the boxes, wondering how it must feel to be of those who sat there with none of the nagging problems of life upon them.

Now here he sat staring up, not down, and out over the throngs from orchestra to parterre. Jewels twinkled in the half-light of the big auditorium on white arms and necks where rich wraps slid away in revealing loveliness, and the air was heavy with the perfume of flowers. He was at once weighed down, and lifted up by the sweet torture of it all.

The great tenor and the golden throated soprano poured forth, not the love-song of a mythical hero and heroine, but of Harry Edward, and he dared hope of—Mary Elizabeth. She, too, seemed to feel the thrill of his presence, for she sat very close to him and let him hold her hand. Now and again he caught the flash of her eyes turned up to him like two stars in the night, for he looked at her more than he did at the actors on the stage.

It was over all too soon.

"Won't you take lunch with me to-morrow?" he whispered eagerly as they drove him to his hotel.

"Of course," she returned as if to say she had had no other thought.

Then he was on the sidewalk watching them drive away.

X.

AND that night Harry Edward Benjamin paid for the privilege of being a prince. He paid and paid and paid. All through the long hours of the night he tossed, unable to sleep—one minute tingling ecstatically at recollection of her nearness, her touch, the look in her eyes; the next, desperate at the thought of going from her forever; overwhelmed by the realization of his position, and the utter impossibility of any sort of explanation or continuance.

There was no future, only the present. He was but a silly moth rejoicing in the flame which would inevitably destroy him. Why had he not told the truth at once, this afternoon?

Well, he didn't regret that. Whatever happened he had had one perfect afternoon and evening! Nothing could take them from him. Even if he had to go back to selling ties.

She liked him! He knew it. Every fiber of his being proclaimed it; as did her flaming cheeks, downcast eyes, and hushed voice.

But she would despise him when she knew him for the impostor he was. Questions overwhelmed him. What would she say to him when he should first tell her? Would her brother put him out of the house and forbid him ever to come back? And how would he bring himself to do it?

He framed a confession, and it sounded weak and foolish. He cast it away and made up another. That, too, was flat and unreasonable. And so speech after speech was constructed and discarded.

He pictured over and over the scene. Now it would be in her own magnificent drawing-room. No, he would ask her to dine in some quiet spot and there lay his soul before her eyes. How it hurt! The contemplation racked him. He tortured himself with the expression of horror on her face; endured all the shame of it over and over. His misery increased as the hours dragged along.

After a while the rattle of milk-wagons on the cobble-stones below his window announced the dawn. Cars clanged down the street at narrowing intervals. Automobiles and carriages rumbled by continually. An organ-grinder's whining tunes drifted up to him; and a muffled hum filled the hotel.

Harry Edward had not slept all night. He did not want to sleep ever again. He didn't want to get up. He had no energy, no ambition for anything.

Perhaps it would be best if he just slipped away with the memory of last night ever green and unspoiled. Hunger, having no respect for mental states, tugged at his stomach; but still he wouldn't get up.

Yes, it were better that he should go, at once, to-day. Never see her again. Never see her tender eyes grow cold. With a groan he covered his head as if that might hide him from the cruelty, the hideousness of his own decision.

He would take the eleven o'clock train back to New York. But there was his luncheon date with her. It wouldn't be nice to break that. Perhaps after lunch—for several moments he dallied with the temptation; then put it heroically from him. He dare not see her again if he would have the courage to get away!

His phone jangled. With a heavy frown of dejection upon his face he rose and took the receiver. Instantly, as if by magic, the frown was wiped out!

"I'm going for a drive up the river; want to come along?" The voice of Mary Elizabeth!

"Delighted!" he cried, completely forgetting that he was to take the eleven o'clock train for New York.

"I'll call for you in ten minutes," she said.

"Better give me fifteen." He spoke ruefully. "I'm just getting up."

"Lazy!" she laughed. "All right; fifteen; not a second longer."

Harry Edward had no time for thought; no time to consider his recent decision, nor the problems which beset him. He had but one problem now—to get shaved and dressed and down-stairs in fifteen minutes.

He dropped his shaving-brush, cut his face, couldn't find a new tie he had bought the day before, and which he had positively placed on the dresser, it having walked away and laid itself on a chair, where he found it after several excited seconds. But thirteen minutes and a half later he stood on the sidewalk in rapturous waiting, forgetting even that he had had no breakfast. She was held up by an inconsiderate police officer, and Harry Edward ran down the block to meet her.

"Oh, there you are!" she cried, her brown eyes lighting joyously at sight of him.

"Yes, here I am," he replied, opening the car door, and sinking ecstatically beside her.

Never if he lived to be a hundred, could he forget that ride along the winding Mississippi. Gnarled old oaks, moss-grown and top-heavy, lined the road. And there was a nip in the air to remind one that winter was in the north.

They had lunch together, away up the river in a rambling white house, which was set upon a high bluff, into which the river ate constantly, coming closer and closer. Some day it would take the house; but

until then, fried chicken would be served to tourists and baked yams and all the vegetables of the season for fifty cents.

Nor was there anything one could do about it but be happy, and when the day came—move out and give the relentless water its way. That was the way with him, thought Harry Edward. He stood upon the banks of a relentless fate. It would sweep him to destruction one day; but mean time—

What a fool he had been to think of running away from the rapture of these moments! He knew now that he would not, could not go back until his money was exhausted. He would sip the last drop of honey from the cup—then drink the dregs. Why waste the honey when in any case he must drink the dregs? For Harry Edward knew that whether he left now, or to-morrow, or next week, or next year, he could not suffer more through the loss of his love. Then why not have all the joy he might?

Mary Elizabeth gave a little sigh as they went out to the car again and faced homeward once more.

"It has been a heavenly day," she said, her foot on the accelerator.

"Surely heaven was never so wonderful as this!" whispered Harry Edward, staring wistfully at the dark, piquant face upturned to him.

A sudden flood of color in her face, a drooping of her eyes, made his pulses leap.

"Oh, Mary Elizabeth!" he began.

She let the clutch out suddenly; starting with a jump.

And they whirled along silent; not thinking, just reveling in their youth and nearness.

XI.

HARRY EDWARD and Mary Elizabeth, sitting in the shadows of the old Louisienne, were leaning across the table whispering about nothing in particular as is the way of young lovers. Her brown eyes, her flushed cheeks, the quick rise and fall of her bosom, the fluttering white hands above the table, all told him, inexperienced as he was, that she loved him.

One week of perfect bliss had he had. For he had indulged in no more nights of thought, no more looking ahead. He had resolutely set about living his little day in the sun, leaving to-morrow's darkness for to-morrow. And in that resolution he achieved a great philosophy.

But to-morrow was at hand! He had lived this week as he had conceived a prince would; and when his room at the hotel, including a couple of expensive dinners for three, several lunches and breakfasts, were paid for he would have barely enough to get back home—to his job as a tie clerk.

No, not that! He might not have her; but he had gained strength to fare forth. He would never again be a job coward. This much she had given him—freedom from the narrow confines of self-fear, which is man's greatest jailer.

"Won't you take dinner with us this evening?" she asked presently.

He scarcely heard her. One marvelous week of Paradise! They had been together morning, afternoon, and evening. She cared! The birds sang it.

"I should love to," he began, "but I'm afraid—you see, I am at your place so much—I—why not you and your brother take dinner with me at my hotel?"

"But my brother told me to ask you."

"It's wonderfully good of him."

"Then it's settled." And she began to talk of other things.

D'Hemcourt greeted Harry Edward that evening with cordiality, and instantly informed him that he had invited Stewart and another friend over for a little game after dinner. "I have a sort of underground den of my own, you remember," he smiled, "quite worth seeing.

"I'm sure I should enjoy seeing it," returned Harry Edward doubtfully, "but as for playing, I'm not much at that."

"Oh, come now," retorted D'Hemcourt, "I've heard men say that before, then break everybody in the game."

"I don't want to be a spoil-sport," returned Harry Edward desperately, "but I had rather hoped we might all go to a theater." He couldn't play with these men. He owed almost every cent he had to the hotel.

"I'm so sorry," broke in Mary Elizabeth, "but I have a theater engagement, so that if you boys will amuse yourselves until I get back, we might have a little party at Antoine's; or, better still, we might see the midnight show at the Cave."

A sinking feeling possessed Harry Edward. She was going away. He would not see her for three hours. Also she had made it practically impossible for him to refuse her brother. But he rallied, soldier-fashion.

"That would be delightful," he said, "but the fact of the matter is, I haven't thought of playing and I have only about four hundred dollars on me."

"Plenty to start with," returned D'Hemcourt. "And if you don't break us all, as I daresay you will, why your check is perfectly good, Mr. Benjamin." He put a slight stress on the name. "I tell you—we'll play a couple of hours; then settle and go to meet the child here. Just a small game."

Harry Edward smiled weakly. What he said was: "Fine!"

It required more moral courage than the poor fellow possessed to confess then and there that he could not play because he owed all his money, nor had any bank account to check against. Neither could he show himself too big a prude to enter into a small, two-hour game for the pleasure and amusement of this man who had entertained him so royally all week. He felt as he knew a trapped mouse must feel. And like the trapped mouse he could merely die.

After the quickest dinner on record—to the mind of the wretched young man—Mary Elizabeth left them. Harry Edward tried to talk. He tried to listen. Presently Stewart and a small, wiry, dark man called Cole were admitted by the ancient butler.

"Well, we might as well start," said D'Hemcourt.

They followed him out of the drawing-room across the hall into another room, whose walls were lined with books, and out onto a balcony; then down a long, narrow flight of steps into a dark yard. An old negro with a bucket of ice in his hand, the other arm full of bottles, came out of an "L" of the house, and waited beyond a fountain in the courtyard.

As they approached, he set the bucket down, lifted what looked in the moonlight like a flower-bed, and D'Hemcourt led the way down another flight of stairs into a dugout. The old negro followed, closing the door after them.

They entered absolute blackness, and stopped while their host made his way across the cavern by the aid of an electric torch.

"Those damned electricians," he muttered, "put the electric button by the wrong door." A flood of light came on, and Harry Edward's astonished eyes saw a perfectly equipped gambling-room—wide and low. "I told them *by the door,* and you'd think they'd have sense enough to know *which door.* Now they're on strike."

He turned to Harry Edward, smiling.

"I've only recently installed electricity down here." Then seeing his guest's surprised expression, he laughed. "There's a tunnel that once ran from that opening"—he pointed to the curtained door where the electric button had been placed by mistake—"clean across the city, out Rampart, and into what was the canal. The filling-in of Canal Street closed our mysterious passage."

It was indeed a curious room. The walls, floor, and low ceiling were of brick. At one side was what appeared to be a great oven, as though it had once been used for a kitchen. Indian blankets scattered about the floor, and hung on walls, gave warmth and color to the wide, square room, while easy-chairs were scattered about. A billiard-table over on one side, a roulette-wheel at the back, and several card-tables stacked with chips would have filled an older man with suspicion. He would have felt that here surely was a secret gambling-den for professional gamblers who picked their prey carefully; entertained them; got their confidence as the city's young blood; then fleeced them thoroughly. But Harry Edward was young, also he loved D'Hemcourt's sister.

He felt hard-driven as the young always are when in fear of seeming a "piker."

"What 'll it be?" asked D'Hemcourt, as

they seated themselves comfortably at one of the tables.

"Draw," suggested the fair, fat young man.

"Cut." D'Hemcourt snapped the cards on the center of the table.

Harry Edward faced the door beside which was the electric button and from which the tunnel ran away, to nowhere. D'Hemcourt was facing the exit.

The heavy portières hanging over the mysterious passage moved inward! Amazement leaped into Harry Edward's eyes; his heart missed a beat. How could those curtains be moved inward if the passage behind them was sealed. All this was very strange and mysterious. Surely a curious fashion in which to indulge one's fancy.

Suddenly uneasy—recollecting things he had heard and read, he watched the curtained door tense and eager.

Four hands were dealt and the game began. The tie clerk shivered as the limit was fixed at fifty dollars.

The old negro opened one of the bottles already in the ice-bucket, and filled their glasses.

They all came in. D'Hemcourt took one card, the other two men three. Harry Edward, his eyes narrowing, stood pat. He raised Stewart's ante; they all stayed. Seized by a fierce determination to break himself all at once and end the agony, or to break them, he raised again. A sort of fever was on him and he kept raising and raising.

Two of the men dropped out; it was between him and D'Hemcourt. All the rest of Harry Edward's savings hung in the balance, save twenty-five dollars. He grew dizzy. He would have to call.

D'Hemcourt pondered a second; then threw his cards down.

"I'm out," he said; "only had a pair of kings."

Harry Edward laid his cards face down, and raked in the jack-pot *on a pair of deuces.*

Now he played recklessly, risking all his winnings.

Again those portières seemed to blow in from the sealed tunnel; but Harry Edward gave it no thought. The thrill of the game was upon him. D'Hemcourt watched him intently.

Harry Edward took one, next time.

They suspected him of bluffing and the stakes soared till Harry Edward once more dug into his savings. Stewart called him, and he laid down a royal flush. The old negro again filled their glasses. As Harry Edward lifted his, he paused horrified—not only had the portières moved; but he had distinctly seen them drawn slightly away at one side; then glimpsed—*a pair of eyes!* He set his glass down silently. And all evening he waited—for what?

The god of chance seemed to have woven a spell around him. He won incredibly.

The old negro made a show of filling his glass every time; and if the others noticed his remissness in drinking they never mentioned it. However, they became more and more hilarious as the evening advanced; let drop some astonishing remarks about other games played in which they had won largely. Harry Edward was burning up with excitement. He held the astonishing hands that so often fall to the novice; and when he didn't hold them he bluffed and won. He had ten thousand dollars' worth of chips before him when suddenly D'Hemcourt suggested that they settle up as it was nearly eleven o'clock.

Harry Edward had never seen so much money. His eyes fairly gloated as they counted it out to him, yet not for one instant did he forget that curtained door, behind which was—*a pair of eyes!*

As he reached out his hand to pick up the money, watching the door, D'Hemcourt suddenly bent toward him, and said slowly, cuttingly:

"I'm not sure, Benjamin, that this was a straight game."

There was a hasty moving back of chairs. Everybody got up. It was what Harry Edward had been waiting for. Something gleamed across the table, and D'Hemcourt's cool voice was saying: "*Was* it a straight game, Benjamin?"

Harry Edward's eyes were fixed on D'Hemcourt's.

In a flash he saw it all. He, who had been mistaken for a prince, a man of money, had been lured into one of those dens of

vice about which one hears so much in the Creole city. All this display of wealth to which he had been treated was but a part of a big game—and the result of it.

A violent movement of the portières drew his attention in spite of himself away from D'Hemcourt. A hand came suddenly through the side of the curtain—a woman's hand—then the dugout became pitch black!

In one concerted movement Harry Edward, with his left hand, snatched the money from the table, and with excellent aim of his right, caught the wrist of D'Hemcourt. The pistol exploded and a scrambling followed. Chairs were knocked over, and a general rush was made around the table. Harry Edward grappled with some one. They fell to the floor.

Still he held to his winnings. Not that the money mattered now—his world had gone to pieces—but he would not be robbed in this high-handed fashion. He managed to get the bills inside his vest. Three figures went up the steps, and the darkness lifted somewhat as the door overhead opened. It slammed, and blackness again. Harry Edward's opponent wrestled desperately with him; got free, and scurried up the stairs, also slamming the door as he went out.

Harry Edward's first impulse was to follow. His next was to see who was in that passage! Whose hand had put the light out.

Thoughts hurled themselves together in his brain, like flying débris in a cyclone. He did not try to decide anything; he found the portières leading to that closed passage—and lunged through them.

His hand touched a warm body, which fled from him in the darkness. He followed, hitting the walls of the narrow passage as he ran. It was just ahead! He could hear heavy breathing. He reached out and his arms closed around a woman!

"Oh!" came a soft voice in his ear. "You hurt me."

Harry Edward's arms fell heavily; his knees grew weak; and he leaned against the damp wall for support.

"Oh, Mary Elizabeth!" he groaned. "Why are you here? What does it all mean? What is D'Hemcourt to you?"

"He is my brother."

For a space there was silence. Then the young man spoke painfully. "You asked me here—for this?"

He was trying so hard to see light—and was so afraid of what he would find.

"Yes," she answered in her sweet, drawling way.

"You knew I'd come?"

"I thought so. I knew so."

Harry Edward wanted to ask her if men always fell into her trap so easily; but he merely said: "And—"

"My brother—we—planned—"

"Don't," begged Harry Edward. "I can't stand it." Then in contradiction of his words, as if he must know all, he asked: "Why—did you—pick on me? I have no money."

"A prince must have some money," she said coolly.

"Oh, I'm not a prince!" he flung out. "I'm just a poor tie clerk who had never had anything but work and skimping; who had only seven hundred dollars in the world, and wanted to be young and have fun; wanted adventure and romance and life. And I met you, and you seemed the girl of my dreams; the girl I'd waited for all my life. You wanted me to be a prince; and somehow, I couldn't disappoint you. So I let you think I was one. I've paid for that! I'd have paid without this, because I knew the time would come when I'd have to own up; and I couldn't make up my mind that you could pass out of my life. I loved you. Oh, my dear, I still love you!"

He reached out his hands gropingly and found her in the darkness; and there was unutterable heart-break in his young voice.

"I knew—I still know—it's hopeless; because you want money. You're used to it. But, oh, if only you would let me take you away from here, Mary Elizabeth! I'd work my hands to the bone for you. And I'd be more than a tie clerk. I've got out of my four walls. I am no longer what Stanley Wilder calls a job coward. I mean to be something more than a moss-covered stone; I'm going to keep moving till I find my niche in the wall of life; then I'll gather mortar and wedge myself into my right place. I can do it. I know I can."

"You'd take me in spite of—"

"In spite of anything!" he cried. "Won't you let me take you away from here, sweetheart? I don't believe you like this sort of thing."

He had been steadily drawing her closer; and all at once he flung his arms around her in a burst of uncontrollable despair. She rested content in them.

Then she wriggled away and, passing through the curtains, pressed the button, flooding the den with light. Harry Edward followed her into the disordered room. She turned to him with a teasing gleam in her brown eyes.

"When I saw the crowd mistake you for Luis Edward," she said softly, "I had a fancy to see if Stanley Wilder was right when he said: 'Assume that a man is a prince or a gladiator and nine times out of ten he'll be one.'"

"You knew?" Harry Edward asked dazedly.

"Of course; brother and I had been at Gilbert's tie sale that morning. I asked you to come down here—and when you did, and when I knew I—cared—" Her eyes fell, her face was suffused. "Well, of course, my brother wanted to know something about your real character. This was his plan. He expected to break you and then you'd either have to acknowledge yourself moneyless or give I O U's that you could never pay.

"My brother is just a great boy with lots of time on his hands and gambling is his hobby. It was fun for him and his friends, adventure for you, and a test of your mettle for me. You'll forgive us, won't you—please?"

"But what about all this gun-play?" asked Harry Edward, a grim light coming into his blue eyes.

"That was the other alternative in case you had beginner's luck," she explained. "You see, we knew you'd see my hand and the moving curtains; you'd know there was a trick of some sort. And I'd have known if you had the real soul of a prince by the direction your feet took when the lights went out."

Harry Edward was conscious only of tearing rage.

"So you and your brother and his friends have made a fool of me! A toy for men with too much money and too much time on their hands!"

"My brother's friends were not in the secret at all," she said. "They were as much surprised as you were. But they are accustomed to his eccentricities. They are never greatly surprised at anything he does. And do you think I was moved only by a spirit of fun?" she asked softly; and all anger went out of him.

He sank on a near-by chair as the door was lifted and D'Hemcourt's voice asked with mock fear: "May I come down?" He waved a white handkerchief at them as a flag of truce; then without waiting for permission descended.

"But if this is all on the level," broke in Harry Edward, too overwhelmed by a confusion of ideas to take thought of the intruder, "then you're rich and—I can't marry you."

"I'm afraid, old chap," chuckled D'Hemcourt, "that if Mary Elizabeth has made up her mind to marry you, you may as well give in. And she told me two days ago that she had. Have you got your proposal over, child?" He turned to his sister.

"Wretch!" she cried.

"I hope you'll forgive me, old chap," D'Hemcourt went on, "I naturally wanted to know what my future brother-in-law was made of; and I can always measure a man in a game."

He extended a hand to Harry Edward, who took it limply, mechanically. His mind held only one fact.

"But—but I don't know anything except ties," he groaned.

"How much do you know about them?" barked a different D'Hemcourt from what Harry Edward had yet seen. "There's a story that the man who put the kink in hairpins was a notion salesman. He knew that women couldn't keep hairpins in their hair because the pins were straight. Nobody else had thought of that, and of how to remedy it. He made a million dollars out of his knowledge. What do you know about ties that nobody else has thought of?"

Harry Edward stared a minute; then

stood up excitedly. "I know how *to keep the kink out* of ties!"

Rapidly he explained his discovery of a magic bath which gave body and luster to cheap materials. He told how he had overcome the softening in damp weather and outlined his carefully-thought-out project for a stock company for the manufacture of the Benjamin Twistless Ties.

"A dreamer of dreams, I see," smiled D'Hemcourt.

"I believe that dream's valuable." Harry Edward felt a sinking in his heart.

"So do I," returned D'Hemcourt. "Most dreams are valuable if controlled by common sense."

"How much do you believe it?" asked Harry Edward sharply. "How much stock would you take in a company to manufacture moderate-priced ties that would keep their shape?"

"You'll do," laughed D'Hemcourt. "We'll talk it over to-morrow. That is, if it's your idea to manufacture them here in New Orleans. I daresay I know some other fellows, too, who will see the possibilities of the twistless tie. I must say, however, I'm glad I have no more sisters to put my theories to a test. Though it *is* a satisfaction to have yourself proved right."

He turned toward the steps.

"You see," elucidated Mary Elizabeth, demurely, "my brother is Stanley Wilder D'Hemcourt."

"Glad you admire me so, Benjamin." D'Hemcourt grinned, pausing half-way up the stairway. "Simplifies family matters, as mother willed the old house to my sister and me jointly."

"Well, I got out of my four walls," triumphed Harry Edward with a sigh, "and put myself in the way of opportunity!"

"If Mary Elizabeth is it, I'm afraid you can't escape either," laughed her brother.

"She is a most determined young person."

The slam of the door shut out his chuckling voice.

Mary Elizabeth giggled and laid a small white finger on a brown spot on Harry Edward's sleeve. "It's funny your getting hold of brother's suit."

"So that's it? Well, it was the best I could find, and it fitted." Harry Edward laughed with her.

"I think you'd better grasp your opportunity, Harry Edward," she whispered demurely.

He did.

(The end.)

WALLS!

BY G. G. BOSTWICK

THEY rise unto the skies by day and night—
High walls and broad; impassive walls of gray;
White walls of Persia and of far Cathay
And Chinese walls of old tradition's might;
The sacred walls that fell—a startling sight!
When earth-worn warriors on their weary way
Marched round the town and, striving to obey,
Cried seven times the magic words of light!

These are the walls clear-seen in every land
But greater far those walls invisible
That close the heart by barriers cold and chill:
Walls raised by minds that cannot understand,
That build of prejudice, of fear and doubt,
Those deadly walls that shut all freedom out!

The Metal Monster

by A. Merritt

Author of "The Moon Pool," "The Conquest of the Moon Pool," etc.

(In collaboration with Dr. Walter T. Goodwin, Ph.D., I.A.S., F.R.G.S., etc.)

LIKE Mr. Merritt's narrative of "The Moon Pool" (published in *All-Story Weekly*, June 22, 1918), and "The Conquest of the Moon Pool" (*All-Story Weekly*, February 15- March 22, 1919), "The Metal Monster" is published with the consent and authority of the International Association of Science. After the expeditions described in the earlier narratives, Dr. Walter T. Goodwin was placed at the head of a special bureau of the association and supplied with unlimited means to prosecute his investigations. Upon his recent return from Central Asia he gave Mr. Merritt the manuscript of his report, to be prepared for popular presentation. In its popularized form it is published herewith.

PRECEDING CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RETOLD

WHILE traveling in the mountains of Turkestan with Chiu-Ming, an educated Chinese servant and companion, Dr. Goodwin met Dick Drake, an American engineer. They noticed a spot on the sun, and saw some tremendous and apparently intelligent force break the rays of the setting sun and suck down an aurora. Next day, in a valley, they saw a colossal imprint crushed into the stone with unthinkable force—a curved heel with four claws each twenty feet long extending from it. And on the next day, while traveling on an ancient road that passed through a hollow, they were almost overcome by an unseen force that sapped their strength. Winning through they met an American girl, Ruth Ventnor, daughter of a scientist, and her brother Mart, who were being kept prisoners by the mysterious force in the hollow. From them they learned that one night two men had come close to their fire and discussed Ruth with exceeding frankness—in archaic Persian. Awakening she had fired at them, and wounded one. The next day they had seen a body of soldiers, dressed and armed like the legions of ancient Darius, approaching, apparently in search of them. They had escaped. Ruth showed Dr. Goodwin and Dick a number of small metal objects, heavier than platinum, that formed geometrical designs that moved, seemingly with intelligence, and formed a bridge. Coming in contact with this metal both Dr. Goodwin and Dick were partially paralyzed.

Metal—with a brain!

CHAPTER IX.

POWER OF PERSIA.

DUMBLY we looked at each other, and silently we passed out of the courtyard. A strange, sick dread was heavy upon me. The twilight was stealing upon the close-clustered peaks. Another hour, and their amethyst-and-purple mantles would drop upon them; snowfields and glaciers sparkle out in irised beauty; nightfall.

As I gazed upon them I wondered, with a deepening of my dread, to what secret place within their brooding immensities the metal mysteries had fled? And to what

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myriads, it might be, of their kind? And these hidden hordes—of what shapes were they? Of what powers? Small like these, or—or—

Quick on the screen of my mind flashed two pictures, side by side—the little four-rayed print in the great dust of the crumbling ruin and its colossal twin on the breast of the poppied valley! And again that icy hand reached out of the unknown, touched me, choked me. I fought for mastery against it; mastery over the alien nightmare fear that gripped throat, checked heart-beat!

I conquered it, pushed it back; then, not willing that Ruth and Dick, now busy with the pony, should see even its shadow on my face, I turned softly aside, crept through the shattered portal, made my way out upon the ledge and looked over the haunted hollow.

Unbelieving, I rubbed my eyes; then strode to the very brim of the bowl. A lark had risen from the roof of one of the shattered heaps and had flown caroling up in to the shadowing sky! A flock of the little willow warblers flung themselves across the valley, scolding and gossiping; a hare sat upright in the middle of the ancient roadway and raised inquisitive ears.

The valley itself lay serenely under the ambering light, smiling, peaceful—emptied of horror!

I dropped over the side, walked cautiously down the road up which but an hour or so before we had struggled so desperately; paced farther and farther with an increasing confidence and a growing wonder. Gone was that soul of loneliness; utterly vanished the whirlpool of despair that had striven to drag us down to death.

The bowl was nothing but a quiet, smiling, lovely little hollow in the hills. I looked back. Even the ruins had lost their sinster shape; were time-worn, crumbling piles—nothing more!

I saw Ruth and Drake run out upon the ledge and beckon me; heard them cry out to me; knew that they had missed me and feared for me; made my way back to them, running.

"It's all right!" I shouted. "The place is all right!"

I stumbled up the side; joined them.

"It's empty," I cried. "Get Martin and Chiu-Ming quick! Quick—while the way's open—"

A rifle-shot rang out above us; another and another. To us came the echoing of Ventnor's shouting:

"Ruth! Goodwin! Drake! Here! They are coming!"

From the portal scampered Chiu-Ming, his robe tucked up about his knees.

"They come!" he gasped. "They come!"

There was a flaming of spears high up the winding mountain path. Down it was pouring an avalanche of men. I caught the glint of helmets and corselets. Those in the van were mounted, galloping two abreast upon sure-footed mountain-ponies. Their short swords, lifted high, flickered like lightnings.

After the horsemen swarmed foot soldiers, a forest of shining points and dully gleaming pikes above them. Clearly to us came the fierce tumult of their battle-cries.

Again Ventnor's rifle cracked. One of the foremost riders went down; another stumbled over him, fell. The rush was checked for an instant, milling upon the road.

"Dick," I cried, "rush Ruth over to the tunnel mouth. We'll follow. We can hold them there. I'll get Martin. Chiu-Ming, after the pony, quick!"

I pushed the two over the rim of the hollow. Side by side the Chinaman and I ran back through the gateway. I pointed to the animal, rushed into the fortress.

"Quick, Mart!" I shouted up the shattered stairway. "We can get through the hollow. Ruth and Drake are on their way to the break we came through. Hurry!"

"All right! Just a minute!" he called.

I heard him empty his magazine with almost machine-gun quickness. There was a short pause, and down the broken steps he leaped, gray eyes blazing.

"The pony!" He ran beside me toward the portal. "All my ammunition on him."

"Chiu-Ming's taking care of that," I gasped.

We darted out of the gateway. A good five hundred yards away were Ruth and

Drake, running straight to the green tunnel's mouth. Between them and us was Chiu-Ming, urging on the pony.

As we sped after him I looked back. The cavalry had recovered, were now a scant half-mile from where the road swept past the fortress. Besides their swords I saw that the horsemen bore great bows. A little cloud of arrows sparkled from them; fell far short.

"Don't look back," grunted Ventnor. "Stretch yourself, Walter. There's a surprise coming. Hope to God I judged the time right. Hold 'em for a little while if I did—"

We turned off the ruined way; raced over the sward.

"If it looks as though—we can't make it," he panted, "*you* beat it after the rest. I'll try to hold 'em until you get into the tunnel. Never do for 'em to get Ruth."

"Right." My own breathing was growing labored. "*We'll* hold them. Dick can take care of Ruth."

"Good boy," he said. "I wouldn't have asked you. It probably means—death."

"Very well," I gasped, irritated. "But why borrow trouble?"

He reached out, touched me.

"You're right, Walter," he grinned. "It does—seem—like carrying coals—to Newcastle."

There was a thunderous booming behind us; a shattering crash. I stopped in my tracks, whirled around. A cloud of smoke and dust hung over the northern end of the ruined fortress.

It lifted swiftly, and I saw that the whole side of the structure had fallen, littering the road with its fragments. Scattered prone among these were men and horses. Others staggered, screaming. On the farther side of this stony dike our pursuers were held like rushing waters behind a sudden fallen tree.

"Come on!" cried Ventnor. "Timed to a second! Hold 'em for a while. Fuses and dynamite. Blew out the whole side, right on 'em, by the Lord!"

On we fled. Chiu-Ming was now well in advance; Ruth and Dick less than half a mile from the opening of the green tunnel. Suddenly I saw Drake stop, raise his rifle, empty it before him, and, holding Ruth by the hand, race back toward us.

Even as he turned, the vine-screened entrance through which we had come, through which we had thought lay safety, streamed other armored men. We were outflanked!

"To the fissure!" shrieked Ventnor. Drake heard, for he changed his course to the crevice at whose mouth Ruth had said the—Little Things—had lain.

After him streaked Chiu-Ming, urging on the pony. Shouting, out of the tunnel, down over the lip of the bowl, leaped the soldiers. We dropped upon our knees, sent shot after shot into them. They fell back, hesitated. We sprang up, sped on.

All too short was the check. Once more we held them—and again.

Now Ruth and Dick were a scant fifty yards from the crevice. I saw him stop, push her from him toward it. She shook her head.

Now Chiu-Ming was with them. She sprang to the pony, lifted from its back a rifle. Then into the mass of their pursuers Drake and she poured a fusillade. They huddled, wavered, broke for cover.

"A chance!" gasped Ventnor.

Behind us was a wolflike yelping; a bestial chorus, raging, triumphant. The other pack had reformed; had crossed the barricade the dynamite had made; were rushing upon us!

We ran as I had never known we could run. Over us whined the bullets from the covering guns. Close were we now to the mouth of the fissure. If we could but reach it! Close, close were our pursuers, too—the arrows closer.

"No use!" shouted Ventnor. "Three hundred yards—but we can't make it. Meet 'em from the front—never do to pass out running away. Drop—and shoot!"

We threw ourselves down, facing them. There came a great, triumphant shouting. And in that strange sharpening of the senses that goes always hand in hand with deadly peril, that is indeed nature's summoning of every reserve to meet that peril, my eyes took them in with photographic nicety—the linked mail, lacquered blue and scarlet, of the horsemen; brown, padded armor of the footmen; their bows and javelins and

short bronze swords, their pikes and shields; and under their round helmets their cruel, bearded faces—white as our own where the black beards did not cover them; their fierce and mocking eyes!

The springs of ancient Persia's long dead power, these! Men of Xerxes's ruthless, world-conquering hordes; the lustful, ravening wolves of Darius whom Alexander scattered—in this world of ours twenty centuries beyond their time!

Swiftly, accurately, even as I scanned them we had been drilling into them. They advanced deliberately, heedless of their fallen. Their arrows had ceased to fly. I wondered why, for now we were well within their range. Had they orders to take us alive—at whatever cost to themselves?

"I've got only about ten cartridges left, Martin," I whispered.

"We've saved Ruth," he answered. "Drake ought to be able to hold that hole in the wall. He's got lots of ammunition on the pony. But they've got us—I'm sorry, old man."

He gripped my hand crushingly.

Another wild shouting; down upon us swept the pack!

We leaped to our feet, sent our last bullets into them; stood ready, rifles clubbed to meet the rush. I heard Ruth scream—

What was the matter with them? Why had they stopped? What was it at which they were glaring over our heads? And why had the rifle fire of Ruth and Drake ceased so abruptly? Simultaneously we turned.

CHAPTER X.

THE SMITING THING.

WITHIN the black background of the fissure stood a shape, an apparition, a woman—beautiful, awesome, incredible! Tall she was; standing there swathed from chin to feet in clinging veils of pale amber, she seemed taller even than tall Drake.

Yet it was not her height that sent through me the thrill of awe, of half incredulous terror which, relaxing my grip, let my smoking rifle drop to earth; nor was it that about her proud head a cloud of shining tresses swirled and pennoned like a misty banner of woven copper flames—no, nor that through her veils her body gleamed faint radiance!

It was her eyes—her great, wide eyes whose clear depths were like pools of living star fires! They shone from her white face—not phosphorescent, not merely lucent and light reflecting, but as though they themselves were *sources* of the cold white flames of far stars—and as calm as those stars themselves. And in that face, although as yet I could distinguish nothing but the eyes, I sensed something unearthly.

"God!" whispered Ventnor. "What *is* she?"

The woman stepped from the crevice. Not fifty feet from her were Ruth and Drake and Chiu-Ming, their rigid attitudes revealing the same shock of awe that had momentarily paralyzed me.

She looked at them, beckoned them. I saw the two walk swiftly toward her, Chiu-Ming hang back. The great eyes fell upon Ventnor and myself. She raised a hand, motioned us to approach.

I turned. There stood the host that had poured down the mountain road, horsemen, spearsmen, pikemen—a full thousand of them. At my right were the scattered company that had come from the tunnel entrance, threescore or more.

There seemed a spell upon them. They stood in silence, like automatons, only their fiercely staring eyes showing that they were alive.

"Quick," breathed Ventnor.

We ran toward her who had checked death even while its jaws were closing upon us.

Before we had gone half-way, as though our flight had broken whatever spell had bound them, a clamor arose from the host; a wild shouting, a clanging of swords on shields. I shot a glance behind. They were in motion, advancing slowly, hesitatingly as yet—but I knew that soon that hesitation would pass; that they would sweep down upon us, engulf us.

"To the crevice!" I shouted to Drake,

He paid no heed to me, nor did Ruth—their gaze once more fastened upon the swathed woman.

Ventnor's hand shot out, gripped my shoulder, halted me. She had thrown up her head. The cloudy *metallic* hair billowed as though wind had blown it. It flashed, coruscated!

From the lifted throat came a low, a vibrant cry; harmonious, weirdly disquieting, golden and sweet—and laden with the eery, minor wailings of the blue valley's night, the dragoned chamber.

Before the cry had ceased there poured with an incredible swiftness out of the crevice score upon score of the metal things! The fissures vomited them.

Globes and cubes and pyramids—not small like those of the ruins, but shapes all of four feet high, dully lustrous, and deep within that luster the myriads of tiny points of light like unwinking, staring eyes! Still with that lightning quickness they swirled, eddied—formed a barricade between us and the armored men.

Down upon the things poured a shower of arrows. I heard the shouts of their captains; they rushed. They had courage—those men—yes!

Again came the woman's cry—golden, peremptory!

Sphere and block and pyramid ran together, seemed to seethe; once more I had that sense of a quicksilver melting. Up from them thrust a thick and rectangular column.

Eight feet in width and twenty high, it shaped itself! Out from its left side, from right side, sprang arms—fearful arms that grew and grew as globe and cube and angle raced up the column's side and clicked into place each upon, each after, the other. With a magical quickness the arms lengthened.

Before us stood a monstrous shape, a geometric prodigy. A shining angled pillar that, though rigid, immobile, seemed to crouch, be instinct with living force striving to be unleashed. Two great globes surmounted it—like the heads of some two-faced Janus of an alien world.

At the left and right the incredible knobbed arms, now fully fifty feet in length, writhed, twisted, straightened; flexing themselves in grotesque, *terrible* imitation of a boxer. And at the end of each of the six arms the spheres were clustered thick, studded with the pyramids—again in gigantic, awful, parody of the spiked gloves of those ancient gladiators who fought for imperial Nero!

For an instant it stood there, preening, testing itself like an athlete—a chimera, amorphous yet weirdly symmetric—under the darkening sky, in the green of the hollow, the armored hosts frozen before it—

And then—it struck!

Out flashed two of the arms, with a glancing motion with appalling force. They sliced into the close-packed forward ranks of the armored men; cut out of them two great gaps.

Sickened, I saw fly fragments of man and horse. Another arm javelined from its place like a flying snake, clicked at the end of another, became a hundred-foot chain which swirled like a gigantic flail through the huddling mass. Down upon a knot of the soldiers with a straightforward blow drove a third arm, driving through them like a giant punch!

All that host which had driven us from the ruins threw down sword, spear, and pike; fled shrieking. The horsemen spurred their mounts, riding heedless over the footmen who fled with them.

The smiting thing seemed to watch them go with—*amusement!*

Before they could cover a hundred yards it had disintegrated. I heard the little wailing sounds—then behind the fleeing men, close behind them, rose the angled pillar; into place sprang the flexing arms, and again it took its toll of them!

They scattered, running singly, by twos, in little groups, for the sides of the valley. They were like rats scampering in panic over the bottom of a great green bowl. And like a monstrous cat the shape played with them—yes, *played!*

It melted once more—took new form. Where had been pillar and flailing arms was now a tripod thirty feet high; its legs alternate globe and cube and upon its apex a wide and spinning ring of sparkling spheres. Out from the middle of this ring stretched

a tentacle—writhing, undulating like a serpent of steel, fourscore yards at least in length.

At its end cube, globe and pyramid had mingled to form a huge trident. With the three long prongs of this trident the thing struck, swiftly, with fearful precision—*joyously*—tining those who fled, forking them, tossing them from its points high in air.

It was, I think, that last touch of sheer horror, the playfulness of the smiting thing, that sent my dry tongue to the roof of my terror-parched mouth, turned my heart to water; sent the mind shuddering back, pressing to the farthest walls of consciousness; held open with monstrous fascination eyes that struggled to close.

Ever they fled from it, and ever was it swifter than they; teetering at their heels on its tripod legs!

From half its length the darting snake streamed red rain!

I heard a sigh from Ruth; wrested my gaze from the hollow; turned. She lay fainting in Drake's arms.

Beside the two the swathed woman stood, looking out upon that dread slaughter, calm and still, shrouded with an unearthly tranquillity—viewing it, it came to me, with eyes impersonal, cold, indifferent as the untroubled stars which look down upon hurricane and earthquake in this world of ours.

There was a rushing of many feet at our left; a wail from Chiu-Ming. Were they maddened by fear, driven by despair, determined to slay before they themselves were slain? I do not know. But those who still lived of the men from the tunnel mouth were charging.

They clustered close, their shields held before them. They had no bows, these men. They moved down upon us in silence—swords and pikes gleaming.

The smiting thing had seen, too—at that moment I knew definitely, at last, that the deep shining points were—*eyes;* could be nothing else. Almost with the speed of light its tripod rocked it toward us; the gigantic metal tentacle straining out like a rigid, racing serpent, flying to cut between its weird mistress and those who menaced us.

I heard Chiu-Ming scream; saw him throw up his hands, cover his eyes—run straight upon the pikes!

"Chiu-Ming!" I shouted, from a dry throat. "Chiu-Ming! This way!"

I ran toward him. Before I had gone five paces the tall form of Ventnor flashed by me, revolver spitting. I saw a spear thrown. It struck the Chinaman squarely in the breast. He tottered—fell upon his knees.

Even as he dropped, the giant flail swept down upon the soldiers! It swept through them like a scythe through ripe grain! It threw them, broken and torn, far toward the valley's sloping sides! It left only fragments that bore no semblance to men!

Ventnor was at Chiu-Ming's head; I dropped beside him. There was a crimson froth upon his lips.

"I thought that Shin-Je was about to slay us," he whispered. "Fear blinded me. I—pay now for some wrong I have done—some good I have omitted to do—"

His head dropped; the body quivered, lay still.

We arose, looked about us dazedly. At the side of the crevice stood the woman, her gaze resting upon Drake, his arms about Ruth, her head hidden on his breast.

The valley was empty—save for the huddled heaps that dotted it.

High up on the mountain path a score of little figures crept, all that were left of those who but a little before had streamed down to take us captive or to slay. High up in the darkening heavens the *lammergeiers,* the winged scavengers of the Himalayas, were gathering.

The woman lifted her hand, beckoned us once more. Slowly we walked toward her, stood before her. The great clear eyes searched us—but no more intently than our own wondering eyes did her.

CHAPTER XI.

THE GREATER PATH.

WE looked upon a vision of loveliness such, I think, as none has beheld since Trojan Helen was a maid. At first all I could note were the glorious, lim-

pidly lustrous eyes, clear as rain-washed April skies, crystal clear as some secret spring sacred to crescented Diana. Their wide gray irises were flecked with golden amber and sapphire—flecks that shone within the pellucid depths like clusters of little aureate and azure stars.

Then with a strange thrill of wonder I saw that these tiny constellations were not in the irises alone; that they clustered even within the pupils—deep within them, like far-flung stars in the depths of velvety, midnight heavens.

Whence had come those cold fires that had flared from them, I wondered—more menacing, far more menacing, in their cold tranquillity than the hot flames of wrath? These eyes were not perilous—no. Calm they were, and still—yet in them a shadow of interest flickered; a ghost of friendliness smiled.

Above them were level, delicately penciled brows of bronze. The lips were coral crimson and—asleep! Sweet were those lips as ever master painter, dreaming his dream of the very soul of woman's sweetness, saw in vision and limned upon his canvas—and asleep, nor wistful for awakening!

A proud, straight nose; a broad low brow, and over it the masses of the tendriling tresses — tawny, lustrous topaz, cloudy, *metallic!* Like the spun silk of ruddy copper; and misty as the wisps of cloud that Soul'tze, Goddess of Sleep, sets in the skies of dawn to catch the wandering dreams of lovers.

Down from the wondrous face melted the rounded column of her throat to merge into exquisite curves of shoulders and breasts, half revealed beneath the swathing veils.

But upon that face, within her eyes, kissing her red lips and clothing her breasts, was something—unearthly. Something that came straight out of the still mysteries of the star-filled spaces; out of the ordered, the untroubled, the illimitable void! A passionless spirit that watched over the human passion in the scarlet mouth, in every slumbering, sculptured line of her—guarding her against its awakening! Twilight calm dropping down from the sun sleep to still the restless mountain tarn! Ishtar dreamlessly asleep within Nirvana!

Something not of this world we know—and yet of it as the winds of the Cosmos are to the summer breeze, the ocean to the wave, the lightnings to the glow-worm.

"Goodwin," I heard Ventnor whispering at my ear, "she isn't—human. Look at her eyes; look at the skin of her—"

White was her skin, white as the milk of pearls; gossamer fine, silken and creamy; translucent as though a soft brilliancy dwelt within it; shimmering, mica fine as her hair was silk of metal! Beside it Ruth's fair own was like a sun-and-wind-roughened country lass's to Titania's.

She scanned us as though she were seeing for the first time beings of her own kind. She spoke—and her voice was elfin distant, chimingly sweet like hidden little golden bells; filled with that tranquil, far-off spirit that was part of her—as though indeed a tiny golden chime should ring out from the silences, speak for them, find tongue for them. The words were hesitating, halting as though the lips that uttered them found speech strange — as strange as the clear eyes found our images.

And the words were Persian—purest, most ancient Persian.

"I am Norhala," the golden voice chimed forth, whispered down into silence. "I am Norhala."

She shook her head, half impatiently. A hand stole forth from beneath her veils, slender, long-fingered with nails like rosy pearls; above the wrist was coiled a golden dragon with wicked little crimson eyes. The slender white hand touched Ruth's head, drew it gently from Drake's clasp, turned it until the strange, flecked orbs looked directly into the misty ones of blue.

Long they gazed—and deep. Then she who had named herself Norhala thrust out a finger, touched a tear that hung upon Ruth's curled lashes, regarded it wonderingly. Something of recognition, of memory, seemed to awaken within her.

"You are—not—untroubled?" she asked with that halting effort.

Ruth shook her head.

"*They*—do not trouble you?"

She pointed to the huddled heaps strewing the hollow. And then I saw whence that light which had streamed from her

great eyes came. For the little azure and golden stars paled, trembled, then flashed out like galaxies of tiny, clustered silver suns!

From that weird, intolerable radiance Ruth shrank, affrighted.

"No—no," she gasped. "I weep for—*him.*" She pointed where Chiu-Ming lay, a brown blotch at the edge of the shattered men.

"For—him?" There was puzzlement in the faint voice. "For —that? But why?"

She looked at that which had been Chiu-Ming—and with a deep, inward shuddering I knew that to her the sight of the crumpled form carried no recognition of the human, nothing of kin to her. There was a faint wonder in her eyes, no longer light-filled, when at last she turned them back to us. Long she considered us.

"Now," she broke the silence, "now something stirs within me that it seems has long been sleeping. It bids me take you with me. Come!"

Abruptly she turned from us, glided to the crevice. We looked at each other, seeking council, decision.

"Chiu-Ming!" Drake spoke. "We can't leave him like that. At least let's cover him from the vultures."

"Come!" The woman had reached the mouth of the fissure, was looking intently toward us.

"I'm afraid! Oh, Martin—I'm afraid!" It was Ruth, reaching out little trembling hands to her tall brother.

"Come!" Once more came the command—and command I now recognized it to be.

"We have seen—what we *have* seen. Goodwin," Ventnor's voice was grim, "after that—could you go back?"

"No," I answered; "no! But—Ruth?"

"Drake can take her—the way you came," he said slowly.

"Martin, no! I won't! I'm going with you," she cried, and threw a fierce arm about his neck.

"No," Dick shook his head sullenly. "I go, too—I couldn't go back now, even for Ruth."

"I won't! I won't!" sobbed Ruth.

"Come!" Norhala called again. There was an echo of harshness, a clanging, peremptory, inexorable, in the chiming.

Ventnor shrugged his shoulders.

"Come, then!" he said.

With one last look at the Chinaman, the *lammergeiers* already circling about him, we walked to the crevice. Norhala waited, silent, brooding until we had passed her; then glided behind us.

Before we had gone ten paces I saw that the place was no fissure. It was a tunnel, a passage hewn by human hands, its walls covered with the writhing dragon lines, its roof the mountain.

As I peered into its depths the swathed woman swept by me. Swiftly we followed her. Far, far ahead was a wan gleaming. It quivered, a faintly shimmering, ghostly curtain, a full mile away.

Now it was close; we passed through it; were out of the tunnel. Before us stretched a narrow gorge, a sword slash in the body of the towering giant under whose feet the tunnel crept. High above was the ribbon of sky.

The sides were dark, but it came to me that here were no trees, no verdure of any kind. Its floor was strewn with boulders, fantastically shaped, almost indistinguishable in the fast closing dark.

Twin monoliths bulwarked the passage end; the gigantic stones were leaning, crumbling. Fissures radiated from the opening, like deep wrinkles in the rock, showing where earth warping, range pressure, had long been working to close this hewn way.

"Stop!" Norhala's abrupt, golden note halted us; and again through the clear eyes I saw the white starshine flash.

"It may be well—" She spoke as though to herself. "It may be well to close this way. It is not needed—when the greater path lies ready for opening!"

The greater path lay ready! What did she mean? The words quickened the deep, enigmatic unease I had known since the first stirring of the tiny metal things in the ruins.

Ventnor's hand stretched out, clutched me.

"You heard *that?*" he whispered. "You *heard?*"

As I nodded, the woman's voice rang out

again, vibrant, strangely disquieting, harmonious. Murmurous chanting it was at first, rhythmic and low; ripples and flutings, tones and progressions utterly unknown to me; unfamiliar, abrupt, and alien themes that kept returning, droppings of crystal-clear jewels of sound, golden tollings—and all ordered, mathematical, *geometric,* even as had been the gestures of the shapes; Lilliputians of the ruins, Brobdignagian of the haunted hollow.

What was it? I had it—*it was those gestures transformed into sound!*

There was a movement down by the tunnel mouth. It grew more rapid, seemed to vibrate with her song. Within the darkness there were little flashes; glimmerings of light began to come and go—like little awakening eyes of soft, jeweled flames, like giant gorgeous fireflies; flashes of cloudy amber, gleam of rose, sparkles of diamonds and of opals, of emeralds and of rubies—blinking, gleaming!

A shimmering mist drew down around them—a swift and swirling mist. It thickened, was shot with slender shuttled threads like cobweb, coruscating strands of light.

The shining threads grew thicker, pulsed, were spangled with tiny vivid sparklings. They ran together, condensed—and all this in an instant, in a tenth of the time it takes me to write it.

From fiery mist and gemmed flashes came bolt upon bolt of lightning! The cañon bellowed with thunder! The cliff face leaped out, a cataract of green flame. The fissures widened, the monoliths trembled, fell.

In the wake of that dazzling, brilliancy came utter blackness. I opened my blinded eyes; slowly the flecks of green fire cleared. A faint lambency still clung to the cliff. By it I saw that the tunnel's mouth had vanished, had been sealed—where it had gaped were only tons of shattered rock!

Came a rushing past us as of great bodies; something grazed my hand, something whose touch was like that of warm metal—but metal throbbing with life. They rushed by—and whispered down into silence.

"Come!" Norhala flitted ahead of us, a faintly luminous shape in the now Stygian darkness. Swiftly we followed. I found Ruth beside me; felt her hand grip my wrist.

"Walter," she whispered, "Walter—she is not human!"

"Nonsense," I muttered. "Nonsense, Ruth! What do you think she is—a goddess, a spirit of the Himalayas? She's as human as you or I."

"No." Even in the darkness I could sense the stubborn shake of her curly head. "Not all human. Or how could she have commanded those things? Or have summoned the lightnings that blasted shut the tunnel's mouth? And her skin and hair—they're too *wonderful,* Walter.

"Why, she makes me look—look *coarse!* And the light that hovers about her—why, it is by that light we are making our way. And when she touched me—I—I glowed—all through.

"Human, yes—but there is something else in her—something stronger than humanness, something that—makes it sleep," she added astonishingly.

I could only look at her stupidly.

"Yes," she went on rapidly. "And this place—it's filled with something, something—electric! I'm tingling all over; and I feel light and buoyant, as though I could walk or run forever. Something is here that is the very antithesis, the opposite pole of the horror that filled that awful hollow. And how fast we are going—Walter. It is as though a swift current were carrying us!"

CHAPTER XII.

NORHALA OF THE LIGHTNINGS!

IT was true! Now I realized. It was as though the whole air of the cañon was charged, but pleasantly. It gave a buoyancy to the body, it stimulated the pulses, sent through every fiber a sensation of well-being.

We were racing on. I glanced about me. Only the enigmatic glow—emanation, it seemed to be—from Norhala quivered within the darkness through which we raced. The high ribbon of sky had vanished—seemed to be overcast, for I could see no stars.

Within the blackness I began again to sense faint movement; soft stirring all about us. I had the feeling that on each side and behind us moved an invisible host.

"There's something moving all about us—going with us!" Ruth echoed my thought.

"It's the wind," I said, and paused—for there was no wind.

From the blackness before us came a succession of curious, muffled clickings, like a smothered *mitrailleuse*. The luminescence that clothed Norhala brightened, deepening the darkness.

"Cross!" She pointed into the void ahead; then, as we started forward, thrust out a hand to Ruth, held her back. Drake and Ventnor drew close to them, questioningly, anxious. But I stepped forward, out of the dim gleaming, stood rigid, my heart beating wildly.

Before me were two cubes; one I judged in that uncertain light to be six feet high, the other half its bulk. From them a shaft of pale-blue phosphorescence pierced the murk. They stood, the smaller pressed against the side of the larger, for all the world like a pair of immense nursery blocks, placed like steps by some giant child.

As my eyes swept over them I saw that the shining shaft was an unbroken span of cubes; not multi-arched like the Lilliputian bridge of the dragon chamber, but flat and running out over an abyss that gaped at my very feet. All of a hundred feet they stretched; a slender, lustrous girder crossing unguessed depths of gloom. From far, far below came the faint whisper of rushing waters.

I faltered. For these were the blacks that had formed the body of the monster of the hollow, its flailing arms! The thing that had played so murderously with the armored men!

And now had shaped itself into this anchored, quiescent bridge!

I think it was that contrast—the chasm between this immobile span and the life-filled, quick, exultant smiting thing which yet were one and the same—that thrust part open the last door between my consciousness and full realization of the incredible, the awful truth!

"Do not fear!" It was the woman speaking, softly, as one would reassure a child. "Ascend! Cross! They obey me!"

I stepped firmly upon the first block, climbed to the second. The span stretched, sharp edged, smooth, only a slender, shimmering line revealing where each great cube held fast to the other.

I walked at first slowly, then with ever-increasing confidence, for up from the surface streamed a guiding, a holding force, that was like a host of little invisible hands, steadying me, keeping firm my feet. I looked down; the myriads of enigmatic eyes were staring, staring up at me from deep within. They fascinated me; I felt my pace slowing; a vertigo seizing me. Resolutely I dragged my gaze up and ahead; marched on.

From the depths came more clearly the sound of the waters. Now there were but a few feet more of the bridge before me, I reached its end, dropped my feet over, felt them touch a smaller cube, descended.

Over the span came the tall form of Ventnor. He was leading his laden pony. He had bandaged its eyes so that it could not look upon the narrow way it was treading. And close behind, a hand resting reassuringly upon its flank, strode Dick, swinging along carelessly. The little beast ambled along serenely, sure-footed as all its mountain kind, and docile to darkness and guidance.

Then, an arm about Ruth, floated Norhala. Now she was beside us; dropped her arm from Ruth; glided past. On for a hundred yards or more we went, and then she drew us a little toward the unseen cañon wall.

She stood before us, shielding us. One golden call she sent.

I looked back into the blackness. Something like an enormous, dimly shimmering rod was raising itself there! Higher it rose and higher. Now it stood, upright, a slender towering pillar, a gigantic slim finger whose tip pointed a full hundred feet in air.

Then slowly it inclined itself toward us; drew closer, closer to the ground; touched and lay there for an instant inert. Abruptly it vanished.

But well I knew what I had seen. The span over which we had passed had raised itself even as had the baby bridge of the fortress; had lifted itself across the chasm and dropping itself upon the hither verge had disintegrated into its units; was following us!

A bridge of metal that could build itself—and break itself! A thinking, conscious metal bridge! A metal bridge with volition—with mind—that was following us!

There sighed from behind a soft, sustained wailing; rapidly it neared us. A wanly glimmering shape drew by; halted. It was like a rigid serpent cut from a gigantic square bar of cold blue steel.

Its head was a pyramid, a tetrahedron; its length vanished in the further darkness. The head raised itself, the blocks that formed its neck separating into open wedges like a Brobdignagian replica of those jointed, fantastic, little painted reptiles the Japanese toy-makers cut from wood.

It seemed to regard us—mockingly! The pointed head dropped — past us streamed the body! Upon it other pyramids clustered—like the spikes that guarded the back of the nightmare Brontosaurs. Its end came swiftly into sight—its tail another pyramid twin to its head.

It *flirted* by—gaily; vanished!

The door of revelation opened wider! I had thought the span must disintegrate to follow—and it did not need to! It could move as a *composite* as well as in *units!* Move intelligently, consciously — as the smiting thing had moved!

What was there human that could stand against these — these things which could act *apart,* could act in *unison* and still with every formative part of whatever shape they choose to take—individual, thinking, intelligent!

The spirit of the hive raised to the *n*th power — without individuality being lost! Soul of the formicary tuned octaves above the inexplicable symphony of the ants—with no single note stripped of its terrible potency!

"Come!" Norhala's command checked my racing thoughts; we fell in behind her. Looking up I caught the friendly sparkle of a star; knew the cleft was widening.

The star points grew thicker. We stepped out into a valley small as that hollow from which we had fled; ringed like it with heaven-touching summits. I could see clearly. The place was suffused with a soft radiance as though into it the far, bright stars were pouring all their rays, filling it as a cup with their pale flames.

Luminous it was as the Alaskan valleys when on white arctic nights they are lighted, the Athabascans believe, by the gleaming spears of hunting gods. In the luminousness the walls of the valley seemed to be drawn back into infinite distances.

The shimmering mists that had nimbused Norhala had vanished—or merging into the wan gleaming had become one with it.

I stared straight at her, striving to clarify in my own clouded thought what it was that I had sensed as unhuman—never of this *our* world or its peoples. Yet this conviction came not because of the light that had hovered about her, nor of her summonings of the lightnings; nor even of her control of those—things—which had smitten the armored men and spanned for us the abyss.

All of that I was certain lay in the domain of the explicable, could be resolved into normality once the basic facts were gained.

Suddenly realization rushed upon me. Side by side with what we term the human there dwelt within this woman an actual consciousness foreign to earth, passionless, at least as we know passion, ordered, mathematical—an emanation of the eternal law which guides the circling stars themselves!

This it was that had moved in the gestures which had evoked the lightnings! This it was that had spoken in the songs which were those gestures transformed into sound! This it was that something greater than my consciousness knew and accepted.

Something which shared, no — that reigned, serene and untroubled, upon the throne of her mind; something utterly *uncomprehending,* utterly unconscious *of,* cosmically blind *to* all human emotion;

that spread itself like a veil over her own consciousness; that *plated* her thought—that was a strange word—why had it come to me—something that had set its mark upon her like — like — the gigantic claw print on the poppied field, the little print of the dragoned hall!

I caught at my mind, whirling I thought then in the grip of fantasy; strove by taking minute note of her to bring myself back to normal.

Her veils had slipped from her, baring her neck, her arms, the right shoulder. Under the smooth throat a buckle of dull gold held the sheer, diaphanous folds of pale amber silk which swathed the high and rounded breasts, hiding no goddess curve of them.

A wide and golden girdle clasped the waist, covering the rounded hips and thighs. The long, narrow, and high-arched feet were shod with golden sandals, laced just below the rounded knees with flat turquoise studded bands.

And shining through the amber folds, as glowing above them, the miracle of her body!

The dream of master sculptor given life; a goddess of earth youth reborn in Himalayan wilds!

She raised her eyes; broke the silence.

"Now being with you," she said dreamily, "there waken within me old thoughts, old wisdom, old questioning—all that I had forgotten and thought forgotten forever—"

The golden voice died — she who had spoken was gone from us, like the fading out of a fantom; like the breaking of a film!

A flicker shot over the skies, another and another. A brilliant ray of intense green like that of a distant search-light swept to the zenith, hung for a moment and withdrew. Up came pouring the lances and the streamers of the aurora; faster and faster, banners and slender shining spears of green and iridescent blues and smoky, glistening reds.

The valley sprang into full view.

I felt a paralyzing grip upon my wrist—Ventnor's. I followed his pointing finger. Into the valley from the right ran a black spur of rock, half a mile from us, fifty feet high.

Upon its crest stood—Norhala!

Her naked arms were lifted to the sparkling sky; her braids were loosened—and as the fires of the aurora rose and fell, raced and were still, the silken cloud of her tresses swirled and eddied with them! Little clouds of coruscations danced gaily like fireflies about and through it.

And all her bared body was outlined in living light, glowed and throbbed with light — light filled her like a vessel, she bathed in it. She thrust arms through the streaming, flaming locks; held them out from her, prisoned. I saw her sway slowly, rhythmically; like a faint, golden chiming came the echo of her song.

Abruptly around her, half circling her on the black spur, gleamed myriads of gem fires. Flares and flames of pale emerald, steady glowing of flame rubies, glints and lambencies of deepest sapphire, of wan sapphire, flickering opalescences, irised glitterings. A moment they gleamed. Then from them came bolt upon bolt of lightning—lightning that darted upon the lovely shape swaying there; lightnings that fell upon her, broke and dashed, cascading, from her radiant body!

The lightnings bathed her—she bathed in them!

The skies filled with a swift mist; the aurora was veiled; darkness dropped like a cloud upon the valley!

Where Norhala had been was—blackness!

CHAPTER XIII.

PRELUDE TO MYSTERIES.

MUTELY we faced each other, white and wan in the ghostly light—yet not all because of it. A great and grim foreboding, a monstrous premonition smothered me. Suddenly Ruth dropped sobbing upon the rocky floor.

"Buck up, Ruth!" The deep and pitying concern in Ventnor's face belied the sternness in his voice. "Now's no time to give way. Buck up!"

"But I'm afraid — afraid!" she whis-

pered. "The—the awful thing that slew—"

"It's just why you must buck up," he said. "We've got to see this through, Ruth. We've got to know where these things come from, what they are — what they're about. And then we've got to get back to our own world—one of us at least —to warn it."

He had given shape to my own thought.

"Good God, Goodwin! Drake!" he cried. "Can't you see it?"

"But, Ventnor," I hesitated, striving against my own conviction, "don't you think you may exaggerate? There—there weren't many of them," I ended, lamely enough.

"Exaggerate!" his eyes blazed. "You can say that after what you've seen! And how do you know there are not many of them? How do you know to what hordes this woman—if she is a woman—who calls herself Norhala, is taking us?"

Again he had voiced my own fear; the fear that had gripped me as I had come from the chamber of the dragons and looked out upon the clustering peaks.

"Not many!" his voice shook. "Yet the few who shaped themselves into the thing of the hollow could smash like flies a thousand men! What chance has flesh and blood against them? No more than against the bullet, the shattering shell, the lightning bolt, the hurricane! I tell you, Goodwin, Drake—man and these—Things —cannot live together in the same world!"

"Oh, I don't know, Ventnor." Apparently Drake was irritated by his vehemence. "A bit of high explosive from a French seventy-five would have blown that murderer higher than a kite. And besides —how do you know that they're not just extraordinary machines—automatons?"

"Machines!" gasped Ventnor; and for a moment a vague hope flickered up in me.

"Yes," Drake went on. "Machines! There's the regularity of their shapes. Clearly, too, their activation is both magnetic and electric—dynamically, I mean. It's magnetic force that causes them to cling together, that's sure.

"You've seen the Hammond torpedo guided by wireless. If some one who knew nothing of its mechanism, nothing of the Hertzian waves and nothing of the operator sending them forth and guiding it—if some one like that saw it in action, what would he believe? That he was looking at an intelligent, living, thinking thing, of course. Well, we're exactly in that some one's position so far as these other—things —are concerned."

"Who do you think is the operator?" asked Ventnor. "Norhala?"

"She certainly is," answered Dick warmly. "You can't deny that."

"How do you think she does it?" inquired Ventnor politely.

"By those queer notes, I suppose. *If* they're automatons they're probably tuned up to operate by sound vibrations. There's nothing impossible or even improbable in that. The wireless telephone is the same principle," he argued.

"My dear Drake," said Ventnor satirically, "even *you* must admit that a mechanism which could undergo the very extraordinary changes and movements we just beheld from the impetus of a single call must be most extraordinarily complex."

"And Dick," I objected, my hope dying. "The little things of the ruins—Norhala wasn't there to call them when they went into action."

He was silent; sullen.

"Drake," spoke Ventnor, "you're saying something you yourself don't believe. Take your own illustration of the torpedo. Do you suppose for a moment that any torpedo could be devised that could break itself into each of its intricate parts—propellor, body, engine and all of it—then reassemble itself? And after that, break again and reintegrate in entirely different shape?

"Granted that once assembled it could be guided in its movements—is the other conceivable? You know it is not, Drake. Yet that is what these—things—do."

"But," he stammered, "but—to admit that—they're—*alive!*"

"There's nothing else to do but admit it," said Ventnor. "Alive, volent, thinking—each one of them! Yet when they join into whatever shape they will, they become a shape of interlocking intelli-

gences, harmonious, coordinate; a thing with as many brains as it has units—with all those brains acting as one! God! What could humanity do against—*them?* Humanity, bickering, quarreling, slaughtering, uncoordinate—ungoverned ferment that it is!"

For a moment he paused; then:

"And your high explosive, Drake—could it blast those bodies of metal? I think not. Scatter them? Yes, for the moment, perhaps. But of what use when in an instant they could remake themselves; rush on, irresistible, uncheckable, smiting through our armies as—it—flailed through the armored men?"

"What can we do? Oh, what can *we* do?" It was a wail from Ruth.

"Do!" he answered. "Go on. Learn. Get back—if we can, and warn. What else is there to do?"

We could find no answer. Ruth arose, drew a deep, unsteady breath.

"You really believe, Martin, that it's—it's as bad as that?" she asked shakily.

"I know it is," he answered.

"Well—" she said, "well—then there's nothing else to do but go on. But oh, I am afraid!" She walked forlornly over to the pony. "At any rate, you must eat," she said, and began to unstrap a saddle-bag.

I felt my heart go out to her. Terrifying as had been the phenomena through which we had passed, enigmatic as was our present situation and hemmed in by mysteries, I knew that we had been moving only through a prelude. Upon what tremendous setting of the inhuman, the fantastic, the terrible would the curtain lift—and upon what incredible sequence—what crisis? Would Ruth be able to endure?

Curiously, she answered the thought.

"You needn't be worried about me, all of you," she whispered. "I won't do anything to make you ashamed of me. Only just now I'm—I'm a little—tumbled up!"

As one, protectingly, we drew about her. In that defense there had been something irresistibly, heroically childlike.

"There are *three* of us, Ruth," said Dick, and there was an oddly tender tremor in his voice. "*Three* of us to look after you—"

She drew a hand over the wet blue eyes, looked up at him, smiled bravely.

"Well—that's *that!*" said Ruth. "Help me get something together."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SHAPES IN THE MIST.

WE spoke little as we drew a spare supper from Ventnor's all too meager store. There was water, fortunately, in one of the canteens; over the spirit lamp we made some coffee. There was sufficient grain for the pony; we gave it the last of the water.

"Might as well," argued Ventnor. "It's a very necessary member of the expedition. And there must be water where Norhala is taking us. No matter *what* she is, there's enough of the human in her to need food and drink."

"And I'm not so sure of that, myself," murmured Ruth.

Nor was I!

The valley was very still; as silent as though sound had been withdrawn from it. The shimmering radiance suffusing it had thickened perceptibly; hovered over the valley floor like faintly sparkling mists; hid it.

Like a shroud was that silence. Beneath it my mind struggled; its unease, its forebodings growing ever stronger; as one who, buried alive, gropes from fog of trance toward terror of full awakening. Silently we repacked the saddle-bags; girthed the pony. Silently we awaited Norhala's return.

Idly I had noted that the place on which we stood must be raised above the level of the vale. Up toward us the gathering mists had been steadily rising; still was their wavering crest a half score feet below us.

Abruptly out of their dim nebulosity a faintly phosphorescent square broke. It lifted, slowly; then swept, a dully lustrous six-foot cube, up the slope; came to rest almost at our feet. It dwelt there; contemplated us from its myriads of deep-set, sparkling striations!

In its wake swam, one by one, six others

—their tops raising from the vapors like the first, watchfully; like shimmering backs of sea monsters; like turrets of fantastic angled submarines from phosphorescent seas. One by one they skimmed swiftly over the ledge; and one by one they nestled, edge to edge and alternately, against the cube which had gone before.

In a forty-two-foot crescent, six feet high, they stretched in front of us. Back from them, a pace, ten paces, twenty, we retreated.

They lay immobile—staring at us!

Cleaving the mists, silk of copper hair streaming, wide, unearthly eyes lambent, floated up behind them—Norhala. For an instant she was hidden behind their bulk; suddenly was upon them; drifted over them like some spirit of light; stood before us!

Her veils were again about her; golden girdle, sandals of gold and turquoise in their places. Pearl white her body gleamed; no mark of lightning marring it.

She walked toward us, turned and faced the watching crescent. She uttered no sound, but as at a signal the central cube slid forward, halted before her. She rested a hand upon its edge.

"Ride you—with me," she murmured to Ruth.

"Norhala!" Ventnor took a step forward. "Norhala, we must go with her! And this"—he pointed to the pony—"must go with us."

"I meant—you—to come," the far-away voice chimed, "but I had not thought of—that."

A moment she considered; then turned to the six waiting cubes. Again as at a command four of the things moved, swirled in toward each other with a weird precision, with a monstrous martial mimicry; joined; stood before us, a platform twelve feet square, six high.

"Mount!" sighed Norhala.

Ventnor looked helplessly at the sheer front facing him.

"Mount!" There was half-wondering impatience in her command. "See!" She caught Ruth by the waist—with the same bewildering swiftness that she had vanished from us when the aurora beckoned she stood, holding the girl, upon the top of the single cube; it was as though the two had been lifted, had been levitated with an incredible rapidity.

"Mount!" she whispered again, looking down upon us.

Slowly Ventnor began to bandage the pony's eyes. I placed my hand upon the edge of the quadruple; sprang. A myriad unseen hands caught me, raised me, set me *instantaneously* on the upward surface!

"Lift the pony to me," I called to Ventnor.

"Lift it?" he exclaimed, incredulously. "Lift it?"

Drake's grin cut like a sunray through the nightmare mists that shrouded my mind.

"Catch," he called; placed one hand beneath the little beast's belly, the other under its throat; his shoulders heaved—and up shot the pony, laden as it was, landed softly upon four wide-stretched legs beside me! The faces of the two gaped up, ludicrous in their amazement.

"Follow!" cried Norhala.

Ventnor leaped wildly for the top, Drake beside him; in the flash of a hummingbird's wing they were gripping me, swearing feebly. The unseen hold angled; struck upward; clutched from ankle to thigh; held us fast—men and beast.

Away swept the block that bore Ruth and Norhala; I saw Ruth crouching, head bent, her arms around the knees of the mystery woman, standing like us, erect. They slipped into the mists; vanished. And after them, like a log in a racing current, we, too, dipped beneath the faintly luminous vapors.

The cubes moved with an entire absence of vibration; so smoothly and skimmingly, indeed, that had it not been for the sudden wind that had risen when first we had stirred, and that now beat steadily upon our faces, and the cloudy walls streaming by, I would have thought ourselves at rest.

I saw the blurred form of Ventnor drift toward the forward edge. He walked oddly, as though wading. I essayed to follow him; my feet I could not lift; could advance only by gliding them as though skating over the enigmatic plane.

Also the force, whatever it was, that held me, seemed to pass me on from unseen clutch to clutch; it was as though up to my hips I moved through a closely woven yet fluid mass of cobwebs. There came to me the fantastic idea that if I so willed I could slip over the edge of the blocks, crawl about their sides without falling—like a fly on the vertical faces of a huge sugar loaf!

I drew beside Ventnor. He was staring ahead, striving, I knew, to pierce the mists for some glimpse of Ruth.

He turned to me, his face drawn with anxiety, his eyes feverish.

"Can you see them, Goodwin." His voice shook. "God—why did I ever let her go like that? Why did I let her go alone?"

"They'll be close ahead, Martin," I spoke out of a conviction I could not explain. "Whatever it is we're bound for, wherever it is the woman's taking us, she means to keep us together—for a time at least. I'm sure of it."

"She said—follow!" It was Drake beside us. "There wasn't much use of her saying that—how the hell can we do anything else? We haven't any control over this bird we're on. But she has. What she meant, Ventnor, is that it would follow her."

"That's true"—new hope softened the haggard face—"that's true—but is it? We have to reckon with creatures that never man's imagination conceived—or could conceive—and with this—woman—human in shape, yes, but human in thought—never! How then can we tell—"

He turned once more, all his consciousness concentrated in his searching eyes.

Drake's rifle slipped from his hand; fell. As it struck the block there clanged forth a curiously high metallic note, muffled instantly as though the sound had been sucked in. He stopped to pick it up; hesitated incredulously, then tugged at the stock with both hands. The rifle lay immovable!

He pushed it and it slithered away from him. I bent; strove to aid him. For all the pair of us could do, the rifle might have been a part of the gleaming surface on which it rested. The tiny, deep-set star points winked up—

"They're—laughing at us!" whispered Drake.

"Nonsense!" I answered, and tried to check the involuntary shuddering that shook me, as I saw it shake him. "Nonsense. These blocks are great magnets—that's what holds the rifle; holds us, too."

"I don't mean the rifle," he said; I mean those points of light—the eyes—"

There came from Ventnor a cry of almost anguished relief. We straightened. Our heads shot above the mists like those of swimmers from water. Unnoticed, we had been climbing out of them; level as an untroubled cloudy sea.

And a hundred yards ahead of us, cleaving them, veiled in them almost to the shoulders, was Norhala, red-gold tresses streaming; and close against those shoulders, as though the woman were pressing her there, were the brown curls of Ruth. At her brother's cry she turned; I saw her arm flash out of the veils with reassuring gesture.

A mile away was an opening in the valley's mountainous wall; toward it we were speeding. It was no ragged crevice, no nature split fissure; it gave the impression of a gigantic doorway.

"Look!" whispered Drake.

Between us and the vast gateway gleaming triangles began to break through the vapors, like the cutting fins of sharks, glints of round bodies like gigantic porpoises—the vapors seethed with them! Rapidly we neared the portal. Now the fins and rolling curves were all about us. They centered upon the portal, streamed through—a horde of the metal things, leading us, guarding us, playing about us!

And weird, unutterably weird was that spectacle—the vast and silent vale with its still, smooth vapors like a coverlet of cloud; the regal head of Norhala sweeping through them; the dull glint and gleam of the metal paradoxes flowing, in ordered motion, all about us; the titanic gateway, glowing with a pallid lambency before us!

We were at its threshold; over it.

This story will be continued in next week's issue of the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY, the consolidated title under which both magazines will appear hereafter as one.

A Circus for Mirabelle

by John H. Hamlin

ZACH MARSDEN, crack cowboy of the Crumpled Creek Rancho, slid out of the bunk-house and over to the corrals at a moment when the other cowboys were deep in a wrangle over their little game of draw. He caught up Pete, his favorite pony, threw the saddle on him, and cantered off the ranch to avoid further pestering.

Zach had brought it upon himself by allowing that he had something up his sleeve which would put a crimp in the barbecue and open-air fancy-dress party pulled off by the Smoke Lake riders. This "blowout" had been given in honor of Miss Mirabelle Dutton, the district school-ma'am, and was a direct challenge to the Crumpled Creek outfit, for it had been a follow-up of the moonlight hay-ride and picnic which the Crumpled Creekers had arranged for Miss Mirabelle but a short time previous.

Rivalry had always existed between these neighboring ranches. Never did a cowboy on the Crumpled Creek Rancho yield a point to a rider from Smoke Lake Ranch. Each deemed it a breach of loyalty to let one faction think for a moment that anything good could come out of the other's stamping-ground.

Did Crumple Creek boast of a crack rider, then Smoke Lake produced one that could ride all around him. If Smoke Lake owned a fleet cow-pony, Crumpled Creek laid the bets on a horse from their ranch; happened that Crumpled Creek claimed a prize hay crew, then Smoke Lake never rested till a hay-pitching match was arranged.

And so it went, season after season; there was rivalry in roping, riding, drinking, anything and everything wherein cunning, skill, strength or bluff was featured.

Now developed a fresh outburst of contention. It was to see which faction could outdo the other in entertaining Miss Mirabelle Dutton, the pretty and popular school-teacher.

Zach had flouted every plan proposed by each and all of the Crumpled Creek cowboys. Not one was worthy of Miss Dutton's consideration even, and then the cowboys had turned upon him full force and demanded that he make a suggestion which would not only please the school-ma'am, but would make the Smoke Lake bunch sit up and take notice. And that was the reason Zach was given no peace on this Sunday morning, and to escape the jibes of his companions, he lit out for more pleasing prospects.

He cudgeled his brain for ideas, discarding every frame-up submitted by Cabby Dole, Chick Williams and the other Crumpled Creek riders.

"I reckon I'm sure up against something

pretty stiff," he muttered to himself as he cantered down the dusty highway. "Miss Mirabelle's all wool, even if she do be a city-bred, and what tickles these range heifers to pieces ain't what she's strong for. We gotta give her something refined and what 'll remind her of the city and keep her pleased to stick round up here."

Zach's thought rambled on till he neared the cluster of rural free delivery letter-boxes down by the crossroads. Then he suddenly straightened up in his saddle. He mightily rejoiced in the soft gray shirt and flowing blue necktie which he had donned that morning.

He passed a hand nervously over his chin and groaned in dismay at the stubble thereon. At that moment the clatter of his horse's hoofs on the loose boards of a bridge attracted the girl's attention. She had been sitting her horse in rather a disconsolate pose, but she looked up and greeted the approaching cowboy:

"Good morning, Mr. Marsden."

"Er—how are you, Miss Mira—er—Miss Dutton?" he stammered, flushing a vivid red.

"I suppose I should be very happy and very well and glad to be alive on such a glorious morning," said she, with a hint of wistfulness in her tones.

"Now that's too bad if you ain't feelin' right smart, Miss Dutton. You sure look fine."

And she did. Her riding-habit was not patterned for park-riding, but she wore a costume which met with the approval of the valley. A divided skirt of khaki, a linen blouse and a narrow-brimmed sombrero. Neatly fringed gauntlets fitted her small hands and her tan riding-boots displayed shapely feet and ankles.

Zach admired the glints of gold in her fair hair and he had already counted innumerable times the five tiny freckles bridging her adorable nose. She was slight of build, suggested a dependable nature, but Zach and his associates had soon learned that there was a spirit of self-reliance in the petite person of the new schoolma'am.

She smiled barely enough to reveal the dimple in the cheek turned toward Zach.

"You are so comforting, Mr. Marsden. I do wish that you were one of the school trustees. I know you wouldn't be horrid, would you?"

"Not on your life—you could run that there school to suit yourself. I ain't no knowledge block, Miss Mirabelle, but I sure wish I was a trustee if it 'd please you at all.

"What's happened? I'll lick all three of 'em trustees if they've gone and done you dirt, honest, I will!"

Miss Dutton looked a little alarmed.

"My goodness, I believe that you would, too. I think I sha'n't tell you unless you promise to behave."

"You tell me first and I'll promise afterward," declared the gallant Zach.

Miss Dutton shook her blond head decisively, raised a gauntleted hand and reined her horse about so that she faced the letter-boxes again. But her gaze did not rest on them.

It carried beyond to a huge barn by the roadside. The entire face of this hulking building was plastered with gaudy circus posters.

Zach's interest wavered between the gay lithographic descriptions of Crane's Crack Circus and the wholly charming person of Miss Mirabelle. He edged his horse alongside the school-teacher's mount. For perhaps two minutes the pair sat in silent absorption, then Zach exclaimed:

"Them's likely lookin' ponies, ain't they, Miss Mirabelle?"

She nodded her head with no sign of enthusiasm.

"And them camels—ain't they got the big humps?"

Another pathetic nod.

Zach's attention once more centered upon the teacher. His brown eyes softened—she must be in dire trouble.

"You go on and tell me what's hurtin' you, Miss Mirabelle, and I promise I won't mess up them trustees—much," he plead

The girl's responsive smile brought both dimples into play.

"Oh, I suppose that I am foolish, really. But the children have been simply wild about the circus; so I told them that we would all go—it would be my treat—and

we would have a wonderful holiday. Think of it—to get them so excited and expectant and then—oh, dear—the trustees won't let me close the school.

"The circus is billed for Friday, and one of them said our summer term was too short to—to, well, he said 'to be shot all to smash with fool holidays.'" Miss Dutton produced a tiny handkerchief and daintily dabbed at her eyes.

"The blamed old varmints! I'll take back that there promise. I'll sure mess 'em up proper," exploded Zach wrathfully.

"Oh, no. That would do absolutely no good. If you did anything rash I should be dismissed."

"I dare 'em to do that! The hell-hounds!"

"Why, Mr. Marsden!"

"Excuse me, Miss Mirabelle, but they sure are." Zach hesitated, then added: "Too bad them kids has to be fooled, but how about yourself—do you admire circuses?"

"Indeed I do! I love the animals and the flying trapeze performers. And would you believe it, when I was a little girl, I always wanted to be a lady bareback rider. Oh, I love everything there is about a circus."

Zach stammered, grew red, then forced out his invitation.

"I—I'd admire to have you go to that there circus with me, Miss Mirabelle. To the night show. We could ride over to Janesville right after school closed and git there in plenty o' time."

"Thank you so much, Mr. Marsden. You are very kind, but I couldn't enjoy it now, thinking of my poor, disappointed scholars.

"I must be going now. Everybody up here has been so nice to me and I suppose that is why I feel so badly about this. Good-by, Mr. Marsden."

Zach slumped, motionless, in his saddle, watching Miss Dutton's progress down the dusty road. He was not so much disappointed over her refusal to go with him—it would be too much to have expected such happiness. Yet, he was despondent over her unhappiness.

"Them onery trustees!" he muttered. "Now ain't it too bad to bust up that little lady's circus party! By Heck, us Crumpled Creek boys 've gotta git busy and rub up a hum-dinger of a preformance for to even up this here bum deal."

Suddenly Zach rose in his saddle with the alacrity and grace of a jumping-jack. A lusty yell burst from his lips. His horse reared straight in the air, spun around a couple of times, then bolted for Crumpled Creek Rancho with the swiftness of a scared wolf.

Zach's whoops punctuated every third jump. The five-barred gate at the end of the lane was cleared in a flying leap.

The cowboys, gathered in a cluster at the door of the bunk-house, watched this tornado approach. Zach made a hurtling bound from his stampeding bronco to be immediately set upon by his mates.

"Soused! Where in Sam Hill did you git a snootful of booze in these dry pastures, Zach?" demanded Cabby Dole.

Chick Williams sniffed at Zach's breath. "Nope, not soused—plumb nuts, that's all," he said mournfully.

"Listen, fellers, it's the best little old scheme ever hatched. It's so blamed good I'm feared to tell you all at once," gasped Zach, wriggling free from his enthusiastic comrades.

"What do you think, Chick—oughtn't we to hog-tie him? It's too bad to let him suffer," said Cabby Dole pitifully.

"It's something that 'll take a fall out of them Smoke Lake fourflushers and give Miss Mirabelle a' evenin's party which is prezactly the sorta thing she admires." Zach's words rumbled forth at top speed, albeit a bit disconnected and decidedly puzzling to his listeners.

"Worse'n locoed," groaned Chick Williams.

"You're gonna back up in a minit, Chick," asserted Zach. "All of you herd in close while I tells you the greatest little old stunt ever cooked up."

Before Zach got half through with his story, a sombrero was flung high in the air; then a wild yell, ending in a chorus of shouts, denoted that the cowboys lustily approved of Zach's scheme. According to Zach, Chick backed up and the Sabbath

terminated in an orgy of enthusiasm on Crumpled Creek Rancho.

II.

It was the night Janesville was to be thrilled by the great, glorious and glittering performance of Crane's Crack Circus. The stars winked brightly as the cavalcade of horsemen topped the divide which separated Crumpled Creek Valley from the Valley of Honey Lake.

Janesville, a sleepy little village of three hundred souls, nestled in a grove of tamaracks on the shore of Honey Lake. The nearest railroad-station was six miles distant, and at that it was merely a siding on a branch line.

The horsemen rode in silence over the sandy road which threaded its course among the scattering ranches of Honey Lake Valley. When they arrived at the siding they guided their horses to the clump of cottonwoods back of the water-tank and the leader of the group called a halt. His was a rough and ready following, well-mounted, and were it not for the cartridge-belts and side arms, it seemed a perfectly good-natured bunch of buckaroos intent upon a harmless lark.

Zach Marsden, for it was he who was the leader, spoke to his men:

"Fellers, I promised you-all a real party if you showed up. Well, here you are and now I'm gonna tell you what it's all about. I guess none of you ain't forgot that there free-for-all wrangle with them circus roughnecks two years back. They trimmed us all right, mostly because they was a bigger herd and they was on their own stampin'-grounds.

"This here frame-up 'll wipe out that ornery brand o' shame if you guys don't pull leather. Are you all game?" Zach punctuated his dissertation with this ringing question.

A husky chorus of assent echoed through the dim shadows of the trees.

"Bully!" exclaimed Zach. "Well, we're aiming to kidnap that there circus after the show to-night. It's gonna be a cinch—they'll be all packed up and headin' for this sidin' in about a' hour from now. All we gotta do is to throw our ropes on 'em and they're our meat."

Zach paused. The working out of his great scheme had given him an inflated opinion of his own importance. But there flashed across his mind a picture of Miss Mirabelle—the sweetness of her dimpled smile, those five tiny freckles across the bridge of her nose; the cleaness and charm of her which placed her far and away above the rough conception he had heretofore entertained of the femine sex. Some inexplicable impulse prompted him to turn to Cabby Dole and Chick Williams.

"Keep the little lady's name dark," he said in an undertone. "These other birds won't git me right—mum's the word about this here party bein' for her, sabbe?"

Chick nudged Cabby.

"We git you, Zach!" Cabby's white teeth gleamed in an insinuating grin.

"You better," came the crisp retort from Zach. "Ready, fellers? We're off in a bunch," he cried.

Zach trotted from group to group as they proceeded along the sandy road leading to Janesville. "Lay off the rough stuff. Don't cripple 'em. We gotta round 'em up big as life and twict as natural." His instructions were concise and clear.

Within three miles of the village he halted. It was not yet midnight, but already a dim speck blurred the white ribbon of road which wound through the sage and sand.

"By Heck, if here ain't our first slice o' bacon!" warned Zach. He hurriedly marshaled his men into two formidable rows flanking either side of the road. Then he summoned Chick and Cabby and the trio pranced forth to meet the unsuspecting victim.

The four-horse chariot crawled forward at a snail's pace. When the driver's drooping head was silhouetted over the top of the wagon, Cabby gave voice to one expressive word:

"Sleepin'!"

Zach's sharp command to halt brought the sleeper to his feet with a jump.

"Fo' de Lo'd! Oh, fo' de Lo'd!"

"Listen, bo—" began Zach.

"Yassuh, boss, yassuh. Dis yere ain't de pay-waggin—" stuttered the negro.

"Close yer trap!" commanded Zach to the negro. Then he turned to Chick: "You take him on, Chick. Stop at the foot of the grade—wait 'll the whole show lines up, then we'll crowd 'em over the hill in a bunch."

By the time the darkey had driven through the gauntlet of grim-looking vaqueros his terror had completely paralyzed his tongue, and this first easy conquest indicated to the cowboys that the whole trick was going to be smoothly turned.

After that first capture, the chariots creaked over the sandy road in close formation.

Instead of halting the drivers, Zach ordered them to push right along and passed them over to their cowboy escorts with scarcely a delay in the execution of this preposterous scheme.

And Zach warmed up to this gigantic kidnaping game. There was an exhilaration in the discovery that his orders were obeyed to the letter—a smashing exultation in the engineering of a seemingly impossible prank. He was primed for the encounter with the owner himself when that pompous person came to hand.

"What in hell's going on here? What monkey business is this?" bellowed a deep voice, and a head was thrust from the cavernous interior of the big band-wagon.

Zach had learned from one of the drivers the identity of Grover Crane and the position of his chariot in the procession.

It may have been due to Zach's wicked looking gun poked into such close proximity to his face which impressed Grover Crane. At any rate, at Zach's command to disembark from his band-wagon, Crane stepped out and stood at docile attention by the side of Zach's horse while the remainder of the circus cortège passed in review and was parceled off to the cowboy guides.

When the very last wagon rolled by, Zach dismounted, handed the reins to Cabby Dole and gave his undivided attention to the owner of the circus.

"Now, Mr. Crane, you and me's gonna ride side by each in your band-wagon. Keep your lamps lit, Cabby. Giddap, driver!"

Zach assisted Crane to mount the steps of the wagon, keeping close behind him.

"Who are you? Who sent you here?" Crane's demands were righteous. Zach measured the man with whom he had to deal.

"Yep, I allow I oughta answer them there questions, Mr. Crane," Zach edged closer to the man, for, in the dim light, he noted that Crane's fat fingers were groping for something.

"Jest don't start nothin'—yet—Mr. Crane," warned Zach, laying his Colt across his knees.

"Here—have one." Crane spoke insinuatingly as he offered long, black cigars. "You smoke, eh—sheriff?"

"Wrong hunch, Mr. Crane. I'm jest a honest cowboy."

The proffered cigars were quickly withdrawn. Crane's temper gave way. The language which he let loose was more picturesque than that of a hardened cow-puncher's vocabulary. His tirade finally terminated with:

"What in hell is your game?"

"I was aimin' to tell you, Mr. Crane. We're borrowin' your circus, that's all. Crumpled Creek Valley ain't never had a circus of its own. We allow it's about time to put our place on the map.

"So we're easin' your shebang over the hill and to-morrow night you're gonna play to the biggest crowd what ever jammed your tents. Us folks over there 'll turn out in force to feed the elephants and monkeys to-morrow night."

"It's a hold-up of the rankest sort. Do you think for a moment you can get away with a piece of highway robbery like this?"

"We ain't aimin' to make nothin' outa this, Mr. Crane. Nary a red cent—you pocket the gate-money same as usual, sabbe? All we want's the glory—"

"Glory be damned!" shouted Crane. "What about my show at Beckwith? We're billed there for to-morrow. I'll lose—"

"Nope, you ain't gonna lose nothin'. Beckwith won't turn out a one-two-three crowd 'longside of the Crumpled Creek audience you're gonna have to-morrow night," explained Zach suavely.

"You'll pay for this. I'll have you behind iron bars by to-morrow night," stormed the indignant Crane.

"Me pay? Say, I ain't gotta month's wages in my old red sock. Look here, you can't git to Beckwith now—this 'll lose you only that there one show. You can easy ketch up on your billin'.

"Buck up, Crane, and be a sport. We're a wild and woolly outfit and if you spits fire we comes back like a parcel o' mad steers. What's your answer?"

Crane chewed his black cigar to shreds. His fat fingers writhed and twisted. Zach leaned back and watched his victim alertly.

"How much is your town good for?" inquired Crane.

"We ain't no town—we're all outdoors and there won't be a empty seat in your tents," replied Zach shrewdly.

Crane groped for a fresh cigar. This time he got it lighted, but the hand holding the match was nervously shaking. In the flickering light the eyes of the two men met.

Zach's crinkled with a smile as he observed the trembling hand.

"Here—have one," muttered Crane, extending a cigar.

"Thanks, don't care if I do. And your answer—" said Zach.

"You've got me where I can't say much—now," snarled Crane, leaning back in his seat and blowing forth great clouds of smoke.

III.

DOWN in the big, smooth-turfed pasture of Crumpled Creek Rancho, bordering the highway, the tents of Crane's Crack Circus were pitched by sun-up of Saturday.

It was rather a dazed company, from the roustabouts to the highest salaried troup of aerial arobats. Accustomed as circus folk are to quick jumps and topsy-turvy life, this enforced breach of circus etiquette was an absolute mystery. But Crane, sole owner, manager, ticket-seller, and paymaster, apparently countenanced this shift in the itinerary.

Then there was to be a whole afternoon of unlooked-for idleness, which was decidedly conducive to good nature. Hence all hands had more to be pleased with than disgruntled about.

It seemed to be an auspicious prank played by whatever gods direct the destiny of circuses. So the members of Crane's Crack Circus, after swapping the harrowing experiences which befell them in the eerie hours of the night, turned in and slept the sleep of utter weariness.

As to Zach and his gang of imps—the success of their adventure reacted like strong wine upon these sons of the soil. Zach was proclaimed a "ring-tailed snorter." His followers were his to command at the drop of a hat, and Zach—well, he commanded.

His mounted henchmen scattered over Crumpled Creek Valley, penetrated the tributary ranges, galloped into the sawmill camp of Juniper, streaked hither and yon, even to the Piute Reservation, where the Indians hailed their advent with joy. And everywhere they went they spread the gist of Zach's astounding proclamation:

"Crane's Crack Circus is showin' in Crumpled Creek Valley to-night! Everybody come!"

And they came. It was an unheard-of event. Unbelievable to think that a real circus would deign to pitch its tents in such a remote section. But, such being the case, it was too great a compliment to overlook.

By seven o'clock a great crowd swarmed about the circus-grounds, and Crane, sitting back in his ticket-wagon, realized that Zach Marsden was a true prophet.

Zach himself was ubiquitous. His ringing shouts of welcome hailed each and every newcomer. He played the part of radiant host; he voiced the magnanimous praises of the circus and at times his bubbling spirits overflowed and he capered about like a small boy too full for utterance. When the Smoke Lake outfit cantered upon the scene, Chick Williams, Cabby Dole, and Zach executed a regular war dance.

"They can't never beat this party, Zach," gloated Cabby. "Never in a thousand years. Spot old Ice-Berg and his Smoke Lakers—that sore they won't speak to us!" Whereupon the three cronies fell upon each other's necks and whooped in glee.

Zach extricated himself with alacrity when he caught a glimpse of Miss Dutton and her bevy of school children. With sombrero in hand, he strode up to the school-teacher. From the breast pocket of his flannel shirt he drew a packet of pink tickets.

"Miss Mira—er—er—Miss Dutton—they's for you and the kids. Compliments of us Crumpled Creek boys. They's tickets for all the side shows, the big blowout and everything," said Zach, extending the tickets to her.

"Oh, but I cannot accept them, Mr. Marsden. Why—"

"You gotta, Miss Dutton, cuz your money ain't no good here." Zach's smile was broad. Hospitality and admiration glowed in his eyes.

"But this was to be my treat to the children, Mr. Marsden," she protested faintly.

"And this here circus is my—er— our treat to you, Miss Mirabelle. Why, we fetched it plumb over the hill from Janesville a-purpose for you, Miss Mirabelle."

"You did—what!" Miss Dutton's blue eyes widened. Her lips parted in a round little expression of incredulity.

Zach was uncomfortable. He hitched his cartridge-belt, stood on one foot, then on the other.

"Why, yessum—seein' as how them ornery trustees wouldn't let you and the kids go to the circus at Janesville, why we just brung the whole shebang right over to you, Miss Mirabelle," explained Zach boyishly.

He pressed the tickets into her hand, bowed awkwardly, and backed away from her before she could grasp the meaning of his words. Rose a clamor of impatience from the children and Miss Dutton came to sufficiently to take charge of her little flock.

It was a generously cordial audience, barring the peevish Smoke Lake cowboys, and every act was greeted with storms of applause. The performers were gratified; they responded heartily to the shouts and whoops of approval.

Crane's Crack Circus had never put over a finer show to a bigger and better natured audience. Even Miss Mirabelle forgot the embarrassment caused by Zach's comment and vehemently applauded the lady bareback riders. She spent her admittance money upon balloons, crackajack, peanuts, and pink lemonade for the children.

At the conclusion of this glittering success, Miss Mirabelle decided to seek out Zach and express to him her thanks. Why, it was all perfectly wonderful. The more she thought of what had been accomplished, the greater her appreciation of what Zach had done.

And then, in the crush of the outgoing crowd, fragments of conversation drifted to her ears:

"That's her—Zach, he done it for her!"

"What do you know about that—"

"Uh-h—Zach's a corker—ain't many guys 'd swipe a whole circus fer his girl."

Miss Mirabelle was embarrassed. She tried to hurry the children, but that was impossible in the surging crowd. She changed her mind about thanking Zach. She became conscious of curious stares and whispered comments directed toward herself. She would chide Zach on the morrow; yet, down in her heart, there was admiration for his brazen deed. Only a chivalrous spirit, somewhat misguided, it is true, could have prompted him to do this preposterous and remarkable thing.

IV.

It was late the next morning when Cabby Dole awakened Zach Marsden from sound slumber—Cabby had been up and about for an hour or more and the news he brought to his comrade was of a startling nature.

"Zach, what do you think—that bloody circus ain't budged. That fat-head Crane beat it last night with the sack o' boodle and one of the circus guys told me nobody ain't been paid for three weeks and they's all dead broke and Crane's owin' more'n the dinged old circus is worth." Cabby paused.

It was a dramatic moment, and he intensified the situation by adding: "Our boss is sore as a goat at you. He allows you've kicked up a purty mess a-gittin' this here

tuff bunch in here and he says it's up to you to git 'em out again, and do it quick.

"Say, I wouldn't prezactly admire to be standin' in your boots, Zach," said Cabby, coolly shrugging from his shoulders any share of the responsibility.

As if to further emphasize Cabby's recital, the roarings of caged beasts and the shrill trumpetings of elephants were wafted into the open door of the bunk-house.

Zach tumbled hurriedly into his clothes, reached for his sombrero and yanked it tightly down to his eyebrows.

"The boss wants to see you—you're in fer a red-hot brandin', all right, Zach," said Cabby.

Zach hesitated at the door, loosened his hat and calmly proceeded to cock it at a devil-may-care angle.

"Keep your shirt on, Cabby. I'll see the boss and I ain't the one to be a squealin' on any of you guys at all—git me. Just you slide out from under and go plumb to—all of you!" Zach strode out the bunk-house, his lips puckered for a whistle which made no sound as he headed for the ranch-house.

His interview with Mr. Benson, owner of Crumpled Creek Rancho, was brief and to the point.

"Zach, I understand that you are responsible for landing this circus here," said Benson with no preliminaries.

"I'm the guy," replied Zach tersely.

"You boys are carrying things too damned far. Since you had brains enough to get that riffraff here, it's up to you to get them out. They've got to move off my ranch at once, understand?"

"Yes, sir," replied Zach, turning quickly on his heel. He went to the barn and saddled his cow-pony. None of his comrades were in sight, and Zach experienced a feeling of being deserted as he touched spurs to his pony and cantered down the lane and across the fields to the pasture bordering the highway.

He encountered a heterogeneous aggregation—some dejected, some threatening, others displaying a careless unconcern. The circus folk recognized Zach as the prime cause of this muddled predicament. His reception differed from the spectacular adulation which had been his on the evening before.

Zach sat his horse in a pose which spelled nothing to those who hurled questions, taunts, threats, and supplications at him. All in all, the situation was enough to stump a much more clever man than Zach Marsden. He spurred on his horse, jerking his head at those blocking his progress.

He noted the circus horses tied beneath the shelter tents with only a scant supply of hay. Zach had more thought for the animals than the human element. There occurred to him a phrase of Mr. Benson's caustic remark: "Since you had brains enough—"

Zach wheeled about.

"Hi, you fellers!" he shouted to the roustabouts. "They's a place down the road a spell in the timber where they's plenty of feed for the critters. You gotta move off'n Benson's land at once. Who's the main guy here?"

A brawny specimen stepped forward. Zach consulted with him. An uncomplimentary exchange of words ensued, ending in Zach's sliding from his pony and confronting the man.

"You'll do what I say and no four-flushin'! Sure, I ain't denyin' I herded you over the hill, but I ain't to blame for old Crane's vamoosin' with the coin. If you want my help you'll do as I say—git me?"

The specimen begrudgingly obeyed. And all the time the tents were being struck and the higera beginning, Zach cudgelled the "brain" which Benson admitted that he possessed.

As the day dragged on, rumors of Zach's fiasco were heralded far and wide. The Smoke Lake cowboys rode over to investigate. Their lusty whoops of derision were louder than the roarings of the lions.

Zach was jeered at, joshed and hounded till he was driven to despondency. Then, when the name of Miss Mirabelle was coupled with the circus gossip, when ribald jests were launched regarding "Miss Mirabelle's Circus," Zach's hand rested continually on his revolver. It was enough that he should tolerate the jibes which he deserved,

but he would not stand for her name being bandied about.

The begging, pilfering and threatening circus troop outraged the entire countryside. Word came to Zach Marsden from a committee of Crumpled Creek Valley farmers, that the circus had to move on immediately. Then the school trustees sent a caustic message to Zach, stating that the parents were afraid to permit their children attending school, hence school was suspended till the district was rid of this circus scourge.

Zach went to Mr. Benson. "I'm askin' you to take over them three cow-ponies o' mine, Mr. Benson, for a steer and enuff grub to feed them circus people a spell. Something's gotta be did right off." Zach met the hard, direct stare of his boss without flinching.

"Supposing I do as you suggest, what will you do after that's gone?" inquired Benson crisply.

"I ain't thought of anything 'cept to feed 'em—not yet. My ponies're worth all I'm askin', Mr. Benson."

"That may be true, but this community isn't asking you to feed this circus—we are demanding that you get them out of Crumple Creek Valley—the sooner the better for everybody concerned."

"Will you swap, Mr. Benson? I'd a heap rather the ponies stayed on this here ranch else I wouldn't ask you. I'm aimin' to do the best I know."

Mr. Benson begrudgingly consented. The string of ponies was exchanged for a fat steer and a goodly stock of provisions. Zach carted the supplies down to the circus-grounds himself.

It was on his return trip that he encountered Miss Mirabelle. It was his first glimpse of her since Saturday night—the big night of the circus performance given in her honor. Zach's tortured senses brightened as he slammed the brake on the wagon. He had been abused and berated so persistently since the reversion of his grand stand play that he craved a word of comfort.

He believed that he could brace up and be fit for any emergency did Miss Mirabelle favor him with a smile. He would tell her of the good samaritan deed he had just done.

The girl sat her horse splendidly as she came down the road at a brisk canter. Tendrils of the gold-glittering hair tumbled about her tiny ears and unconsciously, without yet being able to see them, Zach began counting those five adorable freckles. When she slowed her horse to a walk, Zach removed his hat, his smile of greeting chasing away the lines of worry about his mouth.

"How de do, Miss Mirabelle!"

Instead of the welcoming smile he craved she surveyed him with scathing contempt as she reined her horse to a standstill.

"Miss Dutton, if you please," she replied curtly. "Mr. Marsden, it is unbelievable, this horrid thing you have done. Was it not enough that you make yourself the laughing stock of the whole country without dragging my name in the mire?

"What right did you have to even mention my name in connection with the—the stealing of this circus? The trustees have asked to explain, the children, even, speak of it as *my* circus!"

Her white little teeth suddenly clenched her lower lip to stop its quivering. Her cheeks had paled, but there were dangerous sparks flashing in her wide, blue eyes.

"I—I didn't aim to git you talked about—honest—I jest meant to—to please you—" stammered Zach, so stunned and hurt that the bottom dropped clean from under him.

"You didn't aim! That is your great fault, Mr. Marsden—you do not aim at anything except to perpetrate boorish jokes; you do nothing worth while. No one would care, not the least in the world, if you alone suffered. But see what misery and unhappiness your "not aiming" has brought about.

"My case is bad enough—but look at those poor circus people! Stranded in this out-of-the-way spot, every one abusing them, treating them as the scum of the earth. They are human beings—not here because they willed it, but due to the gigantic idiocy of your practical joke. It is not right.

"What are you going to do? Continue

in your aimlessness and let them suffer? Why don't you do something? I—I should be too ashamed to ever hold up my head again if I were in your place and failed to make amends."

There came a lull in the girl's denunciation. When Zach lifted downcast eyes from the toe of his boot, Miss Mirabelle had vanished. He sat there, miserable and utterly squelched.

He spoke to his team in a mechanical fashion and drove back to the ranch in a stupor of despair. His dull eyes took scant heed of Benson and the man who accompanied him when they came out to the barn where he was unhitching the team.

"Zach, the sheriff wants a word with you," said Benson harshly.

The sheriff stepped forward. "What do you know about this circus business, Zach? From what I can gather you are responsible for this mix-up. What have you got to say for yourself?"

"'Pears to me I've raised hell, all right," groaned Zach, leaning heavily against one of the horses. "I fetched 'em over the hill, sheriff—I'm guilty of that much. I don't know nothin' about Crane's beatin' it with the money.

"I reckon you could arrest me for what I done, but I want you to lay off. You gotta give me time to think—give me till to-night and I'll talk to you straight."

The sheriff had been summoned by an indignant committee representing Crumpled Creek Valley; the circus gentry had also poured their troubles into his ears, and, in a measure, the situation appalled even the sheriff. So Zach's pleas resulted in the sheriff granting him time for reflection.

Zach started for the barn—he would throw a saddle on Pete, his good old cowpony. He could think and act better when astride of Pete. At the barn door it dawned upon him with crushing poignancy that Pete was no longer his.

Zach turned away from the barn and corrals and struck out for the timber; he walked till every muscle in his body ached, but he could not get away from Miss Mirabelle's stinging words—nothing else seemed to matter—nothing did till the germ of an idea stirred in his brain.

He was miles from the ranch, but weariness suddenly left his storm-wracked body. He breathed deeply, vigorously, for there evolved from this first vague germ a plan which caused Zach to throw back his head and let forth a lusty, ringing whoop.

The sheriff and Mr. Benson awaited him at the ranch-house and they looked relieved when they saw him. Zach swung toward them, presenting a far different front than that of a few hours previous. He addressed the men frankly and with conviction in every tone and gesture.

"You reckoned I'd skinned out, didn't you? Likely I would 'a' done it, too, if somebody hadn't showed me what a no-'count cuss I've bin. I guess I ain't ever growed up till this here circus party went plumb to smash. And Saturday night I was swelled all out of shape, thinkin' I'd pulled something fine and foxy. Everybody a slappin' me on the back and givin' me the glad hand and tellin' me how smart I was.

"Great dope, you bet, when you makes good even at a big bluff. Say, I wouldn't 'a' swapped last Saturday night for all of Crumpled Creek Rancho, had you asked me—last Saturday night. That's how much I was growed up, Mr. Benson.

"Well, it ain't the same when your props git kicked out and you hits the grit and there ain't nobody to stick out a paw. And when them what you've rode with and bunked with and drank likker outa the same bottle with—when them lets you lay where you flopped, what kin a guy expect from the rest of you all?

"Look at them circus folks! Didn't you all holler your heads off and laff fit to bust your sides when they was givin' you your money's worth o' fun? But old Crane beats it and leaves 'em flat busted—they's down and out. Nobody recollecks they's got human feelin's, jest like you and me. Forgits that, and all they wants to do now is to hand 'em kicks, spit on 'em, herd 'em off'n this range and let 'em starve on some other guy's stampin'-ground.

"It ain't fair. I'm not forgettin' what it feels like to stand up and have bokays throwed at me—and I ain't ever gonna forgit the bricks, either. I've took my tumble

along with them circus people and I'm aimin' to git 'em on their feet agin or bust a-tryin'.

"Supposin' you drives 'em off—what 'll happen? They'll go plumb to the bad. What they wants is a guy to boss 'em around. That circus's billed to show all summer and they's big money in it.

"Well, you wanted to know what I was gonna do about it, and I'm tellin' you I wants the job of bossin' this here circus! They mind what I says. I kin handle 'em.

"I'm askin' you, Mr. Benson, to back me up in this here deal. I wants the circus and I wants it bad. It's the square thing to do and I kin make good."

An absolute silence followed Zach's astounding argument. Mr. Benson studied him closely and from a different angle than he had formerly looked upon this harum-scarum cowboy.

There was not a doubt in Benson's mind that Zach was in deadly earnest. He knew that he had listened to a speech which came straight from the heart of this newly grown-up man and that it conveyed a message of import.

"Well, Zach, you've sort of taken me off my feet," said Benson at last.

"Same here," agreed the sheriff, whose hostile expression had mellowed.

"Here's hopin' you'll come down with both feet for me," said Zach, smiling grimly.

"Suppose we go down and give this circus outfit the once over," suggested Mr. Benson.

The three of them rode down to the timber tract and inspected every detail of the stranded show. They had a consultation with members of the troupe and secured much information about the prospects, good, bad, and indifferent.

It was none too optimistic a venture, but Benson was one who dared to speculate. Zach's earnest appeal had made a favorable impression—he had faith in this newly awakened cowboy of his.

"If we're intending to do anything about this, we've got to act immediately." Benson turned to Zach. "You're for it, strong as ever, Zach?"

"Fair itchin' to jump into the collar, Mr. Benson," replied Zach.

"Your backing will ease off the biggest creditors, Mr. Benson," encouraged the sheriff.

Later on, when the sheriff was ready to depart for Janesville, he shook hands, first with Mr. Benson, then cordially gripped the big, sunburnt fist of Zach Marsden.

"Benson said all along you had brains—I know from experience with you and your gang of imps that you've got grit. Some combination, Zach, and here's the best of luck to you and the circus."

V.

It was after the noon meal of the following day. Zach had slipped over to the stable with a pocketful of sugar to feed the faithful cow-pony which was no longer his.

"Pete, ol' hoss, I'll sure miss you. Reckon I've had my last lil ol' ride on you, Pete," he said, gently pulling the pony's ears.

The horse nuzzled in his pocket for the lumps of sugar. The clink of spurs sounded on the barn floor, voices carried to the stall where Zach was hidden from view.

"Yep, Jensen told me and he oughta know, bein' a trustee of her school. She's resigned, and Jensen allowed it was all Zach's fault—gittin' her talked about suthin' scandalous cuz he kidnaped that there circus for her." It was Cabby Dole speaking.

"Aw, Zach, he meant all right, Cabby. Wasn't his fault Crane beat it and hogtied the old show. I'm for Zach, even if he ain't speakin' to me now," said Chick Williams.

"Reckon Miss Mirabelle ain't speakin' to him, either. She's leavin' fer Sacramento this very afternoon. W-what's the matter?"

Chick had seized Cabby by the arm. The pair stood stock still, hypnotized at the spectacle of Zach snatching a saddle and bridle from the peg back of his stall.

With lightning rapidity he threw them on his horse and, with watch in hand, rushed past the gaping cowboys without seeing

them at all. He was in the saddle and racing past the ranch-house by the time Chick and Cabby recovered from their shock and got to the barn door.

"What in blue blazes!" gasped Chick.

"Search me!" muttered the dazed Cabby, watching the flying horseman.

Zach's watch had indicated five minutes to one. Her train was scheduled to leave Janesville siding at one fifty. Could he make the ten miles over the hill to see her? Could his wiry, faithful pony carry him over that dusty, grilling divide and on through the sandy road of Honey Lake Valley in fifty-five minutes?

"You gotta do it, Pete, ol' hoss! You jest gotta do it!" declared Zach through clenched teeth.

Down the lane and over the five-barred gate sailed Pete; there was a springiness in his steel-muscled action which thrilled Zach. He patted the pony's glossy neck encouragingly.

"Loosen up, Pete, while the goin's good. We're hittin' a hard trail bimeby, lil ol' hoss."

Over the level road-bed of Crumpled Creek Valley the horse skimmed with the fleetness of a greyhound. At the foot of the grade Zach pulled up a bit and Pete swung into a dog trot up the winding road.

Zach looked at his watch—five miles covered and the minute-hand pointed to twenty minutes past the hour. From the crest of the divide the road dipped in a series of loops to the floor of Honey Lake Valley. There was a brief breathing spell on the summit and then away sprang the pony, bounding down the slope, sure-footed and swift—qualities which had endeared him to Zach. On through the heavy sand, breath whistling through distended nostrils and flecks of foam lathering neck, flanks and withers.

A whistle screeched. Zach bent low in the saddle.

"We've gotta beat the train in, Pete!" The wiry cow-pony's hoofs thudded faster over the sandy road-bed.

A second whistle sounded just as Zach galloped into the shade of the cotton-woods back of the water-tank, and the engine came to a grinding halt at the station. Zach reached for his kerchief and mopped the lather from Pete's dripping withers.

There was a little group of people moving toward the coach at the end of the string of freight-cars. Zach's quick eyes discovered Miss Mirabelle surrounded by her little band of pupils. The sight of her set his head in a whirl, stirred up a pounding of his heart.

It was he who had driven her away from Crumpled Creek Valley by an outrageous piece of tomfoolery. Zach watched her, caught the tilt of her adorable head, the poise of her dainty shoulders.

He groaned aloud. What could he say, now that he had ridden like mad to see her?

She had reached the coach, was standing at the foot of the steps. Her pupils were kissing her good-by. Zach trembled from head to foot, yet he could not muster the courage to go to her.

Then a great wave of embarrassment surged over him. She was looking his way! A small boy detached himself from the group and scampered toward him. Zach could scarcely believe his ears when the youngster shrilled:

"Teacher, she wants you!"

Zach slapped spurs to his horse. He made a flying leap to the ground and staggered to her side. His eyes drooped before her candid gaze.

"Mr. Marsden, I have just heard the news! Tell me, please, is it true?" she said, bending toward him, eagerly, expectantly.

"You mean—" he faltered.

"That you have taken charge of the circus? That you are to be the manager? Oh, Mr. Marsden, is it true?" She was breathlessly interested.

"They was nothin' else to do, Miss Mira—er—Miss Dutton. Seemed like it was plumb wished onto me. I'm powerful sorry you're leavin', Miss Mirabelle. I didn't aim to git you talked about. I'm powerful sorry—"

"I know that you are, Mr. Marsden. But don't you see, I couldn't stay here now. We will forget all about that—it really doesn't matter. I do wish to congratulate you. What you are doing proves that you

are a much bigger man than—well, than just a player of impossible jokes."

"I'm gonna make good, Miss Mirabelle. Mr. Benson's backing me; them circus people respect me—"

A warning whistle prompted Zach to act impulsively. He grasped both her little hands in his strong grip.

"And most of all, I'm gonna make you respect me, Miss Mirabelle. I'm no knowledge-block, but I'll learn. And I'm gonna see you again, Miss Mirabelle—" His brown eyes searched the blue of hers eagerly, longingly.

He lifted her tenderly to the steps of the slowly moving coach.

"I hope so; truly, I do," she whispered. Then her little hand pressed his palm as she softly added: "I—I am glad now that they called it Mirabelle's Circus. I never thanked you for it, but I do; and I enjoyed it ever so much. Good-by—Zach!"

In the flutter of waving farewells, Zach slipped over to his horse. For the first time in his life he saw visions while his eyes took in the misty outlines of the girl standing on the rear platform of the speeding coach. And then she was gone from his sight.

Zach fervently touched his lips to the palm which her little hand had pressed so softly. He sprang into the saddle, keenly alert, fired with a great ambition.

"Mirabelle's Circus!" he exclaimed. "She sed it, Pete, ol' hoss—them very words. That's prezactly what I aims to make that circus—mine and Miss Mirabelle's!"

LOVE'S TRESPASSER

BY CYRIL EVERS

YOUNG Cupid has a park that
Is full of roses fair;
I'll tell, but keep it dark that
You learned from me just where;
For when at first I found it
He seemed both mean and proud,
And put up signs around it—
NO TRESPASSING ALLOWED!

I hung about and hated
The rascal for his sin;
But once when I had waited
A long time I got in.
The place was fresh and fragrant
As one could hope to see,
And there was I, a vagrant,
As happy as could be.

It was the hour that closes
The long, sweet summer day;
I leaned above the roses,
And, oh, how sweet were they!
"Forgive me if I trespass,"
I softly begged above,
Then heard a whispered "Yes" pass
The rose-lips that I love!

Bing, Bang, Boom!

by Raymond Leslie Goldman

PRECEDING CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RETOLD

CAST off by his father with twenty thousand dollars, and robbed of fifteen thousand of this in exchange for an empty hotel by one Ellis Turner, Bertram Bancroft Boom arrived in Selma, Arkansas, outfaced Turner at a political rally; was christened "Bing, Bang, Boom" by Fred Patterson, newspaper proprietor; and found a friend in David Hodge, station-master, and village oracle. He had earned, however, the antagonism of Ruth, daughter of Sheriff Warren, one of Turner's men, and following the election, when, due to Boom's efforts, Turner's men, Spigot and Warren, had been nearly defeated, at a slurring remark of Turner's, Bert slapped the boss across the mouth.

But Turner, a physical coward, declined the issue; later, in his seething rage, hiring a powerful tramp, "Paprika" Blake, to whip Boom.

Bert, meanwhile, diagnosing Ruth's hostility as sheer stubbornness, succeeded in interesting her in spite of herself, and later, with the aid of Fred Patterson, hit upon an idea for exploiting the white elephant which he owned: namely: Quiet. He would advertise the hotel as an original rest-cure.

Then, on the day of a dance at the high school Turner gave Paprika his final instructions, having previously sent Bert an invitation to the dance. Paprika was to insult him, and then "beat him up."

But Amos, Hodge's assistant, eavesdropping, brought Hodge the news, who, inveigling Bert into his buggy, took him ten miles out of town.

At the dance time passed, and Turner's impatience grew as Bert failed to appear. Then, noticing the avid look in Blake's eyes as he gazed at Ruth, he admonished him to look elsewhere. But in his abstraction he did not notice that his companion was staring straight ahead, lips loosely parted, his hot breath sweeping through them, and his black, beady eyes fixed with burning intensity upon the averted profile of Ruth Warren.

CHAPTER XII.

PERIL.

TURNER and Paprika separated in front of the high school, Turner driving up to Oakland Avenue to the home of Mrs. Miller, with whom he boarded.

"Get a room at the Palace," were his parting instructions to Paprika, "and be at my office at nine to-morrow morning."

Left alone, Paprika took his stand on the sidewalk before the building, interesting himself in watching the people who emerged, passing in unknown review before him as they hurried homeward.

He inspected them now with emotions that were totally different from any he had ever experienced. Yesterday, when he had entered Selma, he had been a tramp—dirty, ragged, an outcast from all that was respectable. Then, he had looked upon these very people with the leering scorn in which he had always held the virtuous, the law-abiding, and the God-fearing.

But now there was no scorn in his eyes; instead, a wistfulness that was a reflection of the vague longing that had so strangely

entered into his heart. He thrilled with a certain pride at the gratifying thought that he was—or would very soon be—one of them. He was dressed and groomed as well as any of them—and better than some of them. His face was shaven to the skin; his hair was neatly trimmed and carefully brushed; and he resolved that they should be kept that way.

He was suddenly aware of a dominant sense of cleanliness, inside and out, as if the washing of his body had likewise cleansed his soul.

He wished that his pleasing rise to the position of Mr. John Blake, of Waco, Texas, had not been contingent upon the rather dubious services that Turner would demand of him. In the sudden glow of his respectability, he felt an aversion for all that was lawless, for any act that would not aid him in securing a desired place in the community.

He determined to talk to Turner about it on the morrow. Perhaps Turner would give him other work to do, work that would be harder, undoubtedly, but which would be dignified by its claim to honesty. It must be a fine thing, he reflected, to be able to look upon the world without fear, without hatred, without loathing; to be the friend of such people as these, to visit them in their homes, to receive their cordial greetings:

"Ah! How-do, Mr. Blake. We're glad to see you!" All the greetings that he had ever known were: "Beat it, you little scamp!" and, later, when he grew to man's estate, "Beat it, you dirty tramp!" Indeed, it must be a fine thing. He must have hungered for it all his life without realizing what it was that gnawed upon his heart-strings!

A man and a woman were coming down the steps toward him. As they approached the spot where he stood, his heart quickened with an excited eagerness that was almost childlike. He knew them! He couldn't recall their names; but he remembered that they were two of the few people to whom Turner had found it necessary to introduce him that evening.

As they neared him, he raised his hand and awkwardly lifted his hat. The couple passed him by with the coldest of stares, the slightest of nods, and a grim silence that said enough to grip his heart.

There is a great deal of the child in a mind like Paprika's; and now, like the poor little boy who has been snubbed at the rich little boy's party, he stared after the slighting pair, a dull ache in his breast. He fought against the sullen anger that threatened to sweep over him, for he feared that ruling passion of his, knowing well that his good resolutions could not long survive in its hot, surging tide.

"Stuck-up rubes!" he muttered under his breath; but he promptly forgot them and his smoldering anger when he caught sight of Ruth Warren, who emerged at that moment from the auditorium.

The effect upon him of seeing Ruth was that of music upon a snarling, growling beast. It had had that effect upon him when he had first seen her in the auditorium; and with the touch of her small, firm hand in his, and the sound of her gentle voice addressing him, had come that startling transfiguration of soul and that sense of righteousness that now pervaded him like a heady wine.

As she descended the steps, he watched her with all his eyes, his heart singing in response to her loveliness. When she reached the sidewalk, he approached her, his hat in his hand.

"Good evenin', miss," he said humbly. "Can I—maybe you'd let me walk home with you, miss?"

She drew back from him, as if to avoid the contamination of his touch. He could not fail to see the manifest disgust with which she regarded him.

"No, thank you," she replied, her voice colder, perhaps, than she intended to make it. "I prefer going home alone."

Without a word, he stepped aside to let her pass on; and when she had left him, he stared after her with narrowed eyes, his hat crushed in his hands, his teeth locked so that his massive jaws bulged his cheeks.

There had been no mere snobbishness in her refusal. Even Paprika, who had no knowledge of the finer sensibilities, realized that. He had read in her eyes the revulsion of feeling that came over her at his

nearness; the instinctive shrinking from that which was not clean; the involuntary loathing of the pure for the impure.

But why had he impressed her that way? He had been as polite as any man could be—even humble in his speech and attitude. His clothes were clean, his body was clean; and surely she could not know that they had ever been otherwise. Then why had she shrunk from him as if his touch were leprous?

He recalled Turner's warning to him: "Remember that even though I fixed you up to look half-respectable, you're still just rotten scum!" Then *that* was it. The scrubbing of the body did *not* cleanse the soul. Fine feathers did *not* make fine birds, nor even hide an inner filthiness from the sight of man.

As he thought upon it, the malignant devil in him that had always impelled him to hate all the world, even himself, struggled to gain possession of him again. What hope had he, it whispered to him, of ever being anything except just rotten scum? How dared he to think, even for a moment, that he might alter the course of his detestable destiny?

Life had been unfair to him. It had been unfair to him when it fashioned him into the thing that he was, and it had been unfair to him ever since. He had been born of a mother who had not wanted him, into a world that had not wanted him. From the time of his earliest memory he had been kicked and cuffed and buffeted by the world until, like a cornered rat, he had learned to fight back; to harbor a great hatred for all created things, even as they hated him.

Then why should he strive to change a destiny that was fixed by a fate that seemed to share the bitterness of all things for him? What was the use in it? If he held to his resolve to lead a life of honesty and respectability, who, in all the world, would extend to him a helping hand, a word of encouragement, a friendly smile?

Would these people of Selma do it? That question had already been answered. They couldn't even bring themselves to speak to him nor to look upon him without loathing!

And what of Turner? What would he do with his hireling when his usefulness was passed? Clap him back into jail, whence he had taken him—that's what he would do! Strip him of his finery, and put him where his knowing lips would be tightly sealed!

Ruth had joined a man and a woman ahead, and now the three of them were walking down the street. Paprika, acting upon a sudden decision, followed them, putting on his hat and, prompted by an old habit, turning down the brim to shade his hard, glittering eyes.

His embittered premises had led him to the natural conclusion. He *was* scum—just rotten scum. Well, if that was what his hated God had fashioned him to be, he would act according to his kind. Selma wouldn't accept him as Mr. John Blake, of Waco, Texas; so he would revert to his true self—Paprika, of everywhere!

Ruth walked home with the Danverses, who lived a few doors from the Warren home. They left her at her door, and she let herself in by means of her latch-key. Before she closed the door behind her, she released the lock so that the door might be opened from without; for she was not certain that her father had his key with him, and, since he and Sara might not return until very late, she did not want to have to come down-stairs to let them in.

In her bedroom, she turned on the light, drawing the green shades that blinded the windows to the street. She disrobed slowly, humming softly some recurring melody that singled itself out from the many she had heard that evening, and enveloped herself in a blue silk kimono; for she was not yet ready for sleep. There was hosiery of Sara's and of her father's to darn, and Sara's poplin dress to be mended, so that it would be ready for Madge Brill's five-hundred party on the morrow.

As she plied her needle, her thoughts turned to Bert and to her meeting with him two days before. It was humiliating to her that she should allow that impudent young man to take possession of her thoughts, but he would always intrude himself whenever she gave herself to reflection.

She told herself that it was her great dislike for him that brought him so often to her mind. He had spoken to her that morning of their second meeting as no other man would have dared to speak! He had accused her of unfairness, of unfounded prejudice, of stubbornness! He had ignored every precept of gentility by forcing her into a conversation that had been distasteful to her! The indictment that she drew up against him listed every crime of which a gentleman might stand accused, and yet—

She wondered why he had not been present at the dance that night. It was Turner, undoubtedly, who had forbade the sending of an invitation to him; and he had been forced to spend a lonely, forsaken evening, ostracized by the will of a single man. How dismal it must be to be a thousand miles away from home, among strangers, and to meet with antagonism and unfriendliness on every side!

Of course, it served him right. His unheard-of insolence merited him no better fate. Had he not dared to tell her—and, with burning cheeks, she relived in memory that meeting on Majestic Road.

So she argued with herself, not realizing that she *was* arguing, so convinced was she that her mind was firmly set against him. She did not realize that it was only by this constant mulling over of her supposed humiliation before him that she kept alive the shattery belief that she cordially disliked him.

The single chime of a clock, drifting in to her from the hallway, put an end to her reflections. It was half past eleven. She suddenly realized that the mending of Sara's dress had long since been completed, and that she had been sitting there idly, busied only with her thoughts.

The lingering life of the clock's single stroke had scarcely ebbed away, when her ears caught the sound of a door opening below, and then the soft click of its closing. She listened to hear the expected voice of Sara, but unbroken silence followed.

With a small shrug, she rose, putting away her sewing-basket, and hanging Sara's dress in the closet. Those faint sounds must have been the product of her fancy; or, perhaps, it had been the wind, toying with some half-drawn shade.

She walked to her dressing-table and, drawing the pins from her hair, let her dark tresses fall in gentle ripples about her shoulders. She picked up her comb; then held it suspended in a brain-forsaken hand when her ears caught the unmistakable sound of cautious footsteps that came to her through the silent house. This was no product of her fancy; this no flapping of a breeze-swayed curtain. Some one was moving across the hall below her.

Of course it must be Sara and her father. But why such cautious quiet? Surely they had seen her lighted window from without, and knew that she was not yet asleep.

"Sara," she called, turning to face the door," is that you? Father, that you?"

There came no answer; but after the moment of awful silence that followed upon her call, her straining ears picked up again the sound of careful footsteps.

Scrunch, scrunch, scrunch.

A cold, unnameable thrill of terror raced through her, tingling at her scalp. Some one—*some one*—was slowly mounting the stairs! And it was *not* Sara; *not* her father! She stood, rigid, her comb still held aloft, as if some witchery had turned her into stone.

Even with the creaking footsteps in the hall outside her door, she did not move; nor until the doorway became the frame for the massive form and leering face of Mr. John Blake. In the unknown there was paralyzing terror; in the known there was sickening fear. The comb dropped from her hand, and she crouched back against the dressing-table, her wide eyes fixed upon the intruder.

Paprika stepped into the room, closing the door behind him, and, leaning back against it, inspected the girl with burning eyes, from her blue-slippered feet to her tumbled hair, feasting them upon her beauty.

"You ain't dumb, are you?" he said finally, grinning at her. "Don't you know how to act when you got comp'ny?"

"You!" she breathed. "What — what are you doing here?"

He laughed.

"That's a question to ask, ain't it? Why, ain't it nice to be sociable, an' drop in to see your neighbors once in a while?"

She was silent, the realization of her peril tightening her throat, forbidding utterance.

"Don't you holler!" he warned, watching her as if to divine her probable actions. "If you do—"

"I—I'm not going to," she said, finding voice at last. "But—get out! My father will hear you, and—"

Paprika eclipsed one eye in a knowing wink.

"I'm wise to that," he said. "The old man won't be home for a long time. They tell me it's a long ways to Yeller Springs."

As she looked at the man, still grinning with the knowledge of his power, she knew that there was no hope but in passive fortitude. To scream, to make a show of resistance, would serve but to bring him nearer; and she must make use of every wile and artifice that she could summon to her whirling brain to keep him at a distance until her father returned. Her fear was no less now than when she had first seen him in the doorway; but she had regained the needed faculty of thought, and it gave her a confidence that, in a measure, neutralized her terror.

"I can't understand," she said slowly—for it was upon prolonged conversation that she based all hope of escape—"I can't understand, Mr. Blake, why you have come here. I was afraid of you at first, because I thought that you were a—a burglar. But now that I remember that you're a friend of Mr. Turner, why—"

"I thought you was a little scared," he replied, still leaning back against the door and watching her speculatively. "I'd 'a' sent up my card, but, somehow, you ain't seemed to want to see me, an' I thought maybe you'd say you wasn't in."

She forced her lips to smile.

"I can tell by your tone that you're joking," she said. "You just came up for—for fun to see if you could scare me—"

Still he watched her, a slight frown of perplexity gathering between his shaggy brows. Then, suddenly, the frown was gone, the brows lifted, and he nodded his head knowingly.

"You're a game little filly," he said admiringly; "but I'm pretty wise myself. You want to keep me talkin' here till your old man comes back, eh?" He shook his head. "It's too late for talk now. I give you a chance for that back there in front of the dance-hall, but you didn't want none of it. Now I ain't got no time for it, miss. If I wasn't good enough to talk to then, I ain't good enough now, that's sure. I ain't meanin' to do you no harm, an' if you don't raise a holler, no harm 'll come to you."

"What—what do you want?" she asked.

"Money," he replied shortly.

She met his eyes squarely.

"There isn't any in the house."

Paprika sneered. "Don't try to hand me nothin' like that. I know how you rubes do. Whatever you got saved up, you keep right in the house. Now where is it?" He took a step toward her. "Hurry up an' tell me."

"There isn't any in the house," she repeated, unwaveringly.

Her assurance gave him pause, and he regarded her searchingly, the perplexed frown coming again between his eyes.

"I think maybe you're lyin'," he said slowly. "Will you swear to God there ain't no money in the house?"

She hesitated. There *was* money in the house. Every cent that her father possessed lay in the small safe that stood in his room. Under the circumstances, would such a falsehood in the name of God be pardonable in His eyes? She decided that it would.

"I swear—" she began; but Paprika silenced her with an out-turned palm.

"Don't say it," he cut in. "I already found out what I wanted to know. That trick is as old as the second-story game. I learned that when I was a kid. If you was about to say the truth, you'd 'a' said it without stopping to think about it. Now—where is that money?"

"I won't tell you!" she replied firmly, her small fists clenched, and her bosom rising and falling with her quick breaths.

"*Maybe* you won't," he said, crouching low, as if he were about to spring at her. "Now listen, kid: you're a game little filly, an' all that, but I ain't got much time to

waste. I gotta get out o' this town *to-night*. Now I'm givin' you a fair choice: I either want that money or I'll take *you*. Do you get me?"

Cold terror crept upon her, beating in her throat and temples, sickening her with vertigo. What should she do? A word from her, and her father's savings would all be swept away, leaving him more dependent than ever upon his sheriff's salary, and, hence, more than ever subservient to Turner's domination. And perhaps his threat was but another trick to make her divulge her secret—

"I won't tell you," she said in a voice that she strove to make steady.

"All right," he said; "I give you a fair chance." There was no grin, no leer upon his face now; just sheer, tumultuous passion that shot out in fire from his narrowed eyes, and swept through his twisted lips in hot, quick breaths. "I guess I won't be gettin' the worst of this bargain."

She flung herself aside as he leaped toward her, and his expectant arms closed about the air, sending him crashing against the dressing-table. When he recovered himself and turned, Ruth was across the room, huddled back against the wall, waiting to elude his second spring.

She realized now her grave mistake. His was no idle threat, uttered merely to frighten her. He *meant* it! She had not thought to make an actual choice between a bit of gold and her life—her honor, that was dearer than life itself!

"Wait, Mr. Blake!" she cried. "I'll tell you—"

"I don't give a damn, now," he broke in, looking at her with his breast heaving and his nostrils dilated. "I'll get the money—afterward."

He advanced more cautiously this time, like some huge feline that has cornered a trembling rabbit, his eyes half closed in his calculating watchfulness, his lips hanging loose.

Her eyes, too, were upon him with unwavering intensity, watching his every movement as he drew nearer to her. And then, even as he leaped at her, her hand found the ink-well that lay on the desk beside her, and, in a last desperate hope, she hurled it at him. Over his head it flew, and across the room, its contents marking the way of its flight with small splotches on the carpet; striking the drawn shade and tearing through it, and then through the open window behind it.

The next moment, Paprika had her in his arms, pinning her struggling arms in his embrace, drowning her agonized screams with his hot, moist lips.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RETURN.

WHEN David Hodge pointed a thin finger through the darkness, indicating the vague outlines of the ten-mile post and informing Bert that it was the objective of their strange journey, Bert was, for the moment, stricken speechless with amazement, letting his astonished eyes alternate their gaze between David's unsmiling face and the white post that was scarcely visible through the night.

"Do you mean," he managed to gasp after a while, "that you have brought me all the way out here to show me *that!*"

"That's what I had in mind," David returned. "Let's see what time it is."

He took a nickel-case watch from his pocket and, holding it in his palm, struck a match above it.

"Nine thirty," he said, shaking the flame from the match and replacing the watch in his pocket. "We ain't figurin' on gittin' back till after eleven, are we, son? We'll lay around a while an' give Nancy a rest afore she pulls us home."

"See here," cried Bert, his surprise giving way before his mounting wrath, "what's the idea of this? I want to know if I have to deal with a lunatic or—"

"Son," said David, "I promised to show you somethin' that meant a lot to you if you seen it to-night. Well, I did. That there post is it. If you're so durn thick-headed that you can't see no significance in it, why—"

"Oh, I see your object," Bert replied hotly. "You wanted me to miss that dance to-night. But why? Why?"

"Nice night to-night," said David.

"You'll tell me," cried Bert, grasping David's wrist; "you'll tell me, or I'll—"

"You'll what?" David asked quietly.

He released David's wrist and flung himself back in his seat, beating his fist into his palm.

"Nothing," he said, helplessly; "nothing! But it's a damn lucky thing for you, David Hodge, that you're not twenty years younger!"

David grunted. "Twenty years ago, young feller, I weighed two hundred pounds, an' there wasn't none of it fat. I had arms that was used to guidin' a plow through the fields, an' shoulders that was used to histin' bales. Twenty year ago, son, I could 'a' broke you in two with my left hand."

"Well, I—"

"The trouble with you, son," went on David, "is that you got a severe case o' swellin' in the head. You got more faults than a porcupine has quills, an' yet, if somebuddy was to ask you to name one, you'd have to set down an' think about it afore you cu'd answer. Confidence an' self-assurance is a great thing, but, like anythin' else, too much is wuss than none at all."

Bert sniffed. "Is that what you brought me out here for—to spring some of your fool philosophy on me? I'm not asking you for your opinion of me."

"Course you ain't," said David. "There ain't much chance o' you askin' nobuddy for his opinion o' you. You got your own opinion o' yourself, an' chances are nobuddy else's opinion is goin' to be jest like it."

"Well, I don't want yours," cried Bert. "What I want to know is this: why do you want to make me miss that dance to-night?"

David raised his head again to look at the stars.

"Nice night to-night," he observed.

"You won't tell me? Well, I'll get there before it's over, anyway. I'll do the driving this time!" He reached over to snatch the reins from David's hands. "Your horse 'll make the fastest ten miles it ever made."

"You can't drive that there hoss," said David quietly, relinquishing the lines to Bert.

"Can't I?" sneered Bert. "Watch!" He flicked the horse with the reins, "Giddap!"

"Whoa, Nancy!" David called softly.

Bert clucked loudly. "Giddap, there!"

"Whoa, Nancy!" David repeated. "We ain't a goin' jest yet, old girl. You jest wait till *I* tell you." He turned to Bert. "There ain't heav'n nor hell kin move that there hoss now."

Somehow, Bert realized that David spoke the truth. He flung down the reins, and David casually picked them up and tied them about the whip-stock.

"I've had that there mare ever since she was a skinny, long-legged colt, son. She was born on my farm, an' she seemed to take to me, right off. When my farm was took from me, an' Emma—that was my datter—and me had to find other lodgin's, why, this here hoss, who was only a young 'un then, jest nachurly follered us. Ellis Turner was out there, seein' that he got ever'thin' there was to git; an' when he seen this colt trottin' along behind me, he says:

"'Say! Where 'r goin' with that hoss?'

"'I ain't goin' nowheres with that hoss,' I says; 'that hoss seems to be goin' with me.'

"'That hoss is mine,' he says. 'You can't take it.'

"'Turner,' I says, 'I ain't aimin' to take this hoss. But this here hoss,' I says, 'has got definite idears who it wants to belong to. Now here's a proposition for you: this colt is standin' here in the road midway b'tween me an' you. If you give me two words, you kin use all the persuasion you know how; an' we'll let th' hoss do her own choosin'.'

"'Two words!' he says with a laugh. 'You can't do much persuadin' in two words. Go ahead.'

"'Here, Nancy,' I says to the colt; an' then I started off down the road. An' that there hoss ain't never obeyed another voice b'sides mine since that day." He paused. "You might try the whip, son."

"On you, maybe; not on that horse," cried Bert. "You've got me this time,

David, but I won't forget it. It's the last joke you'll ever play on me."

"You think this is a joke, eh?"

"I know it! That is, it's what you call a joke. It's your perverted idea of humor. I've got your number now, all right."

"What are you aimin' to do about the Majestic, son?"

"None of your business!"

"Figurin' on jest droppin' it, eh?"

Silence.

"Figurin' on startin' it up agin, eh?"

Silence.

"Well," he drawled, reaching for his reins, "I reckon I must 'a' guessed your plans, anyway. Gee-up, Nancy! Time to go home now."

They drove back slowly and in a silence that neither of the men seemed disposed to break. Bert, raging inwardly, slumped down in his seat, and let his thoughts toy with his grievances. Why had he trusted the word of the erratic station-master? Why had he accompanied him upon so ridiculous an excursion? He might have known that David had nothing of such importance to show him. He might have known that it was but a trick. Undoubtedly, Ruth was at that dance. Perhaps he might have persuaded her to dance with him! Perhaps—

When they approached the street on which was the high school, Bert straightened himself and touched David's arm.

"Let me off at the next crossing, David."

"Dance is over by this time, son," said David. "Must be near eleven thirty."

"I'm not asking you any questions," said Bert. "Let me off!"

David shrugged and drew rein, and Bert jumped from the buggy.

"Good night, son," said David.

Bert made no reply. He hurried up the street toward the high school, hoping against hope that the dance was still in progress; but when at length the building loomed before him, he saw that David had spoken the truth.

He turned and retraced his steps to Main Street. Here, too, the houses, with their wimples of shingled roofs and unlighted front windows, seemed to recede into the closing shadows darkly. Here and there small threads of light rimmed the edges of a drawn blind. A slumbrous quiet pervaded, his own footfalls beating harshly into it. He hurried on, for he had ten blocks to walk, and the night air, cool and sweet as poppies, filled him with sudden drowsiness.

He was plucked from his thoughts by the sound of a woman's voice, at first reaching out but vaguely into the stillness, then rising to a single shriek that was quickly broken off.

He stopped short, and standing motionless, threw back his head to strain his ears into the silence. He looked about him. In the house before which he stood, one upper window showed a light, a dark shade drawn over it. Even as he turned to face it, there was a dull report, and some glistening object went flying over his head to shatter itself against the curb beyond him.

When he looked wonderingly from the bits of broken glass that lay about him, up again to the window, he saw that in the lower part of the shade there was a ragged tear through which shot a spear of yellow light. And then he heard a second scream, this one as muffled as the first, but quite as unmistakable in its note of agony.

No longer shackled by perplexed indecision, but rather urged to frenzied haste by his resolve, he mounted the steps to the veranda and tried the door. It swung back unresistingly, catapulting him into the darkened hall.

He closed the door behind him, and paused an undecided moment; then, groping forward, he found the stairway, and, as noiselessly as was compatible with haste, mounted the steps to the hall above. He paused again before a closed door whose transom told of a light within, and put his ear to the jamb. The sound of footsteps came to him. For an instant he hesitated; then turned the knob and flung open the unlocked door.

He stood back, then, blinking in the sudden light, appalled at the sight that met his eyes. A man, whose arms were burdened with the limp form of a girl, had whirled about to face him as he crossed the threshold; and now, keeping his burning eyes on

Bert, he cautiously walked backward toward the bed.

But it was upon the girl that Bert gazed, numbed by a sudden sweep of horror. She lay, as in death, across the man's arms, her head fallen backward as if disjointed at her white throat, her arms swinging inertly from her shoulders, her face almost as white as the gown that showed through the rents in her kimono. Bert passed a tremulous hand across his suddenly clammy brow. It was Ruth—*Ruth!*

When the man reached the bed, he deposited upon it his precious burden, straightened himself; then, and advancing toward the staring young man who stood in the doorway:

"Kid," he said softly, his chest heaving with labored breaths, "I don't know what th' hell you're doin' here, but—beat it!"

Bert did not move. Slowly comprehension of the strange scene came to him. Ruth must have been alone in the house, and this man—

"Well, kid," warned Paprika, stepping nearer, "are you goin' to beat it?"

Bert pointed a shaking finger toward the still form on the bed.

"You've killed her!" he said huskily. "You've—"

Paprika laughed. "Killed her—nothin'. She ain't only fainted. She'll come around in a minute. Now you beat it, kid, or—"

Bert hesitated no longer. With bewildering suddenness he leaped forward, sending his fist crashing full into the man's unprotected face. With a roar of surprise and pain, Paprika staggered back; crashed heavily into the dresser that stood behind him. And there, with his back to the bureau, he held his ground as Bert rained blow after blow into his bloody face.

For a while he made scarcely an effort to fight back, so dazed was he by the unexpectedness of Bert's attack. He crouched low, content to throw aside as many as he could of Bert's thick-falling blows, until he realized that the power behind them was slowly diminishing then he flung himself aside. Bert circled about him, resting a moment from his exertions, waiting for an opening for a fresh attack.

"Kid," said Paprika, passing his tongue across his bloody lips, "you've give me th' best you got, an' it wasn't good enough. God help you now, kid."

He charged then, like a wounded bull; and, nimble as Bert was, he could not elude the arms that reached out to grasp him. He struck upward, with all the power of his arm and shoulder, the blow striking Paprika fairly upon the jaw; but Paprika did not fall.

"That's your last one, kid," said Paprika, shaking his head to clear it. "Now it's my turn."

With the sickening realization that he had, indeed, given vainly of his best, Bert tore at the encircling arms that snaked about his ribs. He flailed useless blows against Paprika's sides; but the powerful arms sank deeper and deeper into his flesh, and he felt himself being slowly lifted.

He fell, the crushing weight of Paprika on top of him, the relentless arms holding him in a viselike grip. He did not struggle now. He knew how unavailing were his efforts; and he needed all the strength that he could summon, to withstand the pressure of those constricting arms and the chin that bored its way into his chest.

As he lay there, fighting with sheer will against the fate that seemed inevitable, he could see, through the murky haze that was gathering before his eyes, the bed upon which Ruth lay. And even as he looked at her, she opened her eyes—wide, wondering eyes that soon took on a film of horror as wakefulness and comprehension came to her.

He thought he saw his name upon her lips; he tried to speak to her, to call her name; but the mantle of darkness that was closing in upon him was shutting him out from the world. He fought now solely against that enveloping blackness. As long as his vision could pierce that swirling chaos of murk, he could hold on to life—could fight—could fight—

He could no longer see Ruth nor the bed, nor the chair that stood nearer. No longer could he hear the heavy breathing of the man who was on top of him, crushing the life from his body. He must hold on a bit longer—must not give way—not give way—

He was suddenly aware that the weight was gone from his chest, that the binding arms no longer encircled him, that he could breathe—breathe—fill his crushed, bursting lungs with life-giving air! He heard a rush of footsteps about him—a scream—a hum of voices, coming to him across infinite space—

And then the vale of blackness closed upon him.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE POSSE.

HOW long he remained unconscious Bert could not know; but when he again opened his eyes and saw that he was still lying on the floor, where he had fallen, he realized that his oblivion must have been of short duration. Ruth was kneeling beside him, her white, anxious face quite close to his; and behind her he saw the wide, frightened eyes of Sara.

"Oh! He—he's not dead!" said Sara tremulously; and Bert smiled faintly to reassure her that he was indeed still possessed of life.

"I—I think I was knocked out," he murmured, raising himself to one elbow and shaking his head as if to fling aside the cobwebby remnants of insensibility. He drew a deep breath and winced with the pain that accompanied it. He looked at his hands, swollen and bruised and streaming with half-dried blood. The other man's blood, he thought, with grim satisfaction—most of it.

Then he raised his eyes to Ruth.

"Are you—all right?" he asked her.

She nodded, a tinge of color creeping into her cheeks.

"I—I'm all right," she said, "but you—I was afraid he had killed you! We tried to lift you to the bed—but you are so heavy! Can't—can't you manage to get over there so that you can lie down more comfortably?"

"Why, there's nothing the matter with me," said Bert; and with an effort that stabbed him with a hundred knives of pain, he rose shakily to his feet. "You didn't see that scrap, did you—Miss Warren?" He smiled mirthlessly. "While it was going on, you were where I just came from."

Ruth buried her face in her small white hands, a quick shudder hunching her shoulders.

"He—he was so—so horrible!" she sobbed.

Bert's lips tightened, and he clenched his swollen fists.

"What happened to that man?" he asked fiercely, addressing Sara.

"I—I don't know," she quivered. "I don't know what it's all about. It's all a—a mystery to me, Mr. Boom. When dad and I drove up to the house we heard a noise, and—and we ran up-stairs, and—and when we got up here we saw somebody climb out of that window, and—and you were lying there on the floor, like dead, and—and Ruth was on the bed, just staring—"

"Where's your father?"

"He—he went after—whoever climbed out of the window," Sara replied, twisting her handkerchief about her fingers. "Can't you tell me what—happened? Why are you here?"

"I was passing the house, and I heard Ruth's scream," he explained shortly. "When I got up here I saw this man holding Ruth in his arms, and—"

"Oh, my God!" she gasped, clapping her hand to her mouth, her eyes staring in horror above it.

"And then—well, we began to fight. I'd have managed him all right, only I couldn't hit him hard enough." He paused and looked down at Ruth, who was still sobbing quietly. "You'd better get your sister to bed. I suppose she's just nervous."

He started toward the door, and Sara grasped him frantically by the arm.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going after that man," he told her.

"Oh, you mustn't!" she pleaded, clinging to his arm. "Don't leave us here—alone! I'd just die of fright if—"

He patted her hand reassuringly.

"I'll stay, then," he agreed. "While you're getting Ruth to bed, I'll go in the other room and wash this blood off my hands."

When Sheriff Warren returned, ten minutes later, Bert met him in the hall and briefly explained to him the situation. When he had finished, the sheriff shook his head slowly and sorrowfully.

"I knew no good would come of it," he said, as if to himself. "I knew no good would come of it."

"No good would come of what?" Bert asked in surprise.

The elder man started.

"Nothin'," he muttered, avoiding Bert's eyes.

Bert frowned. "Were you able to follow the man at all?"

"I lost 'm," said the sheriff. "I got down-stairs just in time to see 'm drop from th' porch, but I couldn't git a shot at 'm, b'fore he disappeared. I don't know where he headed."

"It's up to us to find out," said Bert. "What do you do in a case like this? Have you any deputies, or—"

The sheriff scratched his head. "We ain't never had no case like this 'n b'fore," he admitted. "B'fore you came to town ever'thin' was quiet."

Bert bit his lip. "Well, you've got a case like it now. What are you going to do?"

The sheriff was silent, rubbing his palms together and shifting his watery eyes. Watching him, Bert was filled with contempt for the man. Ruth's father or not, he wasn't even partially capable of holding the office that was given him!

"If *you* don't know what to do," said Bert, "I do! We'll get a posse together as quickly as we can, and stretch a net around this town before he can get out. You're not going to let the man who tried to attack your daughter get away, are you?"

For a moment Warren said nothing. Then his thin lips tightened, and a new light suddenly crept into his faded eyes.

"We'll do what you say, young man," he cried, breathing hard. "I'm th' sheriff here now, no matter how I come to be it—an' I'll do my duty as I see right 'n fit an' not be down under nobuddy's heel no more!"

"You mean Turner?"

"Never mind what I mean," cried Warren, his face purpled with his unusual wrath. "I knew nothin' but bad could come of it all! There's a just God in heaven, but sometimes the innercent must suffer to punish th' guilty. This time 'twas almost my Ruth! An' I tell you, young man, ef'n any harm had 'a' come to her, I'd 'a' killed him like a dog! That's what I'd 'a' done—killed him like a dog!"

The meaning of the sheriff's words was vague, but somehow Bert gleaned their import. He saw in the man's sudden rage a revolt against the rule of Turner, the shaking off of servile shackles, the proverbial turning of the lowly worm. He reached out and gripped the sheriff's trembling arm.

"Come on," he said. "We've got to hurry if we don't want that fiend to get away. Can't you get some neighbor to come and stay with the girls?"

"Next door!" replied the sheriff, spurred to rare activity by his excitement; and dashed out into the night.

He returned about five minutes later, accompanied by a short, plump, apple-cheeked man, who was still engaged in the act of dressing himself when he entered the hall, and who seemed to be in that dazed state that exists between wakefulness and sleep.

"Mr. Biglow's goin' with us," the sheriff told Bert. "Mrs. Biglow 'll be over here soon's she gits on some clothes."

Warren's horse and buggy were at the door, and the three men drove quickly down to the city hall, whose great bell was soon rolling a lusty, reverberating summons over the slumbering village. There followed a period of chafing inactivity for the three men who took their stand on the steps of the building; then the street-lamps, suspended coldly above the crossings, warmed to life, sending down their misty cones of white light upon the hurrying vanguard of Selma's wondering citizens.

The word "Fire" was on every one's lips; but when they arrived at the recognized meeting-place Bert and Mr. Biglow and the sheriff relieved them of this fear, though full enlightenment was withheld until the place was aswarm with excited men and not a few women and children.

The sheriff spoke to them then, as a body, informing them, as briefly as was compatible with clear understanding, of the emergency that had arisen; and when he had finished they broke into a roar of angry clamor that threatened the fugitive with speedy and awful retribution once they laid hands upon him.

"We ain't here fer no lynchin'," Warren shouted to them. "We got laws to punish 'm, an' we ain't got no right to take them laws in our own hands. I want a hundred men to help me go out after that there feller, an' th' rest o' you kin go home an' go back to bed. Now everybuddy git down off'n th' steps, an' then those as want to join th' posse kin all git together up here."

A half-hour later the hundred men were chosen, divided into groups of ten, and, with orders to arm themselves with whatever weapons they possessed, were sent away in every direction to search for Paprika.

In the group to which Bert was assigned were, among others, Fred Patterson, Ellis Turner, and the sheriff himself; and the territory which they were to cover lay to the northwest, in the vicinity of the Majestic Hotel. Some of the men carried rifles, some shotguns, and Bert was possessed of a revolver and a pocketful of cartridges which Fred had procured for him. It was agreed that no shot was to be fired save in an emergency; for Paprika, if he could be found at all, was to be taken alive.

To those who knew Sheriff Warren as a vacillating, timorous, dull-eyed man, he was that night a source of wonder and puzzled admiration. He took command of the situation in a manner that bespoke a determination and resourcefulness that gained for him respect and quick obedience. His voice and gaze were steady and fearless, his tone held a decisive note of unmistakable authority, and into his eyes had come that fire of unfettered soul that had for so long lain smoldering under the ashes of another's will.

His was the short-lived glory of the defiant slave who stands for a tottering moment upon the monarch's throne; his the fleeting triumph of the fuzzy worm emerging from the chrysalis, to fly, a brief span, with a butterfly's golden wings. For, as you shall see, his glory *was* but short-lived and the sudden spurt of fire within him was quite as suddenly snuffed out to a draggled wick.

To Ellis Turner, more than to any one else, this strange transfiguration of the sheriff came as a distinct shock. When the two men were alone together in the sheriff's buggy, driving out to the foot of Majestic Road, from which meeting-place they were to set out on foot, Turner gave astonished ear to the tirade that the sheriff heaped upon him.

"Your goin's on has got to come to a stop, Ellis Turner!" Warren declared boldly. "'Twas a unlucky day when I ever let myself git under your grindin' heel. I don't know how you come to git me elected sheriff, but you as much as told me that it was through some durn crookedness. If I was sure it was, you kin jest bet I'd tell folks about it an' give up a office that don't b'long to me!

"You've went too far now, Ellis Turner! You went an' took that there jailbird an' let 'm loose upon this here community—an' it nearly ruined th' life o' my Ruth. That's what you done—an' I'm through with you. I'll tell folks who this Paprika devil is, an' when I got 'm locked up I'll make 'm say that I'm tellin' th' God's truth!"

"What the devil has happened to you, Joe?" gasped Turner. "Have you gone crazy?"

"Crazy! You jest bet I ain't! I'm jest gittin' a holt on my senses, that's what. You're a goin to git showed up now fer what you are. *I'm* a goin' to show you up, an' I'll have Paprika to prove it! You wait an' see, Ellis Turner!"

Turner laughed. "My goodness, Joe! That's no way to talk to your prospective son-in-law."

"Eh? What's that? Son-in-law, eh? Well, I guess not! You'll marry no datter o' mine, Ellis Turner. Sara ain't a goin' to throw her life away on such as you! *She'll* know what you are, too!"

"Come now, Joe," wheedled Turner,

"This excitement has sort of thrown you off your balance. You know that I had no idea that Paprika would turn out to be the skunk he is. You know that as well as I do."

"Makes no difference, Ellis! It was through your doin's that he got loose on this here community. I see in it God's jedgment upon me—a warnin' to mend my ways an' make amends. I'm a goin' to do it, too. I been doin' blindly jest what you tell me to do, an' fer all I know most of it is jest plain, durn crookedness. If what I done fer you has been wrong in th' face o' th' law, I been innercent of it, an' you know it!"

Again Turner laughed—harshly, this time.

"Not to speak literally, Joe, when any of us hang, we'll all hang together. You talk about crooked elections. What the hell do you know about it? Can you come out and accuse anybody of crookedness? Do you know one little thing to charge against me?"

"I don't know nothin' about th' elections," replied the sheriff, "but I do know about this here Paprika. I know you took 'm out'n th' jail, an' I know what you took 'm out'n it fer. I know *that* much, Ellis Turner—an' I'll have Paprika to prove it ef'n you say it's a lie."

"Now listen, Joe," said Turner, wheedling again; "we've been friends too long to come to this. Suppose you just keep quiet about this matter, and after this you can have a freer hand in things. I'll fix it right with you, Joe, and—"

"You can't bribe me, Ellis! I got my resolve up, an' th' Lord has gave me a warnin' that I'll take heed of. I'm through with you!"

They had arrived by this time at their destination, and now the rest of their party drove up and jumped from their buggies. After a brief consultation they set out in pairs, to work upward toward the Majestic Hotel grounds, combing the woods for the fugitive. The torches they lighted and held aloft changed the inky blackness to a dancing red shadowland, and in its glow the men made their way through the tangled underbrush, routing the deep murk before their steady advance, and laying bare every possible hiding-place.

They emerged at length into the clearing in which the hotel stood, and again they gathered together for conference.

"It's sure he ain't in them woods," said the sheriff. "Reckon we'd better search th' hotel, b'fore we try th' grounds in th' back." He turned to Bert. "Could he git in there, Boom?"

"Easily," Bert replied. "I got in myself, without a key."

"Come on, then," said the sheriff, leading the way.

Bert showed them the broken window by which he had entered a short time before, and the men climbed through into the building.

"Be keerful o' them torches," warned the sheriff, "or you'll set this young feller's place afire."

"Go ahead," laughed Bert. "It's insured."

They separated again; but soon a summoning shout brought them all to the foot of the staircase.

"Looka here!" cried one of the men, pointing to the first step. "Somebody's been on these here steps, an' recent too! Looka these here prints in th' dust!"

"I guess they're mine," said Bert. "I was here the other day."

"Not these," said the man. "You never had no foot as big as this'n. Our man's here, or he's *been* here. Come on!"

They climbed the stairs, following the clearly defined footprints to the second floor and down the long, green-carpeted hall to where they ceased abruptly at the threshold of a closed door. The sheriff tried the door. It was locked!

"He's in here!" he cried triumphantly. "He's in here, all right! Doors can't lock themselves." He pounded heavily upon the panels. "Come out an' give yerself up, you varmint! Open this here door, in th' name o' th' law!"

They waited then, but no slightest sound came from within.

"You hear me?" cried the sheriff. "Come out'n there an' give yerself up, or we'll bust down th' door an' git you! You're in there, all right, an' I'll count

three fer you to open up th' door b'fore we bust it open. One—two—three! Come on, men," he shouted; "shoulders to th' door!"

And then, from within, came a voice, deep, menacing, veiled with a sneer—Paprika's voice.

"Th' first one o' you damn rubes to show hisself in that doorway is gonna get plugged full o' lead!"

The sheriff drew back a pace from the door.

"He's *there!*" he gasped, as if the certain evidence of the man's presence filled him with surprise.

"Has he got a gun?" asked one of the men.

"Maybe he ain't," said the sheriff. "Don't see where he got one if he has." He raised his voice, addressing the man within. "You ain't got no gun! Come out!"

"Ain't I?" replied Paprika. "Watch!"

On the trail of his words came a sharp report; and the frosted glass of the transom fell in splinters about the men.

"Ain't I?" laughed Paprika. "An' I got plenty o' bullets, too. Much obliged to whoever left 'em down-stairs in th' office!"

"He's got a gun, all right," said the sheriff, pushing back his hat and scratching his head. "What 'll we do *now?* We're in th' light, an' he's in th' dark; an' b'fore we'd git a shot at 'm we'd all be dead as doornails."

"Say!" called Paprika. "I thought you was gonna come in?"

The men drew to one side, perplexed with the problem before them. To break open the door was, as the sheriff had stated, foolhardy.

One of them at least would be hit before Paprika could be vanquished. There must be some method less hazardous than that; and a state of seige was agreed upon as being the wisest.

"Fred," said the sheriff, "suppose you an' Harry ride back to town an' git th' rest o' th' posse out here. Ezra, you an' Boom go down-stairs an' stand outside under th' winder, case he tries to drop out thataway. Put out your torches or he's like to see you an' take a shot at you. Th' rest of us 'll jest wait around here. We'll starve 'm out!"

When the four men had departed on their missions, Turner called the sheriff to one side.

"Joe," he said, "I've got an idea. If I could get in that room and have a talk with Blake, I believe I could persuade him to give himself up. I'm going to try it."

Warren looked at him through narrowed eyes.

"I don't trust you from here to th' corner no more," he replied suspiciously.

Turner shrugged. "Don't be ridiculous, Joe. There's no trusting to it. You know well that sometimes persuasion is worth more than force. I think it can do it."

Warren shook his head slowly.

"I reckon no harm can come of it exceptin' to you," he said. "How do you know he'll let you in? He ain't crazy."

"It doesn't do any harm to try," Turner replied. "Now you and the rest go down the hall a ways, to assure him that you can't fire into the room when I open the door, and I'll see what I can do."

Warren told the others of Turner's plan, and he seemed sorry when they accorded with it.

"Don't do no harm to try," they all agreed. "But why should he let *Turner* in?"

Reluctantly the sheriff led his men several yards down the hall, and Turner stepped up to the forbidden door and knocked.

"Blake," he called, "this is Turner."

"Well!" Paprika returned. "I didn't know my old sidekick was among them present. What d' you want?"

"Listen, Blake: if I come in there unarmed, with my hands above my head, and giving you an absolute promise, backed by the sheriff's, that there's no trickery intended—will you let me in?"

"Let you in? What in hell do you want to come in here fer, if it ain't to collar me?"

"I want to talk to you. Don't you get me?"

There was a moment of silence.

"You got somethin' up your sleeve, Turner. What's your little game?"

"It's no game," replied Turner. "Can't

you see you're not taking any chance? I'll be unarmed, with my hands above my head, and you'll have the drop on me, and the door covered. Will you do it?"

Again there was silence. Then:

"I'll be damned if I can figure you, Turner; but I'm willin', I guess. Any dirty work by that crowd of rubes out there, an' you know where you'll go to! I'll unlock th' door, but don't try to come in till I tell you. I'll get back behind my little trench b'fore that door is opened."

"The rest of the crowd are down the hall," said Turner. "Let's go."

There was a sound of advancing footsteps within, the scraping of a lock, and the retreat of the footsteps again. Then:

"All right, Turner," called Paprika. "Mind you have your hands up! I'll have you covered."

"I'll be holding a pocket flashlight in my hand," said Turner. "Don't think it's a gun, and fire."

"All right," replied Paprika. "But mind you hold it *up*."

Turner laid his revolver on the floor, and with a smile for the men who watched him breathlessly he raised one hand above his head and with the other turned the knob. The next moment he was inside the room, and the door had closed behind him.

CHAPTER XV.

TURNER'S METHOD.

HIS hands stretched high above his head, the upraised flashlight painting a luminous disk on the ceiling above him, Turner slammed shut the door with a backward kick of his foot and stood back against the panels, staring sightlessly ahead into the darkness.

"Well, Blake," he said evenly, "suppose you give me the once-over and satisfy yourself that I have no gun, so that I can put down my hands?"

"Lock that door again," came Paprika's voice in reply. "Then stand back th' way you are."

Turner complied; and Paprika came forward, running his hand carefully across the person of his visitor.

"You're all right," he said finally, removing the muzzle of his revolver from against Turner's ribs. "You can drop your hands, Turner."

Turner swept the spot of light about the room, picking out a white iron bed, a bureau, some chairs piled up in a sort of barricade, a window with a dark-green shade drawn down to its length, and, finally, Paprika's grinning face.

"How do you like my lodgin's?" said Paprika. "Th' service in this hotel is great."

"I wish we had a light in here," said Turner.

"I brought up a candle from downstairs," said Paprika, "but I ain't got no matches. Have you?"

"Here's a boxful," Turner replied, drawing them from his pocket.

"You fix it," said Paprika. "I got to keep my trigger-hand free, y'know. Th' candle's layin' there on the dresser."

Turner found out the candle with his flashlight, and touched a match to it, waxing it upright upon the bureau-top. In the weak, yellow glow the men faced each other, Paprika still agrin, as if he sensed humor in the very desperation of his plight. Turner was the first to speak.

"You're in a pretty pickle now, Blake," he said gravely. "What in the devil did you try to do a stunt like that for? Didn't you promise me that if I let you alone, you wouldn't try any rough stuff? Look what a mess you've got yourself into! If those rubes out there get you, they'll string you up on the first tree."

Paprika wiped the grin from his face and passed his tongue across his swollen lips. Turner noticed, for the first time, how sorely battered was the man's face: the half-closed, discolored eye, the puffed, split lips, the great gash that ripped the skin of his left cheek-bone.

"Gad!" said he. "You let that kid give you a lacing, didn't you?"

Paprika grunted. "That kid's a wildcat, whoever he is! He'd 'a' laid me out if he had a real punch. But he didn't have, an' I like to killed him when that rube sheriff came in an'—"

"Do you know who that kid was?"

"Naw. Do you?"

"It was the very fellow I wanted you to lick at the dance," said Turner.

Paprika tried to pucker his lips to whistle. "Go on!"

"The very same. He's the owner of this hotel." He paused. "What the devil did you come here for? Why didn't you keep traveling?"

Paprika shrugged. "When I heard that bell an' seen all th' lights go on, I knew th' whole country 'd be flowin' over with men after me. I couldn't rustle up a horse nowheres, an' I knew they'd get me if I kep' on walkin'. I was headed this way, an' when I seen this empty joint I thought it 'd be a good place to lay low till, say, t'-morrow night, when I could make a sneak to th' railroad an' hop a freight or somethin'." He paused. "Damn it! I wisht I'd 'a' left good enough alone. But the sight o' that little filly jest—"

"The thing is this," said Turner, disentangling one of the three chairs from the heap on the floor, and seating himself: "They've got you cornered here like a rat in a trap. Men have gone out to get the rest of the posse, and there will soon be a hundred men or more swarming that door. They've got men stationed under the window in case you try to drop out that way—though chances are you'd break your neck on the pavement below, if you tried it. You see what a hopeless case it is for you, don't you? All they have to do is to wait in shifts until hunger and thirst force you out of here."

Paprika paled, the bruises on his face springing out in blue vividness. "What—what 'll they do to me when they do get me?"

"String you up!" Turner replied tersely. "The sheriff couldn't hold you from a mob like that—even if he wanted to; and he doesn't."

For a while Paprika was silent, his head bowed in thought. Then he looked at Turner quickly.

"Why did you want to come in here?" he asked. "To tell me that? You got some idea, Turner!"

"You bet I have," answered Turner. "I came in to see if you and I couldn't figure some way out of this. I don't want to see them get you, Blake. I feel partly responsible for this—though, God knows, you got yourself into it alone."

"You mean that?" said Paprika, leaning forward, searching Turner's face. "You mean that you really want to help me out o' this?"

"I do," said Turner, meeting the man's eyes squarely. "They're not going to get you if I can help it, Blake. You and I entered into a kind of partnership, and I don't consider it broken off yet. If I get you out of this, I'll expect you to show me undying gratitude, Blake."

"I will," said Paprika, breathing hard. "B'fore God, Turner—though th' likes o' me ain't got no right to call on 'm—if you help me now, I'll steal an' murder fer you, if you ask me!"

"The question is," said Turner slowly, "how can it be done? Whatever we do must be done quickly—before the rest of the posse gets here. But what?" His hand went to his chin, and he rubbed it thoughtfully.

Paprika watched him with the burning eagerness of the alchemist who views the caldron of his precious concoction to await the result of his experiment. The full realization of his impending fate was now upon him, and for the first time in his life he felt the chilling touch of terror.

"I don't see what we can do," said Turner, shaking his head hopelessly. "I can't see a way out!"

Paprika slumped forward, his whole body loose with dejection, his arms falling limply to his sides, his revolver dangling from his fingers.

"I'm gone then," he said huskily. "They'll string me up! They'll lynch me, them rubes will! Ugh!" He raised a tremulous hand and clutched at his throat.

Turner rose to his feet, and began to pace the room slowly, his hands plunged deeply into his trousers'-pockets.

"Gad!" he kept muttering. "What a mess! What a mess!"

"There must be a way, Turner!" cried Paprika, his mounting terror swelling in his throat. "For God's sake, Turner—some way! They'll string me up, if they

get me! They'll string me up! Get me out o' this, Turner! Get me out o' this, an' there ain't nothin' that I won't—"

"Keep cool, Blake!" snapped Turner. "I thought you didn't have it in you to be afraid. I thought you were the kind to face death without a whimper. The kind that would always keep your mouth shut."

"But—they'll string me up!" choked Paprika, his fingers still entwined about his throat. "They'll—"

Turner ignored him, continuing his thoughtful pacing. Suddenly he stopped, wheeled about, his face lifted as with inspiration.

"Gad!" he cried softly. "I believe I've got it!"

"Turner! You—"

"Listen!" He came to Paprika's side, placing a comforting arm about the man's drooping shoulders. "We've got but one chance, Blake, and I think we can do it. There are only five men out there in the hall now, including the sheriff. Every one of them are men who always do exactly what I say and agree with any plan I suggest.

"You've seen how I've got that sheriff under my thumb. You remember that, all right. What I say will go with any of 'em. Now, here's the idea—and it's our only chance: They think I came in here to persuade you to give yourself up. Well, we'll make out that I succeeded. I'll take you out of here, covering you with your own gun—"

"Never!" cried Paprika, drawing back. "They'll—"

"Now, wait! I'll take you out there, and I'll tell them that you gave yourself up on the promise that you'd be taken to the jail before the mob showed up and got hold of you. Then I'll arrange to slip out with you, and take you to the jail *myself*—get me?—*myself*. The sheriff and his men are to stay here until the rest of the posse gets here, and they're to hold them here till I get you safely locked up. See? That's to avoid a lynching."

"But—they'll get me out o' that jail," said Paprika, trembling. "They'll—"

"They won't; because you aren't going to be in that jail. You're going to get free on the way and hop that five o'clock train that comes through Selma. Get me? You'll break away from me and take my gun from me! That five o'clock train goes through to Kansas City. That's where I want you to go.

"I've got an object in wanting you to get out of this, Blake, other than my feeling of friendship for you. Before you leave me, I'll give you an address to go to in Kansas City; and I'm coming to meet you there in a few days. I'll have work for you to do. You know you promised to help me—"

"Anything, Turner! So help me God, whatever you say, I'll do!" said Paprika, a violent trembling coming upon him. "I'll never forget, Turner!"

"I believe you, Blake. Here's fifty dollars. Put it in your pocket. It 'll see you through till I meet you in Kansas City. Now let me have your gun, and you walk out ahead of me. And keep your mouth shut! Don't say a word, or they might get wise."

Paprika handed his revolver to his friend, holding out a shaking hand. Turner took the cold, moist palm in his hand, and gripped it silently.

"God bless you, Turner!" said Paprika, a sob laying over his words. "God—bless you!"

"Brace up, old man," said Turner, kindly. "You'll need your nerve now!"

The men's hands fell apart, and Paprika, at a nod from Turner, walked hesitatingly to the door.

When the man's back was toward him, a great change came over Turner's face. His eyes, a moment before glazed with sympathetic emotion, now glittered with a light of triumph. His nostrils widened, and the corners of his mouth drew downward in a sinister sneer that immediately shaped itself into a smile that was quite as sinister.

With a steady hand he raised Paprika's revolver, took deliberate aim at the broad back before him—and fired.

This story will be continued in next week's issue of the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY, the consolidated title under which both magazines will appear hereafter as one.

The Sickle of Fate

by Chapin Howard

Author of "Next Door to Chastina."

CHAPTER I.

A CLERICAL DILEMMA.

WHEN the knocker sounded at the parsonage one summer afternoon toward six o'clock the Rev. Arthur Grant himself went to the door. He kept a finger in the volume he was reading, but he hid his pipe behind a bowl of roses on the hall table, for it was still one of his delusions that none of his parishoners knew he smoked.

At sight of the couple awaiting him on the door-step the smile of welcome in his eyes changed to a look of perplexity. Nathan Swain was the rich man of his congregation. Stern-featured, erect, fifty-five or more, with crisp-curling, grayish hair he carried himself arrogantly. By his side stood Flora Winslow, a girl of twenty. She had been a child when the minister had come into the neighborhood and during the years of his pastorate she had grown up to be the village beauty. Her blue eyes were raised to his now for a moment and then lowered swiftly, but under the drooping brim of her hat he had a glimpse of pale cheeks and tremulous lips.

The surprise which the minister felt at sight of his callers showed itself in his manner. He stammered over his words of greeting. Then drawing back, he indicated with a gesture his study, which was at the front of the house on the west side of the hall. The late afternoon sunlight streaming through the open windows revealed it to be a room pleasant and shabby, like its owner. A faint cloud of tobacco-smoke still hung above the chair in which he had been sitting.

Nathan Swain placed his hat precisely on the hall table as he followed Flora across the threshold. Still without speaking he moved over to the study fireplace, feeling in the inner pocket of his coat, and then swung suddenly about, holding out a folded paper.

"Here is the license, Grant," he said. "When you have looked it over, I presume you can marry us at once."

The minister placed a chair for Flora without answering. Then he took the paper and unfolded it slowly. He was trying to give himself time to recover from his dismay. In this remote country parish it was seldom that the unexpected must be dealt with.

He stood staring at the license in his hand. Nathan Swain was fifty-seven—that was about what he had guessed him; Flora was nineteen—a year younger than he had thought. She was marrying, he felt sure, without her mother's knowledge, yet for all that she was of age and there was little he could say. He pretended to read the license through a second time more carefully.

It was so still in the room that he could hear outside the open windows the hum of bees in the rose-bushes and the occasional click of Joel Benton's sickle as he trimmed the grass along the edges of the path. Joel's back looked bent like that of an old man,

yet he was the same age as the bridegroom standing erect here on the hearth.

"There is nothing wrong with the license, surely?"

The question recalled the minister's gaze.

"No," he answered, "it's only that you have taken me so much by surprise. I was not expecting this."

He glanced at Flora. In her pale silk with a bunch of roses lying in her lap, she made a charming picture against the background of shabby books which lined the room. The brim of her hat still hid the upper part of her face, but he could see that her lip was caught between her small white teeth and that she was twisting a diamond ring upon her finger.

Nathan Swain followed his glance.

"I'm used to better luck than better men," he admitted grimly. "If I've prospered, I only wish now that I had more to give. It should all go to make her happy."

The minister folded the paper and returned it without comment.

"I'll call my wife," he said, "and then we'll need a second witness—Joel Benton perhaps."

He moved reluctantly toward the door. But just as he reached the threshold a sound behind him made him pause. He had heard a sob quickly stifled.

He glanced back at Flora. But Nathan Swain stepped between them and bent over the girl. He drew a leather-covered jewel-case from his pocket.

"Here are other things I haven't shown you yet," he murmured.

The Rev. Arthur Grant strode down the hall reflecting on the scene he had just witnessed. It had startled him out of his usual mood of easy-going contentment; in all the years of his pastorate in the village he had never been quite so uncertain as to what he ought to do, and before making up his mind, he decided to consult his wife.

She was not to be found in any of the rooms at the rear of the house, although he had heard her moving about in the kitchen but a little while ago. The tea-kettle on the stove, however, was just coming to a boil, and a few dishes had been set down from the pantry-shelf in preparation for an early tea. He remembered that she might have stepped out to the garden and he looked anxiously from the door in search of her.

Her placid, rather stout figure in a blue gingham dress was visible at the far end of the path by the stone wall. She was sitting on a kitchen chair with a bowl in her lap picking currants for supper, and at the sound of her husband's step, a moment later she glanced over her shoulder—then went on steadily with her work.

He told her his perplexity.

"But Flora's been engaged to Will Davis for almost a year now!" Mrs. Grant protested. "They've gone everywhere together and he's given her some handsome presents. Mrs. Winslow was telling me about it only the other day. She seemed so pleased. She thought they might be married early in the fall."

Her troubled glance was lifted to her husband's face. "I know they say in the village that Will's been rather wild, but he's steadied down since he came into the property, he's making money, and there's no one better liked."

Although Mrs. Grant kept on steadily with her work, her husband knew that she realized, as well as he did, the gravity of his predicament. Nathan Swain was the one man of all his congregation whom it would be rashness to offend. Quick-tempered and self-willed he would brook no interference with any of his actions, and he would take pleasure in revenging himself upon those who got in his way. Although he came only occasionally to church, and concerned himself but little in the management of affairs, it was known that he paid a third of the minister's salary out of his own pocket.

Mrs. Grant looked up anxiously at her husband's face.

"You think you ought not to marry them?" she questioned. "But, after all, isn't Flora old enough to know her mind? If they can't get the ceremony performed here, they'll go over to the north village. So it will only mean a quarrel to no purpose."

In the late afternoon stillness they heard a sharp clatter of hoofs and a whirr of wheels going down the village street

"There's Will Davis driving home from the mill now," Mrs. Grant exclaimed. "No one else around here drives in that reckless manner."

She handed the bowl of currants to her husband and stood up, untying her apron.

"My dear, if I thought you could do any good by interfering I'd advise it. But, honestly, I don't see how you can. He'd probably not even listen to what you say. So go back to the house and go through with the ceremony. I'll come as a witness and we can ask Hetty Ives, too. She's sewing up in the kitchen bedroom."

They moved together along the path toward the house.

"I wasn't sure that I could get Hetty," Mrs. Grant explained, that the mere sound of her voice might soothe her husband's nerves, "but I wanted that old brown silk of mine turned and she's good at that sort of contriving. She's fixed it so that it will do now to wear a while longer. Did Flora have a new dress for the wedding? I wonder what her mother will say?"

Mr. Grant shook his head helplessly.

"I must have a talk with them after all," he protested. "I can't let a girl marry like this—I'd always feel responsible. But I know beforehand it won't be of the least use. It will only make Nathan Swain my enemy."

"Of course, if you think you ought to"—his wife sighed—"if it will make your conscience any easier—but be very careful what you say."

The shadows had lengthened across the garden, for the sun was dropping behind the pasture on the hill. Its level rays lighted up the white walls of the parsonage and flashed against the small-paned windows. The minister and his wife had lived in the old house now for so many years that it took courage to decide on any course of action which might endanger their staying on.

As they came up the path together they found Joel Benton standing by the well. He had finished his day's work—the odd jobs of carpentering and gardening which he did about the neighborhood—and as the minister and his wife drew near him he was drinking from the tin dipper.

"I may want you in the parlor, Joel," Mr. Grant explained, "to act as a witness. It won't take long—just come in as you are."

The little man filled the dipper again and went on drinking. Then he paused abruptly.

"I'm not going in there," he announced sullenly. "You'll have to get somebody else."

He had been pouring water over his head and hands and the stones where he stood, glistened wet. Mrs. Grant passed around to the other side of the well and moved on toward the kitchen door.

"I'll ask Hetty," she called back over her shoulder. "She'll be glad to help you out, and then there won't be any need for Joel to come."

The minister followed his wife across the threshold and saw her start toward the back stairs. He set the bowl of currants on the kitchen table and smoothed his rumpled hair before the mirror. Then he stepped into the hall.

The front door was open, although he thought he remembered having closed it, and a faint breeze was stealing through the house. He heard no sound of voices from the study, and when he had advanced a little way down the hall, he paused to listen. He dreaded the interview. He felt sure that it would accomplish nothing, and that afterward he would have to bear the full force of Nathan Swain's ill will. Just then the kitchen door behind him was blown to, as if latched by an unseen hand, and another door echoed it far off. The change to coolness in the air of the rooms, now that the sun was down, made him realize that he had been absent longer than he had thought.

At first glance the study appeared as usual; then the confusion which had distorted its homelike order startled him. A light, rush-bottomed chair lay overturned in the path to the door and the flowers of the bride's bouquet were scattered on the carpet. Among them gleamed pieces of jewelry, old-fashioned gold bracelets, earrings, a length of threadlike chain, all trampled under foot as if in some furious struggle. Stretched before the mantel, face-

down in a great pool of blood, lay the body of Nathan Swain.

CHAPTER II.

THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS.

THE minister staggered back, catching at the side of the doorway for support, and brushing one hand across his eyes. Something on the hall floor grated under his heel and he stared down at it stupidly. A diamond ring lay on the braided rug at his feet.

He turned and stumbled down the hall wrenching open the kitchen door.

"Joel!" he called wildly. "Joel!"

He could see the little man still standing by the well.

"I ain't comin' in, I told you."

"Help, Joel—it's murder!"

He turned back, and as he did so, he heard quick steps in the hall above. Looking up he saw his wife and Hetty Ives clinging together. Their pale faces peered down at him over the bannister in a frenzy of fear.

"Go back!" he commanded hoarsely. "Go back, both of you!"

"What is it, Arthur?" his wife cried.

"Nathan Swain—" But his voice failed him.

He went on toward the study door. Joel Benton was beside him now, and the two men entered the room together. A light breeze stirred the scattered rose-petals on the floor and swayed inward the long white muslin curtains. Somewhere outside in the silence a thrush was beginning its evening song.

The minister knelt down by the body. The blood which had drenched the hearthstone and the carpet, flowed from a gash in the side of the neck, and as he bent closer to examine the wound, he recoiled from its depth. The head had been partly severed.

"Go for the doctor, Joel!" he gasped. But it's too late—there's nothing to be done—"

He glanced up. Joel Benton was standing rigid at his shoulder peering down at the body of the dead man. A grim smile twisted his lips and a look of triumph shone in his eyes.

"Nathan Swain's renderin' account of all his wickedness!" he whispered. Then he turned and shuffled out of the room.

It seemed only a moment before the doctor came running past the window in his shirt-sleeves. At his heels was the boy who drove for him and, following them at a little distance, came two other men. They crowded in through the hall doorway, while subdued questions, all unanswered, leaped from lip to lip. "Where is he?" "What happened?" "Look out there where you're steppin'!" "Stand back and give doc room!"

During the time he had been left alone in the study, the minister had gathered up the scattered pieces of jewelry from the carpet. Slow, white and shaking, he made his way into the hall. On the stairs he saw his wife and Hetty Ives still clinging to each other. The little dressmaker was sobbing hysterically.

"To think of me sitting up there alone—while it was happening—and never hearing a sound! I was pulling the basting-threads out of the back breadth—"

"Where is Flora?" Mrs. Grant whispered.

"She's gone."

"Gone?"

"And don't tell any one yet of her having been here."

"Arthur! You don't believe—"

"Of course not! If you could see what was done!"

He closed his eyes, shuddering.

"But I must find her. If she is not at the house, I must talk with her mother—I must get her to tell me all she can."

Hetty Ives was staring down at him.

"But Mrs. Winslow ain't home."

"Where is she?"

"I see her come out of their door not fifteen minutes ago. She was headin' this way. She must have been goin' right by here when it happened!"

The possibilities of what she said seemed suddenly to strike her and she checked the words upon her tongue.

"But Flora may be there," Mr. Grant insisted, "I must find her and talk with

her before the constable is summoned. You two are not to breathe a word of this until we are all questioned. I'll slip out the front way. But tell no one where I've gone."

Passing behind the group of men who were crowding in at the study door, he gained the front steps. By cutting diagonally across the yard he could avoid another group of neighbors who were coming up the path. One woman was pushing a baby-carriage before her, and talking excitedly of something she had seen. She called out a question to him, but he hurried on pretending not to hear her.

He kept to his own side of the street, until he was opposite where the Winslows lived. Then he crossed over. No one answered his ring at the front door and he pulled the bell-handle a second time. After waiting a moment and hearing no sound, he walked around to the rear of the house. As he passed the kitchen window he thought he caught a glimpse of some one within, but again when he knocked, there was no answer. So he lifted the latch and pushed the door open.

Mrs. Winslow was standing there alone in the center of the kitchen. She was a large woman with pale eyes and colorless skin. She had not taken her bonnet off and she held a pair of shears in her hand.

"I won't have folks coming into my house so—not even the minister! I expect them to wait until I let them in!"

Mr. Grant closed the door and leaned his shoulders against it.

"Where is Flora?" he demanded.

Her mouth set itself obstinately.

"You'll have to tell me, Mrs. Winslow. You'll have to answer every question that I ask. There's no time now to explain."

"Flora's up-stairs in her room."

"When did she come home?"

"She ain't been out."

He looked at her steadily.

"When did Flora come back from the parsonage?"

"She ain't been down to the parsonage. Don't you go tellin' folks she has, for she ain't been out of the house this afternoon."

For the first time since he entered he noticed that the air in the kitchen was stiflingly hot. He could hear the fire roaring in the stove, and he could see that the damper was open. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead helplessly.

"Perhaps Flora went out without telling you," he suggested. "She was in my study half an hour ago. Are you sure that she is up-stairs here now?"

Mrs. Winslow stood her ground.

"I was talking with her just before you come in," she retorted. "You can step through into the hall there and call to her if you want to. You'll find that she'll answer if you do."

He hesitated a moment and then walked past her to the foot of the front stairs. There he paused.

"Flora!" he called.

As he stood with his back to the kitchen door, he was beside a large steel engraving of "The Feast of Belshazzar," which hung on the wall. It reflected dimly like a mirror. As he looked into its depths, he saw Mrs. Winslow glide forward noiselessly. With one hand she raised a stove-lid, uncovering a glowing mass of flame, and with the other hand she caught up a bundle of something from a chair. He glanced around swiftly. She was intent upon her work, crowding into the fire long strips and rolls of light-blue silk. There was something familiar about the color, and suddenly he understood. It was the wedding-dress which was being burned.

"Flora!" he called sharply.

A door opened up-stairs.

"Who is it?" the girl's voice answered, choked with tears.

"It's Mr. Grant, the minister. I've come up here to have a talk with you."

"Flora wasn't down to the parsonage!" her mother broke in vehemently. "'Twon't do you any good askin' us questions, for that's all you'll ever get her or me to say."

She had followed him into the hall and had raised her voice so that it might be overheard up-stairs.

The minister stepped to the front door, unbolted it, and flung it wide.

"Look down the street there, Mrs. Winslow!" he commanded. "See the people gathering in my yard! A half-hour ago a couple came to the parsonage to be married—your daughter and Nathan Swain.

In the few moments I left them alone together the bridegroom was murdered and Flora disappeared. I came here to find out what she could tell me, but since entering the house, I have seen actions so suspicious that I have decided to give you this choice: either you and Flora will come back with me to the parsonage at once, or I will stay here and keep my eye on you until the constable can be summoned. Then you will *both* be questioned as to what you may know of the murder of Nathan Swain."

A sound behind him made him turn. Flora was crouching half-way down the stairs. Her hands clutched the bannister, her face was blurred with crying and her breath came sobbingly, but her glance was fixed on the group of people down the street —the same sight which held her mother rigid. Neither of them spoke nor moved.

"I came here as an old friend and neighbor," the minister urged, "I wanted to help you if I could. You ought not to keep anything from me."

The flowers on Mrs. Winslow's bonnet trembled slightly and she opened her lips.

"Flora wasn't down to the parsonage."

But even while she was speaking Flora crept down the last few steps and moved toward the open door. She seemed unconscious that they were watching her, as she started to cross the threshold.

"Wait!" called her mother.

Hurrying after her she tried with trembling fingers to pin the collar of the girl's gingham dress, which had not been fastened and to tuck into place a strand or two of hair. But she made no further attempt to stop her. Side by side they moved on down the path with the minister, following a few steps in the rear.

The parsonage yard seemed full of people. The foremost were crowding about the door-step or peering in at the open windows, and the excited murmur of their voices could be heard from a distance.

"Cross the yard, please, and go around to the back door," Mr. Grant directed.

Mother and daughter turned aside as if glad to escape the scrutiny of their neighbors.

At the rear of the house there was no one to be seen except Joel Benton, who, with lowered head, was walking to and fro searching for something in the grass.

Mrs. Winslow, leaving Flora's side, stepped up to him quickly and said something in so low a tone that the minister could not hear. But he saw Joel stare after her as she turned back toward the house.

CHAPTER III.

"HER WAY."

THEY found the kitchen empty when they entered it. In the sitting-room beyond, four or five women were standing with their scared, pale faces turned toward the door. Mrs. Grant stepped forward when she caught sight of her husband.

"Mrs. Winslow and Flora came back with me," he exclaimed. "They came, because I—advised it. Won't you stay near them and keep others away?"

Mother and daughter sat down side by side in chairs close against the sitting-room wall. Flora hid her face upon her mother's shoulder, but Mrs. Winslow sat erect staring straight before her. She had not even returned Mrs. Grant's greeting.

"What has been done here since I've been gone?" the minister asked his wife. "Has the constable been sent for?"

"The doctor says they expect him at any minute."

"When he comes then we must be ready to answer questions." As he spoke he glanced at Mrs. Winslow's stern profile.

"Joel Benton is somewhere around," his wife murmured, "and Hetty's up-stairs getting her sewing things together. She's planning to slip out the back way and go home to be with her sister. She's afraid Lucy will see all the people in the yard and feel frightened. She knows Hetty is sewing here."

They were interrupted by a slight movement of one of the seated figures. Flora had sunk with her whole weight against her mother's shoulder.

"Bring me a glass of water!" Mrs. Grant whispered.

The minister filled a tumbler at the pail of well-water in the sink and brought it to her where she knelt beside the girl.

The group of women at the other end of the room drew together whispering. They suddenly suspected some background to the stark fact of the murder, and their faces peering through the twilight were sharp with curiosity.

The minister turned away. He saw Hetty Ives come down the back stairs and cross the kitchen with her apron over her head and a bundle of sewing in her hand. Joel Benton was waiting for her by the door-step and they walked together just as he had seen them walk away from prayer-meeting every Thursday evening for some years.

A moment later he heard a shuffling of feet in the front hall as the men there stepped back before some new arrival. A hearty voice boomed out: "Well, I got here as soon as I could—yes, all day mending fence up in the hill pasture—where is he?"—and he knew that Jim Amsden, the constable, had come. He must have gone at once into the study, for the people who were looking in the dining-room windows disappeared, moving away toward the other side of the house.

Mrs. Grant got up from her knees and joined her husband in the kitchen doorway. "I want to get a towel and more water to bathe Flora's face. She hasn't fainted. If she just rests there quietly she'll be all right in a little while. Arthur—"

They moved farther away to be out of hearing of those in the sitting-room.

"What did you find out from them? What does she say?"

"She doesn't say anything, and her mother just repeats over and over the same stupid falsehood—she says Flora didn't come down here this afternoon."

"Yet they were willing to come back with you!"

"They didn't dare to refuse—they're too frightened to think. Perhaps later they'll answer the questions the constable asks them."

"Oughtn't you to see him first?"

"I'm going to have a talk with him now—as soon as he comes out of the study. But I didn't want to go in there again."

He rubbed his hand over his eyes as if trying to blot out the picture of that figure on the hearth-rug.

Already voices could be heard asking for the minister in the hall. The group of men by the door drew aside to let him pass. He found Jim Amsden, the constable, standing on the study threshold.

"They tell me you're the one knows most about this, Mr. Grant," he said.

The minister told his story then with all the neighbors listening. He tried to make it as colorless as he could, and yet to omit none of the details, for he realized that on this first version stubborn opinions would be formed.

The constable heard him through without interrupting.

"When you found the body there, you saw no weapon?"

"No."

"Nor any other clue?"

The minister put his hand in his pocket and brought out the pieces of jewelry. "I picked these up from the floor. They had been trampled under foot. The setting of the ring is bent and the clasp of one of the bracelets broken."

"This was all you noticed?"

"Yes, except that the flowers scattered on the carpet were pink roses I had seen in the bride's bouquet."

"Was any one else in the house at the time?"

"Hetty Ives was here sewing for my wife up in the kitchen bedroom and Joel Benton was at work on the lawn. Neither of them heard anything."

"Where is Flora Winslow now?"

"She and her mother are in the sitting-room."

"What does she say?"

"That's the strangest part of it. She doesn't say anything. But her mother says for her—that she hasn't been down to the parsonage this afternoon."

"Yet you talked with her!"

"Yes. Mrs. Winslow—for her own reasons—is saying what I think she knows to be untrue."

Jim Amsden stared about him over the heads of the other men.

"Let me see them," he demanded. They've got to tell us what they know."

He pushed his way slowly through the crowd and the minister followed him. There were whispered comments as they passed and a shuffling of feet as the groups reformed behind them. Every one was determined to see for himself what was to come.

Dusk had fallen and as they stepped into the living-room Mrs. Grant was placing a lighted lamp upon the table.

Jim Amsden glanced about him sharply. Then he walked forward and spread out the handful of jewelry in the circle of light.

"I want you to tell me how these came here, Flora."

The girl lifted her head from her mother's shoulder and stared at him. Mrs. Winslow's dry lips moved.

"Flora doesn't know—anything about them," she said.

There was a slight stir in the hall as a young man shouldered his way out of the group by the door. Dark, thin-faced and muscular-looking in his flannel shirt and corduroys he lounged forward deliberately to the table. One by one he picked up the trinkets there—the ring, the earrings, and the bracelets—examining them in the lamplight and dropping each contemptuously. Then without glancing up he laughed and turned away.

Flora Winslow started from her chair, shaking off her mother's determined hand.

"I want to tell about those things," she cried, "and I want Will Davis to hear what I say!"

Her blue eyes flashed at the young fellow as he stopped half-way to the door. He had not turned toward her, but he stood listening.

"Mr. Swain gave me those things, because I promised to marry him. But I only promised to marry him, because I had quarreled with Will."

She came forward to the table and stood facing the minister. There was a faint flush in her cheeks now and her lips trembled.

"There isn't any use in saying I wasn't here at the parsonage this afternoon—the way mother wants me to! She thinks we can keep every one from knowing why I came. But you talked with me, Mr. Grant, and other people must have seen me come up the path with Mr. Swain. We came to be married. We planned it more than a week ago."

She kept her glance fixed on the minister's face.

"Whenever he met me he used to tell me how much he cared for me and hint what it would mean to marry a rich man like him. And he used to buy me presents. He'd show them to me and—sometimes—I'd keep them for a while. But I always gave them back. He said he locked them away and that they'd all belong to me again on the day I promised to be his wife.

"I always wanted jewelry and pretty clothes and I never had them. Sometimes I used to put on the things he'd buy me and wear them just in my room, where mother wouldn't know. I put the earrings on once to tease Will—when we were going driving together, and I told him they were a present from some one I could marry any time I said the word. I didn't know he'd be so angry. He hadn't any right to talk to me the way he did."

At the recollection of the quarrel she clenched her hands.

"I said he'd begun telling me what I could do and what I couldn't a little too soon! I'd had nothing but that all my life. I told him I could marry some one who'd let me have my own way—who'd think everything I did was right and who'd be rich enough so that other people would have to think so, too."

"It sounds foolish now! I kept hoping afterward that Will would feel ashamed of the way he'd acted and would come and tell me he was sorry—and I waited. I waited until I got so angry I decided he didn't care.

"Mr. Swain gave me a silk dress for the wedding and I had it made up without letting mother know. He said we'd go to the city and I could buy whatever I wanted. He said I could bring home trunks full of clothes. I kept thinking of that. But I never could have come here to the parsonage to-day if I hadn't kept telling myself that I was angry at Will and it wasn't until I saw how you felt about it, Mr. Grant, that I began to realize what I'd done."

The tears were running down her cheeks, now as she looked up at the minister.

"Tell us what happened, Flora, when you were left alone."

"You left us in the study, and Mr. Swain showed me a necklace that he'd bought. He wanted me to try it on, but I shook my head. I didn't say anything, but I stood up and began taking off the earrings and the pin. I was trembling so, that I could hardly unfasten them. He just watched me at first and then he asked me *what that meant?* I said it meant I wasn't going to marry him. He said it was too late now—that I couldn't change my mind. It would make him the laughing-stock of the whole village. He kept walking back and forth, and finally, when he saw I wasn't listening, he came up to me and caught hold of my arms. I was crying so I couldn't make him understand. He frightened me.

"Just then I heard Will Davis drive by. I broke away from him and dropped the jewelry and my flowers and ran out into the hall. He followed me as far as the threshold. But I got the door open and ran down the path. When I reached the gate I felt I couldn't go any further; I just clung hold of it and shut my eyes.

"After a while some one spoke to me. It was mother. She'd seen me from up there to our house, and she led me home. Then she got the shears and knelt right down there in the front hall and began cutting to pieces the dress I was wearing. She said: 'Don't you ever let anybody in this village know what a little fool you've been!'"

"That was her reason then for saying you had not been down here?" the minister asked curiously.

Flora nodded. "It's her way."

CHAPTER IV.

JOEL'S RETURN.

FLORA looked appealingly at her mother who sat erect and unheeding in the chair beside the kitchen door.

"And you had no idea of what happened here afterward—after you ran out of the room?"

"I wouldn't believe it *had* happened when you told us. It seemed so horrible I—but when I heard them talking about it down here—"

She shuddered and put her hands up to her throat.

The constable suddenly leaned toward her across the table, his face stern in the lamp-light.

"Yet you are the last person known to have seen him alive. You admit it was only a few minutes before his death. Have you any reason to suspect who killed Nathan Swain?"

In the silence that followed his question, and while the girl stood speechless before him, a footstep startled every one.

Joel Benton stood there on the kitchen threshold. He held his felt hat crushed against his breast and his glance was fixed on the constable.

"I've come to give myself up," he said, moistening his lips. "You don't have to look any farther."

He tiptoed into the room and laid a sickle on the table. Then he pointed to it with his finger. The quietness of his voice, the restraint of his gesture sent a shudder through the room.

"Think what you're saying, Joel!" the minister gasped. "Not one of us believes you!"

The little man peered up at him and then around at the circle of neighbors—the people who had known him all their lives. He shook his head helplessly.

"I don't look much like a murderer, maybe. I guess I wa'n't intended for one. 'Twas knowin' Nathan Swain that changed me."

His glance was lowered to the old felt hat he was turning in his hands.

"Some of you understood him well enough—the weak ones and the unlucky ones—those he could get power over. Others that were safe from him, that he couldn't touch, thought well of him, I guess."

He was silent a moment apparently, considering. Then he went on.

"Nathan Swain wanted power, and he'd got about all of it a man could get in a little town. Seems as if it was the breath

of life to him. Any one who stood out against him, or who didn't see him as he wanted to appear to folks, that kind he never forgave. But he wa'n't content to leave 'em alone. He kept right after them.

"'Twa'n't really anything more than that between us, to begin with. I saw him for what he was, and I didn't hide my feelings. That didn't suit him. He was terrible sensitive about other folks seeing him on their own level.

"'Way back, years ago, when I tried to run the mill—the one Will Davis owns to-day—I begun to find that Nathan Swain was watching every move I made. He knew I hadn't any capital, and that it would take close figuring for me to get by, and in my timber deals I kept running onto him. Sometimes I wouldn't find out till afterward what he had been up to. But, you see, he wa'n't content to keep it to himself; he always planned to let me know who I was fighting.

"For years he played with me like that—letting me get a little bit ahead—sometimes almost letting me see my way clear. Then there he'd be. He got my mill away from me, and got me into debt, and after that he began on my farm. Acre by acre, and field by field, he's kept right after me. It ain't that I haven't worked hard. I've worked, but I lost my sand. I come to be afraid, just knowing he was there; afraid even enough to suit him, I guess. But he couldn't forget. He had to keep hold of folks just so he could feel his power.

"It had come to about the end of this year. He was going to sell me up. Now that farm's been home to me. It's belonged to us 'way back, field and woods and pasture-land, until there ain't a tree on it or a foot of ground that don't seem like my own flesh to me. He gave me warning time and again, but I suppose he hated to really come to the point, because, with nothing left to call my own, you see he'd have lost his hold on me.

"I was working here in the yard to-day, and I heard his voice in the study just saying a word or two. I got up my courage at last and thought I'd ask him for more time; I'd thought I'd beg him here, right before the minister; I thought he'd be ashamed to have it known how he was treating me.

"So I walked 'round to the front door. It was open, and I stepped into the hall. You see I'd counted on Mr. Grant's being there, but when I come to the library threshold, there stood Nathan Swain alone. I didn't know anything about why he'd come to the parsonage, or what had happened since he'd come, but I could see right off that he was terribly angry. His eyes were bloodshot, and his lips were working. He didn't wait for me to begin. He didn't give me a chance to speak. He was glad enough to find somebody he could take it out of."

Joel Benton twisted his hat in his earth-stained hands.

"Well, he didn't show me any mercy. I wasn't left in any doubt about its being the end for me. What little I had left was going to be taken. It just suited him at that minute to make me a pauper, and when he'd finished telling me so, he turned on his heel and walked back to the fireplace. He wa'n't a bit afraid of me. *I didn't count!*

"It wa'n't till then that I noticed I was holding the sickle in my hand."

Joel raised his head and sent a slow, steady glance around the room.

"'Twas just the accident of my having brought it that gave me the courage. But I want to tell you—and it's the last thing I'll ever say—that I ain't sorry for what I done—"

At ten o'clock that same evening the Rev. Arthur Grant was pacing back and forth the length of the sitting-room. The last curious neighbor had gone home, and the study across the hall was free of its grim tenant. That door was locked and the key was in the minister's pocket.

Mrs. Grant came in from the kitchen, where she had been setting away the dishes after a late supper, which neither of them had touched. She straightened the position of a chair or two and untied her apron.

"I don't suppose either of us will sleep much, after such a day, but it's nearly ten o'clock," she said.

"You go up-stairs then, Alice," he urged. "I'll not be long. I want to think."

His wife glanced toward the hall.

"I think I'd rather sit here with you."

"Nonsense," he protested; "when you're worn out! I'll not let you stay."

He took the lamp from the table, and after examining the fastenings of the windows and bolting the front door, he led the way up the steep, old-fashioned stairs.

Their bedroom was at the front of the house over the study, and as they walked the length of the hall together, his wife clutched his arm.

Not until he had set the lamp on their bureau did he turn to look at her. He saw then that she was staring back toward the hall.

"Shut the door!" she whispered.

He obeyed, and to emphasize the quiet of his own nerves he drew his watch out of his pocket and began winding it.

His wife's face was colorless.

"Arthur, did you see?"

"Did I see what?" he parried.

"There are blood-drops along the hall straight to this room!"

"Yes," he admitted. "I saw them. But that's easily explained. Any one might have come up here at such a time."

"But no one did! I should have heard them!"

"The doctor very likely came up here for something."

She shook her head and sat down in the rocking-chair beside the window. Her face was quivering.

"Oh, I try not to be foolish, but it seems as if this house would never be the same again. I feel as if I were always going to be afraid if a board creaked or a latch rattled."

She drew her breath unsteadily and looked away. "What makes you so sure Joel isn't guilty? You said at supper—"

"Why talk of it any more to-night?" he interposed.

"Because I shall just lie awake thinking!"

The minister slipped off his coat and hung it over the back of a chair. Then he wandered aimlessly about the room.

"Well, for one thing, Joel must have known that Flora was in the study. When they first came he was trimming the grass around the flower-bed outside the west window. From where he was working he couldn't help but overhear every word that was said within. Even if he saw Flora run down the path later, he would never have chosen that moment to speak to Nathan Swain."

"Then who—"

"I don't know. But another thing. That wasn't Joel's sickle. You don't find them often in the country, you know. We use scythes. I don't believe there are more than two or three in the whole village. Joel owns one, but this one he brought to-night belongs in the cemetery. It's used around the graves, and I've often seen it there. It has a split handle."

"But mightn't he have borrowed it?"

"He might have, of course; but this morning he hadn't. I was talking with him about enlarging one of the flower-beds, and I remember picking up his sickle to show him how I wanted the turf cut. He had his own then."

Mrs. Grant suddenly started up from her chair. Her face was drawn with terror and she pointed to the door.

"Arthur, see who's outside there in the hall!"

He came toward her.

"You're only letting yourself get overwrought Alice. There's no one out there this time of night."

"There is! There is! I heard some one just now."

To prove to her the foolishness of such imaginings, he walked quietly over and opened the door. There was nothing to be seen in the lamp-light, and he was about to step back when a queer rustling startled him.

He peered out.

At the head of the stairs hovered a figure indistinct amid the shadows. Its glance seemed to be turned in his direction, for even while he stood looking, it shrank closer to the wall and started downward, hesitating at the first step, then moving more and more rapidly to the accompaniment of a faint, rustling sound. He tiptoed forward to the banister and leaned over, holding his breath to listen. He could see nothing in the darkness, but a moment later, in the

stillness of the old house, he heard the handle of the study door turned.

CHAPTER V.

GHOSTS.

IN the clear sunlight of an early June morning, the Rev. Arthur Grant found himself half doubting the apparition on his staircase the night before. Yet, when he had gone down, lamp in hand, to investigate, he had found the front door unbolted, and he had not been able to persuade his wife that she had imagined a listener in the hall. Of his glimpse of the figure itself he had told her nothing.

This morning his attention was attracted to the condition of the flower-borders under the front windows. Some of his rose-bushes had been trampled yesterday under the feet of curious neighbors attempting to look in, and as he bent to straighten a broken stalk, he was aware of a shadow on the grass.

Will Davis came strolling toward him.

"I stopped in on my way to the mill," the young fellow exclaimed. "It's not about my own affairs I've come," he added quickly.

"He's not the kind to speak of those to any one," the minister reflected.

"You know Flora's mother, sir. There aren't many people as set as she is, once she's made up her mind about a thing. I walked home with them from here last evening after we had seen Joel Benton left away, and Mrs. Winslow told us to wait on the door-step. She said she was going into the house for something. When she came out she handed Flora her purse, and told her to go over and pay Hetty Ives for making that wedding dress. She wouldn't listen to argument.

"There didn't seem to be anything for Flora to do but to obey her mother, so I walked over with her. There was a light in the Ives house, but no one came to the door. We knocked twice. Finally Flora —she's been going there so often lately, that she's got into the habit—walked in. I waited outside.

By and by I heard crying. It seemed she found Lucy in the kitchen taking on terribly. Flora couldn't find out what the matter was, but Lucy kept saying over and over that Hetty couldn't see any one. You know how queer they've always been living by themselves so. Anyhow, there was something about it that frightened Flora. She didn't dare stay. But she wanted me to promise that after I took her home, I'd stop at the parsonage and tell you and Mrs. Grant. I said I would, but we stood talking for a while after that, and when finally I got to the gate here, I didn't see any light down-stairs. So I made up my mind to wait till morning. Of course, it may be all Flora's imagination, but we both thought you ought to know."

"You were right to tell me," the minister agreed. "I'll ask my wife to go up to see them. They've always looked upon her as a friend. Yesterday was a dreadful experience for every one."

His glance searched the young man's face.

"But I'm glad, at any rate, Will, that you and Flora have made up your quarrel —that some good has come out of all this horror."

Will Davis flushed under his tan.

"It was more my fault than hers, sir, really. I lost my temper at being teased. But I'd never been sure she cared for me."

The click of the gate made both men turn.

In the sunlight, a woman dressed in shabby black was coming toward them up the path. A crape veil hung from her bonnet, and between its folds her small face showed pinched and colorless.

"Who is it?" the minister asked under his breath.

"It's Hetty Ives," the young fellow answered. "But what has she rigged herself up that way for?"

She was advancing toward them with no sign of recognition, and the strangeness of her dress, the unnatural tension of her whole manner checked any word of greeting on their lips. Instinctively they drew aside to let her pass.

She walked up the steps, entered the hall and passed before the study door. Then she lifted her hand and knocked.

The minister went toward her.

"What is it, Hetty?" he asked.

If she heard his question she paid no attention to it. She waited a moment, listening with bent head, and then knocked a second time.

The minister touched her on the arm.

"What is it Hetty?" he repeated. "What have you come for?"

She turned to face him.

"I've come to be married to Nathan Swain," she said, and adjusted a fold of the crape veil upon her shoulder.

The sound of voices had drawn Mrs. Grant to the sitting-room doorway, but at sight of the black-clad figure standing there, she shrank back.

Hetty was speaking rapidly in a low voice, as if afraid she might be overheard.

"He came to me last night, and said I was to meet him here. It's been so many years, you know, I thought he had forgotten. But I promised I'd be ready, and I sat up to sew my wedding dress by candlelight. But now it's day—"

She covered her face with her hands.

"It frightens me to think he'll find me too much altered—that he'll expect smooth cheeks, fresh lips, now that my hair is gray! A woman grows old waiting!"

"Tell her, Arthur!" Mrs. Grant broke in. "Don't let her run on so!"

The minister laid his hand again on Hetty's arm.

"Have you forgotten what happened yesterday?" he asked.

She stared at him for a moment and then glanced back over her shoulder at the study door. A strange smile bent her lips.

"It's true, then," she whispered. "I only wanted to make sure—"

A look of exultation gleamed in her face, and suddenly a peal of crazy laughter echoed up the stair.

"Forgotten?" she cried. "No! How could you think that I'd forget? I said he came to me last night. He'll always come. It was the only way to bring him back. I killed him so he'd haunt me!"

And sobbing hysterically she crumpled up in a heap of shabby mourning at their feet.

When they had carried her to the old hair-cloth sofa in the sitting-room and had left her in Mrs. Grant's care, the minister and Will Davis came back to the hall.

"That's why her sister was so frightened last night," the young fellow whispered; it's not to be wondered at, shut up there alone in the house with her!"

"There's some story behind it all that I've never known," Mr. Grant answered. "You can live in a village like this all your life and then find out that you're still a stranger."

He stood on the door-step frowning into the sunlight.

"I want you to get Jim Amsden up here," he directed, "and have him bring Joel Benton along. I think he'll be willing to when you tell him what's happened. No one else in the village need know."

The young man still lingered.

"You didn't believe the story Joel told last night, sir. I could see that by watching you."

"There were too many reasons, Will, for not believing it. I thought at the time he was trying to shield some one."

"But why should he do that?"

"Perhaps we can judge better when we confront him with Hetty."

Will Davis moved off down the path and the minister stared after him. He knew that they had only a little time for the State officers would soon be here, and the reporters for the city papers. All the machinery of publicity would be set up in this remote corner of the world, and worn out as he was with sleeplessness and anxiety, he dreaded what was to come.

He was still standing on the step a few minutes later, when his wife came to the door.

"Hetty wants to talk with you," she whispered.

The little dressmaker was sitting huddled on the couch, her feet drawn up sidewise. Her hat and veil had been taken off and laid in a chair beside her. Two spots of color glowed in her cheeks and her eyes glittered.

"I've got to tell about it to you an' Mrs. Grant," she broke out, "now while I know what I'm saying. And you must both of you remember. Because there may come a

time—you see how it might be, with folks I wa'n't used to—in a court-room perhaps, sitting up there in front, with everybody staring at me—" She wrung her hands. "Oh, I don't want people should think I'm trying to hide anything!"

"You must forget about that part of it," the minister urged her, "and don't say any more now, unless you feel that we can help you."

"I don't dare wait!" she quavered. Then she looked helplessly around the room. "Ain't you got some sewing, Mrs. Grant? Nothing you're particular about, but just some work I could have in my hands. I'm so used to it—'twould kind of steady me."

With a glance at her husband Mrs. Grant turned to the table. Folded away at the back of the drawer was a white dressing-sack she was making. She took it out now and brought it with her sewing-basket to the sofa. Hetty produced a thimble from her pocket.

For a few minutes she bent her head over her work, and when she began speaking again her voice was steadier.

"I don't seem to remember much of what I said out there in the hall," she apologized, as she tried to thread her needle with shaking fingers. "I was all wrought up, and such times, if I can, I try to keep away from folks. It's the same with Lucy. There's that streak in the family 'way back, and you can't say we're hardly responsible. We've always known about it, and it's been kind of frightening to think of it hanging over us—coming nearer an' nearer. It's like great wings brushing across your face sometimes at night. When anything goes wrong, or worries us, we don't seem able to throw it off like other people. Sometimes when a customer I'm sewing for ain't satisfied, or work's slack and I can't get any—"

She fumbled blindly with the muslin in her lap, and her mouth quivered.

"Try to put all that out of your thoughts now, Hetty. It upsets you too much. Just tell us what happened yesterday. It's your duty to clear others."

"I'm trying to tell it just as it was. But to make you understand I've got to go back to a time before you an' Mrs. Grant come here. You'll see then how it started.

"Nathan Swain hadn't been living here very long. His folks come from over Wardsboro way and they had money. I was twenty, an' Lucy was a year an' a half younger. We sang in the choir an' went round some. I don't suppose you'd ever believe it now, but we was both of us kind of pretty. Lucy kept her looks longer than I did, because hard work and worrying about how to get along ages any one terrible. Nathan Swain got into the habit of coming to our house. At first we couldn't make out which one of us he fancied, but after a while 'twas plain enough. Of course I was flattered. Any girl would be. He was a cut above everybody else in the village. He'd traveled, and he was beginning to be looked up to. I thought there wa'n't nobody like him. I gave him my whole heart. And then—"

CHAPTER VI.

THE SICKLE OF FATE.

SHE sat staring before her while the tears trickled down her cheeks.

"And then he stopped coming! He never even told me why. It wa'n't till long after that I found out. You see, his folks not living here, he hadn't known about that queer streak in our family 'way back. And somebody told him. I found out who 'twas. 'Twas Addie Winslow—Flora's mother. Addie Pierce she was then. She wrote him a letter without signing her name, and made things out a good deal worse than they was. She'd never liked the idea of his noticing us. I don't know what she hoped—she wa'n't married then. But it almost killed me.

"I had to keep up, because there was Lucy to look after. She wa'n't very strong. She'd always have to be taken care of, and when father died we were left with just the house. There wa'n't hardly any money—an' two of us so. I kept tellin' myself I'd get over feeling it in time. Nathan couldn't have cared for me much—I seen that clear enough. He went on scheming to get richer, an' I worked out round by the day.

"Addie married a year or two later, and I made her wedding clothes. She didn't

dream that I knew what she'd done. I always kept friendly, because that was the only way I could think of to harm her. You see, she didn't have taste about things, and she let me choose colors and patterns. So I picked out what would be unbecoming. She was short-waisted for one thing, an' I made her look shorter."

A vindictive light flushed in her eyes.

"Flora's been to me with her things, too, lately, and for her I always done the best I knew. She wa'n't to blame for her mother's wickedness. About two weeks ago she brought me silk enough for a new dress, and when I see how particular she was about it, of course I kind of guessed. I knew she'd been going with Will Davis, and I thought she was getting her wedding things. I sat up nights making it just the way she wanted it, and of course I didn't ask any questions—even though once, when I was fitting her, I looked up and she was crying. But I never dreamed till yesterday—"

She paused.

In the silence they had heard the tramp of feet on the stone step at the rear of the house. Men were entering the kitchen, and their shadows obliterated the patch of sunlight on the floor.

"What's that?" Hetty screamed, starting up. "Who's out there? Oh, Mr. Grant, they ain't come for me already?"

The constable's figure loomed in the doorway. Joel Benton and Will Davis were behind him, and two of the selectmen.

Hetty spoke shrilly.

"What's Joel come for?"

"I took him into custody last night," Jim Amsden retorted, "because he confessed, here in this room, to the murder. I hear there's a different story now?"

Hetty took a swift step forward.

"Joel said that? Why, you didn't believe 'twas him, did you? You that have known him all his life. You ought to have guessed he was only trying to save somebody else. You let him go; don't you lay a hand on him! I'm owning to the murder!"

Joel Benton edged past the constable. He looked shrunken and exhausted in the morning light. His hair was uncombed and his face was drawn with sleeplessness, but when he spoke he kept his voice steady. Its soothing tone was meant for Hetty's ear, but his words were for the others in the room.

"You oughtn't to pay any attention to what she says, when she's wrought up so. You ought to see she ain't responsible. I told you how it was last night here, and if you'd listen to me—"

His voice trailed off gradually into silence and he stood looking toward the hall.

The others turned to follow his glance.

Mrs. Winslow had appeared in the doorway. She was steadying herself with one hand against the wall, while the other hand clutched at the neck of her dress. Her eyes were staring.

"I've been looking for Hetty everywhere," she gasped, "and I've been for the doctor. He's up there now. But it's too late for him to do anything. Some one tell Hetty."

"*Lucy?*"

The figure of the little dressmaker stood immovable, as if some thought had fixed it into stone. Only the lips moved.

"I oughtn't to have left her!" she whispered.

They noticed that she asked no other question, but stared straight before her at some picture fear had printed on her brain—some picture, perhaps, which had always been there.

Mrs. Winslow peered from face to face.

"I went over there just now to find Hetty and pay her for making that wedding dress. Didn't any one come to the door, so I walked in. It seemed dreadful still, but I knew Lucy must be somewhere around, so I called and called. Finally I went upstairs, because sometimes she sits up there alone in her room. She was kneeling there by the window with her head on the sill, and when I spoke to her she didn't answer. I see a tumbler on the light-stand—"

She paused, shuddering.

For a moment no one spoke. Then Joel Benton stepped forward.

"Our lies weren't any use, Hetty," he said; "yours no more than mine."

She covered her face with her hands and dropped down upon the sofa. The consta-

ble glanced from one to the other in a dubious manner.

"We haven't got at the truth here yet," he said roughly. "I've sensed that all along. But it's time both of you owned up now to what you know. More lying won't help you."

Joel turned to face him.

"Maybe 'twas foolish—what we did—but we weren't either of us thinking much about ourselves, and the way it happened there wa'n't any chance for us to plan together."

He glanced at Hetty.

"We're willing to tell you everything. But Hetty knows parts of the story, I don't, and she'll have to piece it out after I'm through. It wasn't all lies. What I said about hating Nathan Swain was true enough, and about the harm he'd done me. But it wasn't true about the murder. I hadn't any idea at first—any more than the rest of you—who killed him. You see, when I first heard his voice in the study, I went round to the back of the house to work, so as to be out of the way of what didn't concern me, and I stayed there puttering. I saw Mr. Grant come out the kitchen door and go down through the garden to speak to his wife. Later I got a drink at the well. I took my time. It had been a hot day, and I poured water over my head and hands, standing there with my back to the house. I was trying to tidy up, because I was waiting for Hetty. I knew she was sewing up-stairs, and when she came out I was planning to walk along home with her.

"By and by Mr. Grant spoke to me. He wanted me to act as a witness. I didn't suspect what it was for—I thought maybe it was a will leaving money to the church, and I told him he'd have to get somebody else, for I'd seen too much of Nathan Swain and his villainy. But when I heard the minister's voice calling to me from the house, I knew something terrible had happened. I ran back with him to the study.

"For about half an hour after that, I guess, I saw no more than the rest of you did. Then, with so many folks around, I thought I'd better gather up my belongings. They were scattered through the yard. I got my whetstone and my hat, and my vest that had my watch in it. But I couldn't find my sickle. I thought I remembered leaving it by the back door-step, but I wa'n't sure, and I kept hunting.

"At last I see Hetty come out the back way. She had her apron over her head, and she was carrying a roll of work in her hand. I started walking along beside her. We hadn't gone but a few steps when I realized that *it wasn't Hetty I was walking with!* It was Lucy. She was wearing Hetty's dress. They don't look so much alike, maybe, but they're the same height, and, being sisters, there's always been a resemblance. I thought I was out of my mind at first. Then a dreadful suspicion come to me; I knew, without asking a question, who it was that was guilty. Lucy had begun sobbing and talking to herself, when we got out of range of the house, and I let her run on, for, of course, she was safe with me. I was the only one that knew the old story.

"She'd been engaged to Nathan Swain when she was a girl, and his leaving her without a word drove her almost crazy. If it hadn't been that Hetty here took care of her—gave up her life to her—she'd have been put in the asylum years ago. It's what Hetty has fought against all along, and it's the reason why she and I could never marry. We had to pretend we didn't care, because if Lucy had thought she was a burden to any one she'd have got to brooding over it, and then when she was in one of her moods, she'd have done—what she's done to-day. She's always had times when she acted queer enough to frighten you, and if Hetty came down here this morning and took on before folks—the way Will Davis tells—she was only copying word for word what she's probably heard her sister say."

He waited for a minute, looking straight at the minister, and then he went on speaking more rapidly.

"I questioned Lucy last night, while I was walking home with her, and it didn't take me long to get the whole story. It seems she'd helped Hetty sew on Flora's dress, and, of course, they'd both surmised that it was bought for a wedding. They talked about it, she and Hetty, for days, she said. Then yesterday, while Lucy was

home there alone up in her room, she saw Flora walk down the street. She was wearing the dress that they had made, and carrying her roses. Some one was waiting for her at the parsonage gate. Lucy thought first 'twas Will Davis, but as they turned up the path together, she saw it was Nathan Swain.

"I guess from that moment she wasn't responsible. She talked to me, as if it was years ago, and she'd found out he was leaving her for somebody else. It seemed as if she couldn't bear it. She said the next thing she knew she was around behind the houses, creeping along. She saw Mr. Grant go out to the garden and after that I came to the well. She kept hidden until my back was turned. She could see the kitchen door here to the parsonage was open, and on the step, where I'd put it lay my sickle. She hadn't thought much about why she had come until she saw that. But she picked it up as she crept into the house. Listening here in the sitting-room, she could hear Flora crying. She was begging Nathan Swain to let her go. When he answered he kept his voice low, but he was angry, and they came out to the hall. A minute later the front door opened and Flora ran out.

"Lucy waited until she heard footsteps again in the study. Then she tiptoed across the hall. Nathan Swain was kneeling on the hearth-rug with his back to the door, gathering up some of the jewelry that was scattered on the carpet. She crept up behind him so silently that he didn't turn—and probably he never knew. That was all she remembered, she said, until afterward, when she was coming out of the study. She saw a bouquet of roses in her path. She snatched it up and tore it to pieces, and trampled the blossoms under her feet. Then she walked up-stairs to Hetty."

CHAPTER VII.

PAST AND PRESENT.

AS Joel finished speaking he turned his eyes toward the huddled figure on the couch. No one prompted her, but after a moment Hetty took up the story brokenly.

"I'd been sewing up-stairs in the room over the kitchen all the afternoon, hurrying to finish a dress for Mrs. Grant. When the knocker sounded I didn't pay any attention, because there are folks coming in all times of the day to see the minister. But it wasn't long before I heard him go through the garden, and a little later I heard Will Davis drive by. I knew then I'd have to sew fast, for it must be six o'clock, and I wa'n't quite finished. When I looked out the west window again, I happened to see Mrs. Winslow coming down the street. She was hurrying, and I thought she must have forgotten something at the store for supper.

"I was just beginning to pull out the last of the basting-threads when there were steps outside in the hall. I looked up and there was Lucy. She stood in the doorway, looking dreadful. She had something wrapped in her skirt, and the front of her dress was all blood. 'I've killed him!' she gasped, and she held out the sickle.

"I ran to get it away from her. I thought she didn't know what she was saying. But there was all that blood. 'He's lying down there in the study,' she whispered. 'Put your arms around me, Hetty, I've suffered all I can.'

"It seemed as if the world came crashing down upon me. But I had to try to think, for maybe we only had a minute. I dragged her along the hall to the attic door by Mrs. Grant's bedroom. 'You go up there and hide,' I says. 'I'll come to you quick as I can.' She's always done everything I told her to, and she didn't ask any questions. When I'd shut the garret door, I see I still held the sickle. I carried it through Mrs. Grant's bedroom and raised the screen in the west window. Then I threw it as far as I could into the grass that wa'n't cut yet.

"Back in the kitchen bedroom again I found I'd got blood all over my apron. I took it off and poured some water on it from the pitcher to wash my hands. Then I rolled it up and hid it over there back of the bureau. I tied on a clean apron of Mrs. Grant's that I found in the clothes-basket, and I turned over the rag-rug by the door where Lucy had been standing. There wa'n't time to wipe up the blood-drops in the hall, but it was twilight, and when Mrs.

Grant came up the back stairs, she didn't notice anything. I pretended I was getting my sewing together, though I was shaking so I couldn't hold on to anything. 'Twa'n't more than a minute before we heard Mr. Grant call out, and we both went down."

Joel Benton looked at the minister.

"That's why I couldn't find my sickle. I was hunting for it in the back yard when Mrs. Winslow and Flora came round there with you. Mrs. Winslow stepped up to me, and asked me not to say anything about Flora's having been down here with Nathan Swain. She thought you and I were the only ones who had seen them, and if she could count on our keeping quiet about it, then other folks need never know."

The constable interrupted him.

"But if you couldn't find your own sickle, where did you get the one you gave me?"

"That's the one from up in the graveyard," Joel answered; "I fetched it after I had taken Lucy home. I promised her I'd think of some way to get Hetty out of the house during the evening. But I didn't tell her what I meant to do."

For the first time his glance was lowered. He spoke hesitatingly.

"My own mind was made up, though. My life hasn't amounted to much. There wasn't anything left for me to look forward to, and if by coming down here and giving myself up I could help Hetty, why, that was what I was glad to do. I knew she'd never have let me take *her* place, but perhaps to save Lucy—"

The figure of the little dressmaker struggled up from the couch.

"I couldn't have stood that any better," she sobbed; "although at first just trying to save Lucy was all I could seem to think of. I told Mrs. Grant I was going home, and then, watching my chance, I crept up to the attic where Lucy was hiding. I made her put on my dress and a clear apron, and I got some things for myself out of an old trunk back under the eaves. Looking out the attic window I could see there wasn't any one but Joel round behind the house. All the neighbors were in the front yard. So I told Lucy to go down the back stairs and out through the kitchen, with her apron over her head and carrying my roll of work—pretending she was me. It was her one chance, for I thought any minute they might start in to search the house. From the window I saw Joel start to walk along beside her, but I knew that with him she was just as safe as she would have been with me.

"I thought maybe after dark, wrapped up queer as I was, I could get away. So I waited. Every little while there were footsteps and voices. Finally along in the evening folks must have gone, for the house was quiet. But it wasn't until later, when I heard Mr. and Mrs. Grant talking in their bedroom, that I dared risk creeping down.

Outside their door, in the upper hall, I listened for a minute, and I heard the minister explaining to his wife why it couldn't be that Joel was guilty. I began to understand at last what had happened. Joel had given himself up, and that was why they hadn't searched any further. I guess I made some sound then, for Mrs. Grant was frightened, and the minister came out. But I'd got to the head of the stairs by that time, and I crept down without his seeing me. It was so dark in the lower hall that at first I couldn't find the right door.

"When I got home there was Lucy, almost beside herself with fear. She kept clinging to me and begging me not to tell folks what she had done. I see then for the first time that she was out of her mind, for she'd got to thinking, just as Joel says, that it was years ago, and that Nathan Swain was to have married her. It took me hours to get her quieted, and at last I had to give her one of those powders that the doctor left.

"When she'd fallen asleep, I sat up all night in the rocking chair in the kitchen trying to plan out what I'd do. I knew I'd have to free Joel, and there was only one way of doing that—I'd have to take his place, because I couldn't give up my own sister; all her life she's trusted me. I didn't have any one to turn to—there wasn't hardly any time. I felt numb, I was so frightened. But toward morning it came to me: why not pretend I was the same way Lucy was? Without me to take

care of her, she'd have to be put in the asylum, so if I could go through with it and make folks believe I was out of my mind, too, I wouldn't be sent to prison; there wouldn't even be a trial. I'd be put where Lucy was. We'd be together there, and perhaps they 'd let me go on caring for her and comforting her as long as she needed me. That was what I promised—years ago—"

At some memory of that promise, and of all the years through which it had been kept, sobs rose in her throat, choking her voice and blinding her eyes with tears. She put out her hands gropingly and turned in an uncertain manner, tottering feebly away.

But Joel Benton had stepped forward. The erectness of his figure, the light in his eyes made him seem for a moment a younger man. He put his hand with boyish awkwardness on Hetty's shoulder, and as she turned toward him, sobbing, he drew her into the circle of his arms, holding her close and putting his cheek down against her hair.

"You've kept your promise, Hetty," he whispered; "you've given up everything to keep it. And I've stood by and waited while we both grew old. But now that it's over, and Lucy's past needing you, there ain't anything in the world to keep us apart. For the rest of your life, Hetty, you're going to have some one to take care of *you!*"

(The end.)

Three Days of It

by

Chauncey C. Hotchkiss

"GOOD morning, Mr. Kent."

I was looking at some opals in a jeweler's window on Maiden Lane when I heard my name called. I glanced up and saw Michael Clancy at my side. Clancy is a "plain-clothes" man attached to the Central Office. I always liked Clancy; he is a gentleman by instinct if not by education, and a bit of a philosopher in addition.

"See anything there you want?" he asked pleasantly, as I returned his salutation and shook hands with him. "No," I said. "There's nothing uncommon in the lot. What are you doing down here?"

"Special detail," he answered. "Only cruising around to see if any crooks have got below the dead-line. I heard that 'Beau' Kelly had been seen near the City Hall. He's been at another job. I'd like to take him in."

I wasn't interested in Beau Kelly; I'd never heard of him. "Had lunch?" I asked; for just then St. Paul's boomed twelve.

"No."

"Then I'll take you in. You are under arrest. Come ahead."

He laughingly agreed, and before many minutes we were seated together at a little table in my down-town lunch club. Clancy glanced from the high window which commanded a sweeping view of river and bay. The sight was not novel to him but the elegance of the club fittings was, no doubt, for he looked around in open admiration. Tossing off the cocktail the waiter brought, he smiled. "Fine!" he exclaimed. "I wish I had your habit, Mr. Kent."

"My habit?"

"Yes, sir; the habit of being rich; it's just a habit."

"I don't think I understand."

"Well, that's because you haven't analyzed, like I have. Look here, sir. Most everything is habit. One practises a business or profession until it becomes almost automatic. I'm a thief taker from acquired habit. From habit I can tell a crook when you might take him for a saint. See? You always have been rich; you always will be because you don't change your ways. I've got the habit of being poor. Damned hard habit to break, believe me."

"But a rich man may meet with reverses, Clancy," I began, rather struck by the originality of his idea.

"Sure thing. We sometimes break a habit by strength, but many people never get ahead. It isn't luck. They are often bright, but they're cursed with the habit of failure. Take Beau Kelly, for instance."

"What of him?" I asked.

"Well, Beau Kelly's a crook. He came of good family, but he inherited the habit of failure. Almost graduated from high school—but failed. Got into college somehow, and got out just short of graduation. Failed again. Took to the stage and failed in six months. Took to commercial life. Landed a position in a jewelry-store. Went out with a lot of stuff that didn't belong to him, but as the proprietor was a philanthropist—from habit—and got back most of the loot, he didn't prosecute.

"Then Beau married. In two months his wife was wise to him and skipped, taking with her a diamond ring that Kelly had forgotten to return to his former boss. Failure again. Now he works the one habit he has acquired, but he's a failure at that. He's a jewel thief, well educated, daring, debonair, dangerous; but, sir, he's not complete in anything. He's got the habit of failing, and now he's 'way down.

"There you are, sir. Think it over. Most every thing is habit, from the cradle to the grave—either inherited or acquired. I could talk on that line for a week."

But Clancy is no bore; he knows when he has said enough. "Going away this summer?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Yes," I said, "but I haven't made up my mind as to where. It's a toss-up between the Northwest and the Maine woods."

"Found any new gems lately?" Clancy knows I'm a collector of stones, especially of opals.

"Yes, several."

"Going to leave them in your house?"

"No."

"Wise guy!" said Clancy.

We finished lunch. When I paid my bill I found I had just forty dollars with me, and after bidding my guest good-by I luckily went to the bank and drew five hundred. Then I took a taxi and went home. I mean that I went to my house, for "home" is hardly the word to use, as I am a bachelor of forty and live alone, so far as a family is concerned. James, my butler, a ministerial-looking chap, brought me a bunch of unimportant letters, and after reading them I went to my regular club, dined, and passed the evening.

It was midnight when I got back to my house, bored to death, as only one without a definite object in life can be bored. James, the unsmiling, looked as if he wished I'd go to bed, but I wasn't in the mood, so, after placing the humidor within reach, he retired to his post in the front hall.

I had just finished a cigar and a vapid story in a high-priced magazine when the front-door bell rang and a moment later I was surprised to see Dick Durand fairly rush into the room. Dick is the captain of a regular coast liner, but I don't care to mention the name of the company. I hadn't seen him for a month. He was not in uniform, but that he was mightily upset was

plain enough to me, who know him better than most men know their brothers.

"Thank Heaven, I've found you!" he exclaimed, fairly jumping at me. "You're my last chance!"

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

"There's no end of it unless you help me out," he returned, sinking into a chair.

"Money?"

"No. Listen. Savidge is in a bad hole, and has put me into another. I ought to have thought of his weakness. After looking for you and not finding you, he and I went for a short turn on the Great White Way. Well, never mind details. Billy is blind drunk—insensibly drunk—never mind where he got it—and can't move. He fell and has a fearful pair of black eyes—and the ship sails at six o'clock—in just five hours. You know what that means."

I did know. Dr. Billy Savidge, an old collegemate, was the surgeon of the liner Orion. That is not her name, but I am giving no true names for reasons which will become obvious.

"What are you going to do?" I asked, mightily interested. The conditions were serious; for to have it known that the ship's doctor was beastly intoxicated on the eve of a voyage would ruin him.

"Do!" said Durand. "There is only one thing to do. I can't get a substitute doctor at this late hour, and I can't sail without one. To confess to my share in getting Billy into his condition would break me. I would lose both position and license. You shake a free foot. You've got to fake it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you've got to take Billy's place on the way down."

I threw up my hands. "What!" I shouted.

"Wait," he said. "I thought it all out before I came to you. It's an easy thing. I got him to his home—I arranged it with his wife. He'll be all right by to-morrow night, and he'll join the vessel at Savannah, going by rail, and no one will be the wiser. By Heaven, Kent! Your taking his place is the only thing that can save us."

"Good Lord, but I'm no doctor," I returned. "I know nothing of medicine."

"Suppose — nothing," interrupted Durand. "You won't have a thing to do but wear Billy's uniform and look wise. Nothing ever happens but sea-sickness, and the steward takes care of most of the cases—gives them pickled onions and makes them lie on their backs. But the law says I must have a doctor aboard. Can't you see?"

"I see," I said, with the hesitation that told me I was lost, for by the way Durand put it I could not discover how I was to suffer. Beside, the thing had the smack of adventure, and the more I thought of it the more it appealed.

Durand was watching my face. "You'll go?"

"I suppose so," I said. "For Billy's sake. As for you, you ought to be cashiered for leading him astray."

"Curse me all you want to," he replied, his anxious expression relaxing. "Pack up and let's be off. I've got to be aboard by four o'clock, when the United States mail arrives."

"Then there's plenty of time for a cigar—and I want to catch my breath," I returned, shoving the humidor over to him. "I'll have James slip some clothes into a steamer trunk and call a taxi. How many passengers have you?"

"We're flying light this trip," said Durand, nervously puffing on his cigar. "There's only one name I know. Mlle. Zingaria. She's an actress of uncertain age. Always sails with me at this time of year. Won't go by rail because she can't show off her dresses and jewelry, I fancy. Makes a holy show of herself. But she won't bother you. Speaking of jewels—you had better bring your collection aboard and let me lock them up."

"I don't have to, Dick. They've been in safe deposit for three days."

"So much the better. Get your packing under way. Pass the word for your man. Is he a divine in disguise? He looks it. Say, I'm nervous until I get you aboard."

I laughed and called James, directed him what to pack, and to summon a taxi as soon as finished. I then informed him I was about to leave town for a few days, an unnecessary precaution, as he had probably

heard every word that had passed between Durand and me. I was not afraid, for he had come to me highly recommended in a letter from an old friend. As a gentleman's gentleman he was all that could be asked. And in this case he was as efficient as a battle-ship, for in less than an hour from the time Durand entered the house the captain and I were in a taxi and bound for the Orion. Before the hour had passed far into a second I was inspecting the doctor's cabin on board the steamer.

Savidge's room was near the captain's and opened into the great saloon, down the center of which ran a long table. On either side of the saloon were smaller cabins for passengers. I was rather impressed by the size and fittings of my apartment. The locker was full of Billy's clothes, and his medicine-chest full of medicines, the names of which meant little or nothing to me. When Durand had introduced me to the purser and one or two officers as Dr. Kent, substituting for Dr. Savidge, I felt like the fraud I was; then he had taken me to my room.

"Better get into Billy's uniform; it 'll just about fit you," he remarked. "Will see you later." And off he went to his duties.

I suppose there was the usual bustle on deck when we started, but I did not take part in it, feeling too much like a thief to show myself in my borrowed plumes, and we were well down the bay by breakfast-time. The captain was not present at that meal, as he could not leave the deck until the pilot was dropped off the Hook.

The table was half filled, and as I looked down the line of passengers I was satisfied to note that they all appeared healthy and probably would not need the services of a physician. I picked out Mlle. Zingaria easily enough. She came sailing from a room about half-way down the saloon and on the same side as my own—a woman of at least forty-five, slight, rather overdressed, with delicately tinted cheeks, a mass of blond hair, and an air of sprightliness that could have deceived no one. The earmarks of an actress who resented advancing years was plain enough to any man of the world.

The morning passed without event. After lunch I went on deck for air. The Jersey coast was a blue cloud in the distance, the sky overcast and the atmosphere damp. Having had no sleep the night before and there being nothing novel to me in a sea trip, I returned to my room to take a nap. Throwing off my coat, or Billy's, I was about to stretch myself on the bed when there came a knock at my door. "Great Heaven! A patient already!" I ejaculated, and called a: "Come in."

The man who entered surprised me by his appearance. He was shabbily dressed in an old brown sweater and dark trousers, while his soiled shirt-band was collarless. His dirty face was rather attractive despite a short, ragged beard, and his brown hair was naturally wavy. In his hand he carried a dilapidated cloth cap. I looked at him in amazement, thinking him one of the crew, and wondered how he had managed to get into the saloon.

"What is it?" I asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

The man closed the door gently and advanced into the room. "You are Dr. Kent?"

"Yes. Who are you? You are no passenger."

"Do you confine your services to passengers, doctor?" he asked, in an easy, refined voice. "However, I am a passenger—a trifle late in arriving. Made my début aboard through the coal-hatch."

"You mean you are a common stowaway?" I demanded severely.

"It is to be regretted, doctor," he returned, with the greatest sang froid, as he seated himself on a locker, "that euphemism, as practised in the days of Queen Elizabeth, and perhaps carried to excess at that period, is not more in vogue at present. A stow-away? Hardly, sir, since I am not stowed away. Rather, a gentleman in misfortune who, under stress, has been obliged to act in an unconventional manner."

"What the devil—"

"Don't doctor, don't!" he interrupted. "Let us be quite frank and friendly. You'll admit that a coal-bunker is not a comfortable abode for a gentleman—let alone the danger of being pierced by a pickax in the hands of a common coal-passer. One mo-

ment, please! I think we agree on that, and we will agree that an empty stomach is not on the list as one of life's pleasures. You now have a sketchy outline of my circumstances."

Though I was vexed at the man for coming to me I could not help noticing his uncommon use of language and his general refinement of bearing. "What is your name, sir?" I demanded.

"Mr. Percy Dare, doctor. Sorry I haven't a card handy."

"You are well named," I returned, becoming angry at the fellow's easy impudence. "The purser is the one who will attend to your case."

"Quite right, doctor. I expect to see the purser almost at once. Ah! Were you going to call the steward?"

"Yes," I said; for I was about to push the electric button in the bulkhead.

"Don't do it, doctor — for your own sake."

"What in the devil do you mean, sir?" I demanded. "Who are you? You certainly are not what you seem to be."

"Neither are you," he replied, with a smile that showed his fine teeth.

The deuce of a man's conscience is that it is forever at his elbow. I think I must have turned pale.

"There, doctor—there!" he went on, in a soothing tone. "You have no reason to be alarmed; your secret is safe in this repository." He struck his chest lightly. "No, doctor—no! I wouldn't," he added, as I stepped toward the door, for my first impulse was to see Durand. "It would be the height of folly, doctor. The captain would be ruined, your friend Dr. Savidge would be ruined, and the law deals somewhat sternly with a layman posing as a physician. You wouldn't have the truth exposed—now, would you?"

I halted as abruptly as if I had run against a stone wall, and looked aghast at my easy, softly speaking visitor. "How—how did you know?" I gasped.

"Of that, later," he replied blandly. "At present my necessities are of prevailing importance. With one hundred dollars I could pay my passage, have a trifle left for working capital, and acquire quarters more befitting my station than a coal-bunker. The sum involved is trivial to one of your wealth, doctor." He accentuated the title.

"I'll give you the money if you will hold your tongue."

"Am I ever indiscreet, doctor? No. A friend is a friend, unless he betrays me. But, beyond the money, doctor—you would hardly have me appear before the purser in my present habiliments. It might cause awkward questions, and more than likely bring out a fact you would not care to have exposed. You have clothing to spare. We are about of a size. The loan of a razor, a clean shirt, collars, a necktie, and the *et cetera* of a gentleman's toilet. Eh?"

I groaned inwardly, if not aloud. "You have nerve, sir!" I broke out.

"No, doctor; not nerve. Poise is the proper word—poise—always an attribute of the refined! Have I been brutal? No—only mildly argumentative and, I trust, convincing. I might have placed my knowledge at a much higher figure, but I am nothing if not considerate."

"You are a damned rascal!" I exclaimed. "You have got me down. Have your way. I only wish to know how you discovered the—"

"Facts? Quite so, doctor. You have consented to do me a favor; perhaps I will reciprocate later. Am I plain?"

"You are too damned plain!" I blurted out. "For God's sake get into what you need and then vamoose."

But he was in no hurry. When I opened my trunk he chose a light suit of checks, a fine silk shirt, three collars, an expensive necktie, a gold scarf-pin, and a pair of white sneakers. Then, without asking my consent, but with a profusion of elegantly worded apologies, he proceeded to make his toilet, even using my best razor, while I sat looking on, not daring to leave him alone and not daring to protest.

At length he stood before me completely metamorphosed, and was really a fine-looking man of about thirty-six, his face adorned with a dainty mustache and imperial; and he possessed the easy carriage of one who was in the habit of being well dressed. Opening my hat-box, he selected a silk lounging cap to match the suit, and put it

on. From head to foot he appeared to be a prosperous gentleman. I could have brained him.

"And now for the little loan, doctor."

I gave him the money and he flecked a scented handkerchief at me as he opened the door. "I shall not forget your generosity, doctor. My discarded wardrobe is probably offensive to your fastidious eye. I will remove it as soon as I complete arrangements with the purser. Ta-ta!"

I was too angry to make any return; I was too angry even to think clearly, but I still possessed sense enough to determine not to tell Durand of my hold-up. The absolute loss in money and clothing was really as nothing to me, but there was no telling what Dick Durand would do, if he knew. He was quick tempered and would be apt to make a mess of the whole business by going hammer and tongs for Mr. Dare, thereby ruining himself and Billy Savidge, to say nothing of Mr. Henry Kent.

For a time I sat like one stunned; then my eye fell on the old duds which my late visitor had methodically piled on the locker. I wished no one to see them, and was about to throw a newspaper over the rags when I caught sight of the butt of a pistol protruding from the pocket of the shabby trousers. I woke up then.

Drawing out the weapon, I found it to be a small automatic and it was evidence that Mr. Dare was no common stow-away, though as for the pistol, he would hardly dare use it while aboard the Orion, unless driven into a corner. And I was sure that I would not be the one to drive him.

My impulse was to hide the thing, but the idea was foolish, and I did better. I simply emptied the magazine and threw the cartridges from my port and into the sea. Then I carefully replaced the weapon.

That done, I felt a trifle more comfortable, but my nerves were on edge and the room seemed to suffocate me. I went on deck. The steamer was going along at a great rate, but the weather was not improving; the horizon had disappeared, and the face of the ocean was a series of swells which I fancied would soon test the stomachs of most of the passengers. One of the officers met me as I went aft. "We're in for a fog off the capes, doctor," he said, as he went by.

"I shouldn't wonder," I returned. I felt for a cigar, and then remembered I had left my cigar-case in my own coat. I went down for it and as I opened my room door there stood Mr. Percy Dare. He had gathered his old clothes on his arm, and by the way the trousers dangled I knew the pistol had been transfered to his person. "Ah, doctor," he said, with insulting good humor, "I find we are to be close neighbors. I have been assigned to the room next to yours. Sorry the voyage is to be so short—barely three days. I really would like to cultivate your acquaintance. By the bye, have you a cigar to spare?"

"Damn your impudence—"

"Not quite so loud, doctor," he returned, helping himself from the case I thrust toward him, "you must not forget these rooms have lattaced transomes. Thanks! You are curious, no doubt, to know how the purser received me. Very natural! Well, everything ended beautifully. I apologized for my irregularity in coming aboard. Was going South. At the last moment decided to take a steamer—cars too hot, you know. Arranged to meet my valet aboard with tickets and luggage. Detained on urgent business. Arrived late. No valet. Much upset at very awkward situation, but must see it through. Cursed valet and handed out your money."

"And the fool passed you?"

"Well, doctor, to be frank, he was inclined to be a trifle suspicious regarding my veracity, but when I mentioned you as a friend who would vouch for me things went on grease."

He laughed in my face. I ground my teeth, but could say nothing. When he left me I found but one comfort in the situation: the voyage would be short; in a little over two days I would be rid of him.

At supper that evening Mr. Dare showed up smiling. He certainly cut a fine figure and bore himself like a gentleman, but as he was not seated near me I breathed freely. The ship's motion, which was increasing, had already thinned the table, but there were still a dozen of both sexes and Dare chatted familiarly with his neighbor until

Mlle. Zingaria swept from her room, and then I saw my unwelcome visitor start and open wide his blue eyes.

And well he might have done, for the lady ran true to Durand's description of her. She was elaborately dressed—or overdressed—in a low-cut gown of some rich stuff. Her frizzed blond hair was piled high, and on her throat glistened a diamond necklace with a sun-burst pendant—a matter costing at least fifteen thousand dollars. It was certainly a stunning piece of jewelry, but only execrable taste would permit a lady to wear such a thing on such an occasion. On her bare arms were bracelets and her fingers were loaded with gems.

I marked the astonished looks of the few women at the table, and the icy gleam of the stones seemed to chill even Mr. Percy Dare, for he ceased his chatter. Durand, at the head of the table, gave the actress one glance, then turned to me.

"Ever see such a gross exhibition?" he said, sotto voice. "Come into my room at about ten and we'll have a cigar." I nodded. The actress made a few remarks, but little was said after her advent, though perhaps that was not the real reason. The roll of the vessel had become distressing, and even as we sat there three passengers hurriedly left the table. To my surprise and secret delight Mr. Percy Dare was one of them. Evidently he was not a good sailor, and he went directly to his room. Mlle. Zingaria did not turn a hair of her blonde wig.

After supper I went out, but not to the upper deck. We had not waited to reach the Virginia capes before encountering fog; it had already arrived but was not yet dangerously thick. There was nothing to see but the darkness, nothing to hear but the creaking of timbers and the roaring crash of water as the steamer's bow sheared through the swells. The air was raw and unpleasant.

At a little after ten I went to Captain Durand's cabin. "It's going to be an uncomfortable night, old man," he said, pushing a box of cigars toward me. "Don't think I'll turn in unless it clears. By the bye, did you ever see such a figure as the Zingaria cut? It strikes me that she may have a purpose in making such an ass of herself—something more than a desire for mere admiration or envy."

"She's a fool," I observed.

"Doubtless. Getting used to your professional position?" He laughed. "Narrow squeak for Billy, hey? I told you you'd have no trouble."

I bit my tongue to keep from letting out an account of what had happened. "All the same I'll be mighty glad when Billy comes aboard at Savannah," I returned, and shifted the subject. We talked or remained silent, as only congenial souls may do without a feeling of constraint. The vessel rolled, the woodwork creaked.

I was beginning to feel drowsy, being shy of sleep, and was just finishing a second cigar when eight bells, or midnight, was struck on deck. I said a good night to Durand and had just got to my feet when from the saloon there came a scream—an ear-piercing scream—and it was from a woman.

Though I moved quickly Durand had the door open before I could get to it. The saloon was no longer brilliantly illuminated, there now being but two night lights, one at either end of the long room.

At first glance there seemed nothing to account for the cry, for the saloon was empty, but we had not stood there three seconds when the door of Mlle. Zingaria's room was thrown open and a man rushed out. He took one glance at us; then turning, fled down the apartment.

The light was too dim for me to catch his features, though in an instant I knew him. I knew the old brown sweater, the dark trousers, and the rag of a cap. He was Mr. Percy Dare in his old clothes. Hardly had he vanished through the after door leading to the main deck, or waist of the vessel, when Mlle. Zingaria appeared. She was wigless now, but otherwise dressed, having changed her costume for a kimono. "My diamonds! My diamonds!" she moaned.

Her words cleared the situation. Durand ripped out an oath and started after the fugitive, I behind him, and together we reached the main deck. I caught sight of the shadowy figure of the running man as

he seemed to slide under the bridge, but the fog was too thick to see him clearly. "Stop that fellow!" shouted Durand as the fugitive disappeared in the muck.

There came an answering cry from somewhere forward, and an officer appeared.

"What's the trouble, sir," he asked, saluting the captain.

"A thief, Mr. Peck. Ran from the saloon. Was in a passenger's room. Looked like one of the crew," panted Durand, and the words were hardly out of his mouth when a deck-hand appeared.

"I saw him, sir," he cried excitedly. "When I heard the hail I tried to stop him, but he gave me a clip on the jaw as he passed, then he leaped to the stabbard bulwark an' went up the shrouds like a monkey, sir. He's aloft on the foremast now, sir."

"Good!" exclaimed Durand. "We have him treed! Mr. Peck, station men at the port and starboard riggings and pass the word for the bosun." He drew me aside. "Kent, will you go to my room and get my revolver? You'll find it under my pillow. Hurry."

I did hurry, but I did not go back through the saloon, not wanting to be tackled by the Zingaria. As I ran along the promenade toward the side passage near my room I saw that matters were rapidly coming to a head and that with the capture of Mr. Dare the whole matter of my false position would come out, Durand, with myself being disgraced.

It may be argued that no one would believe any statement as made by a thief, but he could easily substantiate my share in the deception by producing my clothes. However, I let all consideration of policy go with the wind, determined to do my duty, but I will admit that I wished I was in a position to keep Dare's mouth shut, even at the price of protecting him.

All this, and more, flashed through my mind as I ran. Finding the revolver, I hurried back with it, having been so quick on my errand that by the time I reached the group by the foremast the boatwain had only just appeared. Every man on deck was looking aloft trying to see the fugitive through fog and darkness.

"Bosun," said Durand, "there's a thief up the foremast. Stand by to iron him. Mr. Peck, send a man aloft to bring the fellow down."

"Aye, sir."

A moment later a stalwart deck-hand went up the shrouds and became invisible. Presently came his hail from above: "All clear aloft, sir."

"What do you mean?" shouted Durand. "He's there. Overhaul the yard."

"Yard all clear, sir," came back the reply. "Topmast clear to the truck, sir."

"Come down, you fool; you're blind."

The man obeyed. Another was sent aloft, but the result was the same. Durand looked blank. "The fellow knew he was hopeless, and has dropped into the sea from the end of the yard! Any one hear the splash of his body?"

Several thought they had, but no one was sure. And no one could have been sure, for the noise of the ship's way, the rolling wake, and the slap of the seas would have drowned the splash of a falling man. I was impressed, albeit I was also relieved. In my mind I saw my late tormentor struggling far astern, hopeless if not already dead—a man not yet in his prime, probably as much in love with life as was I, and in no condition to meet his Maker. The thought of him sobered me and brought with it a wave of regret.

"Mr. Peck," said Durand, "muster the crew and see what man is missing. From his appearance he came from forward. Report to me when done." He spoke sharply and abruptly left the deck.

I did not join him. I went to my own room. The saloon was quiet, the passengers not having been disturbed, but I noticed that Mlle. Zingaria's room door was ajar and there was a light within. I had been considerably upset by the tragic event of the night and even as I thought of it while sitting in my room it came to me that my clothing would be discovered in Dare's cabin and that until I recovered it I was not clear of the woods. His room was but a step from mine. I determined to go there at once.

That there was a light showing through his transom did not surprise me, neither did

the fact that the door was not locked, but when I opened it I nearly fell backward.

For there sat Mr. Percy Dare in the flesh, dressed in the costume he had forced from me. He did not appear in the least excited or even upset, and was far from looking like one recently out of the sea. He smiled a welcome.

"Good God!" I ejaculated.

"From your exclamation, doctor," he said, in his low and easy voice, "I gather that you are astonished; from your astonishment I gather that you are—well, suspicious. What has the row been about? Why is Mlle. Zingaria excited? I heard her talking to Captain Durand."

"You're a villain," I said, stepping up to him.

"Admitted for the sake of argument, doctor," he countered, with an impudent grin.

"I'll have it out of you, my man," I returned. "I'll report you to Captain Durand, be the consequences what they may. You were in Mlle. Zingaria's room. I saw you come out."

"Your eyesight is unimpeachable, doctor."

"You ran to the deck and escaped up the foremast."

"Freely admitted, doctor."

"Then how did you get here? You'll be in irons within ten minutes."

"I think not," was the smooth reply. "I presume you will further charge me with having robbed the Zingaria of her diamond necklace."

"I do."

"I will admit much, doctor; but really now, not that. I'll admit that you saw me run from the lady's room; I'll admit that she was not prepared to see me; but doctor, my errand to her was perfectly legitimate."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"You will hardly credit me, doctor, when I tell you that the lady is my wife, who unfortunately, I had not seen for some years until at the table last night. My emotion caused me to leave the saloon, as perhaps you noticed."

"Your wife!"

"Exactly — as I have explained. We were not happily mated and — well, she basely, suddenly, and secretly deserted me, taking with her certain property to which she had no right. You will admit that the law permits one to recover stolen goods wherever found. This is it. I annexed it as mine. See!"

He held up his hand, on a finger of which was a gentleman's heavy gold ring into which was sunk a good-sized diamond, and it was a beauty.

"That is pretty thin, sir," I said severely. "You robbed her. You changed your clothing—"

"To protect you, doctor," he interrupted. "Had I been recognized as Mr. Dare, of the cabin, the result might have been deplorable to you, to Captain Durand and to Dr. Savidge. As it was, happily the lady did not know me. She took me to be a thief, as I hoped."

"Then you are willing to face her and prove your relations?"

"Hardly, doctor, for various reasons, among them the responsibility of having a wife, my income being low, and the fact that she does not want me. No; on the whole I think I will remain in my room—sick, you know. The steward will attend to my few wants until we reach Savannah. Come, sir. I have protected your secret as promised. If you persist in exposing me what will be the result? It will be found that I have committed no crime, while you—"

I didn't care to hear the rest. "How in the devil did you learn of my position here?" I interrupted.

"Well, doctor, you have been, and doubtless will continue to be, considerate. I must reciprocate. You have a butler, James Hennessy?"

"Yes."

"To be frank, I don't think James is quite reliable, doctor. He is, or was, a friend of mine. I called on him just after you left the house. I asked for a temporary loan in order to leave the city. He refused it with a high-and-mightiness not at all becoming in an old comrade, but he made some amends by divulging the conditions of your departure. It gave me an idea. I have been misunderstood by the authorities and was anxious to go—anywhere. I had

just time to follow you and slip aboard before the steamer sailed. *Voila tout!*"

Despite the fact that the fellow was undoubtedly a villain there was something likable about him—a something that made anger toward him a trifle of an effort. I was inclined to believe what he had said regarding Mlle. Zingaria; and I fully believed what he informed me regarding my butler; certainly, if true, he was doing me a great favor in exposing the man who had undoubtedly been his old pal. Matters were clearing up rapidly; there was but one unexplained mystery.

"I am obliged to you for your information regarding my butler," I returned. "Now, how did you get back to this room?"

"Easiest thing in the world, doctor," he replied, smiling broadly. "Interposition of Providence in the shape of fog. Ran out, as you saw. Meant to hide on deck. Was seen by a hand. Had to hit him in the eye or jaw. Very sorry. Nothing left but to go up the foremast. When I heard that it was known I confess I considered my cake had reverted to dough. Had an idea. Slid down the foretopmast back-stay to the deck while my pursuers were gawking up the big stick. Then I came here. Then you came. That's about all. What are you going to do?"

I could not help admiring his Jinglelike ease and impudence, and was in no position to answer his question. I felt that he still had me in his clutch. That I was a coward I knew, but cowardice for the sake of a friend may be a virture.

"I will have to consider as to what I will do," I said. "Will you send the ring back to the lady?"

"Assuredly not," he promptly answered. "Not even at the price of your undoing."

The threat was the club he was always flourishing, and it silenced me. I left more angry with myself than with him, and went out on the main deck. Mr. Peck was just going to the captain. "Not a hand missing, doctor," he said. "The fellow who went overboard was a ghost, or he came from the passenger list."

"Nonsense!" was my only return; and Peck went on.

It was not my purpose to perambulate a foggy deck at an hour well past midnight I had an object in view and finally found my way to the wireless-room. The night operator was dozing in his chair. "Can I send a message?" I asked.

The man looked at me and evidently recognized my uniform. "It is Dr. Kent?"

"Yes."

"Certainly you may, as an officer; otherwise you'd have to get the captain's permission."

"Then send this. It is important." I wrote on a blank:

MICHAEL CLANCY,
Police Headquarters, New York.
Have an eye on my butler, James Hennessy. Am suspicious. Will be back in a few days.
HENRY KENT.

I planked a fifty-dollar bill on the paper. "Keep the change," I said, and walked off before the operator could speak.

I started to my room with the certainty that the tenure of office of Mr. James Hennessy, however recommended, would be short after my return. In the mean time I trusted to Clancy, and could not have trusted a better man. My way to my cabin took me along the promenade and I had nearly reached the passage opening into the saloon when something seemed to come from the air and strike me a sharp blow on the side of the head from which it fell to the deck.

Considerably startled, I looked around but saw no one, and there were no lights in any of the ports—none anywhere save one electric bulb in the carlines (carline: a short fore-and-aft timber connecting the beams on which the deck is laid) of the deck overhead, and by its gleam I saw the thing which had hit me.

It was a ball of paper half the size of my fist. I picked it up and was about to examine it when Mr. Peck appeared. "Looking for you, sir," he said. "Captain Durand wishes to speak to you. I told him you were on deck."

"Very good," I replied, thrusting the ball into my pocket. I went to Durand, wondering what he wanted to see me about, and found him walking up and down his room, evidently much disturbed.

"This has been a devil of a trip, Kent!"

he exclaimed. "Nothing like it since I've been on the line! There's been a mysterious thief on board — a fellow who has drowned himself, but Mr. Peck reports that there's not a man forward missing. And that's not the worst. That Zingaria woman came to me and asked about the thief, and when I told her he had gone overboard she threw up her hands and informed me he had taken her twenty-thousand-dollar necklace and a diamond ring with him. She's going to sue the company for her loss."

"Rot!" I returned. "The jewelry was not under the ship's charge. She can't recover."

"No; but she'll sue, and you will be a witness. The facts will come out, and what will that mean to Savidge, to you, and to me? This is awful, Kent! I am growing gray over it! What's to be done?"

If he was growing gray I ought to have grown white. Here was a new coil, but even then I did not tell Durand what I knew. The simpler way seemed to be for me to force Dare to disgorge the necklace on threat of instant exposure.

"Don't worry about me," I said. "I'll pay any fine imposed. It's too late to do anything, anyhow; I'm going to sleep over it; perhaps there's a way out. Good night."

And so I left him, myself being too fagged for lack of sleep to think properly. I went to my room in low enough spirits, and as I took off the cursed uniform coat I thought of the ball in its pocket. I took it out. It appeared to be made of several scraps of newspaper rolled up to be thrown away, and as I peeled off the pieces one by one I felt something hard in the center. When I removed the last bit I turned weak in the knees.

For there in my hand lay Mlle. Zingaria's diamond necklace!

I took one look at it and my wrath rose as I saw through the whole matter. Without a minute's delay, and now fully awake, I hurried to Dare's room. I would have him now. He opened the door at my knock, and I found him beginning to undress. "Honored, I am sure;" he began, but I cut him off and went for him without perface.

"You are a colossal liar as well as a thief, sir," I said, in a guarded voice. "You told me you did not take Mlle. Zingaria's necklace."

"Yes, doctor. I did tell you so. Do you wish me to asseverate—"

"Shut up. What do you make of this?" I demanded, holding out the stones.

The man appeared to be anything but crushed as he bent over my hand and coolly examined them. "And did she present them to you, doctor?" he asked, with a fine air of innocence.

"No, you rascal, you know she did not."

"No? Then really, doctor, according to the laws of evidence it appears that you must have committed a crime and stolen them."

"You need not pretend to me, sir," I returned. "I am not dull. These stones are worth thousands of dollars. You took them. When I left you you were afraid I was about to expose you, and so you determined to get rid of them through your room port. Had it not been for the intervention of my head you would have been successful."

He looked at me and actually smiled. "These hit you while you were outside?"

"They did."

"Ah! How unfortunate—for Mlle. Zingaria!"

"Do not attempt to play with me, sir," I began, but he interrupted:

"Pardon me, doctor, if I say that you are singularly inept—even bordering upon foolishness. Easy, sir!" he exclaimed, as I took a step toward him. "Do not drive me to do what I have no wish to do. Allow me to open your eyes to a fact you have not discovered. I am astonished at you, doctor! Did you not notice that these stones are all backed? No true diamond is ever backed, as you should know. That necklace is phony, paste, punk! Examine it."

His statement seemed to jerk some sense into me. I looked closely at the stones. He was right. The necklace was worthless, though the imitation was very good. The fact seemed to give me a better grip on him. "And discovering their lack of value, you were more than ready to get rid of them!"

"No, doctor, by no means," he whispered, "but in all probability my wife did. It is like her. She intends to sue the company for their loss, and—"

"She has so told Captain Durand." I put in.

"Precisely! She learns that the man who robbed her of a diamond ring has gone overboard and so makes occasion to turn these things to account by throwing them away. That they had been in her possession all who saw her knew, including yourself. She would have plenty of witnesses. The stones are lost. She places a fictitious value on them and sues the company. *Comprenez vous, m'sieur?*"

"Do you mean—"

"Were you near your room when the things struck you?" he cut in.

"I was nearly under the electric light in the ceiling," I answered.

"Then of course the necklace could not have come from my port, which is next to yours. And my observation assures me that the bulb in question is opposite Mlle. Zingaria's port. Are you becoming enlightened?

"You have in your possession the means of giving the lady a hoist by her own petard—and you have my full permission. I am very tired, and was about to go to bed when you came in. Excuse me until to-morrow. Ta-ta!"

With small respect for myself as a man of penetration, I went to my room and tumbled into bed, glad that I might be of service to Durand.

And that was what I did the first thing the next morning, showing him the necklace, drawing his attention to its spurious character, and solving the problem of the lady's threat—an honor that should have been Dare's, but which I took to myself, for the best of reasons.

Durand was furious. "You're a sharp party, Kent," he said, when I finally quieted him. "I'll make that woman squirm!" he exclaimed, and rang for the steward. "Request Mlle. Zingaria to step here," he said, when the man appeared. "Kent, you stay and see it out."

I remained, but after all it was not much of a show. When *mademoiselle* appeared she was aggressively superior, though probably ready for the compromise she expected. But she wilted like a rose under flame as Captain Durand handed her the necklace. "*Madame*, there is your twenty thousand dollars' worth of paste," he said to the astonished woman. "You have committed a crime for which I might hold you. When you charged the drowned man with their theft you lied, and you knew you lied. The next time you attempt to become a thief yourself, be more careful."

The woman was white under her rouge as she stammered: "I—I thought—how—"

"No matter how;" Durand sharply interrupted. "I have only to say to you that if you mention having been robbed aboard this vessel I'll make you sweat blood."

"But—but—I—I lost a real diamond—a diamond ring—"

"I don't believe the man who entered your room took anything," was the quick return. "If he did he's at the bottom of the sea with it. *Madame*, this vessel will dock within a few hours. When it does you will at once go ashore and never again use this line. No more words, *madame*. I have your true number, and for two bits I'd put you under arrest. Go before I change my mind."

And she went, leaving the room in a torrent of tears but without making any defense; and she took her necklace with her. I did not see her again.

And I did not see Dare all that day, he keeping to his room and I not anxious to cross swords with him. All I now wished was to wash my hands of the whole business, and get ashore.

At six o'clock that evening the steamer slowed up to take on the pilot, but I was not on deck, being busy packing my trunk. I had just locked it when a knock came on my door. When I opened it I found myself face to face with Officer Michael Clancy.

"How are you, doctor?" he said, laughing as he gave me the title.

"Good Lord!" I ejaculated. "Clancy! How did you get here?"

"Your sky-cable brought me, sir," he said, sitting down and becoming serious. "I came aboard with the pilot, and of course the first thing to do was to see you."

"What for?" I asked, with a vague feeling that the jig was up.

"You'll soon know," he returned. "Here's my report, short and to the point.

I got your message promptly. I went straight to your house, of course. I saw your precious butler—and collared him at sight."

"Collared James?"

"Sure thing. I knew him at once as Jimmy-the-Stiff; we've been wanting him for a year. Clever forger. How did you get him, Mr. Kent?"

I took a deep breath. "Through a letter of recommendation from an old friend."

"I thought so. Written by himself. He's done it before. Well, sir, I got to your house just in time. He had most of your solid plate packed in his trunk. Say. Remember me talking about Beau Kelly, the other day?"

I nodded.

"Well, sir, he's aboard this vessel. Followed you for a purpose, probably. I have come for him, and believe me, it took some hustling to arrive in time."

Beau Kelly! Goodness knows I saw it all clear enough then. "Is he dressed in a brown sweater, dark trousers, and an old cap?" I asked.

"That's the man."

"What has he done?"

"Been out of Sing Sing six months, and two weeks ago attempted another job—and failed, as usual."

"Sort of hounding him, aren't you?"

Clancy shut his teeth. "My orders are to get him, sir. You have seen him?"

"Yes, Clancy. I saw him. He entered a passenger's room, but was discovered before he could rob her. He ran out and in the fog escaped up the foremast."

"But he was caught?" The detective looked eager.

"No," I replied, with a straight face. "The captain will tell you that he dropped from the yard and into the sea. That was night before last."

"The devil!" exclaimed Clancy. "I've lost him!"

"Looks like it," I returned. "Come with me to the captain's room. He'll tell you."

By this time I had got a grip on myself and was thinking clearly. I introduced the detective to Durand and left them together while I hurried to Dare's room. He opened the door with his old debonair air. "Charmed, doctor, I'm sure. Anything new?"

"Don't fool with me any longer, man," I replied. "I know you. You are Beau Kelly. There's a New York detective just come aboard. He's in the captain's room. He came for you."

"Hell!" Instinctively the man's hand went to his hip and his face turned hard. "You gave me away?"

"Quite the contrary," I returned, assuming his late careless manner and not being afraid of his pistol. "Jimmy-the-Stiff gave you away when he was arrested at my house. As for me, I have just told Clancy that you jumped into the sea night before last."

The man's expression instantly changed. "You—you stood by me!"

"Well—it has that appearance. Somehow I'd feel like a murderer if I went back on you now."

"Sir," he said, looking squarely at me, "were all the world like you I would not be what I am." He dashed his hand across his eyes. "I know I am weak; I know I am a failure, but not in appreciation."

"You have too many," I interrupted, "but you haven't too much time. Here, take this and make a new start." And I shoved a bill into his hand. "Kelly, you are bright enough to get fortune without a jimmy. Try it. Now obey orders. I will hold Clancy in my room, and the moment the steamer docks you get ashore. Hold your head high and take a train for the West. Keep out of trouble, and you may count on me as a friend. Good-by."

I held out my hand. He grasped it, and as I turned and left the room I saw tears on his cheeks. As for me, I confess to feeling a trifle warm around the heart.

I kept my word about holding Clancy, and while I was sitting with him, sure that Kelly had gone, Dr. Billy Savidge came bursting into the room in his headlong fashion. His greeting was most effusive.

"And you have had no trouble?" he finally asked.

"None in the world," I returned. "It has been a rather profitable trip, on the whole, but I wouldn't care for three days of it again."

How Many Cards?

by Isabel Ostrander

Author of "Ashes to Ashes," "Twenty-Six Clues," "Suspense," etc.

PRECEDING CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RETOLD

EX-ROUNDSMAN TIMOTHY McCARTY followed a suspicious-looking figure along the avenue. When the man entered the Creveling house, McCarty hid in the areaway. A moment later the second-story man leaped from a window and the ex-officer collared him. Clancy, the officer on the beat, answered his call for assistance, but the young burglar insisted he was not responsible for what they would find inside.

On the library floor they found a gentleman in evening clothes shot through the heart. An army .44 lay close to his hand. Off the library was a breakfast-room with the remains of a late supper. From the rug McCarty picked up a bit of broken amber, part of a cigarette-holder. Clancy notified borough headquarters, and McCarty sent for his friend, Inspector Druet.

The house was empty of servants, but on the third floor two of the servants' rooms were littered with clothes. While the ex-roundsman and the inspector were looking over this floor of the house, McCarty thought he first heard, then saw a fleeting form as he looked over the stairs to the floor below.

Then the bell rang and McCarty admitted a dapper gentleman, who explained he had arrived in answer to an urgent telephone message, which insisted that he come at once. He stated he was George Alexander, Mrs. Creveling's uncle, and her husband's business partner. The inspector's examination of Alexander failed to reveal any leads. The dead man's partner was as guarded in his answers as Frank Hill, Creveling's valet, who next arrived on the scene. The valet testified he had taken a bag of clean linen to his master at the club on the previous night at eleven o'clock, after arranging for the supper at the house. Rollins, the butler, and his wife, the cook, had been given a holiday, and the other servants had been dismissed when Mrs. Creveling set out on her round of visits.

McCarty in the meantime unearthed another lead; under the table-cover in the library he found a playing card, the nine of diamonds, blood-stained and torn.

The ex-roundsman was pressing the valet to explain his whereabout from eleven o'clock of the night before until his arrival on the scene, when Mrs. Creveling arrived and demanded: "What has happened to my husband?"

No sooner was Mrs. Creveling informed of the death of her husband than she exclaimed "who killed him?" The inspector found she had been summoned home by a telephone call which she supposed came from her cook. The call had come before five o'clock, a full three-quarters of an hour earlier than the wire sent by the police.

Meanwhile, McCarty, whose eyes never left Hill, saw a furtive glance pass between him and Alexander. McCarty followed Hill from the room and they bumped into the arriving butler and his wife. He was convinced there was also an understanding between Hill and Rollins, the butler. From the latter he learned Creveling and Waverly had had words about a fortnight ago and Mrs. Creveling had stated Mr. Waverly was not at Broadmead the night of the murder.

Then Wade Terhune, the noted criminologist whom Mrs. Creveling insisted on calling, arrived. McCarty greeted him and then went out to keep an appointment with Waverly, who had phoned to the Creveling house to offer his assistance after hearing of the accident, from his wife. McCarty forced Waverly to admit he had frequently quarreled with Creveling because of the latter's wild ways. However, he established an alibi for himself which Sam Venner, a shady character confirmed.

McCarty was anxious to make his report to his chief and disclose the evidence of some one having opened the desk with the spring lock, between the time he had first examined the desk with his chief and the time he returned shortly after, for a second and more private inspection. Gloves had been used and the lock oiled.

But as he was about to enter his apartment he encountered his young reporter friend, Jimmie Ballard, who asked for McCarty's version of the case. In return he gave Mac some valuable information as to the Creveling set and explained the leader of the set was Nicholas Cutter.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for July 24.

McCarty called on the O'Rourkes and then on Mrs. Baillie Kip. The O'Rourkes referred him to Cutter as the man most intimate with Creveling's affairs. Mrs. Kip refused to be catechised, but a shot in the dark returned the information she had heard from Waverly of Creveling's death. She registered palpable relief when told the police were inclined to the theory of suicide. Moreover, she had lied about the whereabouts of her companion, Miss Frost. Could she be the woman in the case?

Then McCarty went on to view Miss Frost at her hotel and learned of the strange night visits of Mrs. Kip and her disheveled condition and her wounded arm on her return home early in the morning of the night of the murder. He was in the midst of an interview with Mrs. Lonsdale Ford when the latter left him to greet her husband in the hall. "We're done for, girl," he heard Ford say to his wife. The man admitted to McCarty he had some dealings with Waverly and had seen him the day of the crime before he bundled the ex-roundsman out of the house.

Finally, McCarty returned to the Creveling house and learned from Mrs. Creveling that some months ago she had had a valuable necklace stolen. A servant, Ilsa Helwig had been arrested and released on bail, furnished in cash by a mysterious stranger. Then the girl disappeared. When he left Mrs. Creveling's bedside, the ex-roundsman was convinced the face of the maid who showed him to the door was familiar. Was it the mysterious face that had so suddenly appeared at one of the windows on the morning following the murder, when McCarty had looked out of the cab on his way to keep the appointment with Waverly?

CHAPTER XIX.

THE ADMIRABLE MR. CUTTER.

LEAVING the Creveling house, McCarty for the second time that day boarded a south-going bus, having ascertained from Rollins that Mr. Nicholas Cutter lived on lower Fifth Avenue near Washington Square, and as he rode down-town he wondered somewhat grimly if further mystery were to greet him at his destination.

Never had he known a case with so many conflicting elements, so many threads which led apparently nowhere, such an inextricable tangle of tantalizing suggestions and false clues. Somewhere among them, he knew, lay the solution to the enigma, but it still eluded him. Would Cutter turn out to be as much of a puzzle as the rest of them had been?

The number given him proved to be that of an old-fashioned, square mansion of brick and brownstone situated upon a corner and running back to an unusual depth upon the side street, with a high wall bordering the strip of yard which separated its extension from the house at the rear. McCarty strolled past and examined the extension with curious eyes. It resembled a conservatory, but the walls and dome were formed of thick, opaque, rubbled glass behind which he fancied he could distinguish a network of strong, protecting wires; surely, if there were plants in there they were of extraordinary value to require such guard.

The shades had been raised at all the windows of the house, but they were masked by heavy lace curtains behind which some darker material hung in close folds and no sign of life appeared about the establishment.

McCarty mounted the broad steps which led to the massive front door and sounded with a vigorous hand the bronze knocker which faced him between the wide panels. Its echo crashed upon his ears like the clang of a jail gate and promptly the door swung open, revealing an elderly figure in conventional black whose faded eyes blinked rapidly in the rays of the setting sun as though unaccustomed to its light.

"Mr. Nicholas Cutter. Does he live here?" McCarty asked.

"Yes, sir." The doorway was wide but the shrunken, stoop-shouldered figure seemed consciously to fill it as McCarty made a move to step inside.

"I'd like to see him."

"I will see, sir, if he is disengaged." The servant's tone was gentle with old-fashioned courtesy rather than obsequiousness, but he still blocked the doorway. "What name, sir?"

"Timothy McCarty, though 'twill mean nothing to him. Just tell him that I'm here on a most important private matter."

"Come in, sir." The man threw the door wider, and turning, led the way with tottering but surprisingly quick footsteps to a second door at the side of the dim hallway. "I'm not sure he will be able to see you, but I will take your message."

"Thanks," McCarty said dryly. He was accustomed to encountering effrontery, insolence, and servility from the domestic staff in the homes of the rich, but the formal dignity of this ancient retainer was new to his experience.

When the latter had disappeared the ex-roundsman glanced wonderingly about him. The entrance hall had been so dark that coming in from the glare of the street he had been able to make out only vaguely the outlines of enormous, oddly shaped chairs and settles and chests, the great fireplace and curving staircase with a heavily carved balustrade; but somber as it was he had gained an impression of space and grouping, of unostentatious elegance beside which the costly luxuriousness of the Creveling house seemed tawdry and blatant in comparison.

As a boy in the old country he had once been invited together with other village children to a memorable "treat" at the castle which dominated the county and had strayed unbidden into the great hall; the one through which he had just passed would have filled barely a corner of it, and yet something in its atmosphere recalled that glimpse of the splendor of long-past feudal days as nothing else in America had ever done, and a sensation of awed admiration stole over him.

The little reception-room into which he had been ushered seemed on the contrary to be almost bare, with its delicately curved chairs and tables, its grotesque lamps, and the curiously lacquered cabinet upon the broad top of which a lone vase of washed-out looking blue stood in solitary state. Dennis Riordan's comfortably married sister, Molly, was the only woman whom McCarty admitted to his friendship, and her cluttered "parlor" was to him the epitome of cheerful good taste; give her a few dollars and she would have had that room looking like something that was meant to be lived in, yet it had an air about it, at that, although he could not have told wherein lay the distinction. Had he known that each article it contained was well-nigh priceless; that some of them—like the washed-out looking vase—had graced the palaces of emperors long dead, and that each had a history which would have rivaled an Arabian Nights of the antiquarians, he would have been duly impressed, but it would have made no difference in his personal opinion.

The old man servant had closed the door upon him with a certain definiteness of gesture which made him hesitate to reopen it and listen, but he had not long to wait. Almost immediately the former reappeared, and this time he beamed upon the visitor.

"Mr. Cutter has been expecting you, sir. Come this way."

McCarty followed dumb with astonishment as the other led him across the hall and ceremoniously opened another door. How could the man Cutter have anticipated his coming? Was it sheer bravado, or was Cutter informed by the papers of the investigation and the names of those in charge of it, prepared to give him some facts which would help in the solution of the mystery?

As he passed over the threshold he was aware at first only of a rich, ruby glow falling on rows upon rows of exquisitely tooled books which lined the walls, tipping with gold the magnificent bronze groups that stood here and there in the vast recesses of the room, and gleaming softly on warm-hued silken tapestries and mellow, deep-piled rugs into which his own heavy-soled boots sank with what seemed to him an almost profane pressure.

He started when the butler touched his arm and murmured deprecatingly: "Your hat, sir," and relinquished it with the same feeling with which he would have handed over his favorite blackthorn at the entrance to some museum.

Then all at once he was conscious of a tall, distinguished figure advancing toward him with erect, soldierly bearing and a rich, musical, hearty voice with just a hint of amused tolerance running through it, exclaimed:

"I have been awaiting you, Mr. McCarty! Take this chair and have a cigar; I think you'll find these to your taste."

As though in a daze, McCarty felt the grip of a soft but vigorous hand, and found himself in the depths of a great chair with the best cigar he had ever smoked between

his teeth, and keen, inscrutable gray eyes smiling down at him.

"You're Mr. Nicholas Cutter, sir?" he asked when he could find his voice, and then at the other's nod he added: "You've been waiting for me? I don't get you—"

"Your former colleague, or—er—competitor, Mr. Wade Terhune, has already paid me a call, and he told me that I might expect you shortly." Mr. Cutter dropped indolently into a chair and stretched out his long, slim legs luxuriously. "I'm quite ready to tell you anything I can about our late friend, Eugene Creveling."

So Terhune had been before him, and left that ironic warning, knowing that it would be repeated! McCarty stifled a profane observation, and his own honest blue eyes traveled in swift appraisal over his companion. He saw a man in the late forties, with a dark, lean, almost ascetic face, and hair just graying at the temples; a man who bore himself with the cordial but unconsciously aloof air of an aristocrat, and yet about whom there appeared to be an alert tensity as of one habitually on guard. There seemed to McCarty to be something vaguely familiar about that expression; upon whose face had he encountered it before?

"You'll excuse me for intruding on you, sir, but we've hardly any clues to work on, and 'tis only through Mr. Creveling's friends and associates that we can hope to get a line on him," McCarty began at last. "We're trying to find out what motive he could have had for killing himself."

Mr. Cutter's eyebrows went up, and he put the tips of his long, slender, tapering fingers together.

"So? The authorities have come to the conclusion that it was suicide? That was not the impression I gathered from Mr. Terhune."

"Mr. Terhune is a private detective, sir; a scientific criminalist, he calls himself, and a wonder he is in some respects with his little recording machines and such, but I'm a special deputy on the police force, and one of the old school. Suicide, the assistant medical examiner names it, and as a suicide I'm investigating the case." McCarty's tone was that of one harnessed to routine, but there was a speculative gleam in the gaze he bestowed upon his host.

Mr. Cutter shook his head.

"Of course you know your business, Mr. McCarty, and your medical expert's diagnosis ought to be conclusive, but isn't there room for doubt? I'm not actually insinuating that some one broke in and shot Mr. Creveling, but have you looked at the case from all sides?"

"If there was room for doubt that it was suicide what else are you thinking of but murder, Mr. Cutter?" McCarty demanded.

The other shrugged.

"I have formed no opinion, personally. I can no more conceive of Mr. Creveling killing himself than I can of any one wishing to take his life, yet the fact remains that he is dead from the shot of a pistol fired by his hand or that of another. If the authorities are satisfied that it is a case of suicide that is one step on the way to its solution."

"You've known Mr. Creveling a long time?"

"Since he left the university, but only casually in those earlier years. He was having his fling in the bright lights, and my tastes drew me in quite another direction; it was only after his marriage and through a mutual friend that I really came into contact with him and discovered that we had an interest in common which rendered us congenial."

"And what was that interest, Mr. Cutter?" McCarty asked quickly.

"A love of the beautiful in all things: textiles, books, paintings, porcelains, sculpture. It had lain dormant in him, but with me it was innate, the passion of a lifetime; he had the acquisitive zeal of a collector and I the appreciation of an hereditary possessor, but I was naturally interested in finding a kindred spirit where I had least thought to discover one. If you were a connoisseur, Mr. McCarty, you would understand what a pleasure it was to me to instruct and advise him in his choice. He made many mistakes, but he was learning—he was learning. What a pity!"

"Yes, sir." McCarty agreed gravely.

"Who was the mutual friend that brought you together?"

"Mr. Douglas Waverly."

"Him!" McCarty ejaculated. "And is he what you call a connoisseur, too?"

Mr. Cutter smiled with evident amusement.

"You have already interviewed him, I see. No, Mr. Waverly is a good sportsman and a capital fellow, but he has no interest in—er—antiques. However, I fear we are wasting your valuable time. As I said, I cannot conceive why Mr. Creveling should have killed himself unless—"

"Unless what?" McCarty leaned forward and his teeth clamped upon his cigar.

"I was going to say, unless he had suddenly taken leave of his senses," Mr. Cutter replied, stirring uneasily in his chair. "I would not have suggested it as a possibility, but now that I have permitted myself this indiscretion I must tell you quite frankly that on several occasions of late Mr. Creveling has seemed to be rather—er—peculiar. Not exactly irrational, but he has let go, lost control of himself over the merest trifles, worked himself up into a state of ungovernable fury because of some small annoyance or difference of opinion at which he would have laughed a year ago."

"'Difference of opinion?'" McCarty repeated. "With whom, Mr. Cutter?"

"Oh, any one; I do not recall any particular instance, but it has seemed as though he had been rather going to pieces. I am telling you this in confidence; it may have been simply a case of nerves, but in the light of what has occurred, and in the absence of any possible motive as far as I can imagine, it may be worth looking into."

"It may that!" McCarty assented. "Do you know if any of his other friends noticed the change in him? He was here at your home last Tuesday evening?"

"Yes, poor chap! That is the last time I saw him alive." Mr. Cutter eyed him steadily.

"Did he show any of the temper that you've been telling me about then before the others?"

"'The others?'" Mr. Cutter's straight brows lifted inquiringly. "Oh, you mean my other guests of the evening?"

"Yes. Mrs. Kip and the O'Rourkes and Fords and Mr. Waverly. Did he act peculiar then?"

"I see you have quite a comprehensive list of our mutual friends." The other laughed shortly. "Mr. Creveling displayed no ill-temper, if that is what you mean, but it did occur to me that he was preoccupied and laboring under some sort of excitement."

"Was he on good terms with every one?" McCarty persisted. "Did you notice any coolness between him and one of your other guests?"

Mr. Cutter frowned.

"I did not. He appeared to be on excellent terms with himself and the world. I may be all wrong, but his eccentricities have assuredly become more marked of late, and isn't it quite possible that he may have had a violent quarrel with some one over some unintentional or imaginary inquiry, brooded over it until the tension snapped, and in a moment of temporary aberration shot himself? I realize how far-fetched such an explanation may appear to you, but I can think of no other. He had everything to live for, and not an enemy in the world."

"Did he have any delusions, now? Was he a crank on any one subject that you can recall?"

"No. He was a man with more than the average self-assurance; his egotism was marked, but if that were a gage of sanity I fancy that many of us would be in the hands of alienists!" Mr. Cutter smiled, then his face grew grave. "He was arrogant because he had been pampered and spoiled from birth, and he never seemed able to realize that any one had a right to cross his will, but we got on wonderfully well together, and his death will be a distinct loss to me, at least."

CHAPTER XX.

BIRDS OF DIFFERENT FEATHER.

McCARTY darted a swift glance at his host, for although the words had been uttered with the proper decorum, there was an odd note of risibility in

the tone as though the speaker were secretly amused at some unvoiced thought, but Mr. Cutter's face expressed only deep concern and regret. The ex-roundsman realized that nothing further was to be gained at the present interview without showing his own hand and reluctantly dropping the stub of his cigar upon the ash-tray, he got up from his chair.

"Well, sir, I'll not say the tip came from you, but I'll look into this matter of Mr. Creveling being maybe off his head. I don't mind telling you that it's the first idea I've got hold of that might bear out the medical examiner's report. Young and rich and popular and all as he was, it stands to reason that he must have been nutty to do a thing like that. By the way, Mr. and Mrs. Ford were here last night, weren't they?"

"Yes. They dined with me and we talked until an unconscionable hour. Clever fellow, Ford; one of the shrewdest operators on the street. Take a few of these cigars with you if you liked that one," Mr. Cutter invited cordially as he held out a handful. "You won't find any of the same sort in the city, for they are made especially for me. Look in on me again any time you care to do so; I shall be glad to learn how your investigation is coming along."

McCarty thanked him, reclaimed his hat from the aged butler in the hall and departed. It was nearly six o'clock, and the early spring dusk was settling about him as he made his way to the nearest public telephone booth and called up Dennis Riordan.

"As soon as ever I can get into my regular clothes," the latter promised. "What was that you said this morning about a dress suit?"

"You'd not be needing it to-night," McCarty chuckled. "Don't make it more than half an hour, for if it's not mistaken I am, we have a job like the old times before us, Denny. I'll be at the table in the corner, waiting for you."

Ringing off, McCarty inserted another nickel in the slot, and calling headquarters. got an eager and impatient inspector.

"Is that you, Inspector Druet?" he demanded cautiously.

"Where the devil have you been, Mac? Here I've been waiting for your report—"

"'Twill keep, sir, at least for a while, for I've nothing definite, but I think I'm on the heels of something. You mind that party you took up this morning on suspicion?"

"Bodansky?"

"No, sir. The valet. Has he laid low or yelled for a lawyer?"

"He's standing pat. Says he'll ask for a lawyer when he needs one, and seems confident we'll have to let him go for lack of evidence. I had him up on the carpet for three hours, but no amount of grilling will get out of him where he was during the hours between eleven and six."

"Well, I guess he's right!" McCarty observed. "If you'll take a little tip from me, sir, you'll turn him loose."

"'Turn him—' What-t!" The wires fairly sizzled.

"Let him go, sir, at eight sharp to-night," McCarty urged. "Give him an idea that you've grand new evidence that leaves him out of the case entirely, and you don't give a damn where he spent the night. Get that through his head and then throw him out, but not a minute before eight. Have you Martin there, or Yost?"

"Martin. But what have you got under your hat, Mac?"

"My head, sir, and it's a wonder 'tis still on my shoulders with all the queer dope I've been getting this day!" responded McCarty with fervor. "However, when you let our bird out have Martin on the job. I'll pick the fellow up just outside, and do you tell Martin, please sir, to trail along after me, but do nothing until I give him the sign. I may be wanting Yost later, but if I do I'll phone again."

"You're all wrong this trip, Mac, but I'll let you see it through." The inspector laughed meaningly. "Our bird is too wise to lead you to his covey, but when he's trailed his broken wing before you long enough, pull him in again and come down here with him. Understand? I've got something to talk over with you."

"Yes, sir," McCarty agreed noncommittally. "But until I do see you, sir, for the love of the saints keep the newspaper boys

of the same opinion as the medical examiner! Don't let them know but that the case is closed as far as we are concerned, and it might be a nice little diversion for them if you dropped a hint about there being insanity in the family, and our late friend having showed signs of going bugs himself. Don't put it too strong, sir; a whiff is enough for them news hounds to get on the scent, and 'tis being laid careful for them, and for us, too, if I'm not mistaken."

"I get you." There was a new note in the inspector's tone. "Your party will be under way at eight sharp."

An hour later, over a thick steak and very black coffee, McCarty recounted to the eager Dennis all that had taken place since he left him at the firehouse that morning.

"And that's the whole of it!" he summed up, waving a greasy knife comprehensively. "Every last one of them bluffing and hedging and lying like hell except the O'Rourkes, and not a soul of them knowing that they're giving themselves away with every stall they make! If it's all the one thing they're working together to keep dark, then 'tis better organized they are than Tammany itself was in the old days; but if they've each got their own private reasons—outside an aversion to notoriety—for warding off an investigation, they must be a fine bunch of crooks! There's something queer about the lot, Denny; something I don't understand. I told you the dope I got on them from Jimmie Ballard; now, leaving out my old friends the O'Rourkes—though God only knows how they come to be mixed in that crowd—take the Kip woman. She knew well I was no reporter, but she tried to bluff it out and put over the lie that she was asleep in her bed all night, and had hurt her arm by a fall. She didn't dare deny, though, that 'twas Waverly sent her the message about what had happened to Creveling because she wasn't sure of her ground, and when I sprung it on her that 'twas suicide, it swept her clean off her feet; if she don't actually know it was murder she's got a mighty strong suspicion, and so have the rest of them."

"'Twas a fool move she made, quarreling with the old dame she'd hired to boost her into society," Dennis commented. "Knowing the woman had something on her she'd ought to have kidded her along to keep her mouth shut."

McCarty shook his head.

"Fool she may be, but she knew that the Frost woman wouldn't talk unless it was dragged out of her for fear that notoriety would spoil her chances with another sucker; one hint of scandal and her graft would be gone. As it was, when I put it up to her she cleaned her own skirts by blackening the other woman's. What was it that took Mrs. Kip out of her house at all hours almost against her will? Blackmail, or something like drink or dope that she couldn't keep away from? What kind of investments is her money tied up in, that she's flush one minute and broke the next?"

"Like a gambler," Dennis nodded.

"Why did she break her dates and run a chance of getting in Dutch with the very people she'd been trying to know all these years?" pursued McCarty. "Why did she keep that old leech around her at all if she knew the woman was on to her; for a cloak? Of course, if all this has nothing to do with Creveling's death and her little game, whatever it is, doesn't come under the statutes I'm wasting time and brains on her, but to-morrow she'll come across with an alibi for last night or I'll take her downtown."

"To-morrow will be another day," Dennis remarked. "What if we had a quiet talk with her now?"

"Because we've a little date of our own down-town," retorted McCarty. "Now, there's the Fords. She was ready enough to talk until she let that slip about expecting to see Creveling at Cutter's house the night before, and then she looked for a minute as though she could have cut her tongue out. Why? Whatever it was, her husband was afraid of her talking, too."

"I should think when you heard him ask her if she knew, and then say that they were done for, you would have called it a day and run him in," Dennis observed.

"When the two of them had a perfectly good alibi that Cutter himself vouches

for?" snorted McCarty. "Use the brains that God gave you, Denny, and don't be criticizing your betters! I'm thinking Ford's trouble was not as to *how* Creveling died, but that he *was* dead, and 'twas not grief that was consuming him, either!"

"Then what was it?" Dennis demanded, nettled at the rebuke.

"That's one of about a million questions I'm after asking myself," admitted McCarty. "The Crevelings' doctor wasn't any help, nor yet Mrs. Waverly."

"She's on to her husband's gallavanting, though, that's plain." Dennis attacked his second piece of pie with gusto. "He said he'd be at the Belterre, but she was taking no chances on proving him a liar by calling up even to tell him about Creveling. She's probably got over the quarreling stage and had rather let well enough alone."

"And since when do you know anything about women?" asked McCarty with scorn. "'Tis not in reason that she could care enough for him to be jealous, but the only time a woman is not glad to have something to hang on a man is when she's in her grave. However, that's neither here nor there. Who put up that ten thousand dollars bail for the girl, Ilsa? Where is she now? Who's back of her? The jewels don't matter, but I tell you, Denny, I'd like a few words with her!"

"Let her go," advised Dennis quite as though the elusive Ilsa were within reach of their hands. "'Tis not a thieving housemaid you're after, but the man that shot Creveling."

"The man that shot him may never be found," McCarty remarked and then, at his companion's stare of incredulity, he added hastily: "Cutter is the smoothest proposition of them all. Of course, his alibi is as good as the Fords since they were all together in his house, but why did he try to steer me on to the idea of insanity as the reason for Creveling's supposed suicide? Just because it was the only way to let everybody else out of responsibility, or knowing that Creveling had no motive for killing himself, did he grab that as the wool to pull over our eyes to keep us from going over to the murder theory and investigating them all?"

"But you say he's of a grand old family with money and position and all; what's he got to be afraid of in an investigation?" protested Dennis. "If Creveling was murdered and he thinks he knows who did it why should he shield him?"

"What is he doing, or the O'Rourkes, either, going around with a crowd like that?" McCarty crooked his finger at the waiter. "Mrs. Creveling was there with the family-tree and so was Mrs. Waverly, according to Jimmie Ballard, but they both married plain up-starts and bounders for their money as far as I can make out, and look at the rest of the lot! Mrs. Kip, a climber and God knows what else besides; the Fords as common as bog Irish and hanging on by their eyelids, and George Alexander a has-been in spats and a goatee! What is it makes them all hang together? It's not love of each other's company, for there never were birds of such different feathers, Denny. What's it that binds them together? What's the game? When I've found that out I'm thinking I'll be a long way to knowing who killed Eugene Creveling."

CHAPTER XXI.

THREE TO ONE.

A FEW minutes before eight o'clock that evening a slouching figure strolled around the corner of a shabby street not far from the wide avenue which bordered the park and took up his stand midway the block. He leaned nonchalantly against an area railing with a cigarette hanging from his lips and his hat pushed far back on his head so that the rays from a near-by street lamp fell full upon his square-jawed but not uncomely face.

He might have been a respectable young artisan out to keep a tryst with the girl of his choice or a mere idler of the neighborhood, but there was a curious contrast between the indolence of his attitude and the covertly alert expression in the gaze which he shifted alternately from the westward corner to the precinct station-house a few yards away.

The traffic of the day had ceased, but the

street was alive with shop-keepers and denizens of the modest flats on either side of the way, who freed from the routine of work were thronging out for a breath of the balmy spring air. Two figures, one tall and lanky and the other shorter and heavy-set, rounded the corner mingling with the passers-by and approached the youthful lounger. They passed with no sign of recognition, but as soon as they had gone a few paces beyond he threw away his cigarette and sauntered off in the direction in which they had first appeared.

A short distance from the door of the station-house the two newcomers halted, the taller facing it, the other with his back turned squarely.

"Loosen up, Denny, and act careless-like!" warned the latter. "If you had whiskers you'd look for all the world like a cat watching a mouse-hole! 'Tis well you took up fire-fighting, for you would never have made a first-class dick!"

"Is that so!" retorted Dennis. "I mind a time when you mistook a murdering blackguard for a member of the British aristocracy—not but what the two would be a possible combination—and 'twas a blind man that beat you to the truth! How can I tell it's the right man we'll be following when he comes out of there, and me never laying eyes on him before, if I don't watch?"

"You could tell him with the tail of a glance," McCarty assured him. "He looks like a preacher that's burdened with the sins of this world and hasn't been eating regular. If I don't miss my guess he'll turn in this direction, so the minute you see him, begin to talk loud, but you needn't shout enough to attract his attention and don't call me 'Mac.' Just make him think you're minding your own business."

"And what 'll I be talking about?" Dennis demanded in some alarm. "I'm no hand at speech—glory be! Here he comes!"

A tall, spare figure in clerical-black had appeared in the doorway of the station-house and paused, gazing deliberately up and down the street. Dennis shot out a lean arm in a gesture that was intended to be argumentative.

"I'll never believe it of Terry!" he declared in a loud, indignant tone. "He's not the lad to go back on his friends and what's the good of being a citizen and having a vote if you can't swing it to them that 'll put something your way later? *He's turned this way! Now he's coming!* As I was saying, it's the persuading tongue in his head that Terry has, all right, and the boys are with him. If he says he'll carry the ward for a friend he'll do it!"

"And if he goes around looking for a polling-place in the spring of the year he's liable to be run in for a nut!" McCarty remarked disgustedly, for Frank Hill had passed them and was striding toward the avenue. "'Tis a fine subject you picked for your discourse, but come on; I think I know where our bird is headed for, but he's only calling the inspector's bluff and playing safe."

With one accord they turned and started off in the wake of that deliberate figure ahead and as they passed the corner the slouching youth reappeared from nowhere and trailed along unobtrusively in the rear.

After that first comprehensive glance about him Hill did not even look back, but walked on as though lost in thought, yet with a definite objective in view. He crossed an intersecting avenue or two and then on reaching the fashionable thoroughfare on the farther side, of which rose the park wall, he turned north.

"Where's he making for?" muttered Dennis.

"Where would any faithful employee be going when he's freed from being under an unjust suspicion but back to the place where he works?" McCarty returned. "I told you he'd play safe. 'Tis the Creveling house, no less, that he's headed for now and there it is just ahead."

They slackened their pace and were a full block behind when Hill stopped at the tradesmen's entrance of the white stone house and pulled out his key. Flattening themselves in the shadow of the same cornice beneath which McCarty had effaced himself when he trailed the embryo burglar on the previous night they saw him unlock the door and disappear within.

"And now what?" Dennis demanded.

"Here comes Martin; are you going to leave him to watch the place?"

"There's a blank wall that surrounds the yard space at the rear like a well with never a door nor an opening that a man could crawl through as far as I could see this morning, but I'm taking no chances," McCarty responded. "The houses on both sides of the Crevelings are closed, but there might be a way he could get out, at that. Martin!" he added as the detective from headquarters approached. "Go back a couple of blocks, cross the avenue and climb over the park wall; creep along the other side of it till you are just opposite the Creveling house—'tis that white one there in the middle of the next block—and watch both doors. You got a good look at Hill?"

"Sure; down at headquarters to-day, when the chief was hauling him over the coals," Martin replied. "Me and Yost both give him the once-over. He ain't ever been mugged, I could swear to that."

"Well, keep your eyes peeled and if he comes out again give a squeeze to this and then trail him." From beneath his coat McCarty produced an object not unlike a small motor-horn and handed it to the other. "If he don't come out stay where you'll be till you hear two quick honks of a horn like that one, or we join you, if it's morning. Understand?"

"Right, Mac." Martin grinned at Denny. "The chief thought your side-kick here would be with you. I could tell a mile off, Riordan, that you were on the job!"

He walked off chuckling at Dennis's discomfiture, and McCarty remarked consolingly:

"Never you mind, Denny, every man to his work and it's your own line you'll be following to-night."

"My own line?" Dennis repeated. "You're not thinking of starting a fire, are you, Mac?"

"No, but there may be a bit of wall-scaling to be done and you're the lad for it. 'Tis a hard place to reach, though, and I've no mind to be nabbed by pig-headed householders for breaking and entering. Clancy ought to happen along soon on his beat and we'll wait for him."

"But why would this fellow Hill go back to the house first if he's got something else on his mind?" Dennis was disposed to argument. "There's little Creveling needs of a valet now."

"For an alibi; he'll not be caught again without one," McCarty replied. "It was a woman's voice, you know, that telephoned out to the Waverly country place, and I'm thinking that 'tis maybe because of a woman that Hill won't open his mouth about where he was last night."

"It might not be the same woman, though," Dennis suggested helpfully. "Perhaps the woman that phoned was put up to it by the man that killed Creveling."

"The one that killed Creveling put nobody else up to doing any of the dirty work, Denny," McCarty said after a pause. "'Twas a lone hand that was played last night; the hand that held the pistol. Whoever did the phoning found out about it somehow, and was playing a different game. There's Clancy, now, coming out of that area-way and wiping the mouth of him on the back of his hand! The force is not what it used to be when I was pounding my beat!"

"How're they coming, boys?" Clancy greeted them with a cheerful grin. "Thought you'd be somewhere around, Mac, and I might have known Riordan would be with you. I know as well as you do that 'twas no suicide last night, but I'm glad the inspector took it out of my hands; it 'll be a hard nut to crack!"

"We've been waiting for you, Clancy." McCarty spoke without preamble. "From what we observed just now you seem to be on good terms with the help in the houses along here; couldn't you get the cook in one of those on the next block to let us go through and into their back yard? We'll probably be wanting to come out the same way along about morning, but if we don't there'll be nothing to kick up a racket about. It 'll be just as well, though, if you pick out one that don't know the servants at the Crevelings."

"Sure, that's easy!" Clancy exclaimed. "Getting you through, I mean. As to keeping it from the help at the Crevelings, the cook at the De Forests, two doors away,

had a run-in with that Sarah, the butler's wife, and she won't speak to any of them. Her and me are real friendly and many's the hot cup of coffee she's given me on the cold nights this past winter. She'll let you through on my say-so."

The De Forests's cook proved to be a buxom, good-natured person, and Dennis unexpectedly scored a hit by ascertaining that she came from the same county as he in the old country. They took leave of Clancy and she led them through the kitchen and scullery out to an immaculate asphalted yard, its low fences covered with stout wisteria vines just feathering into bloom.

"If it's over the walls you want to go, man dear, there's a small, little ladder here that 'll hold the two of you one at a time, and you can pull it up after you and let it down the other side," she suggested. "You'll get no interference from next door for the house is closed, and beyond is the one where the poor gentleman killed himself last night. 'Tis some one in one of the side-street houses that you've a warrant for, isn't it?"

McCarty nodded.

"Well, you'll find the fences easy; it's a good thing for you that it is not the Creveling house you want to get into, for 'tis blockaded at the rear like a fort, though heaven knows why. 'Twas some whim, maybe, of the poor soul that did for himself. And to think!" she added with a trace of awe in her tones. "I heard the very shot!"

"You did!" McCarty dropped his end of the ladder and beamed upon her. "If the reporters knew that, I suppose they'd be after you like flies around honey! And how do you know 'twas that shot you heard? What time was it?"

"At quarter of two in the morning. I know, for my family, the De Forests, had come home a while before from a dance and waked me up; we've a house-party of young folks and the noise they made saying 'good night' would have roused the saints! I got up and looked at my clock and I was just climbing back into bed again when I heard a bang! like the roof was coming off! I waited, but nothing else happened and I made up my mind a policeman must have shot a stray dog over in the park. It was only when the papers came out this afternoon that I learned what it really was."

"Did any one else in the house hear it, too?" McCarty asked.

"No, at least, none of the help did, and the butler and footman said that the family talked about nothing else at dinner and somebody said 'twas funny that the shot wasn't heard. I'll be up until near midnight writing letters in the servants' dining-room in the front basement if you're coming back this way, and I've no doubt I can find a bit of supper for you," she continued hospitably.

They thanked her, and when she had withdrawn into the house, Dennis asked:

"Well, Mac, what's the game now?"

"Let's get over in the next yard and pull the ladder with us," responded McCarty. "I want to have a look at the rear of the closed house."

They scaled the fence without difficulty and, depositing the ladder in the grass plot of the second yard, they turned to reconnoiter.

"Do you think, Denny, that you could get up to one of the window-sills on the third floor? You could see over the Crevelings' wall then."

"Do I think I could walk up a pair of stairs with my eyes shut?" returned Dennis. "If 'twas for that you dragged the ladder along, you can hoist it back again where it belongs. With them sills and lintels sticking out the way they do, a small boy could reach the roof!"

Without further speech he shed his coat and hat and began to clamber up as agilely as a monkey while McCarty watched from below in a solicitude that was almost ludicrously maternal. At length he reached the third floor and, perching himself on a broad window-ledge, peered over the high wall into the blind alley at the rear of the Creveling house.

"What do you see?" McCarty demanded in a hoarse whisper.

"Nothing," responded Dennis laconically. "'Tis as bright as day for the light is streaming out from the windows at the back and the court, or whatever it is, is as bare as the palm of your hand."

"Do you see no sign of an opening?"

"There's a back door to the house, but it's closed tight." Dennis leaned over and craned his neck downward. "If it's in the wall you mean, there's not so much as a loose brick. Is that all you wanted to know?"

He prepared to descend, but McCarty halted him.

"Not by a long shot, it isn't! You'll stay where you are, Denny, my lad, until something happens or we're sure that it won't, and you' best be making yourself comfortable, for it's likely there'll be a long wait ahead of you. 'Tis barely nine o'clock now."

CHAPTER XXII.

BOLTED DOORS.

AND a long wait it proved to be. Dennis shifted about from time to time, but stuck faithfully at his post, and McCarty paced back and forth upon the narrow strip of sod which lined the fence. An hour passed, then another, and the lights in the rear of the neighboring houses began to go out, one by one, but still there came no muffled honk from the horn which McCarty had given to Martin and no sign from the watcher above that might tend to alleviate the long wait.

The back of the Creveling house had long since been dark and no sound issued from it. McCarty began to feel an inward misgiving. Had his train of reasoning been at fault? There was so much to be done, so many loose threads to be gathered up in this strange tangle of events. Was he wasting precious time? Had he allowed himself to be turned aside from the main issue by the chance hint of a gossiping servant while the real slayer of Eugene Creveling escaped?

He told himself miserably that he should have had them watched, the whole lot of them! Mrs. Waverly and Mrs. Creveling were out of it, and the O'Rourkes were not even to be considered, but anything could be expected from the rest of them! Even that alibi of the Fords might have been cooked up between them and Cutter, though what common interest they all had in blocking the investigation—

"Whisht!" A sibilant command from Dennis broke in upon McCarty's pessimistic meditation and brought him up standing. "There's a light just flashed up for a minute in the third-floor window nearest the farther wall! You'd have seen it yourself if you'd not been sleep-walking! Look up! There it is again!"

McCarty was already straining his eyes up into the darkness and now he saw a tiny pin-point of light gleam out over the wall from the direction of the window indicated, sweep across space like a streak of distant lightning and vanish.

"Pocket electric torch!" he ejaculated softly, prancing in the sudden excitement of renewed hope. "What's going on, Denny? I can't see through a brick wall—"

"For the love of God, stop your havering!" came from above in a fierce, far-carrying whisper, and McCarty subsided, mentally cursing the increasing girth and lack of physical practise which prevented him from reaching the point of vantage held by his companion. He had not long to remain in suspense, however, for almost immediately the silence of the night was broken by the sound of a window being stealthily raised.

Dennis gesticulated violently and then shrank back into the concealment of the overhanging lintel while McCarty gazed breathlessly but impotently upward.

There came a curious scratching noise which seemed to be receding; the light flashed again fainter than before and then the sound of a soft thud. In an instant Dennis's long arms and legs writhed out of the shadows and he scrambled down with perilous haste to land at McCarty's feet.

"Some one—a man—got out of that window, straddled the wall and climbed down the back of that next house!" he exclaimed. "He'll be off across fences to the next street north and we'll lose him!"

"Like hell we will!" McCarty seized the despised ladder and, setting it against the fence of the De Forests' yard, he swarmed up it and, hanging by his hands, dropped with a grunt to the ground. Dennis was after him in a twinkling and they

tore through the scullery and kitchen, nearly bowling over the astonished cook, who met them in the front hall.

Without a word to her they dashed out into the area-way and once on the avenue McCarty paused only to produce his horn and sound it twice before he set out on a run for the northern corner.

The street was deserted save for the solitary figure of a man walking rapidly eastward far down the block and without wasting speech or looking backward for their ally they took up the trail.

It proved to be a straight one for several blocks and the two following in the shadows exercised all the more caution for that, but the man appeared to have no suspicion of their espionage. Intent only upon his errand the rapidity of his stride increased until he all but broke into a run, but at Third Avenue he halted abruptly.

"If he picks up a taxi by any chance of dumb luck we're lost!" McCarty panted. "There'd not be but one night-hawk along this way before dawn!"

But no taxi appeared and the car-tracks stretched away blankly into the darkness. After waiting irresolutely for a minute or two the man turned south and started off once more with his quick, nervous stride, and McCarty and Dennis trailed along but more cautiously still, for now their quarry glanced constantly back over his shoulder.

He was almost two blocks ahead when he halted again at the curb, and at the same moment there came to their ears the hum and rattle of a car approaching from behind. Without giving himself time to think McCarty sprang out into the middle of the avenue and swung aboard the car as it passed, while Dennis clung tenaciously to the upright bar, heedless of the profanity of the outraged conductor, and succeeded in scrambling up, narrowly missing a pillar of the elevated railway structure.

McCarty had already produced two nickels and they made their way to the forward part of the car, seating themselves with hunched shoulders, turned to the entrance.

"That was a narrow squeak!" breathed Dennis. "We've lost Martin now if ever he was trailing behind. 'Twill be a fine note if the car don't stop for your man, Mac, or if he changes his mind!"

"If you borrowed money the way you borrow trouble, Denny, you'd not have a friend left in the world," McCarty observed. "The car's slowing down now, and as for Martin I never knew him to get left yet!"

The car did indeed stop at the second corner, and as it resumed its way Dennis could not resist a swift glance over the few passengers behind.

"It's Hill, all right!" he announced in a sepulchral whisper. "He's dropped into a seat by the rear door and he looks like the ghost of himself! Something must have happened him, the night, since he went back to the Creveling house!"

"'Tis what's on the mind of him, more like," surmised McCarty grimly.

"You think 'twas him killed—"

"I do not!" McCarty interrupted. "If I did I'd have my two hands on him now, and well you know it! Don't look around again till you hear the buzzer."

To Dennis's edged nerves the ride downtown seemed interminable. Twice the buzzer sounded and twice his eyes nearly crossed in the haste and eagerness of his backward glance, but Hill still slumped in his seat with his head drooping over upon his breast.

"Is it to the Bowery he's going?" he muttered after the second disappointment. "No wonder he stood looking for the car! 'Tis a fine walk we'd have had—"

"Are you a cripple?" demanded McCarty. "We're not even to Thirty-Fourth Street yet, and 'tis not a fire we're going to, you know! There goes the buzzer again."

"And it's him! He's reaching up with his finger on the button!" Dennis made as if to rise, but McCarty laid a heavy hand on his knee.

"Sit still and let your head fall over as if you were asleep!" he ordered. "The fellow's got to pass us to get out front. Don't move till I say the word!"

The two relaxed figures apparently lost in slumber were not calculated to arrest the eye of a fellow passenger making for the exit and Frank Hill's glance did not even include them as he passed and descended

from the car. As it started again Dennis straightened and looked quickly out of the window.

"He didn't cross the tracks; he's heading west," he observed. "After coming all this way are we going to ride on—"

But McCarty had risen and sounded the buzzer in his turn and when the car halted again at the next corner they literally flung themselves off. Frank Hill was no where in sight and the avenue itself seemed utterly deserted.

"There, you see!" exclaimed Dennis disgustedly as they hurried back to the street at which the valet had alighted. "I told you we'd lose him! If you'd have listened to me—there's no one at all in the side street either way."

For answer McCarty stopped abruptly at the corner and pointed through the glass show-window of the all-night drug-store, the lights of which were the only oasis in the desert of darkness about them. Hill was standing at the cigar counter engaged in conversation with the weary-eyed clerk, and it was evident that they were old acquaintances.

Dennis and McCarty had only time to withdraw into a neighboring doorway when Hill reappeared, and rounding the corner, started briskly westward. The others followed just in time to see him almost collide with a second figure which had been lurking in the deeper shadows of a high stoop. Both sidestepped instantly, and Hill continued his way, but though he walked faster even than before his shoulders hunched forward despondently, almost furtively, and a certain elasticity seemed gone from his stride.

"Martin!" McCarty swore beneath his breath as the figure approached them sheepishly. "So 'twas you pulled that bonehead play! You're a disgrace to the force!"

"However in the world did you get here?" Dennis demanded, adding with sly satisfaction: "You've scared off our bird, all right! Any one could tell a mile off, Martin, that you were on the job!"

"I rode down on the same car with you, on the fender at the back," Martin responded, chagrined. "How was I to know he'd run into me like that? It's just the luck of the game. Shall I trail him, Mac? Maybe that clerk in the drug-store is a kind of a go-between in whatever business brought him out, and he's finished what he came for. He's certainly walking as though he was through in this neighborhood."

"And good reason!" McCarty commented. "However, 'tis no good palavering over. Trail him, Martin, but if he starts up-town on a car or in a taxi he'll be on his way back to the Creveling house with nothing more doing to-night as far as he is concerned, so you come back here. I'm going to see how much that clerks knows about him."

The abashed Martin hurried off upon his task, and Dennis and McCarty retraced their steps to the drug-store, where the latter purchased three of the most expensive cigars in the case and remarked casually as he lighted one:

"Thought I saw a fellow in here that I know just now as we were passing; tall, thin fellow, dark, with a smooth face—"

"Oh, you mean Mr. Hildreth?" the clerk interrupted pleasantly. "He and his wife live just around the corner and they trade here a lot."

McCarty removed his foot hastily from the agonizing pressure of Dennis's big brogan and nodded.

"That's my friend, all right, but he can't have lived in the neighborhood long. They used to have a flat up on the West Side. Mrs. Hildreth is a mighty fine-looking woman, big and blond—"

"She's a fine woman every way!" the clerk interrupted again, his tired face lighting up with a smile. "They've only lived around in Lanahan's apartments a little more than a month, but it's easy to tell. She don't come in often herself, but she's always got a kind word about the children," he added irrelevantly: "I lost my own wife a year ago."

"Tough luck!" McCarty said sympathetically. "I'll drop in on the Hildreths one of these evenings. Which apartment house is Lanahan's?"

"Fifth from the corner; got a cracked yellow lamp over the vestibule; you can't miss it."

"Thanks. I'll look in on you again when I'm down this way. Good night."

Out on the street once more, McCarty and Dennis made their way to the house indicated without delay and halted in the vestibule while the former scrutinized the cards in the bell plate.

"Here they are. Fourth floor," he observed. "If Mrs. Hildreth is the dame I think she is, she'll not be answering a ring at this time of night."

"There'll be no need, for some one's left the door unlatched." Dennis pushed it open as he spoke. "You can make some excuse to get her to let us in. Come on!"

In silence they mounted the creaking stairs through an atmosphere redolent of stale cooking to the fourth floor and paused before the rear door upon which had been tacked a card bearing the name "F. Hildreth," written in a small, neat hand.

"I guess the front flat is empty, for there's no card up, and there was none in that space over the bell down-stairs," Dennis whispered. "What are you going to do, Mac? Take a chance and break the door down?"

"Not if I can get in peaceable," McCarty replied in a whisper. "I'm going to be real sick, Dennis. Hold me up!"

Emitting a loud and realistic groan, he leaned limply against his friend with such suddenness that the surprised Dennis was almost borne to the floor, but he recovered himself in time. Another groan welled from McCarty's throat, and a third before finally there came the sound of footsteps within, the door was opened cautiously, and a woman peered out. She was tall and Junoesque in form, with a thick braid of fair hair falling over either shoulder, and great, soft, blue eyes darkened now with apprehension and concern. Her loose, dark robe fell in almost classical lines about her, and the light of the flaring gas-jet in the hall gleamed softly on her creamy throat.

Dennis gasped with astonishment and involuntary admiration at the vision and stepped back while the woman asked with just a trace of an accent:

"What is it? Some one is ill?"

McCarty straightened, and his foot reached out to the door-sill.

"I want you, Ilsa Helwig—"

But he was too late. At his first word a sudden change came over her expression. Before his foot could intercept it she had slammed the door in his face and they heard a bolt shoot into its slide.

"We've got to work fast now; down with the door!" McCarty cried, and Dennis lunged, using his brawny shoulder as a battering-ram, at the same moment that the sound of a subdued crash came from within. At first the stout bolt resisted their efforts, but finally it snapped with a loud report, precipitating them into a narrow, dimly lighted hallway. Two doors facing them stood open revealing their emptiness at a glance, but a third at the back was closed, and they rushed toward it. It was bolted, as the entrance door had been, but its flimsy fastening gave way at the first onslaught, and they found themselves in a tiny kitchen. No other door led from it, but its single window was wide open, a fire-escape showing beyond, and a row of flowering geraniums lay overturned, their red earthen pots shattered.

At a bound they had crossed the room and craned their necks out into the night. Lights were springing up in one or two of the rear windows across the network of clothes lines, but no human figure was visible on the fire-escape nor in the yard beneath.

"Well," vouchsafed Dennis after a pause in which an eloquent glance had passed between them. "I hope the next time you tell any one they're wanted you'll have your hands on them first! Martin did not make the only bonehead play, the night!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FIFTH FLOOR BACK.

THE Hildreth flat consisted only of four small rooms and bath, the latter evidently converted from a clothes closet, and McCarty and Dennis searched them thoroughly, but found no trace of the woman. The quick, double honk of a motor horn in the street below came to their ears as they were on the point of departure, and

they descended to find a crowd of excited tenants gathered in the halls and on the stairs, with a blue-coated officer pushing his way through the throng.

"Get back, there! It's all right, there's no trouble. It was just a bit of a row, but it's over now, and no one hurt." The policeman winked broadly up at McCarty on the stairs and then addressed the jabbering crowd once more. "Get back where you belong and quit making a disturbance or I'll send for the wagon and run you all in! Come down, sir."

He led them out into the vestibule and slammed the door after him.

"Detective Sergeant Martin tipped me off," he whispered. "You're former Roundsman McCarty, sir?"

"Yes. Special deputy now under Inspector Druet," McCarty explained briefly. "Woman on the fourth floor, rear, under the name of Hildreth, is wanted downtown, and we almost had her, but she got away on the fire-escape. Take Martin and search the yards and the roofs, and if you find no trace of her leave him on guard in the flat until he's relieved. Report by telephone to Inspector Druet at headquarters."

"Right, sir," the policeman replied with immense respect. "What the Hildreth woman like?"

Before McCarty could answer, Martin entered the vestibule.

"Hill walked clear over to Fifth Avenue and waited all this time for a bus," he announced. "He's just started up-town, and I came back according to your instructions, Mac, but you were nowhere around, and I couldn't keep on sounding this horn! All at once hell broke loose here in the house, and I figured you were in it, somehow."

McCarty explained gruffly, adding a description of the Hildreth woman, and Martin whistled.

"The Helwig girl to a T!" he exclaimed. "And that valet—so that's how the land lays! We'll find her if she's on the block!"

After a few final orders, McCarty, with Dennis in tow, returned to the drug-store, and nodding to the surprised clerk, he entered the telephone booth and called up police headquarters. A long ten minutes elapsed before he reappeared, red and perspiring, and said in a hurried undertone to his companion:

"Yost is on his way up to the Creveling house as fast as the inspector's own car can take him. He's to find out if Hill is there and stand guard over him."

"But why?" Dennis spoke cautiously out of the side of his capacious mouth. "Why don't he run him in again and bring him up before the magistrate to-morrow to be held for trial? You've got a clear charge against him now of aiding and abetting that woman to jump her bail; that's what the legal sharks call it."

"Instead, if it's not too late for the first editions, the inspector is going to see that every morning newspaper carries the word that he's been released for lack of evidence and is back at the Creveling house," McCarty responded. "Yost will be there to see that he don't get out again or send any messages, and to trace and report any phone calls that may come for him."

"I get you!" A light broke over Dennis's face. "You think the woman will maybe try to reach him there when she learns that he's out again and back on his job?"

McCarty nodded.

"She doesn't know that he's been in the neighborhood here to-night, nor that he led us straight to her. He'll keep on believing that she's safe enough, and think we're only guarding him on his own account." He turned to the clerk, who was watching them with curious eyes. "What are your hours here?"

"Eight to eight," the latter replied, still staring.

"Where do you live?"

"Right up over the store. The janitor's wife takes care of my four kids, but I wouldn't feel easy about 'em if they weren't here in the same building with me. Say, who are you fellows, anyway? It seems to me you're asking a lot of questions around here—"

"And I'm liable to be asking a lot more!" McCarty interrupted grimly. "We're from police headquarters, if you want to know."

"Police—" The clerk gripped the edge of the show-case. "Those—those Hildreths—"

"Have you been on every night this week?" McCarty interrupted.

"Y-yes, sir!"

"Is there any other public telephone-booth in the neighborhood?"

"None any place that keeps open all night." The clerk seemed to be gathering his dazed faculties.

"Do you have many calls from here between midnight and early morning?"

The clerk shook his head.

"Not unless somebody's sick."

"Did anybody come in here and use that phone last night?"

"Certainly; a lot of people early in the evening, but after midnight"—he paused and his eyes widened—"no one came in here to phone after that until—until half past four in the morning."

"Who was that?" McCarty asked sharply. "Some one from the neighborhood that you know?"

"It was Mr. Hildreth! I was surprised, for he looked very bad and I thought that he must be sick and have come in for some medicine, but he said that he only wanted to use the phone. He went in the booth and closed the door and I didn't hear what number he called, but it must have been a city one, for he was only in there a minute. When he came out he looked so pale that I thought he was going to keel over and I offered him a bracer—er—just a heart stimulant, of course. I fixed him up a dose with a dash of strychnine in it and it seemed to pull him together. He said he had been out of town on a business matter and traveling all night to get back; that his train should have been in at midnight, but was delayed and he had to phone to his partner at the earliest possible moment. It did strike me as funny that he hadn't telephoned from the station if it was as important as all that, but I didn't say so. I was kind of sleepy, and it wasn't any business of mine. He hurried off home and I settled down for a nap in my chair behind the cash-register."

"Did you see him again before he came in to-night?"

"No." The clerk hesitated. "I don't know what you've got against the Hildreths and I'd hate to get them into any trouble, for they've been good customers here and pleasant to deal with. I'd never believe a word against Mrs. Hildreth, anyway."

"You said that she didn't come in here often." McCarty eyed him quizzically. "When did you see her last?"

There was a pause and then the clerk replied with evident reluctance:

"Early this morning."

"How early?"

"I suppose I'd better tell you; you fellows would find out, somehow! It was just before five, less than half an hour after her husband left. I told you I'd settled down for a nap; well, I was roused by the bell that rings whenever the door is opened and looked up to see Mrs. Hildreth come in. She's always as neat as wax, but this morning she looked as though she had just thrown on her clothes every which way, and she seemed excited, too, about something. She asked in that soft, foreign voice of hers if she could use the telephone, and it must have been an out-of-town call this time, for she was in the booth nearly twenty minutes, and I heard money rattle in the slot two or three times. She thanked me when she came out, but didn't try to explain about the call the way her husband had about his." He paused and added: "I'll tell you one thing I think, sir; whatever it was that happened to make her husband look more dead than alive it certainly put new life into her! She walked out of the store as though she was treading on air!"

McCarty frowned thoughtfully. He had found confirmation of his suspicions from a totally unexpected quarter and one of the minor mysteries of the case was cleared up, but it led him no nearer to the truth; rather by its very nature it raised complexities which he had not hitherto considered.

"We may want you," he said at last. "What is your name?"

"Willis Udell, and you'll find me here or in the flat over the shop any time you want me!" the clerk declared. "I've done nothing to be afraid of you fellows for, nor said a word I can't stick to, but I hope you are mistaken about the Hildreths."

He shook his head lugubriously after

them as they left the shop and when the door had closed behind them Dennis, too, drew a deep breath.

"Well, that settles the two phone calls, anyway," he commented. "The whole thing is as plain as the nose on your face, Mac! The man that killed Creveling was—"

"He was not in that shop this night!" McCarty interrupted impatiently. "Come on till we hop a car and you'll hear what the inspector has to say about it! He's waiting for us down-town."

But when they presented themselves at headquarters Inspector Druet appeared to be very much of the same mind as Dennis. McCarty told the whole story of the night's vicissitudes, sparing himself not at all in the recital for permitting the woman known as "Mrs. Hildreth" to escape, but the inspector did not censure him. Instead, he listened thoughtfully until the end and then brought his hand down resoundingly on the desk before him.

"That is about the last link we needed in the chain of evidence, I think!" he declared. "We'll clean this case up in record time now, Mac. Don't worry about the woman; she won't get away from us again now that we know she is in the city, and Yost has phoned that Hill is back in the Creveling house. He's camped outside the fellow's door now."

"Did you hear anything from Martin, sir?"

"No, but the officer on the beat up there on Third Avenue called up to say that he'd followed your instructions, but no trace of the woman was found. Martin's watching the flat, and I'll see that both he and Yost are relieved in the morning by the most reliable men connected with the bureau. We'll wait a bit to see if the woman tries to communicate with Hill and then gather him in."

"On a charge of murder, sir?" McCartly's tone was respectfully inquiring, but there was a skeptical quality in it that made the inspector raise his eyebrows.

"Of course! We've got the motive now. I thought before that it might have had something to do with blackmail, but it's revenge. He's infatuated with the girl and whether she's guilty or not she is facing a long term in prison, for the evidence against her, together with the fact that she jumped her bail, would make any jury in the country convict her without leaving the box. Remember, it was Creveling's testimony before the magistrate which was most damaging to her, proving it to have been virtually impossible for any one else to have taken the jewels. I suppose she and Hill both held it against Creveling, and we can't tell the details yet of what happened last night, but they must have had a violent quarrel for the man to have shot his employer—"

"Wait one second, sir," McCarty interposed quietly. "I didn't start working on this case to-night when I first telephoned to you, but from the minute you took me on, and there's a lot you haven't heard yet. Some of it would seem to point to Hill being guilty, but there's more that he couldn't have had a hand in, and 'tis beyond reason that all those society folk would put themselves out to shield him."

"'Shield him'?" repeated the inspector with a frown. "What do you mean? What society folk, Mac?"

"The whole kit and boodle of them!" McCarty waved his hand expressively. "All the Crevelings' friends except the O'Rourkes! They're every one lying or trying to hide something and hold out on us, or I'm a Dutchman! But there's one thing: Hill was in the house long before he showed himself at the door of the breakfast-room, and when you and me were going through the rooms up-stairs and you laughed at me, sir, for seeing and hearing things, I was! If I'm not mistaken, 'twas Hill I heard down in Creveling's room when we were up in the servants' quarters, and Hill's shadow I saw on the stairs."

He told in detail of his second and solitary search of the rooms up-stairs and the discovery that the desks in Creveling's room and that of the housekeeper and been tampered with since their first examination, and Inspector Druet nodded emphatically.

"That only makes it more certain, Mac. We won't have much trouble in sending Hill to the chair!"

"Maybe not, sir," McCarty acquiesced

non-committally. "Did you find that pair of gloves on him that I asked you to look for when you got him down here?"

"They were taken from his coat-pocket at the station-house and that's another strong bit of evidence against him, for they are stained and reeking with oil. Oil from the pistol that killed Creveling!"

"Perhaps the same kind of oil that was used to clean the gun if it was Creveling's own, sir, and the can left lying around handy," McCarty suggested. "The oil might have been used on those desk-locks. Anyway, what has the girl Ilsa and the jewels to do with a playing-card?"

He produced the bloodstained nine of diamonds and laid it before his chief.

"Where the devil did you get this, Mac?"

"Under the edge of the strip of cover on the table right beside where the body was lying, sir," McCarty explained the circumstances and added: "If Hill fired that shot whatever would he be doing with that lone card, and why would George Alexander be in league with him? Didn't you see the looks that passed between them and the way they tried to get away for a quiet word together? The old man wants to keep something dark, and 'tis not to save Hill from punishment for murdering his own partner and meal-ticket!"

"No. It was to prevent notoriety, if anything," the inspector remarked. "You must have noticed how ready he was to accept the suicide theory which he had first rejected, when he saw to what lengths his niece was prepared to go to learn the truth. If he doesn't actually know of any scandal in Creveling's immediate past he must suspect it, and rather than have it unearthed, as it was bound to be if we hadn't so promptly discovered the identity of the murderer, he preferred to let sleeping dogs lie."

"So do the rest of them, it seems! Wait, sir, till you hear."

McCarty gave the gist of his interviews with Douglas Waverly, Mrs. Kip, Miss Frost, the Fords, and Nicholas Cutter, but when he had concluded the inspector shook his head.

"Whatever reasons they may have for holding out on you as you suspect, Mac, it isn't because of a guilty knowledge of the murder. By your own showing the Fords, Cutter and Waverlys have established alibis which no possible circumstantial evidence could shake, and you haven't a thing to connect Mrs. Kip with the affair. You can take what that ex-chaperone of hers said about her with a grain of salt; the old woman was mad enough at being sent packing to have sworn Mrs. Kip's life away, I'll wager, and at that she could tell nothing incriminating. You'll find that Mrs. Kip's little mystery, whatever it may be, is her own affair."

"Well, sir, 'tis your case and you know best." McCarty rose. "I've had no sleep since night before last and 'tis getting on to morning. If so be you've no further instructions for me now I'll go home and rest and be on the job again bright and early."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CURSE OF SCOTLAND.

INSPECTOR DRUET laughed somewhat uneasily.

"Which means that I haven't convinced you and you've taken the bit in your teeth again! I've no instructions for you, only suggestions; you know well that I have always given you your head in every case you've worked on with me since you resigned from active duty and I've never regretted it, especially the last instance, Mac!" His face sobered. "Go ahead your own way and if you can prove to me that I'm wrong I'll be only too glad to acknowledge it, but I tell you now that you haven't a chance! The guilty man—"

"Does that mean, sir, that you won't take in Hill right away?" McCarty interrupted quickly.

"No. We can afford to wait a bit and I told you we would do so to see if the woman tried to communicate with him; we might as well kill two birds with one stone and we've proof now that she was an accessory both before and after the fact. We'll give her two or three days to try to get in touch with him and I'll notify you, anyway, before we decide to rearrest him."

"Thanks, sir." McCarty picked up the nine of diamonds from the desk. "If you don't mind I'll be taking this along, and, by the way, if you run across Mr. Douglas Waverly, take a look at his cigarette-case; 'twill be worth your while."

The inspector started slightly.

"You don't mean—see here, Mac, has that observation of yours anything to do with the cigarettes that we found on the supper-table and that piece of a broken amber holder?"

"Not that I know of, sir, but 'tis thin and shaped like this playing-card here and there are nine diamonds stuck in it; nine real diamonds arranged just like the spots on this card."

This time Inspector Druet's laughter was frank and hearty.

"You've still got your eyes out for something dramatic, haven't you? We're not living in dime novel times, Mac, and that card doesn't mean anything. It might have been lying on the floor there in the study for days; you saw yourself that the house hasn't been kept any too orderly since Mrs. Creveling has been away. Hill may have noticed it spattered with blood after he killed Creveling and slipped it under the table-cover without thinking; a man is usually dazed after a crisis like that and apt to do a lot of meaningless things in a mechanical sort of way as the records of the department show. You'll find there's some such simple explanation of it, and as for Waverly's cigarette-case—I suppose it's no use to talk to you, though. You'll be seeing nines of diamonds wherever you look until Hill goes to trial!"

McCarty's expression did not change as he slipped the card into his pocket once more.

"I'd like to see the rest of the pack this came from," he vouchsafed imperturbably. "Denny and I'll be getting on, then, sir. You'll hear from me if anything turns up."

The ride back up-town to McCarty's rooms was a long and tedious one, and the conversation between the two friends of a merely desultory nature, for Dennis was frankly sleepy and McCarty felt the reaction from the excitement of the chase. An unusual depression overshadowed his natural buoyancy of spirit and he was too fatigued mentally and physically to combat it.

The escape of the girl, Ilsa, from beneath his very hands had been bad enough, but the stand the inspector had taken in the case added tenfold to the difficulties before him and he could see no way out. Not for a moment would he accept the theory of Hill's guilt, despite the circumstantial evidence against him; slowly and almost without conscious reasoning an idea had been forming in his mind ever since he stood beside that disordered supper-table and nothing he had learned since had tended to eradicate it. Now with little added in support of it, it was gradually strengthening into conviction, albeit a vague and still obscure one.

"I'll go on back to the dormitory at the fire-house," Dennis announced as they left the car at last. "'Tis too late to be breaking into my room at Molly's, for that youngster of hers sleeps with both the ears of him wide open for fear he'll miss something and he'd scream fit to wake the dead. I'm on duty from nine to six again to-morrow and then off for twenty-four hours, so you'll find me if you want me."

"Come on up to my rooms instead," McCarty invited. "'Tis after three o'clock and you'll get little enough sleep as it is—by the sainted powers! There's a light in my windows! Thieves!"

He had halted in astonishment, but now he broke into a run and, with Dennis at his heels, sped to his own stoop. The entrance door stood wide, and still swiftly, but with a measure of caution, they stole up the stairs. There was no key in the door leading to McCarty's living-room, but it stood ajar and at the sight which met their gaze through the aperture McCarty halted again, this time in wordless indignation.

Wade Terhune's long, attenuated figure lay stretched out comfortably in the best armchair with a tattered dream book open and lying face downward across his knee and a sizeable heap of cigarette-ashes in a china tray upon the table beside him. While they stared, a delicate snore broke the silence and McCarty's face purpled.

That china tray had been his mother's;

its rightful place was upon the mantel and tobacco had never profaned it before! As to the dream book, its possession had been the one shameful but fascinating secret in McCarty's life; where had that meddlesome officious son-of-a-gun found it, and how had he got in?

"Is it boarders you're taking?" Dennis inquired innocently. "'Twould be well for you if you had as good bolts on your doors as the Hildreth woman had!"

"The gall of him!" McCarty found his voice and muttered wrathfully. "It would serve him right if I had him took up for breaking and entering!"

He pushed Dennis unceremoniously into the room and following closed the door with a resounding slam. Instantly with no trace of sleep in them Terhune's slightly prominent eyes opened wide and he smiled with perfect self-possession.

"There you are at last, my dear McCarty! And Riordan, too; so you are still hunting in couples? I have waited for you some little time."

He spoke chidingly, and McCarty's sandy mustache bristled.

"I was not expecting you, sir. May I ask how you got in?"

"Oh, I had no difficulty; both of your doors open quite readily with a skeleton-key, and of course I could not wait about outside." Terhune waved airily toward the nearest chairs and as though hypnotized Dennis sank into one of them, but McCarty ostentatiously removed the china tray from the table and substituted a familiar, battered one of brass liberally patterned with verdigris.

"I hope you made yourself at home, sir!" he remarked ironically, his grim eyes fastened on the book upon his uninvited guest's knee. "I see you found something to amuse yourself with while you waited!"

"Ah, this elemental but highly entertaining little forerunner of our friend Freud?" Terhune smiled again indulgently. "It is interesting to note how coincidentally the interpretations which mere superstition has placed upon the subconscious agree with the conclusions which science has reached."

He laid the book upon the table and McCarty hastily retrieved it.

"I don't know any guy named Frood," Dennis observed unexpectedly. "Does he say that dreams go by contraries, Mr. Terhune? I dreamed the other night that my step-brother over in the old country, that's drunk up two farms and about eight droves of pigs already, was strung up by a vig'lance committee and then cut down in time to save the worthless life of him—"

He paused to draw breath and McCarty took advantage of the opportunity to suggest:

"You wanted to see me very particularly, Mr. Terhune?"

"Yes, but merely to tell you that the little affair of Creveling is practically cleared up. It seemed to promise a nice little problem at first, but it proved to be a very simple matter, after all."

"Yes, sir?" McCarty replied cautiously. "So the inspector was saying down at headquarters just now."

"Druet?" Terhune frowned. "I cannot conceive how he could have obtained the data which has come into my possession! Even I would never have discovered the truth had it not been for my years of profound analytical study; an advantage which has not been attained by our excellent friend the inspector. It must have been sheer guess work on his part and yet I cannot imagine upon what grounds he could predicate the fact of George Alexander's guilt!"

"Alexander's—" McCarty seemed to find some difficulty once more with his speech and Dennis's eyes almost started from his head. "The inspector said nothing about Mr. Alexander!"

"Ah, ha! I anticipated as much!" Terhune rubbed his long, slim hands together in complacency. "He is upon the wrong track again, then, as usual. A good man, a steady, reliable plodder, but prone to stubborn prejudices and too obstinate to admit even to himself that he may be mistaken!"

There was just enough truth in this criticism of his superior to sting McCarty and he retorted loyally:

"He wasn't on the wrong track in the last case on which we all worked together, though, Mr. Terhune."

The criminologist flushed darkly.

"My own hands were tied by the lack of information which was wilfully withheld from me!" he asserted hastily. "But upon whom has Inspector Druet fastened his eye as a possible suspect in this case?"

"He'll probably tell you himself, sir, if you ask him," McCarty responded evasively. "Since you've come to me, may I ask what evidence you've got against George Alexander?"

"Absolutely conclusive evidence, my dear McCarty! Motive, opportunity, method, the means itself and the confirmation of his subsequent mental reaction as betrayed by his attitude."

"Everything but the proof!" murmured Dennis irrepressibly, but Terhune paid no attention to the remark.

"If you will both come to my rooms tomorrow evening at eight o'clock—or rather this evening, for it nearly dawn—you will learn all the details and unless I am very much mistaken you will hear an interesting confession. I have arranged a little experiment—"

"I'm sorry, sir," Dennis interrupted firmly. "If 'tis going to be anything like the last one you kindly invited me to, you'll have to excuse me. I'm not rightfully concerned with this case anyway, being dragged into it by Mac, here, just to keep him company, and I was not the same man for weeks after you made me sit in the dark and listen to the details of that murder all over again!"

"We'll both be there, sir!" McCarty declared. "If Mr. Alexander confesses I wouldn't miss being there for the world, and all! I suppose I may just as well lay off for the day and get some sleep?"

Terhune smiled patronizingly as he rose.

"You are skeptical as usual, McCarty, I see. By all means pursue your own line of investigation whatever it may be, if it amuses you, but you may take my word for it that you are wasting your time. I will leave you now, for I have many preparations to make."

"One minute, sir." McCarty hesitated. "Would you answer me one question that 'll maybe sound foolish to you, but that's been sticking in my crop for some time, nevertheless? You're speaking of the years of study you've had put me in mind of it that I've been intending to ask somebody who might know about such things."

"Certainly, my dear McCarty! I am only too glad to help you to improve yourself."

"Well, when you've come here on a serious matter like a murder case it seems a silly thing to talk about, but could you tell me, sir, if playing-cards have any meaning?"

"Of course," Terhune responded, amused. "From the ancient necromancers down through the centuries they have each possessed an especial significance of one sort or another to the gullible, but it is too lengthy a subject to go into now. Is there any particular card you have in mind at present?"

"Yes, sir. The nine of diamonds."

"Ah, that is another matter!" The interest quickened in Terhune's tone. "That card has a definite place in history. The Curse of Scotland."

"The curse of—what, sir?" McCarty exclaimed.

"That is the term which has been applied to the nine of diamonds for several centuries and there are various explanations for it, but it is not definitely known from what source it was originally derived." Terhune warmed to his subject. "In one ancient game called 'Pope Joan' it is the 'pope' and therefore the symbol of Antichrist; in another, 'comette,' it was the chief card. Comette is a game with terrific odds which was played for tremendously high stakes and ruined many of the best families in Scotland when it was in vogue there."

"I'd like to know how 'tis played," observed Dennis wistfully. "Any game that could separate a Scotchman from his money ought to make a clean-up among the Irish!"

"But has the nine of diamonds no other meaning, then?" asked McCarty in vast disappointment.

"Oh, yes," Terhune reassured him. "As a curse, it is supposed to go back to the nine lozenges on the Dalrymple arms, as the Earl of Stair was responsible for the massacre of Glencoe, but the most probable tradition concerning the origin of the sinister

name is that the Duke of Cumberland, while he was drunk and gambling on the night before the battle of Culloden, wrote across the face of the nine of diamonds the relentless order to his cohorts that no quarter was to be given to the enemy on the morrow."

"No quarter!" McCarty repeated and the old buoyant note had returned to his tired voice. "No quarter! That means that they were to be killed outright, with no mercy shown them, doesn't it? Thanks, very much, Mr. Terhune! I've prayed for a nine of diamonds many's the time to fill a straight, or a flush, or a full house, but never did I know before that there was a curse attached to it!"

"That is only ancient history, my dear McCarty!" Terhune paused in the doorway.

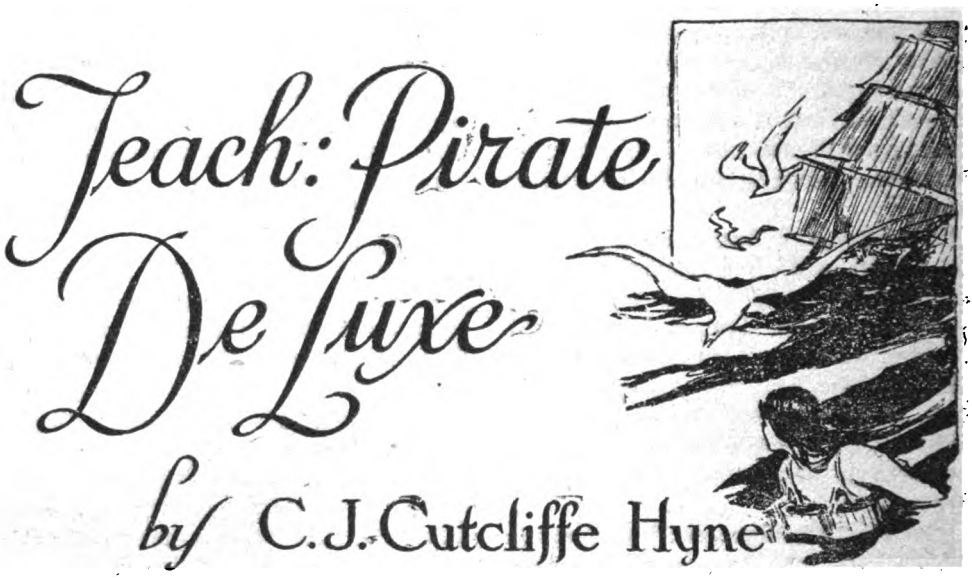
McCarty's face was very grave.

"Yes, sir, and history has a way of repeating itself, I've heard. 'Twas no fool who said that first."

When Terhune had departed he turned to Dennis, who was gazing wide-eyed at him, and added:

"No quarter; you got that, Denny? 'Twas a notice to Creveling that his time had come!"

This story will be continued in next week's issue of the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY, the consolidated title under which both magazines will appear hereafter as one.



THE first of C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne's series of stories detailing the adventures of "Teach: Pirate De Luxe," was printed in the ALL-STORY WEEKLY, issue of May 22. One will appear in each of our issues throughout the summer months. While each story is complete in itself, all are concerned with the adventures of that likable blackguard, Captain Teach—descendent of the notorious pirate Blackbeard—and charming Mary Arncliffe.

XIII—MISS ARNCLIFFE TRANSHIPS

THE day's sensation on board the Littondale was the announcement by Mr. William Pickles, the gunner, that his entire stock of parrots was for immediate sale.

Mr. Pickles was a notable trainer of parrots. "Birds and women," said his admirers of the navy's lower deck, "William could do anything with"; and in proof they called to witness his eight marriage certifi-

cates, and his long list of prize-winners at the Talking Parrot Show.

William's own modest explanation of these feats was that he took pains. He entirely denied that he'd " a way " with him.

" Steady industry," said William in true copybook style, " would tame the most refractory woman or parrot that ever wore feathers."

It was by no means all done by kindness. Not that he suggested unkindness for one moment. That only made them stubborn, and put things back.

" Make up your mind to it," counseled William, " set down to it steady, and you'll never have a failure with either, though I do admit that those gray birds you get from that merchant with the frilled ears who comes out of the Gambia can be very stubborn."

The parrots had been originally looted from the unfortunate S. S. Senegal which the Littondale captured between Sierra Leone and the islands on her homeward trip. (She'd H. E. the Governor of the Ivory Coast on board, it will be remembered, a man who ought to have provided a rich ransom and didn't.) Each bird was housed in its own proper green-painted gincase, which William had stenciled *Kate, Gladys, Agerness, Ermyntrude,* and so on, to avoid possibility of mistakes. They resided on the top of the after gun-house, and Admiral Teach admitted that they were of distinct value to the ship as camouflage.

Instructional classes were held whenever William was off duty and felt that way inclined, and it must be admitted that the pupils made marvelous progress. William certainly " had a way with him," though he would not own up to it.

Of course some of the fowls were high in the class and some low. Florrie, for instance, was preternaturally sharp, but soon forgot things. The thoughts of Gladys were always running astray to her beak, which was afflicated with a white powder. (Alas, how like her dear namesake in Devonport!) Ermyntrude was vain and could only be managed by flattery.

Jane Emma was slow, but never forgot anything once learned. " Good old Jane Emma," the gunner always called her, and reminded her that it was steady and true as kept a man's best affections. But they all progressed in their education. The Littondale's people marveled at the rate of their progress.

Perhaps I ought not to have used the word " classes," as the instruction given by Mr. William Pickles was half of it entirely individual. All the birds were taught to repeat the phrases: " Sweet William," " True William," and " I love William only," but after that they specialized.

The flashy Florry could rattle off " No lass in all the world like Fil-orry," quite correctly three times out of four. Gladys, with her flighty intellect, stuck to " Darling Gladys," when she felt so inclined. But the homely looking fowl with her tail in a perpetual moult could always be relied upon for an emphatic " *Good* old Jane Emma." Mr. Pickles took a lot of trouble over this particular member of his troupe.

But as Satan entered elsewhere to the confusion of industry and order, so did the Littondale's bibulous chief engineer, McDow, intrude into the aviary on the top of the after gun-house. As an austere Wee Free, McDow looked upon octrigamy with black disfavor, and in his cold calculating way set about to frustrate Mr. Pickles's knavish tricks with scientific skill.

He had been an old West Coast trader, McDow, till even the African climate got too warm for him, and had made no small part of his year's income in training parrots and thereafter selling them to the dealers in Liverpool and the Ratcliffe Highway. So when Mr. Pickles was below in his bunk, McDow made it his duty—when ship's business permitted—to be on topside with the parrots.

You perhaps jump to the idea that McDow taught the creatures to swear, having in mind his own elaborate equipment of profanity. But he did not do this.

Instead he drilled the Florry bird to murmur " Sweetheart Gladys," and the Gladys fowl to chuckle " Watch me kiss my Ermyntrude," with an osculatory sound illustrative of that sentiment. And so on. McDow had a neat and pawky humor packed away in his vinous recesses.

The result soaked in upon Mr. Pickles by

slow degrees, but once he had grasped it he saw that a dispersal of his collection was the only course. It is difficult, perhaps, to teach a parrot anything, but once the bird has learned, nothing short of wringing its neck will prevent an exhibition of its knowledge at those exact moments when a more tactful fowl would preserve a knowing silence.

As a social event the sale was an immense success, but its financial results were disappointing. It appeared that the much be-diamonded Mr. Evan Evans, the mate, was also a parrot-fancier, and, look you, these birds were bi-lingual.

Well, there was no getting over that. Mr. Pickles spoke the tongue of glorious Devon, and gave the fullest and broadest value to his vowels. To hear Agerness, for example, prate about her William, you could have sworn she had never been nearest West Africa than Portsmouth dockyard.

But when she got on to her lamentable remark about Sweetheart Gladys, you could almost smell the whisky on the accent. If I personally had been a buyer, I do not think this detail would have affected my bid. But you know the austerity of the higher branches of the fancy. Mr. Evans gave a wave of stout fingers, each begemmed to the knuckles, that meant finality.

"Impossible for the show-bench," was his expert verdict. And so the collection went at break-up prices, which, as the proprietor grimly remarked, would be so much the worse one of these days for eight poor little widows.

Now I bring this somewhat light episode into an otherwise serious history because a good deal hinged upon it.

Every-day life on the Littondale was undoubtedly dull. Captures, chases, retreats, and fights are not the prevailing rule with pirates. They are the glittering exceptions. And between while crews are wondering if they will ever be able to realize on their stored loot and live ashore in splendor ever afterward, according to promise, or if that detestable hanging will come along first.

One reads of the roaring, drunken times the picaroons of old enjoyed in the days of Teach the First. But under his great grandson's rule, where a man had to be practically a teetotaller, or go overboard, the Littondale's pirates were anything but jolly fellows—between excitements, that is.

So when Mr. Pickles's auction came along all hands set to work and extracted from it what gaiety they could.

The Littondale, with fires banked, was buttocking sullenly over weed-hung swells, awaiting a ship which was due to cross that particular steam lane in two days' time. A warm sea-mist enveloped her up to the crosstrees.

Even the water-logged wreck of her latest victim, a nitrate-laden bark that refused to sink, was out of sight, although they knew her to be only half a mile away. The men sweated with the heat, and with nothing to do would have brooded and grumbled.

So Admiral Teach welcomed Mr. Pickles's interlude, and did his best to make it lively. Mary Arncliffe, in her desperation, seized the opportunity.

On the nitrate bark, for reasons of his own which I have never learned, there voyaged one Julio Andorre, a priest. At least he said he was, and dressed as such, though to the extreme of grime and shabbiness, and passed muster with that merciless cross-examiner, Edward Teach.

He may have been a dubious specimen, but there was no other padre in sight, and Teach wanted one. So the man was transshipped to the Littondale, instructed to wash deeply and thoroughly, and given linen. Mary Arncliffe was notified of his arrival, and of the cleansing operations that were in progress.

"And now, my dear," the pirate concluded, "I am sick of dilly-dally. I bought you a ring, months ago. I have captured you no less than five elaborate wedding trousseaux to pick from, and though I should recommend the Doucet one, I won't impede your choice.

"I expect to be in action with a South American liner the day after to-morrow, about 7.50 A.M. But to-morrow's free. You've from now to then to get ready.

"The wedding will take place at twelve fifty precisely, ship's time, I shall give you a quarter of a million sterling in British five per cent war stock as a wedding

present to do whatever you like with. And here are a couple more necklaces to add to your collection of pearls.

"You've not done badly in pearls, Mary, since you've been with me. In spite of those you've chucked away on the Bahama Cays, I should say you are still the largest woman pearl-holder on earth to-day.

"You'd better go ahead and start on any preparations you've got to make. I'm sure you'll appear as a most sumptuous bride. You'd better not come on deck this afternoon. That octrigamist scoundrel, Pickles, is having a sale of parrot-fowl, and proceedings are apt to be ribald.

"Would you like to give me a pre-nuptial kiss? No? All right, then. I'll have six in its place later."

Mary went below, shivering and desperate. Marry Teach she would not. She did not deny that the man had been kind to her, and owned to his attractions. But his trade was horrible, horrible! And, as she kept on reminding herself, she was engaged to James Buckden. Besides, the modern woman in her declined to accept marriage merely as a result of capture.

Down in her stateroom, with its bunks and drawers full of costly clothes, and its cigar-boxes full of splendid pearls, she sat, pressing her temples for an idea—and suddenly got one.

Stowed in battens under the deck overhead was an ungainly thing of cork and canvas called a life-belt. Never so far had she handled it, in spite of all the hazards the Littondale had gone through.

Now she took it from its perch, swung it round her slim figure, and buckled the straps. It was an uncomely garment. But it meant keeping afloat in any sea without the exertion of swimming, or the strain of floating.

Well, she would rather drift away into the vacant spaces of the sea and die of cold and hunger and thirst than that Teach should get her.

She took off the life-belt, ran out into the saloon and up the companion, and peeped out on deck. The auction was in full blast forward, and the whole ship's company were gurgling and yelling with laughter.

Mr. William Pickles never could understand why his simple habit of marrying rather copiously should cause so much merriment among men whose ways were more normal and austere. So it can readily be understood why the stout gunner easily held the floor.

Mary fetched up her life-belt, went aft, found a length of rope, and passed the bight of this round a stay. She got over the rail, gripped both parts of the rope with hands and knees, and lowered herself toward the clear, deep-sea water. Then she halted, and for a dangerous but full two minutes hung there shivering.

A huge jellyfish, a thing as big as a hogshead, of rusty-red and livid-blue, with pale-blue chiffon streamers ten feet long, was navigating past the ship's flank, like some huge, gaudy umbrella opening and shutting.

Teach was above. She feared him desperately, but not till that beautiful, dangerous thing had flapped itself thoroughly out of reach did she dare to venture into the water.

When she did get there, she let go one end of the friendly rope, and pulled it after her, so as to leave no trace of descent, and then set herself methodically to kick ahead, away from the Littondale.

Now Mary Arncliffe was desperate, but she was by no means bent on drowning, or anything like it. Half a mile from the pirate ship the nitrate bark was still afloat and likely to remain so. Teach had refused to waste a shell on her.

"Let her float," he had said. "She'll lure other gulls for me to pick up."

So there she lollopped over the swells, with white and green water running in and out of her scuppers, an offense to the seaman's eye, and a roosting-place for birds.

Once in the water and away from the Littondale, with the warm, damp mist comfortably shielding her, Mary slipped off her hampering skirt. As the life-belt had plenty of floating power, she tucked this inside for future use, being a young woman, who, in spite of a W. A. A. C. training, still scorned lonely breeches for everyday wear, however dashing might be their cut.

But lack of the skirt distinctly improved her swimming speed.

From the Littondale's deck one could see the derelict, but Mary had taken a rough bearing before the mist came down, and by keeping her heels to the steamer's counter, was able to pick up the loom of the bark before she swam the pirate-ship out of sight.

She was by no means lonely in the sea. Bubbly, yellow weed floated in neat gardens on the ice-clear water, and fish swam in it, and came to inspect her. They were unpleasantly friendly fish, many of them, and of a sturdy size. Mary hoped there were no sharks about, and kept a scared eye roving for dorsal fins.

Sea-fowl also planed down out of the blue above the mist to inspect her, but for the most part swung upward again out of sight. Two big gulls, however, slid into the water and paddled alongside in convoy. Mary disliked their beaks, which were hooked like Admiral Teach's predatory nose.

It was a ticklish job climbing aboard the water-logged bark when she came to her, as the heavy hulk sucked and gurgled up and down in the sea like a pump-bucket in its pipe. But Mary managed it somehow, though she was half-choked with smother in the process.

"And there," said she, shaking a wet fist—in the direction where the Littondale was not—"I just see myself being married by a grubby, fake priest like that.

"Besides, of course, I'm going to marry Jim, when the time comes, if I do marry anybody at all. And, now then, how am I going to live on this nasty, wet thing before the next ship comes along the steam lane, as they call it, and picks me up?"

The bark was probably at her best never a very appetizing vessel, being on the Norwegian register, and although the war was over, still stripped of all decencies as a war-time precaution. The thrifty "Dutchman" does not take either his best anchor or his best table-cloth to sea with him if there is a chance of losing them. Moreover, as she was full of water practically to the deck-beams, her after cabin was afloat and uninhabitable.

She carried a top-gallant forecastle, which was dry. Mary sampled this. She had never been in a Scandinavian forecastle before, and there and then took a vow she never would enter one again. She was unladylike enough to spit as she came out.

She was not an expert at spitting, but she continued to do her best at it for some minutes. Ugh! the smell! Also although she was perfectly certain the things that hung and swung to the roll of the ship from the beams above in that forecastle, were merely oilskins, and not suicides, the idea of them was, well, also ugh!

There remained as a place of Christian residence the ship's galley, a rectangular box held down to the deck abaft the foremast by iron straps. The interior was exquisitely filthy; its smell was beyond words; but the seas somehow avoided it, and Mary felt desperately that she must have somewhere to harbor. So she took a firm grip on all her nicer feelings, and invaded it.

On the drastic spring-cleaning that followed I dare give no outline, being merely a man with a constitutional objection to being disturbed in my natural untidiness. Mary has put on record the fact that words could not describe its greasiness, its untidiness, and its general grubbiness; and I take her verdict without question.

I have looked in at the galleys of Norwegian windjammers myself, and seen as little as possible, because I knew I should have to eat their output day in and day out later on. To describe one in full detail would be beyond the effort of a polite pen.

Mary threw overboard, she washed, she scrubbed, and finally—with the late cook's knife-blade—she scraped, and by her faith in herself she removed mountains. A smell remained, which seemed to be concocted in equal parts of alligator, last month's whale, fulmar petrel, and backwoods Norwegian, with a dash of Chinaman thrown in. This refused eviction. But to the eye, at any rate, the galley seemed clean, and with that Mary rested content. She lit a fire in the stove and toasted herself and her garments in the pious hope that they and she would in time dry. She brewed herself tea, and baked scones, which she lubricated with unspeakable butter out of a yellow can. It

was a butter that advertised itself a fortnight ahead.

But Mary felt that the shipwrecked mariner nowadays must take gratefully what offers. That universal store, which the Swiss Family Robinson had to fall back upon, is entirely a thing of ancient fiction.

She would have taken the wrecked bark philosophically enough—so long as the weather kept fine—but for one thing, and that was the prese ce of sea-fowl. These gathered to the derelict from the four quarters of the heavens, perched on its yards, made unpleasant noises, and littered the decks and rails abominably. A dozen times during the first hour of her boarding Mary tried, without effect, to shoo them away. But only those nearest to her fluttered. The rest were brazen. And the way they stared with glass, beady eyes, was—she felt—rankly impertinent.

They had the manners, she felt, of Huns. But even when she called them Huns, they did not budge. They had the thick skin of the Hunnish race.

"All right," said Mary, "I'll strafe you, before I'm through, you unmannerly brutes, in spite of pleasant memories of your lady cousins and their housekeeping on Maryland Cay. For the present I'm busy—cooking scones. I wonder if this condensed milk is what a white woman ought to touch?"

There was a cluttered store-room at the back of the galley full of boxes and bags, and presently after finishing her scones and tea, Mary's housekeeping instincts set her to taking stock. Faugh! What weird tastes in food sailors had, especially Norwegian sailors.

However, unpleasant though the selection might be, there was plenty here to keep her from starvation for long enough. But some of the stuff was obviously useless to her, and if enough was removed she had an idea of making the store into a bedroom.

Well, here was a bag of oatmeal, obviously furred and mildewed. That certainly could go. And this case of bottles that looked like lime-juice? Ah, they would be useful.

She dragged the moldy meal-sack out on deck, and the birds flapped and planed down to it in blue and white clouds. Then she got a corkscrew from the galley, opened one of the bottles, and took a good sip.

I ask you to picture Miss Mary Arncliffe tackling her first mouthful of that abominable Norwegian spirit, aquavit!

When she had finished coughing and choking, she carried the offending bottle outside, shoved away the birds, and emptied its contents over the oatmeal. She did the same with the remaining eleven bottles of the case. That, she thought, would disgust even a seagull, and presently she would be left alone in peace.

But the gulls leaped to the feast, and presently Mary was crying at the discovery that she had made a great number of them extremely tipsy.

"Oh!" she sobbed. "How disgusting of me! I had no idea the beastly stuff would act like that! I thought it would merely drive the creatures away. And that old herring-gull there, that's tipped back on to to his tail, is actually making a speech! Wouldn't Edward laugh if he could see me!"

("Edward," who presumably was Admiral Teach, might have laughed. Miss Arncliffe was probably more competent to judge upon that point than I am. But as a fair-minded historian I may point out that the pirate would have been extremely gratified if he had known that his late captive was thinking of him by anything so intimate as a Christian name.

She had always held him at more than arm's-length. She had never shown him a decent civility. And really, for a pirate, he had been remarkably forbearing and generous with her. That at least must be acceded to him.)

It was a boat's crew from the Brazilian cruiser Jao Geraes that waked Mary from her beauty sleep that night.

They had boarded the derelict without much noise—or at any rate, the noise of the sea and the repentant sea-fowl drowned theirs.

They invaded the galley, armed excessively. They struck matches. Their complexions varied from brown-boot color to austere-black. They all of them talked

at prodigious speed, presumably in Portuguese, but never in unison.

Mary knew no Portuguese, and after listening politely for four minutes, concealed a yawn behind delicate fingers, and sat up in bed.

"I am sure," she remarked, "you are all saying something very kind, only unfortunately my education was a narrow one. I speak English, and have a workable knowledge of French, but that's the end. Can any of you translate?"

They dropped their chatter and listened attentively. At the end, after some active consultation, a small, yellow man was thrust forward. He fingered his knife nervously, and delivered himself of speech.

"You notta Dutch woman, *senhorita?*"

"Nothing of the kind. Quite English."

"Ingleesa, eh? But this a Dutch ship? Got Dutch smell."

"I can't help that. It isn't mine, anyway."

This took some digesting, but after a strenuous consultation the interpreter took up the tale:

"Whata for those fellows they left you when they left shipa?"

"They didn't. I swam here."

"You—er—swama? How swama?"

Mary demonstrated.

The yellow man grinned. "Savvy. Where you swima from? Inghilterra?"

"Part of the way. I did the rest of the trip on a steamer, and didn't hurry over it."

But this again was past the interpreter's art, and once more came discussion. Mary let them go on, without suggestion. She did not confess so much, even to herself, but just then she was seized with an impish wish to "put on time," as children call it.

Of course I am not going to suggest for a moment that she was anxious to give the hated Teach opportunity to get away, but—well, there you are.

At last decision was arrived at. "We fetch officer," the little yellow man announced. "You sitta here. Slow he come."

It was indeed a case of "slow he come," and Mary wondered if all officers on Brazilian men-o'-war go to bed at nights like decent people, and leave the common sailors to look after the ship.

Also when he did come he was a tall man of Nubian coloring. But he spoke public school English as though it was his mother-tongue.

"Good evening. May I introduce myself? Captain Jacob Smith, of the Brazilian navy. No reason at all to ask who you are. I can assure you the various portraits of Miss Mary Arncliffe have taken up a very considerable space in the press of the entire world during these last few months. I like that one where you are sitting on the tail-board of a lorry in Flanders best."

"I never saw it."

"Possibly not. It is a snap-shot taken by a Frenchman. An astonishing lot of people seem to have photographed you surreptitiously from time to time, Miss Arncliffe.

"Now Admiral Teach has always successfully dodged the camera. And that reminds me. Where is Teach? Of course you have him to thank for being here?"

"I suppose so."

"And the brute marooned you here to starve?"

"He did nothing of the kind."

"Eh? I beg your pardon?" Captain Jacob Smith screwed an eye-glass into his black face and stared. "I flattered myself I was the welcome rescuer of beauty in distress."

"You are—I mean, I'm not—that is, I can't help my looks. But really I am very glad to see you."

They both laughed at this, and Mary decided that Captain Smith of the Brazilian navy was an extremely nice man, though he was undeniably a brunette.

"Have you been here long?" he asked.

"Oh, an hour or two."

"What! Do you mean we've got Teach close to us?"

"Perhaps time has passed away more quickly than I guessed. I've had a lot to do tidying up, and that makes the hours pass. I'm afraid the Littondale will be far enough away by now."

"Um!" said Captain Smith, and held up a black hand to his face, possibly because his mouth twitched. "If one may venture

to comment, you don't show any signs of—er—torture. May one ask if Teach treated you decently?"

"Admiral Teach is a gentleman," said Mary shortly, "whatever else he may be. Of course he treated me well. I may say I came away from the Littondale of my own accord. He doesn't know I'm here."

This time Captain Jacob Smith removed his polite hand and showed two rows of ivories in a frank grin.

"Now that's doosid lucid of you, Miss Arncliffe. However, you won't want to stay on here, I suppose. You must come across to my cruiser, and we'll try and make you comfortable, though if we have to stay long chasing Teach in these grilling seas, you'll get as sunburnt as I am. As we row across, perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what you know of Teach's plans, so that I can be after him."

"Plans! Do you think he'd tell me his plans?"

Captain Smith ventured no opinion. The sea mist was growing thicker than ever, and he was singly anxious just then to get back to his own ship and go to bed.

"Well," he said, "we may as well be jogging. We've caught your parrot."

"My parrot!"

"Yes, isn't it yours? It speaks English—or is it Scotch? Not Norwegian, anyway. Quartermaster, bring that bird."

Whereupon a gray African parrot was added to the assembly and forthwith greeted Mary with a request to "Kiss William; sweet, sweet William," and cocked a knowing head on one side to note the result. Thereafter it declaimed: "I love Gladys, kiss Agerness, tickle Fil-lorry," and showed how it cuddled its Jane Emma with an upraised wing.

"It isn't mine," said Mary.

"No? Then the Jao Geraes will annex it as spoils of war and adopt it as a ship's pet. You have no idea how it got here, of course?"

"Flew, I suppose."

"It must have done. Clever of it to have done that and with a clipped wing, too, through this heavy mist. By the way, there was a luggage label on its leg with some sort of a message written on it. Quartermaster, where's that letter?"

Don't run away too far, dear.
Edward.

"I wonder what that can mean and who it is from," said Captain Smith. "Who's Edward, anyway?"

"I wonder," said Mary. She was also deciding that Captain Jacob Smith, of the Brazilian navy, was as black inside as he was out. And she had really liked the man at first!

The parrot, however, insisted upon having the last word.

It cleared its throat with a preliminary *gabble-gabble*, words which possibly were native to its home forest on the Gambia.

Then slowly and distinctly it announced: "Mary loves Edward. Kiss Edward, Mary."

Captain Jacob Smith, of the Brazilian navy, appeared to relish the situation most thoroughly.

IRISH LAMENT

BY KATHRINE BOLENIUS RITCHIE

I SEE your smile in the sunshine,
Your eyes in the larkspur's blue,
Your lips in the red, ripe cherry,
Your hair in the chestnut's hue,
Your grace in the flight of a swallow,
Your tears in the April rain;
But God has called and you've answered—
I'll never see *you* again.

Beware of the Bride

by Edgar Franklin

Author of "Don't Ever Marry," "His Word of Honor," "The Wicked Streak," etc.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MORE EVIDENCE.

AN unconscious woman, surely, cannot formulate and execute any definite design. Notwithstanding this, the fainting Sally, to Thomas's mind, seemed to be doing her best to run true to the dreadful theme of this evening.

With a fluttering sigh, her head nestled more confidingly upon his shoulder, sending a thrill of pure fright through Thomas Henning as he glanced toward the open corridor door and down at Sally again.

Moreover, she was a splendid, firmly built girl, by no means stout, yet far from the featherweight class; viewed from that open doorway, the amount of force that Thomas's arms were necessarily exerting in the effort to keep Sally from sliding to the floor must have looked like a passionate embrace!

All in all, it was a really hideous situation and Thomas had been fully fed up with hideous situations since dinner-time! His eyes shot about, like the eyes of a hunted animal, seeking the best place whereupon to deposit Sally Noble while he went for water and smelling-salts. And the scared gasp of a criminal caught red-handed left young Mr. Henning—for in the very doorway of the place stood William Emerson and Dolly herself!

There was a cynical smile upon William's lips. Miss Hayes was blanching swiftly; her eyes closed for a moment and then opened again, to stare the harder in the apparent effort to make sure that they had seen aright.

"Are you satisfied now?" William inquired.

"I—see!" Dolly breathed.

"Is Mary vindicated?"

"Yes, Mary's vindicated!" Miss Hayes conceded, dully. "I—want to speak to him!"

"Come in," William suggested.

"I won't go—into that polluted place!" said Dolly. "Tell him to—come out!"

William Emerson's lips curled again as he looked young Mr. Henning up and down.

"You heard the lady?"

"I—can't come now! I—" was the best that Thomas could do.

"Henning, the woman can spare you for three or four minutes!" William said, disgustedly. "We'll wait for you in your flat!"

He took the arm of Dolly Hayes and walked her straight through the door across the hall. Thomas came to life with a crash! They were in there now—in there with Mary! They were in the flat which Emerson seemed to feel it necessary to search from end to end at every visit!

Thomas looked about wildly. It was brutal, of course, but the couch over there would have to do its best for Sally, until he himself was free to give her further attention. Teeth grinding, he dragged the fainting girl across the boudoir; with a

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callous thud, he dropped her; with a swish, he caught up her feet and disposed her, at least, in a horizontal position. Then Thomas left the flat of his friend and hurtled back to his own apartment!

They had gone no farther than the living-room, That was much. They were standing there now, and Dolly, however, dazed for a little, seemed to be recovering herself rapidly. She looked steadily at Thomas as he entered.

"Don't speak to me!" she said.

"I—" Thomas essayed disobediently.

"No, please! You have a lie ready; I understand that, Mr. Henning. You're brutally stupid enough to try something like that. I do not wish to listen; I want you to listen to me!"

"Well, if—"

"Dry up, Henning!" William Emerson snapped, angrily. "You keep your mouth shut and hear her, or I'll shut it for you! I'd like the chance to do that!"

His fists doubled. Thomas nodded numbly.

"Consider that I have dried," he said, with a weak, dizzy smile. "Go on."

"I want to say only this," Miss Hayes informed him crisply. "Before—over there—I was angry, when I thought—never mind what I thought. What I mean to say is that it was just a girl's natural anger because the—the man she fancied she loved was flirting with some one else.

"That could have been forgotten and reconciled; this can't ever be! You know that, of course."

Thomas opened his lips.

"I don't know how most women feel at a time like this," Dolly pursued, very steadily and with a distinctly wicked glint in her eye. "Perhaps the usual thing is to forget it and forget the man and the injury and everything.

"But I know how I feel! I feel that if you were—were drawn and—and quartered, it wouldn't be punishment enough, Mr. Henning! And if I know my father, he'll feel that, too, and he'll act accordingly!"

Thomas did not contradict.

"So I'm going home now and tell him!" Miss Hayes concluded simply. "Will you take me down and find my car, Will?"

She turned her back upon her late fiance. Young Mr. Emerson offered his arm—and Dolly was taking it and stepping daintily toward the door—yes, and now the door was closing upon them and—they were gone!

There was a table beside Thomas. He caught at the edge of it and steadied himself.

"Oh, I'm glad!" came brokenly from beyond the curtains.

"Er—what?" faltered Thomas.

"I am! I'm glad!" repeated the hysterical tone. "You deserve it—you deserve all of it! You do!"

Thomas did not release his grip on the table edge.

"Why, Mary?" he asked, and his voice seemed to come from a great distance.

"Because you—you came back here without my clothes!" Mary panted. "I saw you! I saw you when you came in and you were carrying nothing! You did that deliberately!"

"No, Mary," sighed Thomas.

"Yes, you did! You don't want to get them for me! I heard you go in, over there! And you came back without my things, because you—you want to keep me here! You—you—"

Thomas smiled wanly and shook his head toward the curtains.

"No, Mary," he repeated, "you wrong me about that, too. There are quite a number of things I want just now, but keeping you here isn't one of them!"

Through the curtains the towsled head appeared, eyes flashing ominously.

"Then why don't you go back and get them for me?" their owner demanded.

"I'm going to do that, right away," said Thomas Henning, with pathetic eagerness. "I can get 'em, too, if I hurry. I'd have had them before, if it hadn't been for—you wait there, Mary, and keep out of sight!"

He pushed away from the supporting table and steadied himself. For the moment he seemed to have forgotten the unconscious lady across the hall; he remembered her now—but not as a medical possibility. It was only as a glowing opportunity that Sally's fainting spell appealed to Thomas just then. It had looked like a

really good, dependable fainting spell, one of the kind that last five or ten minutes at least.

Even two more minutes was enough! Thomas swallowed and turned toward his doorway—and paused as the steps echoed from the corridor—and stopped to smile strangely, sickeningly, directly at Mrs. Noble herself, as she walked into the apartment.

She was pale, but too obviously conscious once more and fully capable of motion. In one hand she carried a black grip, her fingers clutched so firmly about the handle that the knuckles showed as dead-white spots.

"I want just one more minute of your time, Tom," she said coldly, echoing a sentiment that had been expressed not five minutes ago in this very room. "I'm going to my father now."

"Er—why?"

"Because a real man can handle these matters," Mrs. Noble explained. "I want to tell him the whole truth and I want that from you! You'll have to tell it sooner or later, you know, in the divorce court; you will make matters easier for all of us by telling me now."

"Well?" sighed Thomas.

"What became of Mary Emerson after she—er—hung those things in the closet?" Sally demanded. "She's not hidden in the flat; I've just looked in every corner. Well?"

"I don't know, Sally."

"You do know! You know all about it and you're trying to protect *him!* Tell me this, then: I know that she was there and I know that they have gone away together, but—have they actually eloped?"

"I am utterly certain that they have not!" said Thomas, as his steadying brain comprehended the black grip. "What's in the bag, Sally? Are you leaving home, too?"

Mrs. Noble's nostrils dilated momentarily.

"I'm going back to my parents—yes," said she. "And that bag holds the evidence—Mary's wardrobe! Well? Where have they gone, then?"

Young Mr. Henning's brain cleared more swiftly. That bag was going out of the Cypria Apartments now! Mary's clothes were going to Sally Noble's paternal roof; and apart from the commotion they were bound to create upon their arrival, the fact that they were leaving the building now—

"Sally Noble! What in the name of common sense is the matter with you?" Thomas exploded. "Are you absolutely set on wrecking your own life and Mary's and everybody else's?

"Can't you reason or think or do anything but plunge headlong into scandal and destruction? Can't you see that you're making a whole mountain range out of an extremely small ant-hill?"

"What?"

"You're doing precisely that! Mary may have been in your flat. If she was, it was doubtless with Nelly, your sister-in-law. Nelly was down here earlier in the evening."

"Are you sure?"

"Good Lord! Go out and ask the elevator-boy!" Thomas said impatiently. "Nell was here and she's gone out now with the Motor Corps and—well, that's exactly where Mary has gone, too, of course!

"That's why her clothes were in there, Sally. She rushed over here when the call came, with Nelly, and changed to her uniform rather than go all the way home!"

"Where has the Motor Corps gone?" Mrs. Noble inquired with justified suspicion.

"To a flood somewhere down the valley—that's all I can tell you. You can get the details, I presume, by telephoning their headquarters. And—"

"And how did Mary's uniform—if she ever had one, and I can't seem to remember her as a member of the corps—how did Mary's uniform come to be in *my* home?"

"It was placed there for the sole purpose of exciting you, Sally," Thomas said, with what was almost a sneer. "Or, again, it is just *barely* possible that Mary may have sent a messenger to her home and had it brought down. Such things are done once in a while, you know."

He smiled and relaxed. While seeming to gaze at the picture on the far wall, he

studied Sally Noble. And Sally was beginning to believe!

"So you'd better hurry on home now and start the biggest excitement Braydon has seen in some time," he concluded. "It 'll be wonderful for you and Peter and Mary and her husband will probably sue you for slander and defamation of character and Heaven knows what else—but just go, Sally, while you're good and mad and capable of doing the mischief!"

His words were sinking deeper. Thomas, with a kindly, almost a paternal smile, came to Mrs. Noble's side.

"Sally, dear, don't be so absurd," he said gently. "You know what a good old soul Pete is and how incapable he is of anything like that. Don't you?"

"I've—always thought—"

"And you were right! So, instead of starting something that nobody can stop, why not go home and sit down and calm down for a little. Peter himself is bound to turn up inside of an hour now—he never works after midnight. Have you phoned the office?"

"No."

"Do it. And if he isn't there, call up the Motor Corps headquarters and get the facts about that hurry-call. And give me that bag, Sally," said Thomas, detaching it gently from her fingers and setting it upon the chair at his side. "Not to mention the slight inconvenience it may make for Mary when she gets back, that thing's like dynamite in your hands just now."

His smile grew still more kindly and patient. He patted Sally Noble's shoulder. Looking at him just then, one might have fancied that Thomas was a doting parent, seeking to quiet a wayward child.

Nor was that quick, doubtful, upward glance of Sally's altogether unlike the glance of a wayward child, almost, not quite, convinced of her waywardness.

"Tom, if—if you're not telling me the truth—" she began.

"Sally, how in the world *can* I be telling you anything but the truth, so far as I know it or can guess it?" Thomas laughed, desperately. "I don't know anything about your husband or Mary to-night, except that I'd stake my life that they're not together. I'm trying to keep you from wrecking your own life and Peter's. Well?"

A final quarter-minute Mrs. Noble hesitated, gazing at the bag. Then she looked up suddenly.

"I'll see if I can get Peter at the office," she said. "May I use your phone?"

"You may *not*, Sally!" smiled Thomas. "You may have sized me up for a villain this evening, but I'm really a very punctilious person and I'm keeping bachelor hall here at present. Any of that wild crowd across the street may happen in here to see me at any moment, and it would look just a trifle odd if they found you here. You go home and do your telephoning there."

"I—yes. Very well," said Sally Noble, she started for the door.

"And if you don't get Peter at first, stick to it," Thomas advised. "It's a good deal of a job getting down-town numbers at night, Sally."

"I know," said Mrs. Noble.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MARY'S WISH COMES TRUE.

SHE was on her way! Aye, and she was leaving behind her that precious black grip which meant so much to Mary and to Thomas Henning! The glorious certainty went through Thomas with a giant throb. Her back was toward him, of course, and she could not see.

His face widened into the smile of a man who glimpses Heaven! His mouth opened joyfully, for an inaudible cheer. His hands flew up in exultation. He—why, he was facing the reflection of Sally Noble's countenance in the accursed mirror over there!

Thomas subsided suddenly. Mrs. Noble did not subside. With the speed of a tigress she whirled about—she was past him—she had recaptured the bag and was clutching it to her bosom, as she backed toward the door and panted:

"Oh! I was right! I *was* right! And you nearly talked me into leaving it behind, didn't you! You all but talked me out of the very evidence I—oh, you beast! You beast!"

"Sally!" gasped Thomas. "I—"

"Don't come near me! If you lay one finger on me, Tom Henning, I'll claw your eyes out!" said Mrs. Noble. "I'll scream until every soul in this house is in here! Don't you move! Don't—ah!"

Fumbling behind her, her fingers had found the door and opened it. With a whisk and a terrible, triumphant laugh, Mrs. Noble was in the corridor and the door had slammed after her.

The ears of Thomas Henning caught the sound of her running feet. They reached the stairway and, in three seconds, their echo died out.

That was all.

Behind Thomas, the curtains stirred suddenly. The knight in armor, her helmet in the crook of her arm, tottered into the living-room.

"Where is it?" she cried.

"Where's—what?"

"The bag she had—the bag with my clothes!"

"She took that with her!" Thomas sighed.

"She didn't! I saw it—I was looking when you put it on the chair there!" Mary cried hysterically. "Where is it now? What—"

Thomas dropped into his largest chair and groaned; this was largely because his knees, temporarily, refused to support him longer.

"Mary, if you had kept on looking, you'd have seen her remove it from the chair," he explained, with an exhausted smile. "I—I thought I had you fixed up that time."

In the knight's thunderstruck eyes understanding was growing.

"She—did really take it!" she gasped.

"She did—really, Mary!" said Thomas.

The lips of the unfortunate knight began to tremble. With a considerable rattle the knight collapsed into a chair of her own.

"Then—then they're gone! I mean, she took them away altogether!" she faltered.

"Yes, but don't let it worry you, my child," Thomas managed. "We're not so much worse off than we were before she came."

"You're not!" Mary quavered. "But I—oh, I thought that time—I thought that time that it—it was all right! I—"

Her eyes closed. Her beautiful face puckered. Two more of the gigantic tears in which Mary seemed to specialize this evening rolled down her cheeks. Thomas forced himself out of the chair and to her side.

"There, there, there, Mary!" he said, quite mechanically. "Don't start the weeping again!"

"I'll weep if I want to!" Mary flared. "Don't you dare tell me not to weep!"

"All right, then, weep if—"

"I wish I'd never seen you! I wish I'd never been born!" Mary pursued somewhat irrelevantly.

"Yes, Mary," Thomas agreed.

"And I wish that armor—I wish the fool that made this armor had—had died before he began it!" the bride stated further, and with an excess of feeling. "If I ever—ever see the last of this horrible suit!"

"You will, very shortly, Mary," Thomas fairly purred.

The iron hands gripped his own, frantically.

"Tom, if I ever get out of this thing—it's the only thing I want in the whole world, just to get out of this armor! I'd give ten years of my life just to see the last of this dreadful—"

"Mary, my child, you'll be out of it just as soon as we find something else for you to—" Thomas began—and started up as the sudden whine of the buzzer sounded in the room.

"Let me get back there!" Mary hissed.

"No time now," Thomas mumbled, and snatched the helmet from her and gently placed it on her head once more! "That's Sally again, and—I've got an idea! Wait! Play drunk again! I'll—"

Almost nimbly, the great idea half-formed even now, he stepped to his door. He smiled, too, quite brilliantly. He would whisper to Sally, indicating the supposed male friend in armor; he would accept the grip and thank her for bringing it, thus accounting for her visit; and she would understand. She—

"Good evening, Mr. Henning!" said one

Kratz, a costumer, and stepped into Thomas's home.

"Why, Kratz!" gasped Thomas.

"Y'ain't got it on yet! Thank the Lord for that, anyway!" said the costumer, who was altogether breathless. "He's back! I gotta have it quick!"

"Who's—back?"

"The gent that rented that armor suit, Mr. Henning!" Kratz puffed. "Listen, Mr. Henning! Please don't waste no time with jokes, if that's what you're doing. Letting you have that suit put me in a pretty awkward position, I'm telling you! I had to spend two dollars for a taxi to get up here quick.

"Where you got it? Y'ain't unpacked it yet, huh?"

"The—"

"*Hey!*" cried Mr. Kratz, as he perceived the figure in the armchair. "What's the big idea? You letting somebody else wear that suit? Well, wotta you know about that!

"I wouldn't 'a' thought that o' you, Mr. Henning—a man with your money splitting the expense of a costume at the cheap rate I hire 'em out! Well, that don't make no difference, anyhow. Hey, young feller! Get out of that suit!"

He advanced upon the chair. He laid a rough hand upon a shoulder-plate—and Thomas leaped forward and snatched it away.

"Here! Don't do that!" he cried. "You can't have that suit!"

"Why not?"

"This friend—the man I lent it to—the man in there—he's sick!"

"Sick with what?" Kratz asked pointedly.

"They think it's smallpox!" said Thomas. "We're waiting for the doctor now!"

"They think—what?" gasped Kratz.

"Smallpox!" repeated Thomas. "Get out of here, Kratz. It's too bad—I understand that, but—"

"It's too bad you couldn't 'a' picked the kind o' guy that would fall for that smallpox stuff!" Kratz said, roughly. "Listen, Mr. Henning! I wouldn't 'a' thought this o' you, but it don't make no difference if this man's got leprosy! *I gotta have that suit!*"

"I tell you—"

"You told me already. It didn't get you nowhere," said the costumer. "We made a bargain when you rented that costume, Mr. Henning, that you was to give it back in case the gent that rented it first showed up and wanted it. Well, he just got back to Braydon and he's figuring on going to that ball and getting into the fun before it's time to unmask, and some o' the things that gent said to me would 'a' been grounds for murder—and he was right!

"You help your friend out of that costume and save me that much time, anyway. Where's the box it came in?"

He looked Thomas straight in the eye. Thomas, however, was calm again. There are some things that simply cannot be; this was one of them.

"Talk yourself hoarse, Kratz!" he said. "You can't have it!"

"Say, if you—"

"Let it go at that, Kratz! I've explained. You can't have it. What are you going to do about it?"

His tone grew almost supercilious. He smiled at the humble costumer, who narrowed his eyes and gave an ugly smile of his own.

"Say, listen!" said he. "You want to know what I'm going to do? I'm going to get that armor suit in less'n two minutes. And if it ain't handed to me in that time, I'm going down-stairs and get a cop, and between that cop and me, we're going to pull my property off this guy and I'll take it to the gent that rented it. See?

"There's your ten dollars! Take it! Now, what legal standing you got?"

"I—er—don't know—" mused Thomas.

"And I wanter tell you that the cop 'll be my kid brother, that's on duty outside that damned ball!" Kratz said in conclusion. "And he's the kind of cop that 'd rather get into trouble than eat! Well? What about it? Do I get it without the fight?"

He waited through fifteen terrible seconds. He grunted and started for the door. He was a vulgar person and very much excited, and as a matter of fact he did have

a brother on the Braydon police force, Thomas recalled. And he was going now and—

"Wait, Kratz!" Thomas said quickly. "I—you shall have it! I'll withdraw my trade from you hereafter, but—"

"I don't want your trade! I want that suit! I want it quick!" said Kratz. "Well?"

Thomas Henning tucked his hand under the mailed arm and lifted. The armor rose unsteadily.

"You come in here and I'll help you out of it—er—Jimmy!" he said faintly. "It's too bad, but—you see how this clown feels about his trash."

"Yes, and never mind this clown stuff! Never mind this trash stuff!" advised the costumer. "I make a bargain with a man and I stick to it! Guys like you make a bargain and it don't mean no more to you than—"

He ended with a snort. They had passed the music-room curtains now; they were in the pretty little apartment itself.

"You'll have to do it, Mary!" Thomas whispered simply, brokenly. "That's the box under the piano."

"I won't!" gasped Mary Emerson.

"Do you want that roughneck to tear it from you?"

"Can't you—can't you thrash him? Can't you—knock him senseless?" Mary hissed, quite insanely.

"Not without bringing the whole world in here to find you, after all," sighed Thomas. "It's awful. I know that as well as you do, but we'll have to get rid of him this way.

"Put the stuff in the box and shove it through the curtains when it's ready! I—I wish I could give my right arm to save you this, Mary," said Thomas, quite sincerely, "but it's the only thing to do now!"

He parted the curtains and left suddenly, closing them after him. He thrilled sickeningly, too. Either Mary would or Mary would not comply. One of these things was worse than the other; Thomas could not decide which.

He glowered at Kratz, perched on the edge of a chair, with his uncouth chin set. He turned his back on Kratz—and Mary was beginning to rattle, in there! Mary was gasping audibly, but she also gave forth rattles of some promise, as regarded the peace of the immediate future!

Yes, and as the seconds passed, a succession of thuds told that the pieces of armor were being dropped into the box. Silently, Thomas counted them. He also closed his eyes instinctively, as if to shut out the vision of Mary, in there! He listened again; there was a long scrape now and—yes, the infernal box was being pushed through the curtains!

Kratz darted forward and snatched it up. Kratz leered triumphantly at Thomas Henning.

"I ain't going to make no comments on the way you've acted, Mr. Henning. I ain't got no time!" he stated. "But I got my own idea of a guy like you that 'll save money splitting the expense of a costume when—"

"Kratz!" gasped Thomas. "Get out of here or I'll—"

"No, you won't do anything at all!" the rough person laughed, roughly, as he jerked open the door. "I got no time to bother with you; you made trouble enough for me. I got what I came after and you got your ten dollars back! You wanter be glad I didn't—"

He slammed the door on his own sentence. He, too, was gone!

And with him had gone what, for Mary Emerson, corresponded to the outer garments so much insisted upon by convention, during these last few centuries!

Thomas caught the back of a chair this time, to steady himself. Why, poor little Mary was in there now with—with whatever she had worn under the armor and nothing more! She was here, in his flat—Bill Emerson's bride, *like that!*

It speaks well for Thomas that he turned first a brilliant red and then a perfectly snow-white. He fumbled his way around the chair and sat down, staring, limp!

"Tom!" said what sounded like the voice of a dying young woman, in the region beyond the curtains. "I—I—"

"Yes, I—understand, Mary!" Thomas replied, with some difficulty. "Don't—er—elaborate. I know."

"Yes, but I—I—" the voice tried again.

Thomas laid a hand upon his burning forehead and pressed as he nodded.

"I know, Mary—the armor," he muttered. "You got your wish!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CLANS GATHER.

ACROSS the street, in that abode of merriment, the Thorndyke mansion, the band blared crazily into the latest jazz spasm. A burst of laughter floated to Thomas, too, causing him to look up dazedly and to blink.

Those were real sounds; how happy they all were over there, to be sure, in their joyous task of burying the hatchet and advancing the peace and good will of Braydon, and all that sort of thing!

Yes, how genuinely happy everybody was this evening—everybody, that is, save the few whom Mary's strange influence seemed to have touched! It was an absurd thought, of course. It brought a scowl to Thomas's brow and a grunt from his lips. Instead of staring at the floor and thinking such rot, he ought to—

"Tom! Are you still there?" hissed from the curtains.

"Yes, I'm still here!" Thomas confessed.

"Well? Well? What are you doing?" the voice demanded.

"I was just sitting still for a second," Thomas said, and rose suddenly and with a sigh. "I—"

"Don't you dare! Don't you dare come near me!" the bride screamed faintly, from her music-room seclusion.

"I'm not coming near you. Don't be frightened, Mary. It's all horrible, of course, but it could be worse."

"*How?*" gasped the bride.

"If everybody who had any intention of calling hadn't called already, somebody might drop in and insist on going through the place again, Mary," Thomas smiled sadly. "We're done with that, anyway, and now—"

"Now you're standing there and smiling and not doing anything at all!" whizzed furiously through the curtains.

"If you'll tell me just what—"

"*Get me some clothes!*" Mary strangled!

"Just give me a minute and let me think which girl is most likely to—"

"No! No! Don't stop to think!" the bride begged chokingly. "Every time you think you get us into worse trouble. I don't care whose they are—I don't care what they are! Give me some of your own clothes!"

"I haven't any here, Mary."

"What?"

"Mary, I've just been sleeping here. Both my trunks and all my stuff are up at the boarding-house. Why, the business-suit I wore to-day, even, isn't here!

"Rosenbaum took it, to press it, when I was dressing for the affair and it won't be back here till seven in the morning. Anyway, it's a pronounced check and you couldn't wear it without—"

"All right, then! Don't waste time telling me about it! Sally's gone. Break in that door and get me some of her clothes!"

"I will, Mary," Thomas said, resignedly, "if you'll just calm down first! I appreciate the whole thing fully; it's like something in a nightmare. But the real trouble is all over now. If we keep cool, we'll have the way out in a few minutes."

"Well, I wish it wasn't over—for you!" Mary stormed. "I—I wish that *you*—"

"Stop it, Mary! Hush!" Thomas gasped, with a sudden shiver. "I wish you wouldn't talk like that and wish things on me. The fairies are listening to you to-night and giving you most of your wishes, and if I—"

Here Thomas stilled his protest. Even again, what had become perhaps the most blood-curdling single sound in the world was whining through his flat, the sound of his buzzer!

He jumped one full inch from the floor. His scared eyes shot from entrance door to curtains and back again—and at this point it became apparent that, admitting Kratz, he had failed to snap the spring latch, because the knob had turned and the door was opening, and as a novelty in the way of visitors to the Thomas Henning flat, Mary's Uncle Arthur walked to the center of the living-room!

Unlovely as ever, his eye was cold and hard as he stopped directly before Thomas.

"Where's Mary?" he demanded, without one word of preface.

"You—" Thomas sought to begin.

"Huh?" said Uncle Arthur. "Where's Mary?"

"I haven't got her!"

"I didn't say you had! You're too damned smart for that, young feller, I'll give you that much credit!" Uncle Arthur rasped. "I asked you where she is?"

"I don't know!"

"That's a lie! You took her!"

"I did—what?"

Uncle Arthur leaned on his stick and peered straight into Thomas Henning's soul!

"You can't fool me, Henning!" he stated, surprisingly. "You woke me up twice with your talk this afternoon and I heard you asking her to go somewhere with you! Huh? What say?"

"I didn't say anything."

"And she's gone now and nobody knows where she's gone! Her husband's looking for her and he can't find hide nor hair of her. *I* been looking for her. I've telephoned to forty-one people, her friends, in this last hour, and there ain't one seen a sign of her since eight o'clock to-night. Where is she?"

"I—"

"Because I've got your number, young feller, and I always have had it! You're too pretty for your own good or any one else's—and Mary's a weak, wishy-washy girl. I know all that, but—"

"See here!" cried Thomas, partially recovering himself. "Why on earth are you accusing *me* of having seen Mary?"

"Elimination!" Uncle Arthur cried. "That and horse-sense! There ain't another one of her friends has seen her; you were begging her to go somewhere; and she sneaked off while I was asleep and disappeared. I dunno how far it's gone and I dassent think; but no matter what you do with other women, Henning, no man can play fast and loose with the women of the Lawson family!"

He paused with a puff, trembling some of the fury he doubtless felt. "Don't misunderstand me for one second! I'm an old man or I'd crack every bone in your body, here and now, and throw the carcass out that window. Mary's father'll probably do that when he gets back to town.

"What I'm after now is the girl herself. Where is she?"

"I don't know."

Several seconds, the elder gentleman's dreadful peering persisted. Then he turned away.

"So be it! I'll have you jailed in half an hour!" he stated.

"What for?" Thomas demanded.

"Whatever Penderson, my lawyer, says it's for! He'll find the way for me!"

"You're not—er—contemplating arresting me?" escaped Thomas.

"Tah!" snarled Uncle Arthur. "I—"

Cane clutched, he whirled about, facing the door. His fingers loosened, then, and he stared; nor was he alone in his astonishment, for Thomas also stared.

Two more gentlemen were with them now—a large young man and a large old man, both of them with hard, clean-cut faces, greatly resembling one another, both of them rather overwhelming in every way!

"Why—Deacon Pitt!" cried Uncle Arthur. "What 'n time are you here for, with the boy, at that?"

"I'll tell you what we're here for!" the younger man stated, savagely, and advanced upon Thomas Henning so significantly that Thomas took to backing. "That whelp called up my sister and—"

"Weldon!" the elder of the two giants cried warningly. "None of that, please!"

"I know, father, but no man can say a thing like that about me without having his neck wrung!" the young man cried, as his hands twitched toward Thomas. "He—"

"No! Weldon, no!" said Weldon's father, and gripped his arm. "I know how you feel, lad, but you'll keep your hands from him. That was our agreement in coming here. We'll take our full measure of satisfaction before we've finished with him and give him no opportunity for counter-suits!"

He pushed his angered son aside with quite an effort. Large chin set, he glared at Thomas Henning.

"You!" he said. "My daughter came to me in tears, Henning! You told her, as you have doubtless told others, that my son here, Weldon, was under the influence of alcoholic liquor and—"

"I know—yes!" Thomas said brightly. "That was an error!"

"A what?"

"An error. Some one told me—"

"It 'll be a costly error for you, Henning," the deacon stated. "I've routed my lawyer, Penderson, out of bed—and he'll have papers in a suit against you prepared before he ever sees that bed again, I'll warrant!"

"A—er—suit?"

"Yes, and it will be pressed for the very limit of damages into the very last court in the State!" the deacon pursued, quite specifically. "I'll teach you, as I've taught others in this town—"

"Wait!" Thomas cried. "As to that little matter—that was all a mistake! I'll apologize for that, of course, and—"

"What? You mean here?"

"This very instant! I beg your pardon! I beg Weldon's pardon! I beg Dora's pardon for bothering her! It happened—"

"That's enough!" barked Deacon Pitt, compellingly. "That glib tongue of yours did its foul work publicly. Your reparation will be just as public—indeed a trifle more so! Before I'm through with you, I'll wring every penny that a just law—"

"It's open! Come in!" said a strong voice behind him.

And the deacon paused and looked about, just as Uncle Arthur had paused a little while ago; and they, with the virtuous Weldon and the infamous Thomas, stared at Dolly Hayes herself—Dolly and the short, thick-chested man who was with her and who chanced to be her father.

Nor was he merely Dolly's father. This was the only David Hayes, chief in a business way of the old Grimshaw faction; this was the David Hayes who presided over the Traders Bank and who owned the three mills in South Braydon; this was the man his friends, quite admiringly, called "Fighting Dave!"

He flourished no club just now, nor did he seem markedly excited; but there was something distinctly queer and unpleasant about his mouth as he marched through the group to Thomas Henning and looked him up and down.

"Well, Henning?" he said simply.

"Good—er—evening!" Thomas murmured.

"I'm not here to waste words. You understand my mission perfectly; Dorothy was angry when she returned home—very angry, indeed. She may possibly have exaggerated.

"I've always liked you, until now; I give you that loophole, if you wish to clear yourself and do it very quickly and very, very convincingly, Henning!"

Thomas drew a deep breath. He sought to look David Hayes in the eye; it was useless. He coughed and essayed a frown, which was also a failure.

"Clear myself of—of what?" he asked weakly.

"William Emerson has informed her that he surprised you in this very flat in company with Mrs. Noble, your partner's wife. Later, with her own eyes, she saw Mrs. Noble in your embrace. Well?"

"David!" gasped Deacon Pitt. "Is he *that* sort, too?"

"Huh?" cackled Uncle Arthur. "What's that? What 'd he say? Mrs. Noble, was it? Sally? Huh! Is he *that* sort? Why, that young devil must have half the girls in town—"

"Well?" Mr. Hayes repeated, and it seemed to boom this time.

Thomas cleared his throat again.

"I see," he said smoothly and with really admirable calm. "This is one of those—er—unfortunate cases in which circumstantial evidence, apparently—er—damning in itself, but actually having no—"

"I think that's all, Henning," Hayes said. "It is so then. I need not go to the length of forbidding you my house and any intercourse with my daughter?"

"If you will give me time to explain—"

"A matter of this character that requires time, cannot be explained," Hayes said briefly. "The next time you're caught like that, put a little passion and fiery outrage into your denial.

"And the next time we meet, Henning,

and we're going to meet just once more, very privately," he added, breathing hard, "I'll give you the thrashing a hound like you deserves! I will, if I hang for it!"

"Dad!" gasped Miss Hayes.

"Don't be frightened, Dot. It isn't going to take place here. Come!"

He took her arm. Thomas, quite automatically, extended both hands in pleading. His best reward was the single glance of pure detestation with which Miss Hayes favored him as she moved away.

And, like her father, ceased moving!

CHAPTER XXX.

CONCERNING THE HATCHET.

STILL more of Thomas Henning's friends had crowded their way into his pretty little living-room—Sally Noble, this time, and the tall, lean, very cultured-looking, rather evil-looking gentleman with the rimmed nose-glasses, who was Sally's father and, at the same time, Henry Bond.

Aye, Henry Bond, chief of the clan of Bond, who had shaken hands with David Hayes and lunched with David Hayes this very day, for the first time in twenty-two years!

Their smiles were startled—yet they were smiles during that first ten seconds.

"Henning is here?" Mr. Bond queried, in his low voice.

"I'm—er—here!" Thomas contrived.

"Ah, Henning!" pursued the lean gentleman, as he approached Thomas. "My daughter tells me that you occupy a rather odd position in her troubles? I want to chat with you for ten minutes and—er—it may be as well for the rest to hear."

"Look out for that feller, Bond!" Uncle Arthur advised.

"Eh?"

"Decidedly so—Lawson's right!" David Hayes added.

Henry Bond frowned slightly. His daughter, just beside him, recovered from a brief attack of sniffing and biting her lips and looked about.

"Oh—Dolly!" she cried, impulsively.

Miss Hayes drew herself up suddenly.

"Oh! Please!" she cried, and thrust out a delicate hand to fend off the approaching presence.

"W-what?" faltered Sally Noble.

"No! Please don't come to me for sympathy in your troubles!" Miss Hayes said, with curling lips. "I can't sympathize with with troubles of that sort—*creature!*"

"*What?*" cried Henry Bond, and ceased his frowning to whirl amazedly upon Miss Hayes. "What was that?"

Dorothy had suffered keenly that evening. That may have been the reason. At all events, Dorothy glanced up and down the length of Sally's father and favored him with a most unpleasant smile.

"I don't care to know Mrs. Noble," she said insolently. "I can't know Mrs. Noble—really. I can't feel myself even an acquaintance of a woman who makes love to her husband's partner—in his flat, in her flat when her husband's away, wherever they may happen to be, you know!"

An instant, Henry Bond stood speechless—only an instant.

"What the—the devil do you mean by that?" he gasped.

"What—*here!*" David Hayes shouted, with almost equal amazement, as he dashed forward. "Whose daughter do you dare swear at?"

"Yours! *Yours*, when she dares—"

"You—you confounded, slithering scoundrel!" David Hayes gasped again, and fury blazed in his eyes. "I'll take that out of your hide!"

"Don't threaten me, Hayes! I've carried a gun for ten years, after your last threats!" said the astonishing Mr. Bond. "I have it now! And—and—by Gad! Hayes, if that baggage of yours was a boy instead of a girl, I'd blow you out of the way and tear her limb from limb! You heard what she said?"

"I heard it and it's the truth!" David Hayes announced.

"You lie!" roared Henry Bond.

"By—by golly!" Uncle Arthur cried, almost delightedly, for he was and always had been a powerful Bond partisan! "Go it, Henry! That's the stuff! Doggone their peacemaking—that's what I've said from the start! Go at him and finish him, Henry!"

Deacon Pitt stepped forward hurriedly. It chanced that Deacon Pitt, like his son Weldon, had many interests in the Hayes camp.

"You keep out of this, Lawson!" he said.

"Huh?" rasped Uncle Arthur.

"You keep your oar out of this affair and—"

"Well, who in blazes are you, to tell me that, you psalm-singing old hypocrite?" Uncle Arthur demanded. "I'll get in and stay in! I'll back up Henry Bond, with every dollar I got! Hear that?"

"Yes, and for every dollar you raise to back Henry Bond, I'll put ten behind Dave Hayes, if he needs 'em! I—"

Thomas backed away dizzily. They were all talking now, were they not? Yes, all five of them were talking at once, and with a hot, swift, incoherent fury that was simply dumfounding.

Sally had dropped to the chair in the corner, where she held her forehead and moaned in a strange, futile fashion. Dolly stood nearer the door, round-eyed, amazed at her own work!

And they were waving their hands now, as they talked. Thomas shook himself together and tried to think—tried to hear. It was all but impossible, even after three of the terrific minutes.

Sally's father was explaining luridly to Dolly's father just what he meant to do in a business way, avenging the insult. Dolly's father, on the other hand, seemed equally enthusiastic as he delineated the wreck that lay ahead of the Henry Bond interests.

Uncle Arthur shook his fist in Deacon Pitt's very face; Deacon Pitt's jaw wagged up and down incessantly, albeit Thomas could not distinguish a single word in the general din!

And—ah! They were getting down to specific cases now, were they? Hayes was explaining, in his own slightly emotional fashion, the manner in which the Bond & Bond Manufacturing Company and all its related industries should go down to destruction. And at the same time Henry Bond was making clear the dire disaster that loomed with perfect certainty before and three original Grimshaw companies, the Hayes concern itself and the three banks so closely interwoven with their several destinies!

Thomas reached the wall and ceased his backing. In a way, he was able to understand now. Nothing like this had happened for full ten years! Why, for half a decade or more the old feeling had been mainly passive enmity, flickering up insignificantly here and there, but steadily going of its own accord to a natural death.

At this very minute, the band across the street was blaring in celebration of the feud's final end and the burial of the hatchet—and here the feud had chosen Thomas's ill-fated flat in which to flame out once more and the hatchet, out of the ground, was fairly doing somersaults of delight all over the place!

And now the noisy part was over. They were moving toward the door. They had forgotten his very existence.

"Finish fight, this time!" Hayes was saying, wickedly, as he urged his daughter on. "I'll send your home in the car, Dolly. I'm going down to the offices and start things!"

The machine gun rattle was Uncle Arthur, coming to the end of his personal argument with Deacon Pitt; above it spoke Henry Bond:

"Your finish! Believe me, if it costs me my last dollar, Hayes, *your finish!* Sally!"

"Ah!" Mrs. Noble faltered, sickeningly.

"Go to your own home for the night!" snapped her father. "I can't spare time now to take you home! Don't cry! I'll strip the skin from his bones and put his daughter in rags for that insult, child! Go and lock yourself in while I'm here to protect you from physical violence!"

He pointed, panting. Mrs. Noble went. Across the corridor, the door closed.

Henry Bond strode out, snarling, with Uncle Arthur after him, talking rapidly. They took the stairs. Dorothy, with one bewildered backward glance, passed out between her father and Weldon Pitt. They passed to the elevator, and Thomas Henning's door swung gently after them and latched.

Young Mr. Henning himself remained

quite motionless. He had, indeed, all but forgotten himself. The ghastliness of the whole catastrophe fairly overwhelmed him.

It was on again! Their idiotic feud was on again—full tilt and to a finish this time! And what did it mean? Ruin for Braydon! And that was no exaggeration, either; dollars by the hundreds of thousands had been hurled into that absurd fight in the past; concerns which might have prospered wonderfully had been ruined for mere spite.

One bank had failed; one had gone out of business rather than continue; two had tottered and were still not quite through tottering. Let the whole thing start over again and every firm not absolutely wedded to Braydon would quit in sheer disgust!

Real estate, of which Thomas had bought more than a little this last month, would go to bits. Yes, and the Henning and Noble firm bade fair to go down in the wreckage as well and—

". . . just over and all the younger generation making friends and even intermarrying—just like Pete and Sally and Dolly and I—" Thomas found himself saying aloud.

"Did she leave it?" hissed from the curtains.

"What?" cried Thomas, with a sharp start, for these last minutes the very fact of Mary's existence had passed from his brain. "Were you there? Did you—did you hear the excitement?"

"I heard it all! *Did she leave it?*"

"Mary, have you any idea of what it means to this town?" Thomas exploded. "It means that everybody—"

"I don't care anything about the beastly old town!" Mary cried passionately. "Did Dorothy leave that cloak of hers on the chair? It slipped there when she first came in and I didn't dare look again to see if she forgot it. Is it there?"

"No—er—it isn't there," Thomas said dully.

"Look again!"

"I'm looking!" sighed Thomas. "Mary, there are some things even more important than your clothes and—"

"Not to me, you—you callous fool!" Mary's voice gasped at him. "How dare you say that? How dare you stand and mumble about the town when I'm—I'm standing here like this!

"Isn't there one shred of decency in you? Isn't there a particle of chivalry or shame in you?"

Thomas forced himself away from the wall.

"Yes—yes. I'll get you something to—er—wear, Mary!"

"And this time, do it!" the bride cried furiously and there was a tremor in her voice which rather scared Thomas and quickened him. "I can stand a great deal—I have stood a great deal!—but I can't stand everything and I won't try! You get me something to wear or I'll—do something desperate!"

She was panting now, quite audibly. Thomas shivered and looked about for his hat. There would be stores—

"Have they gone?" came from his doorway.

"Sally!" escaped Thomas.

"Yes, I couldn't stay there. Alone and thinking—no, I couldn't! I'm not the sort that broods and endures uncertainty and wonders!" Mrs. Noble continued, gustily, as she entered swiftly and closed the door.

"What did they mean by it? Tell me that? What did the Hayes girl mean? And—tell me where Peter has taken her, Tom! Just tell me that!

"I want to see him, because I—I know the boy's mad! I want the truth!"

"Well, I'm going to run out for a few minutes, and if you'll just sit in your little flat till I get back?" Thomas suggested.

"Sally!" floated, clear and high, from behind the curtains of his music-room. "Sally, come here!"

Mrs. Noble, because her nerves were badly unstrung, shrieked frankly.

"Who is that?" she demanded.

"Sally!" the voice said sweetly. "Just come here and see for yourself. I want a minute with you!"

One swift glance of inquiry Mrs. Noble shot at Thomas Henning. The inquiry found no answer.

Mrs. Noble rose quickly and sped to the curtains—aye, and directly through them! And Mrs. Noble, after a great, gulping breath, screamed faintly again!

"Mary! Hah—*Mary!*" she began. "So—so *this*—"

"Never mind how I look—never mind anything!" cried a strange, savage voice that must have been Mary's. "Give me those clothes you're wearing!"

There was a sudden sound, as of feet scuffling. Thomas Henning, pure fright in his eyes, looked about wildly, as if in search of aid.

"Mary! You're—crazy!" gasped Mrs. Noble.

"I know it—I know that!" Mary panted. "But I'm going to have your clothes! Do you hear? Gimme that dress, Sally! Give it to me or I'll tear it off you and—"

"Don't, Mary—don't!" Peter's bride choked, horribly. "Mary—*don't!*"

Followed a long, struggling gasp—and a rustling—and a sudden, heavy, sickening thud!

And then there came perfect silence—utter, breathless silence. Thomas Henning's hands clasped tight together; there was an impulse to shout, but his vocal apparatus seemed wholly paralyzed.

And it went on and on and on, that silence! It bore down on him, crushing the very life out of him. Something awful had happened in there! He tried to move and found it impossible. He listened.

He could hear Mary's breathing now, a blood-freezing little wheeze. He saw the curtains stir, as a hand clutched them on the other side; and the owner of the hand appeared to be reeling dizzily, for the curtain swayed back back and forth, back and forth.

Then:

"I've killed her!" came from Mary.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MURDER—ALMOST.

SO this was the end of the evening: a murder!

Thomas dropped his limp, cold hands and smiled a dreadful little smile. It was the logical finish, of course. But—the consequences! In rather less than one second they all flashed before Thomas; the hurrying officers who would come so soon after the arrival of the doctor Thomas would have to call in a minute—the arrest of Mary, just as she was!

Then the hideous scandal, the ruin of several lives, the trial, the conviction. Perhaps, after that—

"T-T-Tom!" Mary whispered.

Thomas dragged his blank eyes about, to look at the thing, doubtless visible on this side of the curtains. He saw nothing more startling than the curtains themselves, one of them wrapped about Mary Emerson and leaving her head visible. Her eyes dilated and her lips were white.

"What have you done?" Thomas breathed.

"I—I didn't mean to do it, Tom!" Mary whimpered. "It isn't all my fault! You've driven me insane and she—she wouldn't give me that dress. I didn't mean to do anything like that."

Thomas steeled himself. Everything notwithstanding, she was Mary and very much in need of succor now.

"I know," he said quietly. "Tell me about it. What did you do? Stab her?"

"*Stab* her?" Mary faltered. "I—I hardly touched her! I—why, I just reached for her, Tom, and she—she squawked and fell down like that! She—"

"Is she breathing?"

Mary tightened the curtains about her.

"I don't know, Tom," she said hoarsely. "You—you look!"

The fatally beautiful Henning heir, to the best of its owner's belief, straightened out and stood bolt upright as he crossed the room. His skin rose in several million small pimples; he felt his lips tightening as they dragged down on his teeth—but it had to be done!

Oh, yes, it had to be done, and worse than merely looking at Sally might have to be done, too. He bent quickly as he entered his little music-room and laid a hand over the prostrate Mrs. Noble's heart.

"Why, she's—alive!" he cried.

"She is?" Mary echoed wonderingly. "I thought—"

"Of course she's alive!" Thomas laughed as reason, with some difficulty, stepped back to her throne. "She's simply fainted, Mary. That's all. She faints very easily."

"She faints horribly!" Mary murmured. "I never saw anybody faint like that before!"

"Well, that's what she has done, nevertheless," said Thomas, as he slipped an arm under Sally and lifted. "I'll put her in the chair there and—"

"You take her out and put her on that couch in the living-room!" little Mrs. Emerson directed, sharply. "You can't stay in here!"

"All right!" muttered young Mr. Henning, and finally gathered the limp form in his arms.

Quickly enough, he crossed the room and laid it upon the couch. Mrs. Emerson watched silently, as he bent over Mrs. Noble, slapped her hands and finally lifted a lid and gazed at one eye for a moment.

Sally did not stir. However swiftly she might have emerged from the former fainting spell, this one was a more thorough and a much more scary job! The conscious part of Sally Noble was far, far away in that mysterious region where such consciousnesses are entertained.

"It looks serious!" Thomas muttered.

"How serious?" Mary inquired.

"I'll have to get a doctor, I think—scandal or no scandal."

"But not yet!" Mary said quickly.

Thomas scowled his warm perplexity.

"I don't know, Mary," he said. "I'm no expert on these things. It's going to make an awful mess if I get in a strange medical man and—"

"That wasn't what I meant," the unusual Mrs. Emerson added eagerly. "Is she really going to—to be like that for a while?"

"I fear so."

"It *is* just a faint?"

"Why—yes."

Mary smiled strangely.

"You go out of here for five minutes, Tom!" she ordered, and in her voice there was a weird, tremulous sweetness.

"What?"

"Yes, go out and walk up and down the hall, or somewhere, for five or six minutes. Then you can come back."

"But—"

"Tom, will you please just stop asking questions and go out?" Mary demanded, and her voice rose. "Must you ruin everything, every time, by hesitating until it's too late? Can't you understand anything at all? Can't you see that this is the one chance?"

"For what?"

"For me to get some clothes! *For me to get some clothes!*" Mary shrilled.

Thomas Henning caught his breath.

"What do you mean, Mary? Not—not the clothes she's wearing?"

"What other clothes?" Mary demanded fiercely. "Will you please—*please!*—just go out and leave me alone with her for five—"

"And what about me, after it's all over?" Thomas inquired flatly, because surely it was a time for plain speaking.

"Well? Well? What about you?"

"Mary, I'm already entertaining one lady—yourself—in a slightly embarrassing—er—costume, as I assume."

"You'll be rid of her, if you'll just go!"

"Possibly, but I'll have another one on my hands in the same state," Thomas Henning said doggedly. "I don't see it at all, Mary! I'll do anything under the sun for you—anything but that!

"I'll—listen! If you'll swear to stay just where you are—if you'll swear not to lay a finger on Sally while I'm gone, I'll get into her apartment and steal every stitch she owns, Mary! On my word of honor, I'll steal everything wearable that she owns and bring it to you—clothes, dresses, shoes, gloves, hats, stockings, everything! Yes? Will you do that?"

A bare arm detached itself from somewhere behind the curtain; its hand clasped upon Mary's troubled brow.

"Tom, will you please—please! Please!—just go out and leave me alone with her for five minutes, while there's still time?" Mary pleaded, and her very soul was in her words.

"Not until you promise!"

Mary's pupils grew larger.

"Do you know that I can ruin us all just by screaming and screaming at the top of my lungs?" she demanded. "Do you want me to do that? Because I can

and I will unless you get out and let me have the only chance I—"

"You won't have to scream very loud, Mary!" Thomas said softly. "Psst! Here's more company!"

"What?"

Thomas held up one hand for silence and turned his ear toward the door. It was ear-grown preternaturally sharp by this time; it could distinguish between steps, out there in the corridor; it had an extra sense which told it just those steps which were due to stop before the Thomas Henning door.

Nor had the extra sense erred this time. The steps stopped. The buzzer buzzed sharply. And as if the same wire had controlled them, the curtains fell before Mary Emerson and she herself vanished from the picture.

Young Mr. Henning, lips compressed, stared at the insensible young woman on the couch. He would not open the door this time!

Nay, though the buzzer buzzed until dawn painted the eastern sky with the usual glorious tints, he would stand just where he was, soundless, motionless! He smiled strainedly at the portal—and the knob turned and the latch, which Thomas even now had neglected to spring, gave and permitted the entrance of William Emerson himself!

William looked pale and dangerous as he closed the door after him, but he was quiet.

"Henning," he began—and stopped as his gaze fell upon Sally. "What the—what's that?"

"That—er—is Mrs. Noble!" Thomas explained weakly.

"Until her husband gets wise, eh?" barked William, and the short laugh must have scorched his very lips in passing. "You beat her, too, do you? Gad! What kind of a beast are you, anyway? Caveman? Apache?"

"Neither. The lady—"

"Don't tell me about her. She doesn't interest me," said William and, turning his back, cast Sally and her ostensibly shameful affairs out of his personal world. "Henning, I want to beg your pardon again!"

"Eh?"

"You're let out of that mess, at least, whatever you may be wallowing in here! I have the truth!"

"What is it?"

"My wife's gone with Noble!" William stated.

"Peter?"

"Yes! With Peter Noble!" William choked as fury clogged his throat. "She's gone with Peter. Did *you* know it?"

"No, I didn't know it," said Thomas with perfect truth. "I think perhaps—"

"Oh, I'm not wrong!" young Mr. Emerson laughed bitterly. "I've been doing a little detective work! Noble was the dog who checked her bag, down at the station, Henning. I've been down there and I wrung the truth out of Harkness.

"They must have been going out and seen me wait—and decided to flee some other way! And that's not all, by a long shot! I met this woman's father, out on Bond Avenue—I met Henry Bond and he—*he* told me the truth in so many words.

"Mary was in his flat, Henning—in Noble's flat, and now she's gone with him! Could you have believed it?"

"I cannot believe it now!" said Thomas.

"You know what I'll do to him, don't you?" William snarled.

"I haven't an idea."

William Emerson threw back his coat for a minute. Thomas started. Save in the movies and, perchance, in some more remote sections of the Far West, he had imagined, they never wore such things—but it was fact that William just now was wearing a shoulder holster from which protruded the ugly wooden butt of a heavy Colt revolver!

"I'll kill him!" William explained, almost pleasantly. "I'll follow them through this world, if I have to, and through hell itself—but I'll get that dog before I ever eat or sleep again!"

His fingers coiled about the wooden butt. Thomas endeavored to shake his head in a perfectly calm, sane, soothing manner.

"Well, that's very dramatic, Bill," said he, "but before killing him, I'd be sure that—"

"I'm sure now!" William said hotly. "The more I think of it, the more sure

I am, Henning! That sober breed is the kind that pulls the dirtiest tricks—that staid, steady, reliable, honest kind! And I'll get Noble! I'll get him if it takes me fifty years!"

"I know, but you can't go without eating or sleeping for fifty years," said Thomas. "Give me that gun, will you, until you calm down?"

"Eh? Is he still in town? Is he *here?*" cried the suspicious William.

"No, he's gone to Chicago," said his late friend, to whom much practise was making lying actually easier than the truth. "He'll be back soon. I just heard from him! I—" He paused. His mouth remained open. There are possibly fifty people alive today who whistle the "Mikado" music while going about their daily affairs. One of them lived in Braydon. He was Peter Noble. And now, before the very door, somebody was whistling the impressive aria of the "Three Little Maids from School!"

More than this, an informal hand was trying the wretched door and the wretched door was opening with its accustomed ease! Peter Noble, with what was for him an unusually playful bound was in their midst.

This story will be concluded in next week's issue of the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY, the consolidated title under which both magazines will appear hereafter as one.

The Brave and the Fare

by Marc Edmund Jones

THE car, sparklingly new in every line and in every bit of polished nickel, mounted the hill with the speed and power of a combat airplane. Muffled in a heavy driving coat as freshly acquired as the machine, a young man at the wheel directed its course with one hand and all the nonchalance of a professional aviator.

In his other arm, nestled with perfect content, rested a girl. She was enveloped in a duster which had yet to achieve a wrinkle or a speck of dirt; and her flying veil, designed to destroy eyesight with black dots as big as pennies, refused to hold any number of strands of bright yellow hair in check, and declined entirely to cover her eyes, which were closed and left to the protection of long and attractive lashes.

At the brow of the lengthy incline there was a sudden gasp from the man; a start, and a cry of fright from the girl as she opened her eyes. Not thirty feet away was a short, sharp curve to the left, over a narrow, wooden railroad bridge. At the speed they were making it would be impossible to keep the road. A crash into the flimsy sides of the viaduct would tumble them to the road below, and certain death.

She shrank away from her companion, instinctively leaving him free to cope with the situation. He jammed on the brakes. Ahead was a fine lawn, but no driveway leading to the house. Nevertheless the driver kept on straight, running up onto the grass and managing to bring the little racer to a stop within a bare foot of the porch.

Another moment and he backed out, turned, and swung across the bridge at a decent speed. Then, after a furtive glance at her, he wiped his brow.

She felt the chills dash up and down her back, once the danger was over; but she thrilled with a glorious realization. He had measured up to an emergency! He—she was sure — would always prove to be a brave, resourceful man! She moved back, closer to him, and slipped a little hand under his arm. The rough material of his auto greatcoat scratched as she did so, yielding her a distinct sense of comfort.

He was aware of her hand instantly. Without removing his own from the wheel again, or taking his glance from the road now, he pressed it to his side with an understanding firmness which brought added color to her cheeks.

She dropped her eyes to her lap in sheer content. There, revealed where the duster had fallen away from her new and never-before-worn traveling suit, she saw and removed and threw out of the car carefully two small grains of rice.

The marriage had taken place a little over an hour before in Lillian's home in Worcester, and the first part of the honeymoon was to be spent at an obscure inn in the Berkshires. The wedding breakfast and the ceremony had been picturesquely successful. Fully two dozen of Jack Connelly's friends had journeyed to Massachusetts to see him safely embarked in wedlock; threatening all sorts of elaborate pranks as tokens of good luck.

To avoid the hazing Jack had planned painstakingly. His new car was purchased secretly and garaged many miles out of the city. Lillian told a confidant — one dependably loose-tongued—that their honeymoon was to be a boat trip out of Boston. By doubling on their route—by changing taxis—by walking to a trolley—they had eluded pursuit.

Lunch was at Greenfield. Lillian watched her husband with pride as he ordered, demanding and obtaining perfect service. As she watched him finish off his salad with the gusto known alone to the touring motorist, she smiled at the memory of one of the things which had been whispered to her the day before the ceremony. A bridesmaid had it from her brother, who was one of the ushers.

Jack, it seemed, was worried about just one thing. Was Lillian able to cook? Dear Jack! It was fortunate that her mother's illness, years before, had thrown the house upon her hands for eighteen months or more. He would not have to descend to prevarication and hypocrisy to praise her fare. She would show him a table such as few men knew. She would prepare viands fit for a king, and they would be happy—desperately happy—if he always was brave and true as a king should be.

Through the afternoon the little car sped its way, generally westward. The sunset found the honeymooners mounting one of the main ridges of the Berkshires.

Fifty miles lay between them and supper, and their shelter, for Jack's driving had been far too leisurely. He tore down the grade at a reckless pace, but stopped upon her insistence at the top of another rise nearly an hour later.

"Please, dear!" she pleaded. "Let's watch the sky for a moment!"

He yielded, and found them a sheltered nook carpeted with moss. Red became purple, and purple a dull dead blue-black. The last vestige of sun tint was gone when a flash of lightning, bright in the dusk, bore witness to the approach of the storm from the south.

The two, awakened from their dreams, ran for the car. Jack put on his lights, clambered in hurriedly, and pressed the self-starter. There was the usual grind as the willing motor turned the engine over, but no response. The car refused to start, utterly. At that instant came the first pattering drops of rain.

Jack, with first thought of her, hastily put up the top; then sought to locate his trouble. The rain, from a fitful sputter now and then, became steady; and as the wind rose, increased in volume until he was wet to the skin, and whipped about and lashed mercilessly. In the swirl of the water it was impossible to do anything. He lowered the hood to protect the engine.

She reached out and plucked his sleeve suddenly. "Jack!" There was the delight

of discovery in her voice. "I see a cottage up there in the trees, and—it isn't lighted up, but it will be a shelter—"

He leaned in to get his heavy coat. Fortunately he had stopped the car well off the road, and they could leave it if the house should afford them a haven. "I'll investigate!" he told her.

She clambered out. "And I'll go right along," she affirmed; "right by the side of my darling hubby, always, rain or shine!" Even as she spoke the driving water began to penetrate the thin materials of her duster and the suit beneath.

Turning and seeing her standing there in the rain, already soaked, and so thoroughly willing to share anything and all things with him, he forgot everything else and pulled her to his arms. A few minutes later they recollected themselves and ran for the cottage madly, laughingly, as if a second or half a second could spare them any part of a drenching now.

The house seemed utterly deserted as they groped their way onto the porch. She clung to him, drawing upon his nearness for courage. A flash of lightning showed that the woods came down to the cottage on three sides, and revealed, further back, a new garage building.

"No one's here," he deduced, audibly, after a moment. "They wouldn't be in bed this early, and—I'm going to break in!"

"No, no!" Her grasp of his arm tightened. "What would they say if they came and found us?"

"Nonsense!" His voice took on a proper husbandly shade of command. "Who would turn us out in a night like this? Come on!"

He found the door, turned the knob, and threw his weight against it. Unlocked, it swung back out of his grasp, and he fell to his hands and knees upon the floor.

"Damn!" It seemed a proper word in the Stygian darkness.

She giggled. "Jack! You swore!"

He clambered to his feet; took her by the arms. "I—I forgot myself, Lillian—" He realized it was the first time he had had to apologize to her since achieving the right to call her his.

She leaned close against him and put up her lips. "I liked it!" she said softly.

Another five minutes elapsed before they cast about for illumination. After all, it was their first day. Lillian found the switch and flooded the room with electric light.

"Just think!" she murmured. "Electricity 'way out here, or do you suppose they have their own plant?"

Jack was doing no supposing. "I hope there's something in the icebox!" was his remark. Then he looked at her. "And if we can only make ourselves comfortable for the night—"

She dropped her eyes. "Silly!" Then, after a moment: "Let's explore!" And, without thinking, she clapped her hands at the prospect.

The room in which they stood was a large living-room with a massive fireplace at one end. A huge, attractive log rested on two old-fashioned, wrought andirons, while beneath was kindling and paper ready for the touch of a match. At the far side a staircase led up-stairs, and an arched doorway to a tiny library which, at a higher level, was reached by four steps. The way to the dining-room and kitchen was opposite the fireplace. As disclosed by its interior, the house was immensely larger than they had supposed.

Lillian led the way to the larder. Pantry, kitchen, and an alcove holding the icebox were immaculately white and clean. The shelves in the pantry and the compartments in the icebox were stacked, jammed with supplies.

"We eat!" Jack exclaimed sententiously.

Lillian, true to her sex, was more romantic. "And each thing shall be prepared by your little wife," she said, "for quite the dearest man that ever lived!"

His expression softened. Then he looked at her and laughed, and the laugh was succeeded by an expression of concern.

"You're soaking wet, honey! And"—it was almost a discovery—"so am I?"

Indeed, there was a little pool of water on the linoleum where each of them stood. She giggled at the spectacle.

"Let's see if we can rustle up some dry togs up-stairs," he suggested.

For a moment she frowned, demurely—it seemed hardly right. But she shook off her scruples. "I—I love to explore," she admitted.

They made their way up-stairs together and found the light in the upper hall. The first room they entered was a very feminine chamber, decorated in a tasty shade of pink and furnished with bird's-eye maple.

"This," he announced, with an airy gesture, "shall be our quarters for to-night!"

He thoroughly enjoyed the appropriation of other folks' homes, a new experience.

The room revealed no clothes of any sort, however, and the discomfort of their own damp garments sent them further on their task of exploration. Two other bedrooms in the front part of the floor proved equally barren of clothing. A fourth door was locked, and insistent knocking brought no response. "Wish I dared break in!" muttered Jack.

Lillian led him away by the arm. Finally, in the back part of the house, in two rooms apparently servants' quarters, their search was rewarded. Jack, in the first room, dug up the coat and vest of a butler's uniform, a pair of neatly pressed but cool Palm Beach trousers—luckily of dark color—and a supply of shirts and underwear and haberdashery, some of which had never been worn. He was happy.

Lillian left him to make his change. In the other room they had seen feminine apparel which she now proceeded to ransack. Everything was so faultlessly clean, and she was so decidedly cold and uncomfortable, that she buried her scruples and arrayed herself in the articles available. The only dresses were white, the typical garments of the maid servant; *but* the underthings were warm and soft, if not as fashionable and alluring as her own discarded silk.

"Well, James," she ejaculated, at the first glimpse of him.

"Yes, cook!" he rejoined, laughing as heartily at her appearance.

They hurried down to the kitchen, warm now, and famished both. From icebox and pantry they produced materials enough for a seven course dinner. She rolled up her sleeves and soon was immersed in details beyond his comprehension.

"I'm going to set the table," he said, after a bit of reflection. "Let's eat in style! What do you say?"

She looked up from lighting the oven, her face flushed. "Oh, boy!"

He put on all the lights in the dining-room and proceeded to inventory the contents of the china closets mentally, with the idea of producing the best possible setting of his board. He discovered doilies, and fancy crested silver, and imported glassware. He brought in some cut flowers from the living-room. He made an art of his task, and by the time he was finished the entire dinner was cooked and ready.

They brought it in together, and for a moment stood looking at the sizzling sirloin, the cream-white potatoes, the steaming young peas, the salad of lettuce hearts and tomatoes and mayonnaise. Then suddenly she clutched his arm. Her face went white.

"Listen!"

Sure enough, there were the sounds of footsteps up-stairs, and a door was slammed. Then, down the stairs, with the heavy, flat-footed tread of an elderly person, the laborious transfer of a dead weight from one unwilling limb to the other, some one approached. Across the living-room the steps came, and then, in the curtains, appeared a fiercely visaged, gray-haired man of near six feet, faultlessly attired in evening dress. He looked from Lillian to Jack with some show of surprise, and something in his eyes fixed them with more than disquiet, with a feeling akin to positive fear.

"So!" he said. "Dinner is ready! Good!"

He advanced to the table, taking the seat at the end. As the odor of the meat struck his nostrils he smiled and he picked up the carving knife and steel with all the anticipatory pleasure of an epicure.

"I hope you will pardon us for intruding," Jack began in a timorous voice. They had been taken so thoroughly by surprise that he felt about as adequate as a boy caught on a step-ladder in the preserve cellar. "We had no idea; that is, we—we—" He didn't dare look at Lillian.

The man at the table seemed oblivious

of them. There was the regular stroke of steel upon steel as he sharpened his carving blade; no more.

"I hope our intrusion—" Jack began again, in a louder tone. Eliciting no response, he raised his voice a second time. "I want to explain how we happen to be here, if you will listen—"

The object of the addresses heard nothing, apparently. But he did notice the second place set, suddenly, and brought his fist down upon the table with a resounding whack, turning to Jack as he did so.

"*Who told you to arrange two places?*" he thundered. The carving-knife was still in his hand, and he did not seem to realize he was waving it belligerently. "Are *you* in the pay of my nephew? Are my *new* servants sent here to worry me into a reconciliation?"

He lowered his voice, but a note of fine scorn crept in. "Am I to deal with *servants* as ambassadors of the worthless scamp I have thrown from my doors? Never!" He half rose in his chair. "Not until hell freezes over will I look upon his face again! *Take that plate away!*"

Jack, startled into the action of perfect obedience, hastily picked up the plate, glass, silver, doilies he had so carefully arranged for Lillian. Holding them, he faced the man once more.

"We are not servants, you know—" he raised his voice until it seemed he must be heard a mile away. "If you will listen—"

Lillian broke into laughter suddenly. It was too ridiculous. "He's stone deaf, dear!" she called from her place near the kitchen door.

Their host, carving himself an ample piece of the steak, looked up all at once and saw her. Apparently he had not noticed her before. Fixing her with a glaring glance, he brought his fist down upon the table again. "God, woman! Are you going to stand there and watch me eat? Do you think you've come to a circus? *Out into the kitchen!*"

Lillian fled. Half a moment later Jack joined her. They looked at each other, speechless for several instants. Then the humor of it struck them simultaneously, and as they laughed he went over to her and put his arms about her. It was sweet to be together, even in as odd a situation as this: And it was a first day far different from their plans.

Jack pushed her away finally. Forced to surrender their supper to this tyrant, denied a chance to explain—it rankled the more he thought of it. "I'm going in and make that old codger understand, if I have to write, and hold his head while he reads!"

She checked him and led him to the window. Outside it was raining harder than ever, if such a phenomenon were possible.

"He might ask us to get out, dear!" She slipped a hand in under his coat and up around his arm, scratching his back—a trick which had never failed to put him in a good humor during the engagement. "Let him eat away, eat his head off! Then, after he's gone, I'll cook up something even better, and we'll eat out here, and pretend we really are servants, and have nothing in the world but our love—"

He swept her to his arms, and it took four rings of the bell from inside, each more violently insistent than the other, to remind Jack Connelly that he was supposedly a first-class and efficient butler in a wealthy private home up in the Berkshires.

The man at the table ate the steak, every bit, and cleaned all the other dishes. His capacity and appetite was that of a gormand. Finished, he rose and turned to Jack. "You will have breakfast ready at seven; promptly at seven!"

Without waiting for a nod or a "Yes, sir!" he faced about and strode out of the room, across the living-room, and up the stairs. His tread, as before, was heavy and springless. The steps died out upstairs and there was the sound of a door slammed viciously.

Jack turned to Lillian, grinning. "Will we have breakfast at seven?"

She smiled. "We will have dinner, darling mine, and I'm going to cook it!"

"And I"—Jack straightened—"I'm going to fix up this table again. I still insist we eat in style!"

She raised on her toes to flick him a kiss upon the lips; then she hurried out through the swinging door to be at her task.

For the second dinner the inexhaustible

larder supplied a fine young roasting chicken for which the oven still was hot. A bunch of new asparagus went into a pan on top of the stove; some early potatoes were put in to roast with the fowl; and some more lettuce, and bananas and apples sliced for the salad—Lillian's heart sang within her as she thought how well she would feed her sweeter-than-sugar man, her own Jack.

In time the fresh spread was duly set forth upon the best service the house afforded. Jack escorted Lillian to her place, pushed the chair in under her, stooped for a kiss, and went around to his own chair. Suddenly he paused, listening. Lillian started up and met his gaze.

Sure enough, just outside, was the unmistakable sound of a motor. Lillian, with uneasy presentiment, rose from her place and went to Jack's side. A moment later the door opened and a breezy young chap entered, followed by a rather disheveled girl. She stopped to shed her outer cape, wet in spite of the shelter of the car, and to rearrange her hair. He glanced about eagerly, shaking water from his overcoat like a shaggy-haired dog emerging from a pond after an unexpected bath.

"Isn't it jolly here!" he exclaimed. Then, glancing into the dining-room, he started with surprise and seized the girl's arm. "Look, Amy darling! Look!" He clapped her on the back. "We're in luck, we are! *Dinner's ready!*"

Lillian's heart sank. She watched Jack and noticed his mouth set.

The girl, divested of her hat and outer wraps, stood, on high French heels, a pert and rather diminutive thing, but a perfect picture in a trim, fashionable suit and a waist of crepe de Chine and filet lace, the neck cut very low and revealing in a long and narrow "V" the delicate mottling remaining from the sunburn of the summer. She reached up with her left hand, and a diamond flashed as she stroked his cheek.

"Ith my honey, tho terribly hungry?" she asked.

"I'll say so!" Without more ado he picked her up boldly, kissed her while holding her in his arms, and then brought her into the dining-room, where he placed her in the chair which Lillian had vacated. Taking the other chair himself, he picked up the carving-knife. His eyes were bright as he looked over the dishes before him. "Let's go!" He remarked briskly, seeking to strike the proper joint with his carver. "What say?"

She reached into her waist to arrange her shoulder ribbons, pulled it up a bit in front, and fussed with her hair. "Not tho much, thweetie!" she directed, watching him as he gave her half the breast, a wing, and a second joint; but taking the plate before he could diminish the portion. "Ithn't it wonderful?" she murmured, mouth full of white meat.

Jack cleared his throat, catching the eye of the other man. "We—we are not—we are not the servants—"

"Oh, that's all right," interrupted the other condescendingly. "I didn't understand you were engaged; but you're here, and this lay-out shows you know your business—so why worry?"

"But you don't understand!" Jack flushed uncomfortably. The simplest thing becomes hard to explain under irritating circumstances, and this was the second dinner being appropriated under his nose. "We—we are just here until the rain will let us get away. We're—we've—we—"

"Aw!" The new arrival paused with a forkful in mid air. "You can stick it out! If it's a matter of money you can have what you want! I don't care! The old man made his pile in war brides, and it's up to me to help him spend it. So—" The bit of chicken ready for his palate was too tempting, however; the observation was never completed.

Jack leaned on the table, controlling himself with difficulty. "T-that isn't the question!"

"Here!" The master of the situation, harassed because he wanted to eat, threw down his fork and produced a bill from a vest pocket, slipping it under Jack's hand. "That 'll hold you for sitting up and keeping dinner this late for us, and—and if you're on the job I'll treat you handsome, I will! Now let me alone!" He leaned across the table to kiss Amy, and upset a glass of water as he did so.

Jack looked at the bill. It was ten dollars. Then he glanced at Lillian helplessly. She beckoned.

He followed her to the kitchen. "Isn't it a mess!" he protested. "Who do you suppose these people are?"

She began to laugh. "The deaf old man's nephew, I guess! Wait until they come together in the morning!"

To him it was no laughing matter. "We won't be here in the morning to see it!" he announced with determination. "This is no honeymoon!"

She went over to him and fingered the lapels of his coat. "How are we going to get away, dear? Walk—in the rain?"

He drew her close. "I'm not going to have you cook wonderful dinners for every deaf tartar, lisping baby-doll, and new-rich idiot in the Berkshires!" he muttered.

"I'm going to prepare one more!" she rejoined, "and the best of the three, too!"

He said nothing. Conversation became unnecessary.

The couple in the dining-room disposed of everything they found upon the table before them, even to mopping up with bits of bread the butter which had dripped from the roasted chicken.

Finally—it was nearly midnight now—the man of the combination invaded the kitchen.

"You"—indicating Jack—"will get the bags from the car and carry them up while I run the machine out to the garage! You"—turning to Lillian—"will attend my wife!" He strode out with dignity.

Jack looked at Lillian. She gasped. To be maid as well as cook! Then they smiled, and as he hurried out to get the bags she went in to Amy.

Amy rose somewhat foolishly as Lillian came in. She seemed about to speak, then thought better of it and led the way upstairs. Lillian lighted the pink-and-white room in front, and the smaller girl took it all in with the naïve pleasure of a child.

Jack entered with the bags and departed, closing the door. Lillian opened the bag which presumably was Amy's, and began taking out the things, as she had watched servants do it in the moving pictures.

Amy came to her finally. "You know," she admitted, "I—I never had a maid! I'm—I'm not used to being waited on this way at all!"

Lillian smiled, somehow finding she was growing to like the other girl. Then something struck her. "I thought you lisped!" she remarked.

Amy dimpled. "That'th for Hubert! He thinkth it maketh me cute!"

Lillian laughed. Amy, smiling, removed her coat and slipped out of her skirt. Lillian took the suit, finding a place to hang it in the closet. She noticed it was of splendidly soft material.

Amy, tongue unloosened, seemed bound to talk. "It cost two hundred dollars, that suit!" she announced. Already she had forgotten that she had an attendant. She threw her waist into a chair, a careless ball, and began to arrange her hair for the night. "Everything is new and expensive," she went on. "This"—coloring prettily—"this is my honeymoon, and I'm so happy!" In the glass, in proportion to the rest of her tiny features, her eyes seemed impossibly big.

The conquest was complete. Lillian hurried to her side, forgetting her rôle. "I am on my honeymoon also!" she explained softly.

Amy swung around in her chair before the glass, her hair gathered up now in an attractive knot, and held in place by a single hairpin. She looked at Lillian with eyes swimming, for theirs was the closest of bonds—each bride venturing forth upon an expedition into a land of rose tints and golden fancies. Flinging two slender, bare arms about the older girl, she murmured in ecstasy: "Ithn't it wonderful!" It was Amy's stock expression, rather than a lapse into her affectation.

Lillian refastened the other's hair, which had nearly slipped down; and then the little bride ran over to the bed, kicking one pump under it, the other under the dresser. Leaning back in the smothering softness, and overbalancing because she did not anticipate finding it so yielding, she pulled off her two stockings, one with each hand,—for all the world like a child of eight or nine; then, straightening up, she fingered the firm, heavy silk in sheer delight.

"I never wore silk before!" she admitted, "at least not often, and—" she looked at Lillian and checked herself suddenly. "Oh, excuse me! You don't know what it is to wear silk, do you? I didn't mean—I—" she stopped, confused, and turned away.

Lillian laughed. She had only explained that she, too, was on her honeymoon. "I'm not really a servant!" she said. "These are not my clothes, but some I found, and Jack and I are—"

Amy, slipping into her nightgown, still marked with the creases from the box in which it came, had not heard her. "Aren't these ribbons pretty?" she demanded. Then she rose to her full four feet ten of stature. "And am I not cute, and"—winking—"thweet!"

"Very!" Lillian adjusted the garment to its wearer. "I started to tell you," she began, patiently, but there was another distraction.

The door opened and Hubert breezed in. "All garaged and everything!" he shouted; then puffed a bit as if he had been running.

Amy, with a bound, was in the bed. Lillian rose, hesitatingly. Hubert stood looking at her, not realizing he was staring.

Embarrassed suddenly, Lillian started for the door. "You are through with me?" she ventured.

"Yes!" There was relief in Hubert's voice. "Yes!" he repeated.

Jack was pacing the kitchen floor as she returned down-stairs. At once the maternal welled up in her.

"You poor boy!" she exclaimed. "You must be famished!"

For the third menu she found lamb chops, and there were plenty of potatoes. The fresh vegetables which could be cooked quickly were exhausted, but she picked a good brand of canned spinach. The lettuce was gone, but in the icebox were artichokes, deliciously cold, and there was a great supply of mayonnaise.

Jack, indefatigable or stubborn, reset the table. At about two o'clock both were seated before the steaming meal.

Lillian cut into her chop and ate it methodically, telling herself that she must eat, necessarily. But she suddenly discovered that she had no appetite. The events of the evening, following the long day in the car, and the excitement of the early wedding, all had been too much for her.

She looked over at Jack, and for a moment thought he was neglecting his dinner also, but as she glanced at him he took quite a large bit of the meat and smiled with very evident delight.

"You sure are a wonderful cook!" he exclaimed.

Pleased, she bent to her own plate again, but it was almost hopeless. She felt as if she never wanted to eat again.

Finally she gave it up. Watching Jack, she suddenly realized that he, too, had lost his hunger. Whenever she glanced toward him he hurriedly took something, but when she looked from the shelter of her lashes she caught him eying his plate with a baffled expression which entirely matched her own feelings. She laughed, and after a moment he joined her. Before them lay the splendid dinner, practically untouched!

She went over and climbed into his lap. So tired was she that her laughter was close to hysteria, and only the near presence of Jack quieted her. But it was an uncomfortable position in the chair, and soon they realized the extreme lateness of the hour, for the chill of night had penetrated the house.

They made their way up-stairs on dragging feet. He started for one of the front rooms, but she reminded him, with a slight smile, that they were servants, and that their clothes were in the rear. The two little rooms seemed cheerless, with little choice between them. On the verge of despair, she went to the window; then suddenly uttered an exclamation and called him to her side. The rain was over, and a big moon, full and low in the sky, cast a silvery sheen over the trees.

She clutched his arm. "Can't we get away from here now, dear? It's—it's unfair to have the first day of our honeymoon upset like this!"

He straightened. "I can fix the car in a jiffy, with the rain over, and a little light. I'll see if I can find an electric torch in that other fellow's machine, or the garage, and we'll be away in no time!"

He started for the door, but she had to call after him.

"Our clothes! They are still too damp to wear!"

He turned back and plumped down on the side of the bed in despair.

After a moment's thought she laughed. "I have it! While you're fixing the car I'll take our things down to the kitchen and get them dry so quick you won't believe it. I'll iron the dampness out!"

They loaded up with the clothes and stole back down-stairs. Hope of a quick getaway lighted their mood, and once again the whole thing seemed an adventure, a lark. She giggled at their every misstep in the darkness of the stairs. He chuckled as he left her, in the kitchen, putting half a dozen irons on the stove and hanging things up above to catch the heat.

The way to the garage was somewhat winding, hard to see beneath the heavy foliage of the trees, and terribly soaked after the storm. Jack negotiated it at the expense of wet feet, finding the door slightly ajar and stepping in noiselessly. Then he stopped with the acute consciousness that some one else was there. He sought desperately to accustom his eyes to the darkness.

After a moment there was a sharp sound, metallic and yet like the cracking of glass or chinaware. After a short interval the sound was repeated. Then Jack was able to see the dim outlines of a figure bending over the engine of the automobile. He stole close, his wet shoes making no noise, and at the third repetition of the sound he understood what was happening. The man was deftly breaking the porcelains in all the spark-plugs, and when the machine was started in the morning trouble would develop that might puzzle the average driver for a good many hours.

It was vandalism, maliciousness at its worst. Jack waited for nothing, but seized the unsuspecting perpetrator of the outrage and demanded an explanation. For answer the other man struck at him, and in a minute Jack found he had his hands full.

The cramped quarters, the darkness, proved a terrible handicap; each fighter receiving more injuries from various objects in collision than from his opponent. Finally Jack landed a blow which, delivered with all his force, flattened the meddler; and the dull thud of the falling body to the cement frightened him.

He leaned over. The man was breathing naturally. Rising, he rummaged for an electric torch and found one. About to flash it on his victim, to see if he was all right, he was arested by a whisper from the door.

"Bob! Oh, Bob!"

Jack stole over. A second man started to steal in and he seized him. "What are you doing here?"

The answer was prompt. "None of your d——d business! Where's Bob?"

Jack was equally terse. "He's on the floor there where I knocked him, and you can go keep him company, and the both of you can learn not to steal around at night and meddle with automobiles!"

With a well directed shove he flung the second man on top of the first. Going to the door, he closed it, and with a bit of branch wedged the hasp to hold the pair prisoners until the owner of the car should find them in the morning.

The walk down to his own machine, aided by the torch, was easy; and he was able to pick the dry spots. Just at the edge of the trees, however, he was startled by an unmistakably human call.

"W-sst! W-sst!"

He switched off the light. In a moment he distinguished the dull outlines of a third car, hidden from the moonlight near the trees. He stole over; then, stopping, muffled his voice purposely. "There?"

The answer came in a whisper. "Did you put the car out of commission all right?"

Jack hesitated only a moment. "Yeh! Com'ere!"

The figure which emerged from the shadows was smaller than the other two men and no problem for Jack. He wasted no words, but with rope which the victim produced himself from the car, he lashed him securely to a near-by tree.

"You fellows will learn not to monkey with other folks' cars!" he muttered, pleased with himself. "Wait till 'New-

rich' finds the three of you in the morning!"

His own little racer he found safe in place, unmolested. There had been no damage from the storm, and it was the work of a few moments to wipe up the little water here and there. On test the ignition worked perfectly and the carburetor seemed to function properly. He pressed the lever of the self-starter and the engine started at once. Elated, but puzzled, he started to clamber in to drive to the house when there was a sputter and the car was dead on his hands again. The symptoms were unmistakable.

"No gas!" he exclaimed.

On examination his guess proved correct. Enough gasoline had accumulated from the vacuum system to fill the carburetor, and that was all. Then he grinned. The car of the three meddlers! He walked back to the house and found a pail at a side door. Returning, he coolly appropriated the contents of their tank, transferring the precious liquid to his own. And, he resolved, he would not confess to Lillian that he had failed to remember that one filling of his tank was insufficient for an all-day trip.

When he drove up to the kitchen door and turned he noticed a change in the air, and a glance at the sky showed him that dawn was breaking. They must hurry! He bustled about, filled his radiator, saw that everything was shipshape for the next lap of their journey, then entered the kitchen. A look, and he smiled.

His own clothes, dried and pressed, were laid out for him neatly. Lillian already was dressed in her things. The borrowed garments were out of sight, perhaps returned up-stairs. Lillian herself, her head on her elbow, her hair of fresh-spun copper the brightest thing in sight, was sound asleep. Her breathing, hardly a snore, was a testimony to the fact that the little bride was quite worn out. She would awake to her second day of married life after as unsatisfactory a first one as a person possibly could have.

Before rousing her he made his change and concealed the butler's clothes in an unused flour bin. Then he went to her, kissing her lightly, here, there, until she opened her eyes. Her first act was to fling her arms about him.

"Is the car ready, and everything?" she asked finally.

He nodded. "Shall we go?"

"No!" She shook her head emphatically. "It's early yet, and I'm going to cook breakfast. You're hungry, and I'm famished!"

He was uneasy, remembering the men locked in the garage, and the third tied to a tree, but she had her way. He sat at the table and dozed off himself before he knew it. When she shook him everything was ready—eggs, bacon, toast, coffee, fruit, and preserves.

He pitched into it, finding he was hungry after all; and she watched him fondly, not neglecting her own appetite. As they ate they laughed and chatted and never dreamed it was nearly seven thirty.

The unmistakable footsteps of the old uncle, coming through the dining-room, startled; petrified them. He pushed through the door, and seemed to grow several inches in stature as he saw them at their meal, dressed in their own clothes.

"*Where is my breakfast?*" he thundered. "Why didn't you call me? Where are your uniforms? *Where is my breakfast?*"

Neither moved. He started to speak again, when there came the sound of voices from the direction of the living-room, and he stopped, in amazement, as though he were able to hear after all. A moment later Amy and Hubert rushed out, bright and fresh as the morning, and irrepressibly happy.

"Where ith breakfast?" she demanded, winking at Lillian.

"When do we eat?" added Hubert, who had been in the army.

The elderly gentleman's jaw dropped, and his voice was very different as he looked at the other four. "How in blue blazes—how—which of you couples is which?"

Jack and Lillian looked at each other.

Hubert seemed surprised to see the author of the question, but he answered quickly enough. "I'm Hubert Denby! I've rented this place for a month for my honeymoon. Who are you?"

"I?" He of the gray hair was decidedly chastened. "I'm the goat!"

At that moment there was a commotion, and the three young men, Jack's visitors in the night, burst in. The leader had a black eye and the other two were disheveled. All were dirty, tired, and angry.

Hubert let out a yell of delight as he saw them. "Bob Daley! Who hit you? And Billy, and George!"

Bob, after a reproachful look at Jack, turned to him. "What's the big idea of carrying a black-jacking body-guard around with you, Hubert?"

"Huh? I don't get you?"

"Him!" Indicating Jack. "He's got a Dempsey wallop, and then some! He cleaned up the three of us!"

Hubert laughed. "He's the butler! What were you trying to do to him?"

Jack, puzzled, tried to intervene here. "I'm no but—"

He was not quick enough. The elderly gentleman, moving now with the distinct alertness of youth—of angry youthfulness—had approached Bob Daley, the possessor of the black eye.

"See here, Bob! Why didn't you put me wise that there were two couples? I wasted all my histrionic effort! I told you I didn't know Denby, that I had never seen him—"

"Shut up, Cardigan! Give us a chance! You'll get yours!" Bob Daley turned to Jack. "Who are you, and where did you come from?"

Jack, tempted to refuse to answer, thought better of it. "I, too, am on my honeymoon. The car broke down, we saw this house, rummaged up some dry clothes, which happened to be servants' stuff, and got mistaken for servants! He"—pointing to Cardigan—"and he"—to Hubert, "wouldn't give me a chance to explain; but"—ruefully—"they cleaned up two perfectly good dinners we'd cooked for ourselves!"

At that Bob and his companions burst into laughter, in which Cardigan joined them after a moment. Hubert, impatient, finally seized Bob, shaking him.

"All right! Let us in on it!"

Bob sobered. "I got wind that you'd rented this place, Hubert, on the 'q.t.,' sight unseen, for your honeymoon. We thought we'd rag you by making you believe you'd stumbled into the wrong house. Cardigan, the best actor in the country in character bulldozing parts; was to make you believe he was the owner, and that he had mistaken you for his new servants, just expected. He was to terrify you so you would pretend to be anything rather than try to cross him, and we followed you so as to steal in and disable your car so you couldn't get away, and to see the fun! We"—ruefully—"had a blowout, and got here late, that's all!"

"Yes!" Hubert was scornful. "And your fine scheme didn't work at all!"

"Didn't work?" Bob burst into unrestrained laughter. "Didn't work? It sure did, only the wrong honeymoon couple got the benefit of it!"

"Yep!" Cardigan, who had removed his wig, was reminiscent. "And I got fed, for once in my life. The best steak I ever had!"

Amy was indignant. "I think it'th an outrage!" She looked at Lillian. "Th'he cooked herthelf a wonderful thupper, and that ham"—an inflection of disdain—"ate it, and then th'he cooked another and we ate it!" She wheeled to Bob suddenly. "I hope your black eye thticks to you for thix weeks, I do!" And to Lillian: "I'm thorry, really!"

In their car, along toward noon, after they had broken away, Lillian turned in Jack's arms to look up at him. There was a twinkle beneath her lashes, a shade of maliciousness in her expression. "Are you sure now, darling, that your wife can cook?"

"Um-m!" It was an example of monosyllabic expressiveness.

She picked at a loose thread in the seam of her duster. "I know," she added, "that my husband can fight, and take care of himself, and of me!"

A moment later she murmured something else, something he could not hear. He took it to be of no importance. She was quoting two words, however: "'Dempsey wallop!'" "'Dempsey wallop!'"

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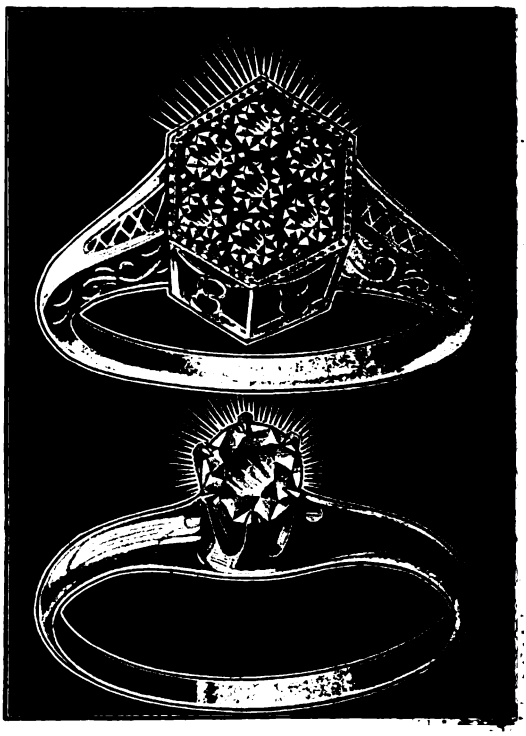

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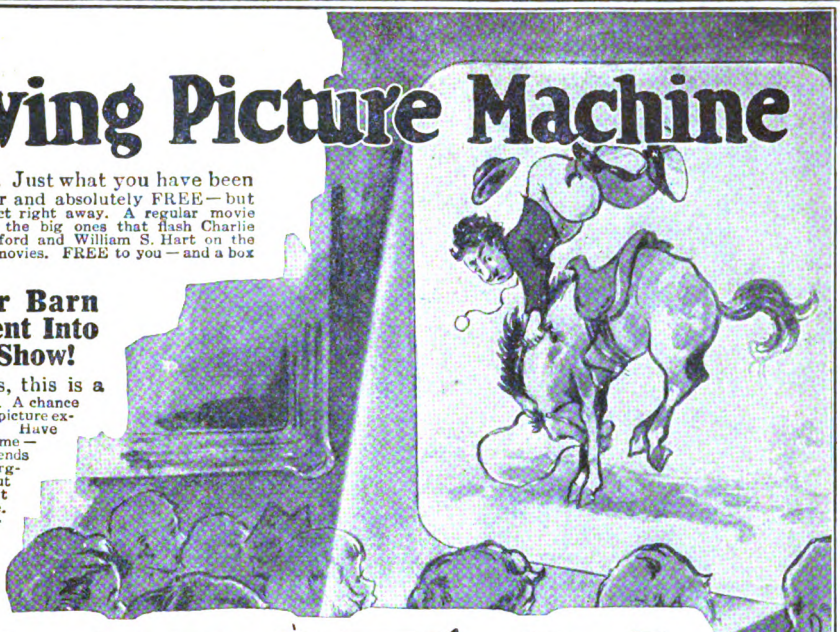
Reading advertisements enables you to get more for your money because they tell you where, what and when to buy. And it is a well-known fact that advertised goods are more reliable and better value than the unadvertised kinds.

No. 7 *This advertisement prepared by N. W. Ayer & Son, Philadelphia.*

Moving Picture Machine

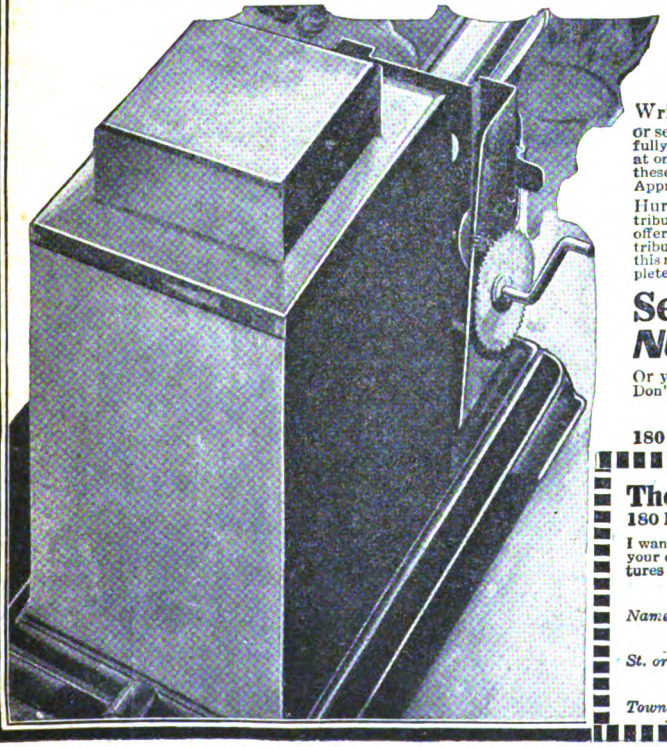


HERE it is. Just what you have been waiting for and absolutely FREE—but you must act right away. A regular movie machine, just like the big ones that flash Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford and William S. Hart on the screens of the big movies. FREE to you—and a box of film besides.

Turn Your Barn or Basement Into a Movie Show!

Boys and Girls, this is a chance of a lifetime. A chance to be a real moving picture expert and operator. Have movies in your home—entertain your friends make money by charging admission. But hurry, hurry. Don't wait a single minute. Send the coupon below at once or you may be too late. Act right NOW!

GIVEN



Boys and Girls!
This Is Your Chance

Write your name on the coupon below or send a post card. I will send you 9 beautifully colored artcraft pictures. But you must act at once. Don't wait a second. Everyone wants these pictures. They are full of lovely colors. Appropriate for the finest parlor.

Hurry, Hurry. All you have to do is to distribute these pictures on our wonderful special 50c offer. They go like hot cakes. When they are all distributed, then I wil send you FREE and PREPAID this real, genuine moving picture machine. Complete with a box of film; ready to set up for your show.

Send Coupon Below *NOW*—Don't Wait!

Or you may be too late. This is your chance. Don't delay. Send coupon or a post card NOW to

The Movie Dept.
180 N. Wabash Ave., Dept. C145 Chicago, Ill.

The Movie Dept.
180 N. Wabash Ave., Dept. C145 **Chicago, Ill.**

I want to get a moving picture machine FREE by your easy plan. Please send me the Artcraft Pictures and full details of your offer.

Name.....

St. or R. F. D......

Town.....*State*.....

inted for American Chicle Co.
C. Coles Phillips. © 1920

ADAMS

California Fruit

Gum

A CHICLE