


ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

An illustration of a woman with dark hair, wearing a light-colored blouse and a dark skirt, leaning over a rocky cliff edge. She is looking down towards a small boat on the water below. The cliff is steep and rocky, with some sparse vegetation. The water is blue and the sky is a pale yellowish-brown.

The Mysterious Quest

by Frederick R. Bechdolt

Far afield under sealed orders



All-Wool Heavy Sweater

Sent for Only

\$1.00
Down

Send only \$1.00 with the coupon. This All-Wool, heavy, jumbo sweater comes on approval. Money back instantly if you ask for it. Don't bet too late, order now.

Heavy Pure Wool

This is a splendid big sweater at a bargain price. Every fibre pure wool. Heavy rope stitch. Large fashioned shawl collar. Two large lined pockets. Close knitted wristlets. Ivory buttons to match. Made in big full size, in rich fast colors. Nothing so practical for fall and winter wear.

Sizes 34 to 46. Colors: Dark Maroon or Navy Blue. Order by No. F-2. Send \$1.00 with coupon. \$1.50 monthly. Total price, \$9.95.

6 Months to Pay

Learn to buy the Elmer Richards way as thousands of well satisfied men are doing. Everything you need in clothing or shoes and you pay in monthly sums so low you will never miss them. Strictly dependable qualities only. See this big sweater bargain on approval. Send coupon now.

Write for our Free Bargain Catalog of men's, women's and children's clothing and shoes. Everything on small monthly payments.

Elmer Richards Co.
Dept. 9277 West 35th Street, Chicago, Ill.

I enclose \$1.00.

Send Heavy Wool Sweater, No. F-2. Size.....Color.....
If I am not satisfied when I receive the sweater I can return it and get my payment back with charges. Otherwise, I will pay the advertised terms, \$1.00 with coupon, \$1.50 monthly. Total price, \$9.95.

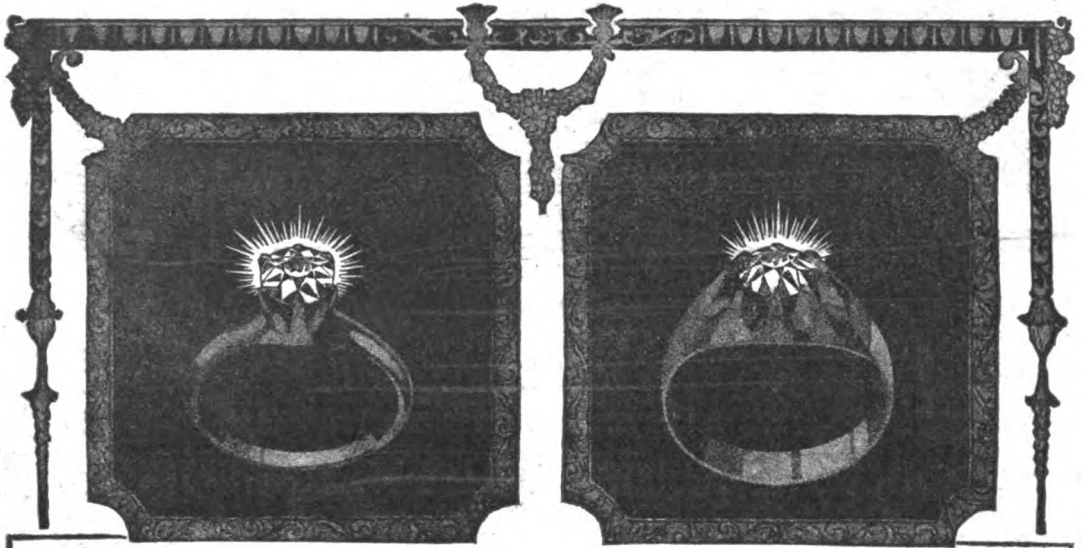
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Address.....State.....

← Send Coupon

Don't miss this. The supply is limited. You take no risk. We stand back of this sweater. Money back if you say so. Send the coupon now with a \$1.00 P. O. order or a dollar bill. Don't be too late. Send the coupon now.

Elmer Richards Co.
Dept. 9277 West 35th Street, Chicago, Ill.



Send the Coupon and We'll Send You a *Lachnite*

THREETHOUSAND years ago alchemists tried to turn base metals into gold. The more ambitious attempted to create a jewel to match the diamond's radiance. For centuries the secret was sought in vain.

But now, at last, one effort meets success. The search begun in Egypt 3000 years ago has reached its end in our day in a French laboratory! An obscure chemist has given the world a jewel with all the diamond's fire. In heat as intense as the terrific heat of the earth's core, where diamonds themselves are formed, he has crystallized a new jewel. In beauty, brilliance, and color it corresponds with the mined gem, and it withstands the great diamond tests of radiance, acid, fire.

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If you will send your name and address on the coupon below, you may get this latest miracle of man's invention for a genuine free trial. We will send you either of the rings illustrated above upon your simple request—without a penny down. When the Lachnite comes, merely deposit \$4.75 with the postman. Then wear the jewel for 10 days as if it were your own. Wear it everywhere you go. Submit it to the most exacting tests you know. Show it to your friends. And

then—if you or they can tell it from a diamond, send it back and your deposit will be refunded immediately. You are under no obligation to buy.

Pay Only a Few Cents a Day

Would you hesitate for an instant to pay \$18.75 for a carat diamond? Of course you wouldn't—and that is the total cost of the superb Lachnites shown here. The Lachnite in the lady's ring weighs about a carat—in the man's a trifle less. Both are set in solid gold and cut by the master diamond cutters of Europe. And you may pay this low price at the rate of \$2.50 a month—a trifle more than 8 cents a day. Less than a day's carfare to own a jewel with all a diamond's fiery loveliness.

Send the Coupon Without a Penny Down

Just put your name and address on the coupon and tell us which ring you prefer. Either one will be sent with the distinct understanding that you can return it if you can tell it from a diamond. Please be sure to send your finger size. To get it cut a strip of paper that will just meet around the middle knuckle of your finger. Send the coupon now—and not a penny in cash.

Harold Lachman Co., Dept. 8277

204 South Peoria Street, Chicago, Illinois

Send me prepaid Ladies' Ring on ten days' free trial. When it comes I will deposit \$4.75 with the postman. After ten days I will either return the ring or send you \$2.50 a month until the balance is paid. Total cost to me \$18.75. If I return the ring you will refund my \$4.75 immediately. I enclose my finger size.

Name.....

Address.....

HAROLD LACHMAN COMPANY
Dept. 8277, 204 South Peoria Street, Chicago

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY W E E K L Y

VOL. CXXVI

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NUMBER 4

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BEGINNING NEXT WEEK

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Closely Every Second

BY J. BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS

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FRANK A. MUNSEY, President

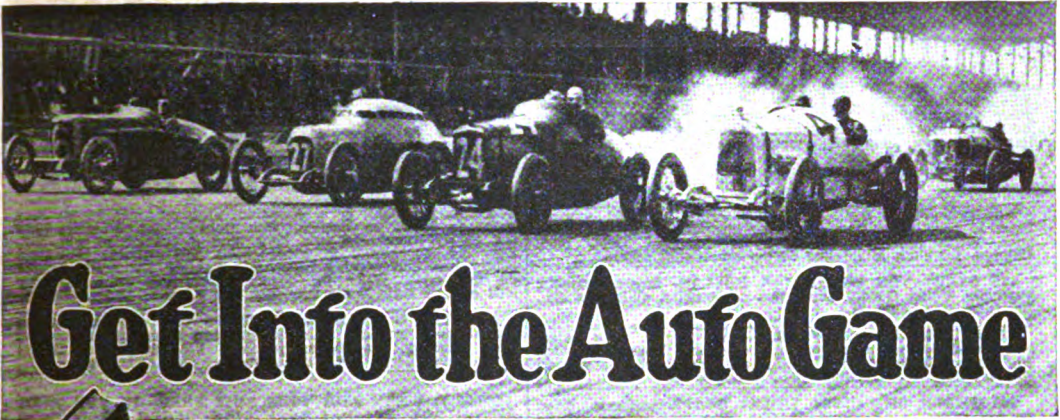
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Address
Reference

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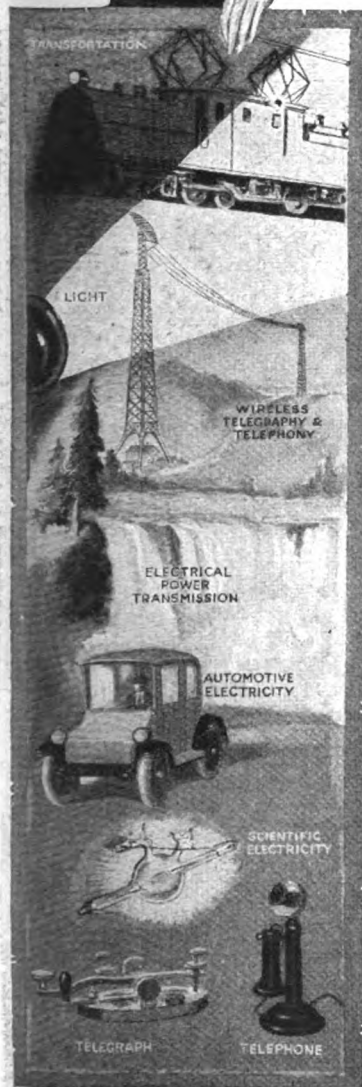
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...Civil Engineer.....	5,000 to 15,000	...Steam Engineer.....	2,000 to 4,000
...Structural Engineer.....	4,000 to 10,000	...Foreman's Course.....	2,000 to 4,000
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...Accountant and Auditor.....	2,500 to 7,000	...Telephone Engineer.....	2,500 to 5,000
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\$3.25

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The Mysterious Quest by Frederick R. Bechdolt

Author of "Whose Gold?" etc.

CHAPTER I.

BEFORE THE SHADE FELL—AND AFTER.

I WAS heading straight toward adventure and I did not know it. Danger and doubt and strange, wild happenings on land and sea lay dead ahead like a nest of hidden rocks without a ripple of the waters to betray their presence in a ship's path. A man can read the imminence of a storm in the barometer, but one gets no warning of the angry waters which I was approaching when I started out on that sullen Sunday afternoon; but if I had sensed what I was coming upon in its fullness, I would not have altered my course; rather, I would have crowded on more sail.

I was—and am still—a seafaring man, but this is not a yarn of ships and their ways; such things as happened off-shore might have taken place on land. I mention my calling so that you will understand why I turned my steps down the narrow street when I started to take my walk, instead of going westward toward San Francisco's wind-blown hills. The bay drew me as it always draws those who seek

their bread and butter on the sea. I do not care whether he is a common fore-castle hand or the master of an ocean liner, your sailorman is as bashful as a country girl when it comes to facing the city's up-town life, and always hangs close to the harbor side. So, instead of making a good swinging tramp of it, I steered my course down Clay Street among the dingy, silent warehouses with their iron shutters and their bewildering odors; came out on the embarcadero and—

Because it was the nearest craft I bought a ticket and followed the crowd aboard an Oakland ferry-boat. I had been a week or so ashore, just long enough for the land sights to still hold forth an appeal; not long enough to have got the cold smell of Bering's fogs out of my nostrils and the memories of anxious night watches out of my mind; but for all that, long enough to be a little restless, itching to fare forth again. To all appearances there wasn't a chance for me to get a ship until the next spring; with the homing of the great fleet which had been carrying freight and passengers to Cape Nome and St. Michael

during that summer of the big gold rush, there were mates and masters a-plenty seeking berths.

It looked like a quiet winter and I had hired lodgings for the season in one of those dingy buildings which used to line lower Clay Street in the days of San Francisco's shabby picturesqueness before the great fire. The realization that I was on the beach, that life was going to be just a long succession of Sunday afternoon walks until the ice broke in Bering next spring, came over me during the ride across the bay—and of course the itching to be off again immediately grew sharper.

The foolish little steam trains which used to do suburban service on the eastern shore before the recent electric lines, were hissing and clanging in the shed at Oakland Mole. I took the one which was handiest and within a matter of sixty seconds was being jolted along a track which led southward between Oakland's dirty western fringe and the marshlands which stretch in their turn between the estuary and the lower bay.

I was staring idly out of the window, when I saw the house for the first time. It stood in the middle of the flat lowlands as solitary as a ship at sea. Why any man had chosen to build it in the center of this expanse of dreary salt grass with the multitude of winding channels and pools and great patches of orange-colored mud encompassing it, is one of those mysteries which the outskirts of every great seaport city hold. And the mad builder had further gratified his freakish whims by painting it a vivid pink.

A two-story house, with narrow eaves, no porch or wing—just a bare square—and not an outbuilding or even a fence; its boards were fashioned to resemble squares of stone, painted hideously in pink.

It was a sight to set a man thinking. The windows were boarded up, but there was about that solitary monstrous square of pink a suggestion of human life. As if some one were hiding behind those hidden windows, crouching within the dusky rooms.

As the train clattered by the rotting wooden shed I saw a ruined walk made of short bits of plank laid crosswise, leading

away from the fragment of a station and on the walk, a good two hundred yards from the track, a man trudging with bent head toward the house.

Then the train whooped on by and the whole thing went out of sight. And I dare say I would have forgotten about it if it had not been for the reappearance of that man two hours later.

I had wandered in the mean time around Alameda, which offered little enough in the way of distraction on that somber afternoon, and finally caught a train back to the ferry. Approaching the pink house on the marsh I saw him coming toward the little station. As had been the case before, his head was bent, but on the other occasion he was going slowly and this time he held it low in his haste. He barely made the track in time and there was a very perceptible protest in the manner of the train's stopping, as if the engineer were playing even for his tardy signal by giving us a good shaking up. I was recovering myself from this punishment when the new passenger entered the coach.

He was a blocky old fellow, round-faced, with an enormous mouth that seemed ready to twine back around his ears if he should start to smile. His eyes were small and it occurred to me that there was something furtive in them as he glanced about the coach. I know he was looking to see whether any one was watching him. He was my fellow passenger all the way to San Francisco, for I saw him leaving the ferry with the crowd at the city side. After that I lost him—for the time.

I had dined by myself in a Market Street café and had spent the evening at the Tivoli—that was in the good old days when a man could have his comfortable smoke watching the comedians and listening to the chorus—and I came back to my room in the rain. Good heavy rain, with a wind to whip it under your umbrella. I entered the building by the Clay Street door. It was a quiet block, without any elevator, and the rooms in the rear were let for lodgings, while those fronting Kearney Street were occupied by offices. I had often come in by the Kearney entrance, but I had never seen a client climbing the stairs to one of

the lawyers whose names were printed on the doors of that corridor.

My room had a window opening into what my landlady was pleased to term a court. When I came into the chamber I headed for the gas-jet, which was near the window. I had the match in my hand and was about to light up—for I had it in mind to write a certain letter, of which I will speak later, to my father—when I chanced to look across this so-called court. The shade of the window directly opposite was up.

That window opened into the office of William Jaspro, attorney at law. I knew it because I had read the sign on his door. But that was the only reason I did know, for I never had caught sight of the tenant himself, nor had I ever seen any one entering or departing from the office. Furthermore the blind had always been down and only the lamplight in the evening had betrayed the lawyer's presence. Now I saw into the room and what I beheld made me change my mind about lighting my gas-jet.

A man was standing at the door, a lean man, and from where I was I could see that one of his eyes was bad; the eyeball was discolored, as if it had spoiled. But that was as much of his face as I got a look at then, for a dark handkerchief draped the features from the nose down. He had his back against the door, one hand upon the knob, and in the other hand he held a revolver. Another man was beside the window, a thick-set fellow, and I had just time to see that he, too, was wearing such a mask as his companion wore, when his arm swept downward and the shade closed with the movement. I turned and hurried out into the hall.

I had it reasoned out before I reached the door of William Jaspro, attorney at law, that the lean man's attitude—with his hand still on the knob—probably meant he had not yet turned the key in the lock. I wondered where the lawyer might be—I had got no sight of him. And in the next moment I was throwing myself against the door.

It gave, and I almost fell into the room, but not too quickly to recover myself and spring for the man with the spoiled eye.

I caught him while he was still staggering from the shock of my onslaught. I gripped his wrist and wrenched it; the pistol clattered to the floor and then the thick-set fellow was upon me. He was a burly man and quick, and I saw the handkerchief-mask fluttering before his expelled breath as he closed in.

It lasted less than ten seconds, but that little space of time was crammed with action and I had my hands full before it was over. His undoing lay in his revolver; he was groping into his pocket for the weapon when he flew at me and he was still tugging at it when I met his onslaught with a blow below the waist. I fought hard and foul, for I was fighting to win with my life at stake. I shook him with that first blow and while he wavered I thrust my knee up into his stomach. And by that time I managed to get hold of his pistol-hand just as the weapon came into sight.

His breath was gone and he was fairly staggering, but he hung to the revolver like grim death. Centering all my energies on getting it from him I had stepped back a little and had no grip on his body or garments. Thus I gave him his chance to break free with one mighty swerve and before I could leap for him he had gone. The other man must have crept out into the hall before him, for I got no further sight of him at all.

I pulled myself together and looked about the room to see my neighbor for the first time. William Jaspro, attorney at law, huddled in his wide-armed office chair with his face livid from fright, was the man whom I had watched walking to the pink house on the marsh that afternoon.

CHAPTER II.

UNDER SEALED ORDERS.

I STOOD there for about a second, I suppose, and took my first impressions of the man who, in an hour's acquaintance, turned the whole course of my life. Although I saw him only for a short time and did the things which I was to do in the company of others, the memory of him remains vivid in my mind, just as the memory

of the lightship marking the entrance to a harbor abides with the helmsman who steers his ship past it through the dangers of a bad channel. I have a picture of William Jaspro, the creases in his fleshy cheeks, the droop of his enormous mouth, the flickering light of dread in his small eyes.

I realized right then that he was fearing things which were yet to come rather than those which had already taken place, that the danger from which I had rescued him was only an incident reminding him of other hazards still impending. He gave me the feeling that he had waded into deep waters and, finding himself beyond the safety zone, sensed the presence of greater depths near by. He did not move, but strove to speak and, gasping, failed; which gave his mouth a fearsome twist. Then I caught sight of the revolver which I had wrenched from the grasp of the man with the spoiled eye, and as I bent to pick it up I noticed the heavy odor of tobacco-smoke in the room's warm air. Carrying away these incongruous impressions—the one of comfort and the other of inquiet—I turned and ran, with the pistol in my hand, after the vanished thugs.

That was what I believed them at the time, and, after all, I was not wrong when it comes to the question of moral turpitude. A man is what his methods are. I heard the stir of people in other rooms; voices were sounding behind doors which lined the corridor. I took the stairs, with one hand on the railing, in two long leaps, and felt the dash of rain-drops in my face as I emerged into Kearney Street.

I halted to get my bearings, looked up the thoroughfare and down; there was no sign of fugitives. Directly opposite a figure showed in a shadowed doorway, but as I started across it whipped out of sight within. I increased my speed, heedless of what consequences my desperate appearance with that revolver in my hand might evoke, and caught the man half-way up a flight of stairs. When I managed to make my purpose clear he answered—with a composure which struck me then as being odd after his panic—that he had just come around the corner and taken shelter from the rain. I remembered some time later

that his sleeve, which I was grasping, was quite dry. He was a little man, and in the half-light his face showed, sharp-eyed, thin as a weasel's.

I left him in the doorway and retraced my steps to the office of William Jaspro. He had arisen from the wide armed chair and was standing with his two fat hands on the table before him facing the door when I entered.

"Did you get them?" His question came with an indrawn gasp. I shook my head.

"Good!" he said quite loudly.

"What's that?" I demanded. "Good?"

"They're dangerous," he muttered, and his eyes lowered before my astonished gaze. "Yes—good for your sake." He pointed to a chair and, sinking into his own, "Sit down," he bade me more composedly.

The tumult in the neighboring rooms had subsided, but I had hardly taken the seat to which he had gestured, when the heavy tread which marks the coming of a policeman anywhere the world over, sounded in the hall.

"Come in!" The lawyer answered the knock on the door.

The usual perfunctory examination with the inevitable vest pocket note-book and and stub pencil enclosed between thick fingers as its accompaniments, gave me fresh food for thought right at the start. For, although there was a telephone on the wall within ten feet of the armchair where Jaspro was sitting, the police had received notification, so it developed, from a neighboring room. The officer seemed to take it as a matter of course that the victim had been too badly shaken to send in the call himself; he was not deeply interested in the case anyway; I could see that with half an eye; those were, you will remember, the old days, and San Francisco has changed her ways since.

When it came to a description of the robbers I was astounded by the lawyer's words and angered by a quick, sly, sidelong look which he gave me as I started to protest.

"Both of a size; tall men and large; I'd say a hundred and eighty pounds; black hair—I'll swear to that—the two of them," was what William Jaspro said. I had intended giving over the revolver which I

had picked up, but now I changed my mind. This affair was none of my business so long as the victim chose to handle it. No use of turning a good automatic over when it was not going to help serve the ends of justice. I said nothing about it, and when the officer asked me to describe the highwaymen I shrugged my shoulders, telling him I had not had the time to look. But I did mention the man in the stairway across the street when I was narrating the circumstances of my fruitless pursuit, and the patrolman nodded wisely.

"Ought to o' hung onto him," he chided me gravely and took his departure, apparently to see if there were any sign of the fellow there now.

William Jaspro turned his small eyes on me in appeal when the door had been closed.

"You'll not say anything—" he was beginning, but I cut him short and informed him that I was on my way now to my own room, which information I proceeded to verify by leaving at once. And when I had regained my dingy apartment, I lighted the gas-jet by the window and sat down to write that letter to my father of which I spoke before. It was a long letter and there is no need of going into its details, but I must tell you of it in a general way, for it has its own part in this story.

Henry Dolan is my father. If you know anything of shipping on the Pacific coast you are familiar with his name and character. He has left the impress of the latter on his business and the business of other men. He had wanted to play the ship's master and have me play the foremast hand when it came to my own course in life. The trouble with that was my own heritage of obstinacy, and my consequent departure from home in Seattle four years before this narrative begins.

There was no trouble and there was no scene; we simply could not hit it off and I went; and he told me that when I chose to come back to take my place in the business—which controls many things besides its own formidable fleet of cargo carriers—the place would be ready for me. In the mean time I had enjoyed making my own way, alone and unhampered. Not only

that, but I was not anxious to go home yet—nor to take my place under orders.

But I was homesick for a sight of him. I wrote at considerable length, telling him what I had been doing and how I had been getting on. I had my master's papers and knew a few things about handling men and ships. Also I let him know that I missed the sight of him and was thinking of him—in short, I unbent a great deal, for my neck had been stiff when he last saw me.

I was rising from the table where I had been writing when footsteps sounded outside my door and there came a knock. To my call William Jaspro entered.

"Mr. Dolan," he said. I showed my surprise at his knowledge of my name. "I've asked the landlady about you," he told me coolly, "and I'd like a talk with you, if you don't mind."

"Sit down," I bade him, but he shook his head.

"In my office?" He was wise enough to put it as a request. I could not actually dislike him, in spite of what I had heard and seen a little while before; there was that in his small eyes and his big, comic-mask mouth which made dislike impossible.

Fresh tobacco-smoke still hung in a thin blue haze and its odor made his office seem very snug. The rows of yellow books around all four walls, the comfortably cushioned armchair and the table with its tobacco-jar accentuated this impression. William Jaspro took his seat in silence, and I found mine without a word.

"You see, I own this building," he began, "and the landlady has been my tenant for a good many years. I didn't want you to think she'd gossip about her roomers to every one."

I acknowledged the explanation with a nod and he took time to fill and light his pipe.

"You're a seafaring man," he went on, "and not at work." He paused and I made no answer. "Well," he resumed, "that's point one. A man of ships and not at work. Now, here's point two—you're of good people. I knew your father myself in a business way—small matter, but I remember him well—years back; he wasn't so big as he is now."

I frowned, for it was plain that my landlady must have been keeping a sharp eye on me—and perhaps my mail too. Else how would she have known about my father? There had been some letters from the office up home written on company stationery and enclosed in its envelopes, letters from men in my father's office; and she had evidently seen them on my table. But William Jaspro paid no heed to my vexation.

"Honest and of good family. Point three," he continued, "is you're able to handle yourself mighty well. Which makes me think that I've not even thanked you." He smiled propitiatingly and it was like looking on one of those masks you see in windows at Hallowe'en time. "The idea is, you could be of great help to me—and others."

I started to protest for I was not anxious—at that time—to run a-foul of any more of this undercover business; but he made a gesture, half command and half appeal.

"You would further the interests of *justice*," I noted his emphasis on last word and had occasion to remember it afterward. There is no one more capable of distinguishing between actual right and the letter of the statutes than a lawyer after all.

"How?" I asked.

"By going—to—work—on—a—certain—case." He separated every word from the one following by a perceptible interval of time and in that interval wagged a fat forefinger.

I shook my head.

"You leave me in the dark right in the beginning," I reminded him.

"All that I can tell you," he said, "is that others need help besides myself. And need it sorely. And they are," his voice became defiantly assertive, "honest people." He repeated the last two words. "They are in danger," he added quickly.

I thought of the pink house in the middle of the marsh and then, somehow, I began to feel like yielding. It was curiosity. I think he saw it in my eyes.

"There is nothing I can tell you, nothing I have the right to tell." He was speaking with a certain heavy gravity. "But I can appeal to your—your love of fair play."

"How do you know I have such a love?" I countered, but I was weakening and he knew it now. He pressed his point the harder; and to make a long story short, I allowed my itching for action, which had been torturing me all that afternoon, my liking for him which was growing already in spite of the evasions which I had witnessed on his part, and above all my curiosity, to get the best of me.

In the end I went under sealed orders, and so plunged into the remarkable affair which had begun before I had come on the scene and was now in process of darker developments than I could have dreamed of.

"And now what?" I asked him when we had arranged the matter of my employment and my pay, which latter was decent enough.

"Pack a bag and lock your room and come here within the hour," he bade me.

CHAPTER III.

THE PATHWAY OF LIGHT.

I DID some thinking while I was making my preparations and the upshot of my reflections was that William Jaspro was in a tight fix. This lawyer, who had done well enough to become a man of property and was old enough to settle down in rusty quiet with his pipe and yellow books in that snug inside room, was dodging about in the dark like a thief, and the thief's fear of a hand on his shoulder was with him all the time. Even while he had been speaking with a sort of fierceness of the honesty of this enterprise—a fierceness which in itself went far to show that he was on the defensive on that very question—the furtiveness kept creeping into his eyes.

He had told me enough to guide me in my packing. I made a change into my sea clothes and tossed such belongings as would last me through a few weeks' cruise, into my bag. Before I rejoined him I went out to the nearest box and mailed the letter which I had written to my father.

The rain was coming down in sheets and the nearest street lamps were blurred, but

as I stood there at the box I noticed a figure in the doorway across Clay Street. One man on Kearney and another on Clay; it looked as if both entrances to our building were being watched.

I found my employer awaiting me, cloaked to the eyes in an old-fashioned cape mackinaw, and when he rose to go forth with me I could hear his noisy breathing clear across the room; his plump cheeks were as pale as paper, and his words came in shaky jerks as he asked me how the weather was outside. We left the building by the Clay Street door and as we walked down the block eastward I glanced behind, just in time to see the man leaving his doorway in our wake.

William Jaspro saw me turning my head and whipped a look over his own shoulder; he said nothing, but quickened his pace and the two of us went on down the sidewalk almost at a dog trot. I took a second observation before we had gone a hundred feet, but the street was empty.

"He's gone," I told my companion.

"Yes," he answered—and there was a sort of weariness like fatalism in his voice—"he never follows far." Which made it all the worse to my way of thinking, for if one shadow was willing to give up the dogging there must be another somewhere to take up the trail. And what was more, they must have some idea of where we were heading for, or at least believe they had. But I said nothing of this; time enough to cross the bridges when one came to them.

Down among the odorous commission houses we came upon a hack—those were the days before taxicabs had crowded out their slower predecessors—and while we were making toward the gleam of its twin lamps, a drunken man came lurching on us from among the bales and crates which littered the pavement, all but blocking traffic in this neighborhood.

He was, it struck me, too extremely drunk; and he had appeared too suddenly to suit me; moreover, we were just coming into the radiance of a corner gaslight at the time. I looked more sharply at him as he drew off on another tack, and then I leaped for him. For one of his eyes was spoiled. But, all in an instant, he sobered to com-

plete agility; dodged my outstretched hands and made off like a lean hound.

I halted after two or three strides and saw the lawyer hurrying on down the street; he waved me to follow and when I caught up with him did not so much as listen to my announcement, but urged me toward the waiting hack. The door was open and the driver was on the box.

"Same place as last night," William Jaspro bade him and threw himself inside the vehicle.

I followed, but took time before I closed the door to look behind. A little hole in the wall of a saloon was casting a pool of yellow radiance on the cobble-stones back in the next block. Within that illuminated area I got sight of a lean figure, bent double, running toward the groggery. Then I flung myself back on the cushioned seat and listened to the rattle of the iron-shod wheels on the granite paving, while the hack dipped and swayed like a ship in a seaway; and the rat-tat-tat of the horses' hoofs told me that our team was taking it at a fire-engine gallop.

We swung around a corner and I tasted the reek of harbor mud in the rain-soaked air. A block, another, and then two more; we turned to the left and presently I heard the hollow beat of the hoofs on planking, the rumble of the wheels on wood. And when we stopped I knew that we were on the docks.

It was a dingy nook among tumbled-down wooden warehouses and the lights of the ferry building were blazing away two hundred yards or so to the northward. We emerged from the vehicle in blackness that stank of rotten piles and decomposing tidal ooze; through the deep mutter of the rain I heard the swishing of the water in the near-by slip; a dock lamp made a dull red blotch in the darkness and beyond I could make out the distant glow of Oakland across the bay.

I happened to glance across East Street. A man showed in the light which gushed from the glazed doors of one of that thoroughfare's numerous groggeries. He was holding one hand above his eyes as if to shield them from the obscuring rain-drops; and as he halted in that attitude—I had

caught sight of him while he was still coming forth from the saloon—there was that in his body's pose which told me he was peering straight toward us. While I was looking the driver spoke to his horses and the hack rumbled away.

William Jaspro nudged me.

"Come on," he quavered. We plunged through the gloom down a narrow gang-plank and came out on a float. A voice hailed us from the night, asking us who we were.

"All right," the lawyer answered in a lower tone. "It's me, Jaspro. And now, quick! You got to make a run for it again, I guess."

By the glow of a match I made out the cockpit of the biding launch and got aboard. The match went out. We were in darkness again.

I felt my way to a cushioned locker and heard the lawyer's breath whistling through his teeth as he sank down beside me. The engine coughed; the little craft surged forward. I heard the rain-drops beating on the deck-house between the motor's sharp explosions and the slap of waves against her prow. We were speeding out into the harbor without a spark of light.

My companion's voice came out of the blackness of the little cabin.

"I heard a story once," he said with husky attempt at levity, "the optimist—falling from the top of a skyscraper, you know. A man in a fourth-floor window heard him saying as he went down by: 'Well! So far; so good.' That's us. So far so good! Eh!"

"Suits me," I answered and chuckled.

There is something pitiable—the more so because it is half comic—in a fat man's show of fear; but this fat man was game. I was assured of that in my own mind. It was the gameness of one whose whole body is shaking with physical loathing against what it must encounter, one who much kick himself into every move he makes.

I was young and big enough to like trouble and I wondered what it must be like to go through what he was going through at this time.

A ray of white light came stealing over

the water after us, showing every crest, illuminating every smooth trough; it bathed the stern; the figure of the man in the cockpit showed outlined against it. And now the whole framework of our craft trembled with the shudder of the speeding motor; our wake showed boiling, bubbled with a myriad of phosphorescent globules.

"We beat 'em last night," William Jaspro told me. "We can beat 'em again to-night."

The streaked reflections of the dock lights drew away behind us until they merged into a long row of parti-colored radiance, already dimmed by the rain. The white eye that was following seemed to be lessening in its brilliance a little already. And before we had passed Goat Island I knew that, barring untoward accidents, the race was ours.

My hopes were verified within another mile. But, if the launch had distanced them in this same manner the night before, and they were satisfied to take up the chase to-night again, they must have a fairly definite idea of where our trail was going to end. I said as much.

"Think so?" William Jaspro answered. "Well, I guess you're right. I was beginning to get the idea myself this evening—when I hired you." He lapsed to silence and I heard his noisy breathing close beside me between the coughs of the engine. "They've not found what they're after, anyway."

The water about us was running more quietly. I made out the loom of the land on either side and I knew now that we were running up Oakland Creek. Lights showed as we passed on, the lights of dockyards, of coal-bunkers, and other structures by the waterside.

We ran beneath the bridge and now the pace slackened; I caught a glimpse of a dark hulk close behind us; another loomed ahead. The masts of the salmon packers appeared like a grove of trees outlined in the night, shadowy and barely perceptible against the lowering sky.

We ran alongside a schooner at half speed, reversed and came to a stop. I climbed out, bag in hand, and the man in the cockpit, who had not uttered a word since his first greeting, showed a light. The

lawyer gripped the man-ropes and mounted a short Jacob's ladder; I watched him climb clumsily and pondered over the mysteries of this emergency which had brought the old fellow into such untoward action under cover of the darkness; then I followed, and when I had flung my legs across the low rail, I stood on the deck of the schooner getting my bearings.

The first thing a seafaring man does is always to make out what he can of the craft he has boarded. I could see enough to know this fore and after was three-masted and slender as a gull. From somewhere off in the darkness I heard a dog barking, probably a watchdog on the deck of one of those north-going ships which were lying here over the winter. A heavy clanking came from under my feet. I knew that men were busy overhauling things down in the engine-room.

William Jaspro led the way aft and a voice hailed him softly out of the darkness; the scuttle opened; I got sight of the speaker on the companionway stairs, then we two plunged below and I closed the scuttle behind us at the lawyer's bidding.

It was a neat cabin and spacious—but I will describe it in more detail later on. It has no place in this narrative as yet.

"This," my companion was saying, "is Mr. Dolan, your new mate. Mr. Dolan, Captain Wilson."

I took my skipper's hand and looked into his eyes. They met mine fairly enough, bold eyes, and there was a dash of hard recklessness in them. He was a handsome devil, somewhere in his late thirties, but lean and hard as a boy, black-haired, and swarthy as an Indian.

"Got to clear out some time to-morrow at the latest."

The lawyer added the news to the introduction so quickly that the skipper dropped my hand.

"Man," said he, "it's absolutely impossible."

"We got to," the other repeated dully, and flung himself upon a locker. "I can't argue. If you're not off inside of that time, we're—" He shrugged his fat shoulders and made a gesture of impotence with his two hands before him.

Captain Wilson bit the ends of his black mustache and stood there glowering down on him.

"Well," he said finally, "it's no time for wasting out wind in talk if that's the case. If I knew what's ahead of us—what it's all about—why—" He swore. "I'm taking your orders, Mr. Jaspro," he ended grimly. "We'll get down-stream with the morning tide and—you be on hand—there's the crew and"—he turned to me—"you can give me a hand in getting things shipshape to-night, then, Mr. Dolan; that's one satisfaction."

But the lawyer interrupted him.

"I've got to take Mr. Dolan ashore with me," he said. "For one thing, I need his help—or mebbe will—I was held up to-night, and Lord knows what would of come of it if he hadn't showed up just in the nick of time. Then—I—there are the other parties; and I want him to have a talk with them."

Now that was bad business—taking a mate away from his skipper and over the latter's head—to talk with owners over their affairs. And it did me no good in the eyes of Captain Wilson. I saw it right then and I started to protest. But the skipper himself silenced me with a laugh which was not altogether good natured.

"Mr. Dolan," he said, "I'll have you know this is queer business—if you don't know that much already. And it's not being run the way a seafaring man is used to seeing things handled—at least, not as far as I have seen things go so far. When you come back aboard and we're off to sea—then you'll find things different. Just now—well, you're"—he pointed to William Jaspro—"under landsman's orders."

He turned to the lawyer: "Want anything more of me? If you don't—I can hurry them up a bit in the engine-room." He left us with the words.

"There's a boat," William Jaspro told me, "tied somewhere back here by a rope. If you'll get it in hand and fetch it round to that infernal ladder, we'll go ashore."

I was busy at this and the lawyer was awaiting me on deck when the white pathway of light rays which had followed us across the bay came creeping over the

waters of the river and enwrapped both of our figures. I called out a warning, but it was too late.

CHAPTER IV.

INSIDE THE PINK HOUSE.

THE launch had come out from behind one of the ships which was moored below us; now she ran right on past the schooner, so close that I could have tossed a pebble aboard her. I saw the forms of several men on her; I heard their voices, and one laughed. William Jaspro stood as if he were rooted to the deck. I waited until the coughing of the engine was growing fainter beyond us up-stream; then I brought the boat around to the man-ropes.

"That finishes us now," the lawyer said and ended with a groan.

But he seemed to gather himself together in the instant and climbed overside into the skiff. There was no sign of the craft which had brought us across the bay and I remembered having heard her motor drumming off into the distance when we had gone below. I followed my employer, after bidding him to hold fast with a boat-hook; took the oars and, under his instructions, rowed to the Alameda shore. Eventually we drew up alongside a dilapidated little wharf.

The rain had eased off now into a clammy drizzle. I let the lawyer lead the way ashore and presently found myself beside him in the middle of a railroad-track. We struck off in the direction of Alameda, whose lights showed in a great yellow blur, and when we had gone perhaps a hundred yards he spoke for the first time since giving me my directions whither to row.

"I don't know," he said dully, "I don't know." I had a notion to remind him that I knew, if possible, even less than his nothing, but there was a despair in his leaden voice which made me hold my peace. We went on in silence and presently I thought I recognized the rotting little shed of a station when I first caught sight of it through the gloom. He halted in its shelter.

"Hark!" he whispered, and gripped me by the arm. A moment passed.

"Did you hear anything?" he asked in the same hushed voice.

I told him that I had heard nothing but the faint swishing of the salt grass in the rising wind. "May as well get on to the house," I ended. He drew away from me with a choking exclamation.

I told him then how I had seen him from aboard the train and instead of reassuring him it only increased his distress.

"Heaven knows how many others may have seen me, too!" he quavered.

"Well, when it comes to that," I replied rather roughly, "I've an idea some of these other people—whatever they are—know a lot more about your comings and goings than you think they do. I notice they had some one on hand at every turn we made. If you'll let me suggest, I'd say we'd best be getting on. We can talk it over when we're under shelter—and sure we're out of hearing. There could be twenty men around here listening and we'd never be a bit the wiser."

That set him off and he struck out without another word to find the little boardwalk which led across the marsh. I was the one to make the discovery and now I took the lead. A good half of the cross planks were lacking, and every twenty or thirty feet one or the other—and sometimes both of us—would miss our footing. I had a couple of bad falls and the lawyer fared even worse. Then, of a sudden, before I was expecting it, I saw the loom of the house right in front of me. It stood out blacker than the night itself, a forbidding shadow, and the damp marsh smells came to my nostrils, the whisper of the wind in the coarse grass was in my ears. William Jaspro limped past me and knocked ever so quietly on the door. The stealthiness of that summons was in keeping with the nature of the place. Silence followed; there came a footstep somewhere within; a voice called:

"Who's there?" There was a sick quaver in the tone of that demand which prepared me for what I was to see. When the lawyer had announced his name and I had followed him through the door I was not surprised at the appearance of the man who confronted us.

His hair was as white as paper and the skin hung loosely in yellowish folds over his cheeks. The pallor of his lips and the blaze of his dark eyes made a strange contrast, and his nose was thin, hawklike. That man had aged within a few months or a year at most. In the prime of his middle life something had shaken all the vigor out of him and left his whole frame listless. Sickness for one thing; it showed in his movements when he walked; he was even now recovering from a siege of some sort which must have racked him sorely. And, for another thing, dread. He was a bold spirit; his eyes proclaimed that indomitability which makes a man ride himself and others mercilessly; but he was always listening for the coming of some one. He was—in flight. When a man starts to run away he can never hide the fact, try as he will. This white-haired man of middle age, with his dragging limbs and shaken body, was being hunted like an animal. I was sure of these things before I had fairly stepped inside the room.

The fool who had built that pink house here in the middle of the marsh, had plastered its walls. The dampness had rotted the coating until it had broken away in patches exposing the laths. There were some sticks of furniture and a red-hot stove. And over on one side against the wall a number of small leaden boxes—ten in all as it afterward turned out—bound with iron straps. William Jaspro shuddered and we all went closer to the stove. Within its little area of parboiled air we took our seats on two cheap wooden chairs, but the white-haired man limped back and forth, rubbing the palms of his waxen hands.

"You're late," he turned and faced the lawyer as he spoke. Then flinging his hands before him in a gesture whose futility was like that of an irritable patient in a hospital bed: "Man! When do we get out of here?"

"Late," William Jaspro answered heavily, and his shoulders were sagging now. "Yes, and lucky I came at all. It looks—" He paused and shook his head.

"They're here then!" The other interrupted sharply and fear gave him a look that made me shrink from him. Jaspro

rose and drew over to one side. They stood there; the lawyer talked in a half whisper and I saw the eyes of one and then the other going to me as he went on. I wished I had been sensible enough to remain in my room instead of going forth on this extremely dubious matter; I resolved that when they ceased their conference I would withdraw and leave them. I was done with it. If they were in the right, why all this night prowling and all this dread? They finished their whispering and returned to the stove.

"Mr. Dolan," the lawyer indicated me with a gesture, and the other extended his waxen hand, "Mr. Langton." There was a hesitation in the manner of his pronouncing the last name which was not lost on me. I suspected it was an alias right then. But I took the hand and shook it.

"He'll help us out of this—er—crisis—I've an idea," my employer went on clearing his throat as one who tries to hearten himself to proceed. "All we need is a little boldness—er—just a dash you might say—er—Langton, and we're out of the woods. And I'm sure of him. I'm—"

I was on the verge of interrupting him, to tell him that I could not see my way to going further—not unless I had absolute convincing assurance in the way of evidence that the thing was fair and aboveboard, when another interruption came. The door of the next room opened and a girl stepped out into the lamplight.

She was young, not more than twenty; I knew her for the daughter of the white-haired man before she crossed the room and placed her arm over his shoulder as he sat there before the stove. I knew it from the marked resemblance and from the manner in which her eyes went to him at the instant of her entrance. Large eyes and dark; she was a little thing; small and with a delicacy of feature and figure which suggested fragility. Yet she had in her eyes and in her bearing that peculiar indomitability which one sometimes sees in small women. One look at her and you would swear she would go through things which would overwhelm many men. I think it was that spirit more than anything else which made my heart go out to her in one great leap as soon as I set eyes on her.

That and the charm of her dainty femininity.

She merely said: "Father," and I saw her eyes looking down on him.

"I'm going to help," I said as resolutely as if I had never had a doubt on that question from the very beginning, "but I've got to know what I'm doing—what you are heading for—if I'm to be of any service from now on." She watched me while I was speaking; I knew she was appraising me as women do; and my pulses beat a little quicker, for I caught something like appeal in her eyes.

William Jaspro was on his feet now and quite courtly for a fat man, too, as he made my introduction, but her father broke in impatiently before he was decently through.

"You tell him, Jaspro." And then taking the words out of the lawyer's mouth: "What d'ye think," he asked me sharply, "do they know we're here?" I shook my head.

"Can't say," I told him, "but they know enough to—" I hesitated.

"To run me down any time now. Isn't that it?"

I looked at the lawyer and he caught the question in my eyes.

"Here's the situation," he said. "The schooner sails to-morrow, and to-night we must get Mr. Langton and his daughter aboard." He glanced at the strange boxes. I went over to the pile and lifted one of them in my two hands; it weighed a good one hundred pounds.

"And bring these aboard, too?" I asked. I knew—and they knew that I knew, for only a fool would have guessed otherwise—that only something very precious could be the cause of so much concern.

"A team," Jaspro told me, "is due within the hour."

"And the men who followed us across the bay saw you on the schooner," I reminded him dryly. "She'll never sail with her passengers and that cargo if your friends, who seem to be so anxious concerning your movements, can help it."

It was quite apparent that they could help it, too; I read the fact in the lawyer's worried face and in the yellow features of

the sick man. I did not like the affair; I'd have deserted them then and there if it had not been for the girl. For all I knew Jaspro might be a liar and her father a common thief, but—she was already trusting in my help; her eyes were on me all the time. I swallowed my compunctions; the chance of aiding in wrongdoing did not impress me somehow as being as serious as the idea of abandoning her; she was no thief at any rate.

"If they'd not happened to see me," the lawyer muttered.

"Chances are," I interrupted, "they've known it longer than you think. The schooner's going to be watched from now on, anyway."

Silence followed. Jaspro sat holding his chin in his two hands, staring before him, frowning. Langton was bending forward as if to embrace the stove; I could see him shivering. His daughter continued to regard me steadily. She was the first to speak.

"Can you do it?" she asked quietly.

"I'll try," I promised her. "Let me think."

CHAPTER V.

"HEARING THINGS."

THE plan came to me soon enough; there was nothing wonderful about it, but it was the only solution that offered, and time was going by; the team of which Jaspro had spoken would be on hand within the hour to take the queer boxes away; and there was always the chance that the men who had been spying on the lawyer might overhaul us at any moment.

It turned out as I had hoped. The launch was standing by up-stream. She was to carry boxes to the ship. I had seen enough of her to know her for one of those sea-going craft which the fishermen use off the Farallones.

"We'll have her run in to a landing up above there; put the passengers and cargo aboard," I said. "Then she can slip away and meet the schooner somewhere off the lightship to-morrow." It meant some dis-

comfort for the sick man and the girl, but I imagined discomfiture would be preferable to these dismal quarters. All hands seized the suggestion with a sort of despairing eagerness.

I left them in something of a fever of excitement and set forth alone for the waterside, carrying a note to Captain Wilson from the lawyer and instructions as to how to reach the launch. Jaspro was to accompany the wagon with the leaden boxes and, when these had been placed aboard, one of us would go back to the house with the team and bring the other two down to the landing. It seemed that neither of them had the slightest idea of the geography hereabouts.

It was a little after three o'clock in the morning when I left the pink house on the marsh. I stood before the door for a moment partly to accustom my eyes to the blackness, partly to listen for some sound of prowling enemies. I never saw a darker night; the wind was driving the rain straight before it; a man might as well try and look about him in the bottom of a mine. Which suited me all the better, for if I could not see, neither could any one who might be searching for me. As for sounds, there were plenty of them, but they all came from the storm as far as I could determine.

I found the skiff where I had left it at the little landing and I sculled out to the schooner without any more sound than an occasional ripple from the oar's blade. Captain Wilson was on deck with a demand as to my identity before I had fairly got on board. I handed him Jaspro's note, written on my suggestion, and he took me below into the cabin, where he read it with a puzzled frown. His brow cleared when he had gone over it the second time; and then, without a word of comment, he scratched a match and burned the paper, smudging the black remnants to ashes under his heel.

"Very good," he said quietly. "I take it I'm not to have your company until I'm at sea." I am sure that the idea of clearing without his passengers and cargo was something of a relief. I asked him concerning the whereabouts of the launch; it seems she was awaiting a signal from the lawyer

to return and pick him up, but beyond that the skipper could tell me little. I had to take Jaspro's rather vague instructions as my guide in finding her. So I shook hands with the captain, wished him luck, and he accompanied me to the rail, where he cast off when I boarded the skiff.

I took the oars and pulled up-stream; the tide was at the flood and would be running out with the current behind it within a short time; but I had to take it slowly, for one reason lest I make too much noise, and for another that I might keep a lookout for our powercraft, which I knew would be keeping somewhere close to the bank and under cover if it were possible. I was treading my way, keeping close to the Alameda shore. The necessity for constant vigilance against dangers to which I was not accustomed was enough to fray my nerves. I was pretty well on edge inside of a half-hour. Another fifteen minutes had gone by and I was almost on the point of despairing of ever finding the wanted craft when I ran right along her side under the lee of a landing stage.

There is no doubt that William Jaspro, whatever may have been his shortcomings as a strategist, had good judgment in hiring his men. Wilson, the captain of the schooner, was an example to the point, as I was to learn later; the launchman was another, as I found out now. He was upon me with a boat-hook before I had fairly sensed his imminence, and I believe he would have brained me had I not the presence of mind to proclaim my identity before the weapon descended. He checked the blow as soon as he heard my voice and asked my pardon civilly enough. I climbed into the cockpit and told him what I had come for, and then I asked him if he had seen anything of the other powercraft which had come so near to being our undoing.

"She passed me going up-stream, sir," he answered, "with five or six men aboard. Soon after she came back and ran so close I could of laid holt of her with the boat-hook. There was only one man on her then, and he saw nothing of me, I'll swear to that." I began to congratulate myself that we had started things moving; it was pretty clear that the pursuers were getting

ready to close in somewhere. I hoped that "somewhere" might not be the pink house on the marsh. We cast off and poled the launch to the next landing some hundred yards above us, the one Jaspro had designated as our meeting-place; and while we sat there in the shelter of the little deck-house I listened to the drumming of the rain-drops and the swishing of the wind, straining to catch the sound of men moving in the darkness, but there was no sign of any one save our two selves.

At last I heard the tramping of horses, the jingle of harness, and the rattle of wagon-wheels. With the relief which these noises brought came new apprehensions, for it seemed to me as if that team would awaken the whole neighborhood and bring down upon us every lurking spy who had been left on this side of the bay. However, William Jaspro and the driver were the only arrivals.

I told the former of what news I had learned from the launchman and learned from him that everything was quiet when he left the house; he had encountered no one along the road. It looked as if we had a pretty good chance of giving them the slip if luck held a little longer. We set to work like madmen transferring the wagon's load to the biding launch.

The three of us were burly men and used to bending our backs in labor; but a hundred pounds is not an easy load to carry through the dark and to strike a light even for a moment was out of the question. The footing was bad and a misstep meant a fall into the river. But we tore into the task, each man saving his breath for the labor. I do not think that any one ever handled the same weight over the same distance in any less time than we made. The last leaden box was aboard, and two or three bags and one trunk were in transit. Thus far not a single alarm had come to interrupt us. And then—just as I was laying my own burden into the launch—I knew that some one was talking close by. I had imagined the same thing before, but this time it was a certainty. I bade the launchman go aboard, took the teamster with me and found William Jaspro where we had left him at the horses' heads.

"They're over there," he pointed in the direction of the railroad-track. It ran parallel with the stream's course some fifteen or twenty yards distant, and the road crossed it coming down to the landing stage. I hearkened while the teamster took the lawyer's place, whispering to his animals to quiet them.

The track was on a twenty-foot embankment and by looking sharply I could barely make out the forms of several men bunched there against the skyline; their voices came to me in a confused blur. Here on the low ground the wagon was in deep shadows. Its black cover came fairly between that group and the team, hiding the animals. The interval between us and the right-of-way was littered with heaps of salvage from broken ships.

"Stay here," I bade the lawyer, "and don't make a move till I come back." I slipped away at once, and made my way on hands and knees toward the foot of the embankment. I was able to get within five yards or so of the track without showing myself in the open, and I crouched behind a pile of old iron close beside the right-of-way fence. Now the voices were plain, the words distinguishable; I counted four men, vague shapes against the lowering night sky.

"Nothing there," the speaker swore. "You're always hearing things. Besides the orders was to wait here for Doc. If we start in to rooting round we're liable to make a racket and ball things all up."

"Some one coming now," another voice announced, and I could hear the footfalls down the track. One of the party gave a low whistle. The answer came out of the night, and as the new form revealed itself approaching, the others started toward him in a bunch. From where they met, any one of them could have spat upon me in my hiding-place. Just then one of the horses stirred, shaking his harness.

"What's that?" a voice demanded, but the newcomer silenced the speaker with an oath.

"Want to spoil it all?" he growled. "I've got 'em located. Not a quarter of a mile away, the two of 'em, I tell you."

"And I tell you, there's some one down

there by the crick." It was the man who had given the alarm. "If there is, it's none we're after," the other assured him easily. "I've been watching the place since dark down by where the schooner's laying. Right after you fellows come up-stream in the launch, there was two of 'em went ashore."

"We saw them two," another interrupted, "when we went by; on deck they was."

"I know," the newcomer told him sharply, "and I saw 'em when their launch brought 'em. Now listen—here's the p'int: They went ashore; pretty soon one of 'em went back aboard the schooner. I was watching the land trying to figger where he'd been, and I saw a light. Remember that old house in the middle of the flat? 'Twas there. I just been over to the place—and heard a man and woman talking inside. Not a chance fer a mistake. It's the parties we want." He lowered his voice until I had difficulty in catching what he was saying. "Keep quiet about it and do what I tell you and we'll have 'em inside of fifteen minutes now." Already they were starting down the track.

I crept back to the landing and told the news to William Jaspro; and while I was talking I had a mental picture of the girl waiting beside her father in that moldy room; I could see the joy lighting up her face as she heard approaching footsteps, and see it turn to terror when those men came into the door. I did not wait for the lawyer to speak. "You get aboard the launch. I'll go back and try to get them away."

"But where are you going to bring them?" Aye, where? It was a poser. I did some swift thinking in that moment while we two stood facing each other in the darkness. The creek was beyond consideration now. Jaspro and the launchman would be lucky if they could slip away downstream with those miserable boxes and avoid detection. We had to find another rendezvous and that was all there was about it. It struck me at the time that the further this was from here the better. Once the schooner got beyond the heads and took the mysterious cargo on board from the launch, she was reasonably safe to run

whither her captain pleased. There flashed before my mental vision a picture of the coastline as I had scanned it many a time on the printed charts, with every headland, every cove and bay and port.

"Get on," I cried, "and follow out the plans the way we've made them. When you see Captain Wilson out at sea to-morrow tell him to run down to Monterey Bay—and stand by off Moss Landing. If I can get them out of this, I'll bring them down there and when we signal with a lantern, he can send a boat ashore to take us on board."

It was just about one chance in a hundred. He realized that as well as I did. But he never made a protest. After all, it was the only opportunity that offered—and those five men were already well on their way to the pink house on the marsh. We did not take the time to say good-by. In silence we struck off in opposite directions through the dark.

CHAPTER VI.

"OVER THE TOP."

THE teamster who was standing by his horses when I came up left their heads and climbed to the driver's seat. "Where's Jaspro?" he demanded. "I thought he was to go back after them two."

I boarded the wagon without another word. Here was an unexpected ally, and I saw a chance to win the race with this new help. But he was doing some thinking on his own account and when we had crossed the railroad-tracks. "Fellow," he told me, "this here's queer business. Only for me knowing old Jaspro—always good pay and never kicked about a bill, and"—he swore at the horses—"there's that girl. D'ye see her? The one at the house."

"I saw her, but I don't know much more than you do about this business. Maybe not as much. But I'm not going to let that bunch get her if I can help it."

"They're after her?" He cursed the team again. "Say, I'd hate to ditch her myself." He urged the horses on. The road was vile; it was all that I could do at times to hold my place by clinging to

the seat. He assured me that it would be worse directly. "After we make the turn we got to take it at a walk. Holes every few feet that a horse would break a leg in if he was to trot."

"Will you stand by then," I asked him, "where the road's join? I'll finish faster afoot. If I can get those two to the team—"

"Then we can play fire-engine all the way to Alameda," he finished for me. "Sure, I will. If I get in jail over this, why, I guess old Jaspro will bail me out." I never got a look at that teamster; I've never seen him, save through the darkness, to this day. But I'll make a wager that he has an honest face. He pulled up a few moments later and told me. "Just follow the road; it runs straight to the house. Can't miss it, for it's all the way there is. Once your off of it, you're in the water to your waist." I had not gone twenty yards before I took a header in one of the holes which he had mentioned; from that point on I made progress in a series of brief dashes, each of which came to an end in another ugly fall. Finally I saw that if I kept it up this way I was going to put myself out of the race with a broken bone or two, to say nothing of knocking what little breath was left from my body. I slackened my pace to a swift walk.

Sometimes I wished that I had not given up the wagon, but I reflected that the noise of its approach would surely alarm the other party to greater haste, while I was able to make the intervening distance in less time than the horses. Besides which I knew that a mishap to the team would probably destroy our last chance for safety. I went on through the pouring rain feeling my way in the blackness, staggering over the bad footing, stumbling in the chuck-holes, until I saw the gray loom of the house ahead of me and paused to listen.

A voice sounded in the direction of the railroad-track. It was not more than fifty yards away. I heard a loose plank rattle on the narrow walk. Evidently I was winner by a margin so narrow as to leave the ultimate result in the gravest doubt. I found the door and never stopped to knock. I stepped within; the room was quite dark,

but a gush of light came with the opening of the door which led into the front of the house, and Langton's daughter stood confronting me. Her face was pallid and her eyes were wide with fear. I placed my finger on my lips. "Quick!" I whispered. "They're out there in front." She nodded and turned on the instant. Outside I heard another plank rattle and I swore under my breath. It seemed several minutes, but it could not have been more than a few seconds before she was back with her father, and I noted that the two of them were cloaked. "I do not think," the girl told me under her breath, "they are as far as the front door yet."

"We'll chance it anyhow," I said, and slipped outside ahead of them. As I emerged into the darkness I was ready for anything; but the night gave forth neither sight nor sound of any enemy. The two fugitives were beside me and the door closed silently. I whispered to hurry down the road, and as they started, I came on behind them. It was like walking in a funeral; the man could hardly drag his feet; and I felt the sweat running down my body as I heard the pad-pad of stealthy footsteps coming around the house.

My feet refused to move with any swiftness, and at each stride I felt as if I were weighed down with lead. Yet we had gone a good hundred feet before that first prowler gained the rear of the building, for I heard him stumble over one of the bits of timber which had tripped me a few minutes before. I closed in and joined my two companions. "You must make him hurry faster," I told the girl, and took his arm. "Come now," I bade him. He uttered the only sound he had made since I had entered the house—a whispered groan. All the despair that comes from physical impotence in a moment of great danger was contained in that gasp. I slipped my arm about his body and told him to throw his over my shoulder; and in this manner I half carried him up the broken road.

Silence endured behind us. The wind muttered and the rain splashed. I could hear the gasp of Langton's indrawn breath at every stride he took, and once, when he slipped, the scrambling of our feet in the

noise made a noise which I thought would wake the dead. It was not that I was afraid. A vast impatience was making my nerves bristle until I was ready to start at the dropping of a pin. The desire for movement was leaping through every restrained muscle and to keep on repressing it was maddening. We had made another hundred feet and then a third. The noise of knocking came down the night wind. It gave me a great start; the very fact that I had been expecting it all this time made it hit me all the harder when it did come; and Langton fairly collapsed. I heard his daughter whispering to him; he stiffened at her words and thrust his lamed limbs before him with a resolution which he had lacked before. I knew as well as if he had told me that it was of her that he was thinking, of the things which would come to her—and not of what was awaiting him in case these men caught us. And, no matter what disgrace he might have brought upon himself and this fragile, little thing, no matter what wrong he might have done, I felt my heart go out to him a little. The knocking stopped. It was resumed within an instant. This time it was a hollow, long roll. And then a voice came:

"Open there. We're officers!" I could not help drawing away a little from the man whom I was holding at those words. I felt him shaking as I resumed my former position. I looked over my shoulder just in time to see a sudden flood of light gushing out into the blackness, cutting the night on either side as sharply as a knife; a fan-shaped pathway of yellow radiance that showed every little object on the earth, revealing the forms of two men. And in the instant both shapes dived in and were swallowed by the dark bulk of the building, from whose open door that brightness flowed. And then I plunged onward, dragging the man whom I was supporting so swiftly that his limbs hung loose and helpless, his feet scraped in the mud of the roadway.

A pandemonium followed; across the distance came the noise of feet pounding on the uncarpeted floors, the bang of doors, the crash of furniture thrown about. It ceased as suddenly as it had begun and was succeeded by a little interval during which

the only sounds were the hissing rain, the rushing of the wind and our own sloshing footsteps in the muddy wagon track. Then voices clamored, the voices of men, but they were more like the intermingled yells of wolves who are crying on a reeking trail. I glanced behind again and saw several forms in the fan-shaped patch of light outside the open door; they were running headlong toward the road. I turned my head. "We'll make it yet. The wagon's not one hundred yards away." Langton gasped something which was lost in the whistle of his breath; the girl uttered a soothing word and I felt her arm slipping out around her father's form below mine. We staggered onward for some distance and I was sure that I could hear the jingle of harness as the waiting horses stirred, when my foot went into a hole and I pitched forward on my face, dragging Langton with me. He groaned aloud, but before I had got up he was already scrambling to his feet.

Now we had not lost more than three seconds in that accident and yet the time was enough to change the whole issue of the race. It was a case of fight; some one must make a stand. Down the road I heard the beat of running feet. How many of them were after us I could not tell, but there were several, and one of the pursuers was drawing so near that we could never make the wagon before he overtook us.

"Take him on," I bade the girl, "I'll hold the road. And with the words I loosed my hold of Langton's body. She made no answer, but I could hear her encouraging her father as they hurried into the darkness. I took my stand, crouching in the shadows at the side of the wagon track. The footsteps of the pursuers were coming closer. Some one cursed back there in the blackness and I heard a sloshing thud. One of them, at any rate, had come to grief in a pitfall. Another voice sounded still further back; the foremost man was within fifty feet by this time and he was running straight upon me.

I waited, immovable, and let him come on. He never saw me until I straightened up before him; and as he halted—so abruptly that his feet all but slipped from

under him in the soapy clay—I swung for where I judged his chin should be; swung wide and with all my body's weight behind the blow. I felt the sharp sting in my knuckles and heard the smack of their collision and he was huddled in the roadway at my feet. But before I could turn to resume my interrupted flight another form showed and a third beside it. They were right upon me almost as soon as I saw them and fighting as they came. I got a great blow between my eyes which made my head fairly sing and flung a shower of stars before my vision, and in the same instant a pair of arms gripped my waist. The three of us went down together with a mighty crash that left me breathless.

But if I was shaken by that fall, so were they; and I had a large advantage which had come to me through the very handicap under which I had labored while I was in flight. For, while they were running at full speed over the bad ground in the darkness, I was taking it, perforce of necessity, with slowness; the consequence of which was their own utter breathlessness at the very beginning of the encounter. Now they were, for the instant, spent. Nor was that all; their very odds of two to one made them go counter to each other's efforts in the gloom; while I was working to a single purpose, a purpose which I understood; it was not my first rough-and-tumble mêlée, you see. I had been, as I have said, a whaler's mate. So, as soon as I struck the earth, even while the shock was jarring

my very bones, I set to work with the one object of getting free.

One of the pair had fallen right upon me and the other must have been dragged down alongside the two of us. The first man started feeling for my throat; and while his fingers were fumbling about my collar, creeping up toward my windpipe, I gathered my legs toward my body, hunching up my knees; then let fly with both feet. The kick caught him in the mid-section and I heard him grunt as he went flying from me. I flung myself upon the other the moment that I was freed from the weight of his companion and felt one futile blow glancing from my body; then showered a whole volley down upon his face and leaped to my feet.

One of the prostrate men was rising close beside me. He made a lunge and missed and without waiting to return the compliment, I took to my heels. I could hear the horses stamping ahead of me as I raced up the road. I got sight of the wagon and a voice cried out. It was the girl. I answered with a shout, and in the next second leaped over the tail-gate. A pair of hands gripped me by one foot. I kicked backward and felt the grip relax. Then the team plunged forward, and I heard the girl's voice beside me. "He's here, father," she cried. "We're safe."

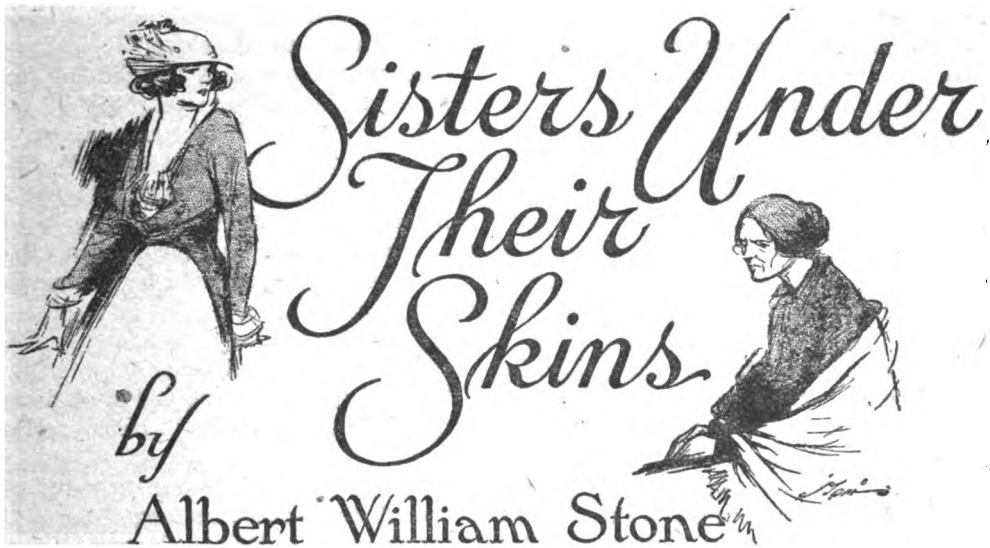
Somewhere behind us a man cursed. I got one last glimpse of the patch of light emerging from the open door of the pink house in the middle of the marsh.

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.

SAVE THE ROSE

ON a dance-hall floor
 Lay a lovely rose,
 A delicate perfumed thing,
 With a gold, gold heart
 With petals apart,
 Like a pinky butterfly wing.
 Dropped from the breast of a human flower
 Once like the rose—all fair,
 Now—as the rose will be in an hour
 If left to be trampled there.

Margaret G. Hays.



JAMES HENRY PULLIAM was dead. Peter Mallett, thief, thug, housebreaker, and all-around criminal, was on trial for the murder. The trial had been going on four days. During most of that time Peter had sat slouched down in his chair, a few strands of his tumbled, dirt-brown hair showing over the top.

His tenure of the witness-stand had been short. He admitted, without hesitancy, that he had fired one shot at Mr. Pulliam; that it seemed to have taken instantaneous effect. Then Peter had fled, as befitted his furtive nature. Mr. Pulliam's body subsequently having been discovered in his front yard, Peter was arrested.

"I didn't go to do it," was his explanation. "Th' old guy went into his hip pocket like he was fixin' to pull a gat. So I cracked down on him."

A person of considerable assurance was Peter Mallett. His wrinkled blue-serge coat was torn at the shoulder, his dirty white shirt showing through the gap. His shapeless trousers were frayed at the bottoms. His eyes, too large for his hatchet face, were a milky blue.

The testimony was in. Grant Pierson, the district attorney, introduced but one witness in rebuttal. It was Dr. Louis Mace, the coroner.

"There was no revolver on the person

of the deceased," the coroner said formally. "I am positive that the body had not been disturbed when I arrived."

"That's all, your honor," said Pierson. "That's our case."

"You may declare a recess, Mr. Bailiff," remarked Judge Vincent, twisting his blond mustache with tapering fingers. "The court will retire to chambers to prepare the instructions."

Helen Pulliam, beautiful daughter and heiress of the dead man, had been in constant daily attendance upon the hearing. Her soft brown hair escaped in little tendrils from under her natty velvet toque, framing her cameolike countenance and matching her dark eyes. Her companion, a girl of her own age, was in the midst of a commentary upon the flustered appearance of the young attorney for the defense, when Helen suddenly touched her arm.

"I wonder who that is?" she asked.

She was pointing with a gloved forefinger. Her companion glanced across the court-room and saw the object of Helen's query—a gray-haired woman in the front row of spectators' benches, wedged in between a man with a twisted white beard and a youth with no beard at all. She was leaning slightly forward, her shoulders incased in a worn, knit shawl, and her hair draped across her forehead like a smoothly

parted curtain. Her eyes were gray as a March mist.

"She hasn't taken her eyes off the prisoner once," continued Helen.

"Maybe it's his mother."

But Helen shook her head. "She looks too good to be the mother of that brute." Her emphasis on the word was casual but unmistakable.

The district attorney, busy with a mass of documents, looked up and crooked his finger. Helen arose and advanced to his side.

"The case is a cinch," he informed her in his heavy bass. He had a bald head and a manner habitually belligerent. "The defense hasn't a leg to stand on. The jury's mind is already made up, if I'm any judge. We ought to get the extreme penalty."

The girl's eyes flashed and her pretty mouth tightened.

"You mean that they will—hang him?"

"Absolutely. Not a chance that they'll do anything else. This Mallett is the coldest-blooded criminal I ever saw. His behavior alone will convict him. He shot your father down—"

"Please!" begged the girl, holding up her hand.

"And admits it without batting an eyelid," went on the district attorney. "The fool thinks he can get by with his self-defense plea. But he can't. He was in your father's front yard for the purpose of committing robbery. Jim happened to be in the yard. That's all there is to it."

The clerk appeared in the door leading to Judge Vincent's chambers and held up a forefinger. Pierson nodded.

"We're going in to prepare the instructions," he explained hurriedly. "After that will come the arguments." He lowered his tone. "Have you noticed the old woman in the front row—the one that keeps her eyes on Mallett all the time?"

"Yes."

"That's his mother. The boy comes of a fairly decent family, I understand. He's probably a throw-back. Young Freeman has been trying to figure out some way to ring her in, and I've got a hunch he'll point her out to the jury when he gets a chance. Pull a lot of tremble-talk about their duty

to the mothers of society, and all that sort of thing. See?"

"How about the daughters?"

The girl's lips were a straight line, and her chin protruded ever so slightly.

"That's just it. If he starts any of the sob-stuff, I may take a hand myself." Pierson smiled apologetically as he gathered up a handful of papers. "Excuse me if I'm a little rough in my language, Helen. I've known you since you were born, and Jim was my friend."

"I understand."

"Then it will be all right?"

"You may do anything you think necessary to win the verdict," Helen replied firmly.

"Good for you. Better stick around. We won't be in chambers long."

He strode after William Freeman, counsel for the defense, disappearing presently through the door that led to Judge Vincent's private office.

The instructions had been read to the jury by the judge, some forty minutes later, and the allotment of time for the arguments had been awarded to each side. The customary shuffling of feet, indrawing of breath and readjusting of bodies had taken place.

Grant Pierson, his bald head thrust belligerently forward and his right hand resting in his hip pocket, advanced to the stand.

"Please, the court 'n' gentlemen of the jury." Pierson was characteristically sparing of the niceties of enunciation when talking to a jury. "You've heard the evidence in this case, and the instructions of the court. I don't need to take up your time with a long-winded harangue. You look like intelligent men, and it won't be necessary to tell you what your duty is."

"The killing of Jim Pulliam is now history. You all know what sort of a man he was. He lived among you for a good many years, a respected citizen who never did anybody any harm in his life. He raised his family, and built up a law practice. He gave to charity. He owned property and he paid taxes."

"And then, just when he had reached the time of life that most of us look forward

to as a well-earned rest, along comes a stranger—an alley-sneaking footpad, a criminal by his own confession and the evidence—and shoots Jim Pulliam down like a dog!”

The court sustained an indignant objection by Freeman, and ordered the jury to disregard counsel's remarks concerning the defendant's character and habits. Pierson merely grunted an exception.

As he proceeded with his argument his voice emerged from its husky bass and took on a note which occasionally broke into falsetto. He made his points tell. Now and then his big fist crashed into his palm, or down upon the stand before him. Even the prisoner's studied calm deserted him once or twice, as the district attorney pointed a stubby forefinger at him and visualized, for the benefit of the jury, the Pulliam shooting.

“Look at him!” he shouted. “Does he look sorry for his deed? Are you going to permit a man like that to come into your community, shoot down in cold blood one of the finest chaps that God ever quickened with the breath of life, and escape?”

He turned dramatically and waved his hand toward Helen Pulliam, who had resumed her seat back of the counsel table.

“Counsel for the defense will try to arouse your sympathies for the defendant through somebody else, I presume. He will draw a picture of the home left desolate, and all that sort of thing. But I want to remind you gentlemen that another home has already been left desolate by the hand of this assassin.”

The girl's delicate face flushed, but her gaze did not waver. There was a visible surge in the jury box. Pierson's heavy countenance gave no hint of the satisfaction he felt.

“I repeat,” he said, “this man is admittedly a criminal—a scavenger of society. For years he has ranged the byways of our cities and towns, committing depredations of all kinds. He has served terms in jails, reformatories and penitentiaries.

“And now he comes to you, his hands red with the dripping blood of his victim, and tells you that he acted in self-defense. He does not deny that he intended to rob

the Pulliam house. In some States, gentlemen, burglary is punishable by death. This man—”

“We object!” interrupted Freeman. “Counsel is going outside of the evidence, and he knows it. We ask that his remark about the defendant's motive be stricken from the record.”

“Oh, I'll withdraw it if you object,” offered the district attorney with ready craft. “Anyhow, gentlemen of the jury, I'll leave you to think over what I have said, for the present.”

He retired to a seat beside Helen, wiping his face.

“Well, did I make a good start?” he asked.

Her flashing eyes rewarded him:

“I thought I'd take some of the wind out of his sails,” he explained. “That's why I brought you into it. The jury will have a few minutes to let it sink in, you see. If he tries any funny business with Mallett's mother, though, I'll want to come back at him strong. It'll be all right, won't it?”

“If Mr. Freeman tries to take any such advantage as that, he is a coward!” she flamed.

Pierson grinned.

“Oh, not so bad as that, I guess. It's all in the game. He isn't looking for an acquittal, anyway. If he escapes the rope, it'll be triumph enough for him.”

He looked at her.

“Nothing less than the rope will do,” he said significantly.

“Nothing,” she agreed, biting her lips nervously.

The attorney for the defense was advancing to the fray. He was young, a trifle self-conscious, and lacked in pronounced measure the impressive bearing of his legal opponent. When he began to talk his tones were husky; but it was the huskiness of embarrassment.

Presently he found his voice. His bearing became surer. The prisoner abandoned his position of studied inertness and sat up. He even smoothed down the stubborn strands of his hair with a dirty hand. His pale-blue eyes were fixed on the back of his attorney's head.

"It is true that this man, the defendant, hasn't the most unblemished reputation in the world," said Freeman. "But his past has nothing to do with this case, gentlemen of the jury. The court has instructed you that you are to consider only the unimpeached evidence. Arguments of Mr. Pierson regarding the defendant's past are out of place. My client admits that he killed Mr. Pulliam. But he shot—as he thought—to save his own life."

"The very fact that this friendless man is a social outcast is all the more reason why he should be shown mercy. He has no powerful friends to lend their aid in this, the crisis of his sordid life. The wheels are greased to send him to the gallows. You gentlemen have your hands on the brake. Are you going to sit by and permit him to go to the scaffold—even give him the push that will land him there?"

Grant Pierson nudged Helen.

"Pretty weak," he whispered.

The young lawyer proceeded. "Nor can we overlook the fact that the prisoner will not be the only one to suffer, in the event of a conviction. The district attorney has called your attention to the plight of the survivors of Mr. Pulliam. Let me say, in turn, that there are others who will suffer—"

He turned and pointed directly at the gray-haired woman in the front row of spectators' benches.

"I have in mind the mother of the man upon whom you are soon to pass judgment."

The young lawyer's attempt at dramatic impressiveness failed utterly.

Pierson chuckled under his breath.

"Have you thought of the suffering in store for her? To see the boy to whom she gave life dangling at the end of a rope—"

"Just a minute!" It was the district attorney who interrupted. "Your honor, this defendant's mother is not a party to the action. I object to counsel's reference."

Judge Vincent's bland countenance was expressionless.

Freeman took courage from his hesitation.

"Mr. Pierson did not refrain from making a similar reference," he defended.

"My reference was perfectly right and proper. I remarked merely that Jim Pulliam's murder had plunged his family into grief."

"This defendant has a family, too."

"He ought to have thought of his family before he committed murder, then."

"Gentlemen," remarked the court, "please remember that your arguments are to be made to the jury, and not to each other."

"I'd like a ruling, just the same," insisted Pierson.

Judge Vincent did not give it immediately. He twisted at his mustache and gazed out of the west window, through which the late afternoon sun poured its rays. The clock over the bench ticked loudly. The bailiff, an ancient man with a white beard and gnarled knuckles, grasped his gavel and waited. The crowd held its united breath.

"Judge, yer honor, kin I say a few words?"

There was a shuffling of feet and a craning of necks. An old woman, with gray hair parted smoothly over her forehead like a curtain, and eyes as gray as a March mist, stood in the front row of spectators' benches, grasping with trembling fingers the black knit shawl that incased her shoulders.

She was gazing eagerly at the blond-haired judge, patently oblivious of the fact that she was the cynosure of three hundred pairs of eyes.

The district attorney was on his feet.

"I certainly object to this woman saying anything!" he shouted.

"And I," cried Freeman, "resist the objection!"

Judge Vincent's indecision was evident. The two lawyers stood on the balls of their feet, waiting. Finally the court turned to the jury-box.

"Gentlemen of the jury, you may retire for a few minutes," he directed. "Mr. Bailiff—"

The old man rose stiffly and hobbled around the bench, his eye on the clock. The jurors filed out of the door into the corridor. Instantly the district attorney renewed his objection.

Judge Vincent smiled courteously.

"I think she may address the court, if she wishes, Mr. Pierson," he said. "You may proceed, madam."

The old woman felt her way along the railing to the swinging gate, through which she pushed awkwardly. Half-way across the open space between the railing and the rows of desks she came to a stand.

The sun, shining through the west window, drenched in red glory a pair of American flags, crossed above the judge's head. The deep hush which had fallen over the court-room was not disturbed. With her shoulders slightly hunched beneath the knit shawl, her gnarled fingers grasping it at the throat, the woman began to speak quaveringly.

"Judge, yer honor, I reckon I ain't got no right to say anything, just like that man says. I didn't see th' shootin', an' I don't know nothin' about it 'cept what I've heard in this here room.

"My boy says he killed th' man. Maybe he could 'a' denied it, an' got off free. I dunno. But he didn't, judge, yer honor. He come right out and said he done it."

She transferred her gaze fleetingly to the object of her plea, who had resumed his slouching position in the chair.

"He ain't never been a very good boy," she went on. "I'm sorry to have to say it, judge, but he ain't. 'Pears like he's been a thorn in our sides every since I kin remember. He's been in more trouble an' cussedness than you could shake a stick at, he has. His paw's had to fix things up fer him so many times he quit countin' long ago."

The gray eyes took on a reminiscent expression.

"He was only ten years old, judge, yer honor, when he busted into Bill James's chicken-house an' hooked a couple of th' fattest pullets Bill had, which he tuk to town an' sold fer six bits. He didn't have no more sense than to sell 'em to Bill's own cousin, Ike Walsen. Paw had to pay his fine to git him out o' jail.

"'Twasn't no time after that, 'peared like, that he busted into Allison's store down to Hinesville. There was four er five boys in that scrape. They didn't git caught fer quite a spell, 'cause th' constable

thought men had did it. When they 'rested Pete his paw couldn't help him, 'cause he'd done committed a pen'tent'ry offense. So Pete went to th' reform school. He was there a whole year 'fore he done bruk out."

Again the woman cast her gray eyes accusingly upon the countenance of her son. The corners of her broad mouth trembled.

"While he was out, judge, he stole a gun of somebody an' held up a man, not a mile from th' school. He got four dollars an' thirty-three cents from th' man. He didn't even have a chance to spend it 'fore they got him agin. He had to stay in th' school till he was twenty-one—four years ago. He's twenty-five now, yer honor, come th' 6th of next January.

"Since then 'pears like Pete's gone from bad to worse. He's committed robberies everywhere, I reckon. He's served two stretches in county jails, an' one in th' Missouri pen. He jest nacherally ain't no good, judge."

She paused and fumbled in the pocket of her old-fashioned skirt for a handkerchief, which she pressed to the corners of her mouth, to still the trembling. Judge Vincent's kindly eyes were on her.

"I ain't askin' you-all to let him go free!" she cried suddenly. "He killed a man. He's gotta suffer fer it. His paw—"

"Where is your husband?"

"He had to stay home, judge, yer honor. 'Peared like this scrape o' Pete's sort o' finished him up. Paw's sick in bed. But me an' Paw is gittin' old, judge. We've rastled with Pete ontill we can't rastle no more. When we heerd about th' killin', Paw told me to come.

"'You go, an' I'll stay home an' pray,' he says. 'Pears like it's all I kin do.' But prayin' ain't gonna do no good, yer honor. We done tried it, time an' agin. Paw an' me has both got callouses on our knees, 'most, callin' on th' Lord to stop Pete's doin's. He's jest nacherally bad. He don't care nothin' fer his paw an' maw, So I ain't askin' nothin' fer him."

The prisoner suddenly sat up, his pale eyes staring. A flush appeared upon his sallow cheeks, and he pulled his attorney

by the sleeve. The attorney shook him off.

"What I'm askin', judge, is fer myself—an' paw. We feel like we've suffered enough over this boy. An' I feel like you might let him off with a life term, 'stead o' hangin', 'cause—'cause we don't want to have to look back durin' th' rest o' what time th' Lord's allowin' us to live—an' see Pete hangin' on th' end of a rope."

The gray eyes remained fixed upon those of Judge Vincent for a long moment. Then the old woman turned and stumbled back toward her seat, her handkerchief at her lips.

Judge Vincent removed his eye-glasses and polished them vigorously.

"The court feels the utmost sympathy for you in your misfortune," he began kindly. "I feel certain that neither you nor your husband is responsible, directly or otherwise, for the predicament in which your son finds himself. I believe you when you say that you did your utmost to train him properly, and give him a Christian upbringing."

"At this stage of the proceedings, however, the court cannot discuss the merits of the case. Neither can it entertain your plea, however sympathetic I may feel personally. Under our system of jurisprudence the jury, and not the judge, is the sole arbiter."

"Then can't I talk to th' jury, yer honor?"

The woman was now standing before the railing.

Judge Vincent shook his head.

"Unfortunately, Mrs. Mallett, you cannot. The jurors are permitted to consider only the evidence which has been admitted to the record, and the instructions of the court. Nor can it be permitted for them to know anything of what you have said to me. I am sorry."

There was unmistakable finality in his tone. For a moment the old woman stood swaying, the picture of despair. Then, blindly, she sank into a seat, her broad mouth working at the corners.

"You may recall the jury, Mr. Bailiff."

That functionary rose to obey. He hobbled

toward the corridor door, followed by the eyes of the spectators. As he passed Helen Pulliam she was staring at the woman who had just finished her tragically fruitless plea. Then she rose to her feet, her eyes shining with something like a great resolve.

The sun formed a brilliant shaft of rose-yellow as it streamed across the dingy court room, splashing the opposite wall with gold.

The bailiff's nasal voice floated in from the hall, summoning the jurors back to view the last act of the sordid drama.

They straggled in and filed into the box. The one in the lead sank into his seat and adjusted his trousers at the knees. His attention was suddenly arrested by what he saw.

Straight along the shaft of sunlight Helen walked. Her slim young form was bathed in its glory. As she neared the bowed form of the gray-haired woman she held forth her arms. Her fingers touched the shoulder beneath the knit shawl, and the woman looked up dully.

The creaking of the twelve swivel chairs ceased abruptly. Twelve men, good and true, were witnessing a sight unparalleled in their uneventful experience. They saw a gray head, encircled by a white arm and drawn quickly to a silk-clad shoulder, where it rested very much as if it belonged there!

"I wish I could help you," Helen was saying in a matter-of-fact whisper. "But—I don't know—"

Grant Pierson punched his assistant savagely in the ribs.

"D'ye see that?" he demanded.

The assistant was a young man, not long out of college.

"It's just as Kipling said—they're all sisters under their skins," he observed in a whisper.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Grant Pierson. "But that jury 'll never hang anything, after this."

He settled back, resignedly, secure in the knowledge that no one could see what lay beneath his scowling exterior.

"Confound a woman, anyhow!" he muttered.

What Was That?

by Katharine Haviland Taylor

Author of "Yellow Soap," etc.

PRECEDING CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RETOLD

A PARTY of Greenwich villagers had rented a bungalow near the scene of the killing of Rudolph Loucks, whose murderer had never been found.

But Loucks's ghost had been seen and blood appeared upon the walls and the stairs of the bungalow. Noises assailed the new occupants and, following the visit of Frank Lethridge, whose pistol had been used to kill Loucks, two of the girls at the bungalow, Nan and April, saw the ghost.

Then April made a double discovery, a wooden box beneath the river-bottom and a locket belonging to Lethridge containing the portrait of a woman. Next, Gloria Vernon appeared on the scene and made love to Gustave, whom one of the girls at the bungalow loved. Tension ran high when Frank Lethridge's body was found in shallow water opposite the house.

CHAPTER IX.

INVESTIGATION.

IT was found by Jane, who asked: "What's washing up over there? I saw it when the Lily started out." The Lily is our motor-boat.

"Don't know," Laurence answered. Gustave walked down to the end of the porch and stood staring down at the boats. I think he was trying to get up courage to go off to hunt Gloria.

Then Jane screwed a little frown between her eyes, leaned far over the balcony, and said: "I think—we ought to go to see, I think—it's a man!"

"You are a cheerful cuss," growled Gustave, with the first words he had given her for days.

"But," she said, growing white, "I think it is. Don't you see the head? There, under the big lily pad? And an arm—"

"I'll certainly faint if I do," said Laurence. "Death affects me *profoundly*. I don't think—"

But Gustave cut him short. "Try to be a man for once in your life, O'Leary," he said brutally. "We'll need one around. You girls get in the house. There is some one over there, drowned."

They started over, but we didn't go in the house.

"I wish," said Midgette, "I'd stayed with father. He needed me. He really did—and suppose we are blamed? Who can it be? I know I am going to faint. Do let us be calm! This morning when I was eating breakfast I knew something horrible was going to happen—it is a man; they're pulling him up—oh!"

We all joined that, for we saw Laurence sit down precipitately, and Gustave turn to say something to him; then we saw him get to his feet and, with Gustave, drag the body into the boat. They came to us the color of chalk.

"Better go in," advised Gustave. "You—you'd better." His teeth were chattering so that he could hardly speak. Laurence was beyond speech; his eyes were fixed on the most horrible thing about that body, the stub of a wrist, torn and raw—all that was left of Frank Lethridge's left hand.

Midgette fainted. That was what we expected. But we did not expect to see Gustave faint, which was what happened after he and Laurence had laid the water-soaked corpse out on the landing. Yet Gustave is not the fainting sort.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for October 9.

After we had all quieted a little, some one whispered: "We'd better telephone the police department." Some one else whispered: "Yes," and then some one else went to do it. Jane and I sat on the bottom step of the stair that led to the landing. "I suppose," she said, with a shudder, "that some one ought to stay."

I nodded. Then she slipped her hand in mine, and I shook from the frightful cold of it. I will never forget the look of that landing, that scene. The sun was beginning to sink, and the high hills which surrounded us always made our twilights deeper and earlier than those of the levels. A heavy mist was rising on the creek, and somewhere a frog began to boom. I felt Jane shake and then cover her eyes; and I knew that she, with me, could not help looking at the awful human wreck that lay before us, and that with every look she grew nauseatingly, horribly sick.

His skin was peculiarly grey, and his eyes, wide-open, looked as if they would burst from the sockets. There was an agonized, strangled look in them that turned one dizzy to view. And the hand—the horror of that, all that it hinted—left one gasping and close to a swoon.

"The—the hand—" Jane whispered.

I swallowed hard, moistened my lips and managed to get out: "Yes."

"What?" she asked. I could only shake my head. She began to cry.

"Where—where's Gustave?" she asked.

"Telephoning town," I responded.

"Laurence?" she questioned further.

I said I didn't know, and in the queer way one's mind acts on such occasions, I thought that probably he was writing a verse on "Death." It amused me, even in the middle of that horror, and I heard myself voicing my thought.

"Probably," answered Jane, without a smile. Then she said: "*It moved!*" But it was only the slap of the water against the landing that had made a board shake.

"Nathan will have to put in some nails—that board's loose," I whispered, my eyes fixed on the figure; I had gotten so that I couldn't look away.

"Yes," she replied. "It was that. But—April, it *did* move—"

"You go—" I whispered. "I'll stay—" And she did, after a little more urging. It was really hardest on her, for she had known Frank Lethridge better than we had. After I had sat there either ten minutes or five hours—I don't know which—Gustave joined me. He sat down by me, and whispered, as Jane had. "They'll be out in a little while," he said. I nodded.

"Want to go?" he asked, and I thought it was decent of him, for I knew he wanted some one to stay; being there alone wasn't pleasant.

"Oh, no," I answered, and as easily as I possibly could. "I'll stick it out."

"You're all right, April—" he said, and I felt his hand close over mine. I let it stay there; there is something wonderfully comforting in any human touch when the murky black and cold of death confronts you. Gustave's hand was warm, and the contact strengthened me. I found myself clinging to it.

"Jane said his Jap telephoned this morning, asking if he'd been seen. Said he often didn't come home, but always went to the bank. They'd telephoned from there."

"Is that so?" I heard myself say.

"Yes. She said she left him at the main road yesterday at a little after five. For some reason she didn't let him motor her down. She didn't say why."

"Did you ask her?"

"Yes. She only said: 'I don't know.' Seemed upset. Think she"—Gustave stopped and coughed—"cared for him?"

"Probably," I responded.

"That's the *devil* of a note," he said resentfully. "Last thing I knew she cared for *me*. Never trust a woman!" And again, right in the middle of all that horror, I wanted to smile. Gustave had actually spoken aloud. I think his anger at Jane had, for the moment, pushed his sick fear aside. Then again he remembered.

"That hand—" he whispered. I nodded. "What happened to it?" he went on. I said I didn't know. "What I mean is," he continued, "what *could* have torn it off that way?"

I managed to gasp: "Don't!" and then I had to lay my head down somewhere, and the nearest somewhere was Gustave's shoul-

der. So—when the police found us, as they did just then, they immediately decided that I was Gustave's sweetheart, and I know that my position at that moment discounted what I had to say about where I had seen Gustave.

"Well," said one of the men who had come down on the landing, "this is the second affair of this sort that's happened around here. And we intend to find out who did it, this time!"

"Yes," said another one slowly. "And—perhaps it'll reflect some light on the other—" and then they looked at us and grew silent.

"Better go, April," said Gustave, and I was very glad to stagger off. I found Midgette at the height of her folly when I gained our living-room. She was actually working the ouija board, stopping now and again to mop away her tears and blow her nose. "It—it says it doesn't know," she moaned. "I—I wish I were *dead*!"

I went to the kitchen and put on some water for coffee. Nan joined me, and at my direction, began to cut bread. She seemed calm, but she tried to cut it with a tea-strainer, so I realized she wasn't.

"We haven't eaten, and we'll have to," I said.

"Yes," she answered. Then she began to bite her thumb-nail and to stare at me with miserable, horror-filled eyes. "*That hand*—" she whispered.

"Forget it," I said, and I tried to say it briskly. Then I set every one to work, made people eat, and for a small while we felt a little better. But—when the dark came! Well, of course it had to be one of those low, moaning-nights; the sort when every breeze holds a sob. The boats banged against the landing with a dull, slow thud. From outside came the boom of frogs, the swish of boughs moving in the wind; then once and again the smart snap of willow, and we would gasp, some one would say: "*What was that?*" and some one else would answer: "The willow rocker," and again we would become quiet, listening—listening—for what, we knew not.

I had telegraphed Billy soon after the affair. I did it by telephone, with an especial emphasis on the "Rush," and in the

telegram I asked him to come. I was glad to think that, if he had any message in time, he could get a sleeper at nine and be with us the next morning. The idea of his coming cheered me; I almost prayed that he would make that train.

At ten we made sleeping arrangements, for we girls decided to bunk together again.

"Take my room," said Gustave. "It's bigger, and not too close to the—the—"

"Landing," I finished for him.

"Yes," he answered; "and I'll sleep in yours. We'll switch until we all feel better." I thanked him, and felt a new respect for him. He was the man of that party. Laurence was doing a large imitation of a soggy, cold wet sponge. He actually cried half the time and made verses the rest—which was worse—these entitled: "Death, what lies beyond your cold, gray arms?" and: "From the River's Depths!"

We did change rooms, and I cleared out my clothes in a hurry, too big a hurry; it led me to do an awful thing! Then we put up two cots in Gustave's room, and turned in. Of course we didn't sleep. In the first place Laurence kept pacing the halls and moaning, and then the wind had risen and the trees began to slap the sides of the house.

"Do you suppose they could blame Laurence?" asked Nan, her hands working nervously and her lips trembling.

Jane answered this with truth, if not politeness. "For Heaven's sake, no!" she said. "Any one who sees him now would know that he couldn't kill a rabbit without sniveling. Wonderful oak you've picked out to vine yourself over!"

"He is so sensitive!" said Nan happily, and then her face changed, grew white, as did ours, I suppose; for we heard noises on the porch, heavy footsteps, and then a banging on the door. It was then nearing two, and any one's coming was strange. Gustave went down, with Laurence clinging to his bathrobe and sobbing at every step.

It was a telegram from Billy. It read:

Charmed to come. Arrive to-morrow.
Why didn't you write? BILL.

"Damn Bill!" said Gustave, after I explained.

"I just told him to come—not why. He didn't know that this would come in the middle of the night, or, if it did, that it would upset us."

"I want to go b—back to New York," babbled Laurence, who still clung to Gustave's bathrobe. It was too much for Gustave, who frankly lifted his left foot, with intent, and kicked back of him at Laurence. It landed plumb on Laurence's shin.

"Go write a verse on pain, you damn fool!" he snarled, when Laurence had let go of his bathrobe and was clutching his shin with both hands. "Go do anything! Only—let go of me—or I'll—" Then Gustave stopped; no one was mentioning murder that night. No one ever tells funny stories about drunks when they have one of the real story-makers in their own family; then it ceases to be humorous. We no longer mentioned death and murder.

I thanked Gustave once more, apologized to every one for frightening them, and again lay down. We left a lamp burning, and the light from it helped—but what soothed me was a little yellow slip of paper with "Western Union Telegram" written on it. I kept my hand on this a good deal of the night, and the words, in which Billy said that he was coming, sang through me even in those fleeting moments of sleep. I wanted him to come, most awfully.

Early the next morning we had a detective and several policemen call on us. They made a pretty thorough overhauling of the house, and even investigated old Nathan's cabin. I never thought of that locket, which was the silliest folly I ever committed, until one of the men came downstairs—carrying it.

"You say you know nothing of Mr. Lethridge's disappearance, Mr. Gerome, but if that is true, why is this locket, which he carried on his watch chain, hidden in the room in which I am told you sleep? I found it under a loose board. Will you be kind enough to explain?"

I began to speak, but I was silenced.

The officer smiled at me, and in his smile I saw a little bit of yesterday which he had hung in his memory, and that bit was my head on Gustave's shoulder. How I

hated and scorned myself for my stupidity, and how I despaired about righting it. It seemed impossible.

"I never saw it before!" said Gustave.

"He didn't!" said I.

"I changed rooms with her," he went on—simply to tell the truth, I am sure, and not to blame me—"and probably some one—some one else put it there, some one who can explain—"

"Blame this little yellow-haired person for that?" asked the officer. "Why, all she needs is wings, and she'd be one. Come on, be a man; tell us the truth—the whole truth!"

"It is the truth!" I said, breathing fast; and I told them about finding it, but I felt that no one believed me.

"My dear," said the man who questioned us, "he isn't worth it. He really isn't!" And the eyes that he turned on me were kind, although he would not believe my truth.

"This man loves *that* girl," I went on, pointing to Jane, "and she does him—don't you, Jane?" Jane looked at him, and forgot all wisdom through the hurt that he had given her.

"Love him?" she echoed. Then she laughed, and her laughter held a sneer. "Well, *hardly*!"

"You fool!" I said sharply.

"Too bad!" said one of the men. "Too bad!"

"I'll prove it!" I said.

"Go ahead," I heard. And then I stopped. How could I, what could I do, and what was to come to Gustave through my folly? I heard myself say, "Oh, I wish that Billy would come!" and at that very moment he tapped lightly at the door.

I kissed him when he came in, and he looked very much surprised.

"Pretty good," said one of the men. "Clever touch, but he didn't take his cue. This young lady ever kiss you before, stranger?"

"No," said Billy, "but, thank Heaven, she's begun!"

"You fool!" I said again, and this time half crying, and again I explained; but no one outside our party believed me; and

clearing up the affair—showing the real truth—seemed hopeless.

CHAPTER X.

THE SEVERED HAND.

BREAKFAST did not seem good to me the morning after that terrible affair.

The coffee smelled and tasted as it does after you've been bilious for a week, and Midgette opened a boiled egg that was almost ready to fly.

Very loftily Laurence told her to be calm, and at that Gustave sneered. Then one of the officers who was sitting on the side lines asked if he might have a cup of coffee. I gave it to him, and after he drank it, he said it was enough to make any one irresponsible. Nan, who had got breakfast, was really hurt, and Laurence said he'd thrash the cad after he finished a verse on "Courage"; but he didn't. Nan said he had forgotten, but I wasn't so sure of that.

At about ten o'clock, the sun, which had been making feeble efforts to shine, broke through the haze of fog, and every one felt better.

"Never want to see another creek or river in my life—" said Jane, with a shudder. I was with her on that. She looked across the water and half whispered—"What do you suppose?"

I only shook my head. We were silent for a space, because we were both seeing that horrible, rigid figure as it lay dripping on the dock. "Why did he come out to see you?" I asked, after several minutes had gone by.

"He was shadowing old Nathan," she answered, in a sort of shamed, silly way. "It sounds perfectly idiotic, but he almost persuaded me. I watched Nathan for him, too. Frank—" she paused a second after the name, "said Nathan was connected with the murder of Rudolph Loucks, and was up to something worse now. Frank had been getting letters, anonymous ones, warning him against stirring up inquiries about the old affair—that was after he came here that first day—and telling him to keep off the ground."

"Why didn't he consult the police?" I asked.

"Well, you know what they are here. He said if there was enough cleverness in the guilty ones, or one, to evade the search for all these years, there would be more than enough to dodge the local sleuths. And—he had a feeling about working it out himself.

"He said no one would dare attack him in broad daylight, since a shot would be heard by the farms near by, and that too many people would be astir to make it safe.

He never came out at night except the time he followed Gloria Vernon—he knew something about her he didn't tell me. Not that she is in the least implicated. He thought Nathan—"

"I can't think old Nathan would do it—even be connected with it," said I. She shook her head. "It always sounded crazy to me," she answered, "but—Frank was convincing. He assured me that more than murder would be unearthed. I wrote him almost every day. He asked me to happen into Nathan's cabin once and again, to look around pretty thoroughly if possible, and to report what I saw. I did. One time he was cleaning fish and another time fussing with the spark plug of the Beasleys' flivver. He's quite a mechanic, you know. But—as for anything suspicious—well, there simply wasn't a thing of that sort!"

At that very moment old Nathan appeared. He had a way of doing that quickly and of being almost upon you before you realized it. Woods life had made him silent-footed.

"I found something," he announced. And—he held out a corkscrew.

"Where?" asked Jane, with no great interest.

"Up-stream a ways," he replied, and with a good deal of triumph in his tone. "Blood on it," he announced next, "and the ground tramped considerable where I picked it up at."

We looked at it with a little more interest.

"The jedge happen around here yesterday?" he asked next. I nodded. "He went

walking up the path by the creek," said Jane, "after he found that April was out."

"So I reckoned," said Nathan.

"How?" I asked.

"Well," he drawled, after a marvelous display of the spitting art, "it's like this: when a woman, she up and pins a white ribbon over her waist, real prominent placed, you can *reely* safe on it that some-thin' made her think of that particular branch of *reeform*. Usually it's a husband who likes his little jug. And—I ask yuh, is there any likelier citizen in this here town to carry a corkscrew than the jedge of this here district?"

We smiled. It was true; the judge was redolent of alcohol, never drunk, and in the opinion of some, never really sober. He was one of those home drinkers, who do it alone—in the cellar—and who only show what they have done by a flush, a smell, and a heavy, sleepy look around the eyes.

"Did you find it where the fire had been built?" I asked sharply.

Nathan nodded.

"I found Frank Lethridge's locket there," I went on. "And it had a picture of *Rudolph Loucks's wife* in it."

"Yassem," replied Nathan. "I ain't surprised."

"Why?" I asked.

"Well, they was sweet on each other. She up and married Rudolph in a huff. Frank Lethridge and her had had a tiff. Right up here they had it. I was settin' in one of them willers, waiting fer a oriole to come hang on her nest; wanted photee-graphs for a article on mother birds. Well, I'd set there two days pretty regular, and I wasn't going to holler just as I almost had that there oriole enough tamed to be sociable like and set fer her picture. So I heard it. Wasn't no bungalow here then, and they was walkin'. They set on a log." He stopped, and surveyed the corkscrew.

"Go on," said Jane.

"Well, they set. They set quite a while arguin'. It was her mother who wanted to live with 'em, and she was a cantankerous old kangaroo, always gettin' her feelin's hurt and leaving the church and such like.

She wanted to live with 'em. Well, Frank, bein' a level-headed one, he wasn't so anxious for that, so he offered her a nice sum of money, to be hers every month, understand, and offered that she could have a house he owned at the south side of the town.

"Then this here girl, who loved her maw, up and repeats some of the things maw had jawed out about Frank. Well, it went on that way mebbe an hour, then she gets up like a man o' war, and begins to edge off. He says, hoarse, 'Then this is the end?' And she says, 'Since you will it so—' Well, he kinda sobbed like, and says, 'No—my *darling*!' Right romantic it was, but she up and got, and I guess that was all.

"It wasn't so long after that that she took Rudolph, on a spite like. Rudolph, he wasn't no lady, but he had some things on his side, too." His tone changed. "I know," he went on. "My wife, she up and run off with a man who had money and owned factories and sich. That was thirty-two year ago, but—I ain't got over it yit, and some day—" Old Nathan stopped speaking, his throat unfinished; but his eyes held it clearly.

Both Jane and I pitied him. He was a good old fellow, and his outdoor life had given him a charm so great that one could overlook the tobacco juice, the dirty hands, and broken nails. He was, as I have said before, a piece of the woods. And if, as a young man, he had the same gentle manner, his wife was a fool.

"It ain't no joke," he muttered, "havin' yer wife pretty up fer some one else. It ain't no joke to set and see it crawlin' on yuh—that there ache that never finishes, and that there hate that never stops. So—I say Rudolph was to be pitied, too. It ain't no joke!"

"You'd better go in and tell that part to the police who have been insulting Nan about this," said Jane, "and I'll tell him about Mr. Lethridge's suspicions—" I shook my head violently. I couldn't see her get old Nathan tangled in it.

"I only mean his suspicions about some one's doing something they shouldn't around here," she explained.

"All right," I answered, and she disappeared. Old Nathan went with her, and Billy came out.

"You send for me, April," he said, "and then treat me like a *dog*."

"You're such a fool!" I answered irritably.

"Why should you want to protect Gustave?" he asked, his chin sticking out an inch farther than it does in times of peace. I explained why, and how my stupidity had misrepresented him.

"Swapping rooms!" he said after I had finished my narrative. "It is disgusting. Can't you *see* how impossible this whole thing is? Can't you see that decent people won't have anything to do with you? Can't you see that you can't ignore conventions like this, and—" But he stopped, for I had moved away.

"I sent for you to comfort me," I said over my shoulder. "You *are* indeed a great help."

"Oh, *April*!" he appealed, and I knew he was miserable, but I thought he ought to be. I hurried off the porch and almost ran toward a path that twists up through the woods on to the top of the hill. But Billy ran faster than I did. And when he caught up to me he almost shook me.

"You're bad-tempered," he said, "spoiled, and cruel!"

"Then I think you're very silly to run after me," I responded.

"So do I!" he groaned. Then we puffed on. It is an awfully steep path.

"Sit down," Billy ordered, and I did. Not because he ordered me to, but because I was tired. He had selected a log for my roost, and he settled by me and began to pull grass out of its root sheaves. It was tall, rank and strong, and the labor this pursuit involved seemed to completely engross him. I maintained silence until he began to divert his attention to poison ivy. Then I spoke.

"That's poison ivy," I said.

"I don't care!" he replied, which I considered childish.

"I want you to know," he said, after he laid down a bunch of carefully plucked grass and had mopped off his forehead, "that I am going to stay up here with you

until you go back to New York. If Aunt Myra ever hears of it, it will kill her, but you are not to be trusted alone."

"You needn't inconvenience yourself, or your Aunt Myra," I said. "I don't want you around."

"My *gosh*, you're cruel!"

I did not reply.

"But so lovely—so lovely—" he went on, and then he buried his head in his hands. I began to feel a lot better. Billy always manages to cheer me up. And his whole attitude was so much more sensible that I decided that I'd be a little kinder.

"Billy, dear," I said, moving a little closer.

"Darling?"

"I have to stay, I can't pull out now; I promised I'd see it through. And do you think it would be decent to cut and run when everything is so frightfully upset? The rest can't; we're all dead broke."

"I suppose it wouldn't be fair!"

"Oh, it wouldn't!" I said.

He put his arm around me: "You're such a square little person," he said, "in spite of being so wonderfully round. You're the *dearest thing*!" He drew a long breath after this. I loosened his arm, but let him keep my hand.

"I love you," he asserted, "so much that some day you've *got* to love me—*got* to!"

Then he stopped speaking, and we both listened, for some one was coming up the path. "I have it—I have it—I have it—" the some one was saying, and I knew that it was that poor deficient son of Jason Beasley, the paralyzed man who was being nursed by Gloria Vernon.

"What's up?" asked Billy. I explained. Then he passed us. A lank boy of uncertain years, he was. Nathan said he was not a boy, but that he looked so because worries hadn't settled on his spirit. He had that clear, unlined look that is often seen in those half-awake. He was pathetic.

I always hated meeting him; the sight of him touched something inside of me that I would rather keep subdued, and that is the feeling about whether there is a going on—whether, in another consciousness, he

would have all of his, why he should have been, and—other little wonders. I can't look at stars for long, and lack of reason, death, and great spaces have always depressed me.

"What's he dragging?" asked Billy, as he took out his cigarette-case and hunted a match.

"Don't know," I answered, "but we'll see soon." And we did. He had the end of a rope in his hand, and to this was attached something reasonably heavy, for the rope jerked as he pulled it, letting one see that the something that was being dragged caught on the roots that ridged the path. We waited with a mild interest. When the end of the rope appeared we first saw a steel trap, that heavy type which is, I think, used for bears. I leaned forward and felt my heart stop, miss a beat, then double on the next. My mouth grew dry.

"What the dickens?" said Billy weakly, and then I sagged against him and saw only black for—I don't know how long. When I came back I was held in Billy's arms, and he was almost shouting.

"You sha'n't be frightened like this! I will take you off!" I shook my head.

"Where has he gone?" I asked weakly.

"I don't know—I don't care!"

"But perhaps it held a clue," I said.

Billy picked me up. "I'd rather walk," I protested, but to no effect; I did not walk until we were in sight of the bungalow, when Billy set me down, but kept a firm hold on my arm. I did sway a little, and it was no wonder that I did.

To see—first that vacant-faced boy chanting words he'd heard some one say somewhere—to wonder idly what he was dragging, to lean forward to see, and then to see—it was far worse than horrible—to see a hand, pallid, almost green from water, torn, with one of the bones gone from the back of it; and then to see it slipping along before you—catching the dust of dried, trampled leaves, seeming to twitch with every jerk of the rope—it was no wonder I fainted; even Billy was gray.

When we gained the porch he spoke.

"This is rotten," he said. "I am going to stay. This has got to be cleared up.

Are you strong enough to go in alone, dear? I'm going to get that boy—"

I nodded, and he dashed off.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAN-TRAP.

THE developments of the next week preluded a calm, perhaps I should say, an outer calm; for inside, things stung, hurt, perplexed and irritated all of us. Wonderings and worries did not cease as the suspicion of the town's folk quieted.

That morning after the tragedy and after I had been up the hill with Billy, I saw the judge. I found him waiting for me. Billy had run to catch the individual whom all the countryside call "The Echo" or "Beasley's boy," and I went in the bungalow alone. The living-room was empty except for the judge, who was stirring around by the fireplace and, when I entered, was just about to open a cupboard at the side of this which was once used for wines. His attitude was suspicious, and it made me wonder. And I was even more perplexed when I saw old Nathan peering in one of the windows with the most indescribable look of cunning on his face. I coughed, and the judge jumped.

"Used to know this bungalow well," he said, after greeting me with some constraint. "Found it, ah—natural to—ah, move around, look things over. Hope, ah—you don't mind. Seemed like home."

"Indeed?" I said, and then I sat down on the edge of a chair, and the judge settled near me and began to "ah" and "ahem." He wanted to say *something* to me, and didn't quite dare. I had the queerest feeling of hidden depths that ever was. It was quite as if one looked at an unrippled pond, and yet knew that currents were raging beneath the surface, and that quicksand edged the placid place.

We talked about the murder, accident, suicide, or whatever it was, for perhaps ten or fifteen minutes. Then from outside I heard old Nathan's planing, and it helped me to gain steadiness and to hurry the judge on with his errand; it was a soothing sound, that slip of the plane.

"You wanted to see me, I believe?" I prompted.

"Ah, yes," he said; "ah, yes. Difficult to explain, but you have that, ah—look of innocence—"

I stiffened. I have had men say that to me before, and twice, when they had most uninnocent proposals to make. "Have you," went on the judge, "ever been to Florence?" I nodded.

"Fra Angelico painted you in one of the cells," he said.

"San Marco is a charming place," I replied stiffly, and then: "What was it that you wished to see me about?"

"I don't want you to be hurt!" he said, leaning forward. "The rest—the rest are hardened, world-wise young fools who can take care of themselves; you—young lady, I must tell you that—"

And then suddenly old Nathan's hammer began; the judge grew white, and stopped speaking. "Indigestion," he gasped. "Water—"

I got it, but I found he had recovered when I returned. He sat, looking quite his usual bloated, puffed self, tapping his finger-tips together and staring at a sketch of Gustave's, a bit of the down-stream creek, with a bridge, cows, and a punt in it. He had done it in crayons, and it was a fairly good color bit.

"Um—good," said the judge; "but that young man has been taught to see too much gray and purple."

I agreed with him, but I was enraged. He had excited me, half announced what I knew to be a large missing link in our mystery, and then—without explanation, started a light patter about painting. "Um—" he continued. "His sight isn't the best. Careless about measurement?"

I broke out with: "I don't want to discuss painting. What were you going to say?"

He moved uneasily, turned, and I looked back of him, where his eyes were now focused. Old Nathan was taking off the screen door which, for two weeks, had not quite closed.

"I guess I won't disturb yuh, jedge?" inquired Nathan.

"Oh, no!" said the judge. "Oh, no!"

Then he laughed in a silly, half-hearted way. I grew more angry.

"Leave that door alone, Nathan," I ordered. "You can do it at another time, or not at all. The judge wants to speak to me privately."

"Same to me," said Nathan. "I ain't in no sweat to work at this here. Miss Severance, she decreed that I fix her up, that's all. I'll go monkey with liniment, or fix them shingles on my cabin ruff. It's the same to me!"

And he departed. I heard him fixing the shingles on his roof, and the judge had another attack of indigestion. "Getting old," he said, when he could speak, "getting old. Some day I'll slip off, and then—perhaps there'll be real rest." I felt sorry for him—a horrible want for peace showed in his voice.

But—the mystery remained, and it was at that point a menace. I probed. "You know your corkscrew was found up the creek?" I said.

"Where?" he asked; and then he changed color, said he never carried one, and grew not a little pompous in his haughtiness. I smiled at him meaningly, which is the cruelest and most powerful thing any woman can do. Again he began to breathe hard, and for a moment the short sound of his breath and old Nathan's pounding were the only things to be heard.

"I lost it, Sunday," he admitted.

"So I thought," I replied.

"I—I wanted to find Lethridge; to warn him—" Again he stopped speaking and began to breathe hard.

"Mr. Lethridge had been warned," I said, "by anonymous letters. Some one, in these, told him that the truth about the murder of Rudolph Loucks would come out, if he bothered around here. What is the mystery about this place? Is some one trying to protect us? Was he a dangerous character? Was he implicated—connected with the first affair? I feel that there is a link—"

Then Nathan spoke from the door-way:

"I heerd yuh tell Frank Lethridge, Sunday," he announced, "to keep his hands off. Offa what, jedge? I jest sorta wondered—"

"It was—it was a matter of investments," he explained, fumblingly. "We bought some copper stock together, which did not—did not do as well as we hoped. Lethridge wanted to sell, and I believe in holding when the rest unload. My principle in speculation has been that the public is, if you will pardon the somewhat crude expression, a sucker, and when they bite, I do not; when they do not, I do. I have never lost, and I have played the market for over thirty-two years."

That made me doubt his word. I didn't believe it was possible.

"Kind of you to warn him," said Nathan, with undue smoothness.

"We were friends," said the judge, sitting more straight, and growing red.

"I reckon," said Nathan, "you took his pistol, too, didn't you? That there time he was so broke up by Rudolph Loucks's wife's sufferings that he was a meditating suicide."

"I—" began the judge after a gasp.

"Yessir," went on Nathan with unusual haste, "I overheard it. I was settin' in a tree up the crick a ways, settin' and waitin' fer a owl to come out. And I heered you comin', walkin' down with Frank Lethridge. You says: 'Frank, give it to me. No man does it. Fight it out, stay here. This is your fight! You won't help her by doing this!' Real nice and manly it *did* sound. He says: 'But—I made her do it! I—and to think what she is sufferin'!' But he forked over his pistol, now didn't he, judge?"

The judge did not reply.

"Now the wonder of it is," went on old Nathan, "what 'll happen if the truth about this here comes out? Don't yuh think mebbe the two crimes was connected? Don't yuh think mebbe if one is found out, t'other will foller? Well, that's the way it looks to me. I'll take this here down to my cabin and plane her there, and you folks can jaw along real sociable, all alone!" And then he lifted off the screen door and carried it away.

For several moments the judge looked a great deal like a frog that is endeavoring to swallow a fly seven times too large for his swallower. He sat before me, gasping and

attempting to engulf something, which was, I surmised, his nervous shock.

"My heart's weak," he said, when he could speak; "always was. Old Nathan's got a valvular defect in his. Did you know that?" I said I had not. "Well, he has," the judge asserted; "bad one. Doctors have said for years that he might slip off any day. Don't be surprised"—the judge stopped and wiped his forehead with a heavy linen handkerchief—"if you don't hear him around some morning, and find him dead. They've all predicted that would happen. He'll just slip off some day as I will. Quietly, and naturally. They all said he would—why, ten years ago a doctor from Quincy said: 'That man 'll live two years, no more!' And look at him. But—I shouldn't be surprised if he would go some day—"

Something horrible flashed over me. I stood up, shaking, and growing sick, and I saw in that saturnine old face before me all the cunning and cruelty of a fiend—a fiend planning another murder.

"You were going to warn me against Nathan, weren't you?"

He bit his lips.

"*Weren't* you?" I repeated, bending toward him.

He whispered a feeble "Yes," after a backward look. "A coward, too," I thought. It proved it for me.

"You needn't worry," I said. "I'll take care of myself *and* Nathan."

He stood up. "So long as you understand," he said, as he reached for his hat. His hands shook almost uncontrollably, and again I pitied, even as I scorned him.

"I think I am beginning to understand," I said with some emphasis. "I think I am beginning to get a light."

"Then," he said, with a frightful smile, "*be careful*. Walk carefully, or else you'll be hurt. Avoid the—the pit. *Do* you understand?"

"I think so," I said, playing at cross-purposes with him, and honestly loving the game. He reached toward me, clutched my wrist, and whispered: "Don't—" and then he had to stop, for the crowd who, I found afterward, had to go to town with the police force, re-

turned. They came in, but hardly noticed the judge or his departure.

I hurried to Nathan's cabin. I found him working on a sort of light that he said he used in the woods to catch moths. Then he showed me some he had caught, told me something of the sort peculiar to the country and various woods, and then he talked:

"Wouldn't 'a' said what I did to the judge," he confided, "fer I ain't one to go nosin' trouble, but I hadda be sassy fer this here reason: Twict now I heard that there artist gent you got with yuh say as how he'll kill any one who so much as teches his gal. Well, Frank Lethridge and her was gettin' thick, and I ain't fer seein' any of your crowd hung. I wouldn't shield no guilty man without I had principle back of me, and here I hev. Fer—I know what it is to get notioned on one woman and then hev her take up with somebody else."

"But Gustave didn't!" I said, growing white. I felt the blood leave my face and heart.

"No," agreed Nathan, "we'll say he didn't, fer there air sins and sins, and them that is thought the worst sins is sometimes only *truth*."

I sank down on a bench by old Nathan's work table. "Nathan," I whispered, "I know he didn't! No one else heard him say that."

"I dunno. I reckon not, but I'll fix it."

I clasped my hands tightly together, and stared at the floor, a heavy board one, the cracks of which were full of the dirt of ages. I heard Nathan move around, but I was honestly too ill to lift my head.

After I heard Nathan go up a ladder to his loft and then return, I looked up. He held a trap of the sort "The Echo" had pulled up the path on the hill that same morning.

"This here," he announced, "is a bear trap. Now you know there is bears up in the mountains not so fur from here, and once and agin in the big spring rains one of these here has washed down. Now we'll say this got tangled like in a rut in the rick, and that Frank Lethridge told his Jane gal

he'd up and git her some water lilies, since she was partial to 'em.

"And so he moseyed up the crick. And he leaned over in the real deep water, and he seen somethin' aside lilies. Mebbe he'd fell in and didn't mind wettin' his clothes, so he dives down to see, and when he gets this here thing he feels—"

I nodded. Then I managed to speak.

"Did you see the body?" I asked. Nathan had not. I told him about the hand, and then I told him about the trap. His jaw dropped about eight inches and he began to gasp.

"I'll be goll-darned," he said, "if that ain't it! Why, he was always rootin' around this here crick bottom, huntin' Gawd knows *what*, and I suppose—he thought this here was whatever he *was* a huntin'—" Nathan stopped, looked down at the bear trap, and so did I. "I'll be goll-darned!" he repeated.

And I echoed that. Then I began to cry, for I had been fearfully afraid, and worried almost into madness by the fear that I had hurt Gustave by my carelessness.

"I thought the judge—" I began, and then I stopped. "How," I asked with new energy in my voice, "did the person who did have that pistol get it?"

"Easy enough," answered Nathan. "Afore this here murder, nobody locked their doors; we was a peaceable, Gawd-fearin' little village then—nothin' ever happened. As I says, I was just puttin' in to be sassy and to shet him up. I do remember Frank Lethridge and the judge discussin' suicide, and he did take the pistol, but that ain't saying nothin'—"

"No," I responded, "there doesn't seem to be much proof of anything, but if we can only avert suspicion from Gustave—that is all I ask."

Nathan nodded. Then he looked up and out of his door, although I, of city-untrained ears, had heard nothing. Gloria Vernon passed, and old Nathan vouchsafed a comment. "I ain't a trustin' that there female," he said, eyes narrowing. "I'm afeered—" And then he, like a good many others, ceased speaking without finishing his sentence.

I got up and went up to the bungalow. Gloria was there, and she was honestly upset.

"Suspicion pointed to *you!*" she almost screamed at Gustave, who nodded. Her face grew as hard as I have ever seen a face. Then she laughed shortly. "Why, you were with me!" she said shrilly.

"That's not worth while," I put in. "Nathan and the judge both know he wasn't; that he left you before this happened."

"Do you want him hung?" she asked, turning to me.

"No, I don't. That's the reason I want the truth, not lies," I answered. Then I saw that she did care, for she went up to him, put her arms around his neck—and we were all in the living-room together—and I heard her whisper: "Do you think I'd let them—*let* you be hurt?"

It was almost savage, her attitude; something primal, revolting, and yet beautiful, shone through it. I heard Jane gasp. I saw Gustave look at Jane with agonized, *trapped*, pleading eyes, stand stiff for a minute under Gloria's touch, and then melt and almost forget us all.

"Oh, God, Gloria!" he stammered, "what does it matter? *What* does it matter!" and he kissed her. I got up and left, Jane went to the kitchen to sink down beside a table and hide her head in her arms—she was past tears—and the rest faded in different directions.

Billy followed me through the kitchen, and we wandered toward the road to town.

"Like to soak him!" he said. "That poor kid!" He was speaking of Jane.

"Yes," I agreed. "I'm so tired of it all! I hope I'll never see another representative of or dabbler in any of the arts, after I shake this crowd. I'd like a peaceful apple-pie, sock-darning existence where Russian music is unknown and Futurist paintings undreamed of."

"Marry me," said Billy. "I'll guarantee to supply the sock hunger. Oh, April, if you only would—"

I felt a sudden wish for it and a great rising of love for Billy—but I knew that my softening wasn't to be trusted to last; and that my feelings of that hectic, horrible

time might not be mine even to-morrow, and most certainly not a month from then.

"Not now," I said. "I can't tell what I want. I can't be bothered about deciding. We'll talk of that later, Billy."

He looked crestfallen, but had to accept it. "After this simmers down?" he questioned.

"Yes," I agreed. "Then I *will* decide."

"Then it's got to quiet—"

"It will," I responded, and I told him something of what old Nathan supposed. But—I added that there had been mysteries right along, since the start of things. So we sat down on a fence that surrounded the field where Rudolph Loucks was shot, and I told him these things.

CHAPTER XII.

BILLY SUMS UP.

HE wrote them down carefully as I related the various happenings. This is the way the line-up appeared in his note-book:

Blood on walls and banister (first afternoon).
Dog jumped through window of cellar, finger prints in blood on door. Dog unhurt. Brick hurled against door that evening.
"F. Don't do it, R." written on kitchen wall, first day that Frank Lethridge called.

"Anybody but Laurence ever see that dog?" queried Billy. When I told him "No," he drew a line through the dog item. I had to admit that it didn't amount to much.

The data I supplied made this page in his note-book:

Laurence has cold. Sneezes heard in cellar.
Frank Lethridge, going down, said no one was there. Both Laurence and Nan say they spent afternoon in bath-tub.

Billy stopped after I'd dictated this item and sharpened his pencil. "Can't you see how *disgusting* the whole affair is?" he asked.

"If you're going to act that way—" I began, threatening to slip from the railing, but I didn't, for Billy's hand closed around my arm. "You'll stay right here," he announced, "until I finish this thing."

I pretended to sulk, but I enjoyed his ruling. Every woman does like some male to boss the job, and especially those flat-heeled females who constitutionally look like Boston on a rainy day and seem to wear cast-iron wills. They wilt at a touch. I've seen it. I'm not one of them, but I have enough of a will to enjoy the new sensation that comes with losing it.

After Billy had finished sharpening his pencil he went on, and he wrote something that I hated to see on record. Billy scoffed at me, saying that no one would ever see it, and that after he'd struck a trial balance he'd dispose of the evidence. It was:

Gustave says he'll shoot any one who hurts Jane.

"How many times did he say that?" Billy asked.

"I don't remember exactly—perhaps three or four," I answered.

"Enough," said Billy, writing "four times" after his item about Gustave. "What did the darned fool do it for?" he asked further. I couldn't say.

I began to get down again, and again something restrained me. This time it was around my waist. "Oh, honey," said Billy, "don't be a grouch! You know I love you. What else did you see?" I said only a cow, that day, and tried to pry off Billy's arm, but without much success. So I gave it up, held the note-book on his knee and he held me and the pencil. The next entry on the pad was:

Frank Lethridge's locket is found on porch. Must have been dropped after Nathan swept at seven. Gloria Vernon arrives same night. Jane says F. L. followed Gloria. Why? Picture of Rudolph Loucks's wife in locket belonging to F. L.

"Don't go into that," I said, "it will take too long. He was much mashed on Rudolph Loucks's wife, you know."

"Yes, you told me about that. Did Frank Lethridge come here for any particular reason?"

"He poked the creek. I think he was hunting what I found one day by accident and then never could find again." And I went on to tell Billy about the box I'd

stepped on, and the hole it had left that I had stepped in, and then about the spot where it had been dragged to shore, and how a fire had been built to cover its tracks. "Old Nathan said he was frogging," I explained.

"Um—" grunted Billy, looking down at the pad. Then he asked me if I knew I was the sweetest thing on earth, and when I said "Yes, of course I do!" shook me a little, but very gently. "Gosh, I want to get this cleared up," he said. "You know what you promised," I nodded.

"Such funny things were heard," I went on.

"What?"

"Well, Nan heard Jane say: 'Oh, Frank, you wouldn't? Promise me you won't!' She heard that one day when she was hunting Gustave, who, as usual, had crawled across nine swamps and walked fifteen miles to avoid his share of the work. He, Gustave, was peeking at Jane and Frank, and he was—awfully jealous at that time."

"Um—"

"It is baffling. After Gustave heard Jane say that, he turned to Nan and said: 'If he hurts her I'll kill him!' Nathan heard Nan repeat that later; we didn't know he was on the porch." Then I went on, and Billy wrote:

Judge Harkins comes up to find Lethridge. Starts to warn April—but sees Rudolph Loucks's shade on hillside and devotes himself to tea instead of telling the thrilling tale.

"The judge is afraid of Nathan," I told him.

"When the judge appears, Nathan always uses his hammer just to let him know he's around, and the judge always has what he calls indigestion, and what I think is something close to apoplexy, induced by fright. The judge and Frank Lethridge were tangled in some way. Nathan heard the judge tell him to keep his 'hands off.'"

"Why do you exonerate Gustave?" asked Billy, after a cautious look around.

"Because of Gloria," I replied. "He's simply mad about her. She's an obsession, and Jane—simply isn't any more."

"Oh, stuff," said Billy; then he ex-

plained what made him say that. He felt that Gustave hated Gloria for what she'd done to him, even while he reveled in what she gave him; he believed that Gustave had undergone a great deal of suffering, and felt much remorse because of Jane; and was sure that if any one really hurt Jane, or tried to, that he would shake off Gloria, if only for a few hours, to repay the doer of the wrong.

"Can't you see," Billy said, "that the very fact that he has been a brute might make him half savage in a wish to make it up to Jane somehow? Gustave knows what that Vernon woman is like—he's not a baby—and he knows what Jane's like; he knows she's a good, true little pal, and that he's acted like a devil. He knows that this Gloria has got hold of his worst side and is making that live so strongly that there is no chance for the other."

"I can't possibly believe it," I said doubtfully.

"Not a pretty story this," said Billy, "but it illustrates what I mean, and so I'll tell it. Comfortable, dear? Well," he went on, "when I was up at New Haven there was a chap in my class named I. Gillman Parker, a Southerner, and about the worst rotter I ever met. But—sort of attractive in spite of his really vicious ways of living. He was engaged to a mighty pretty girl, if she looked *anything* like her tin-type. He wrote this girl pretty regularly, and seemed in love with her; but even then she didn't hold him, and it was a wonder that he was not expelled. But he was a smooth one, and had friends. It did not surprise me, therefore, to hear, about three years after his marriage, that he was absolutely neglecting his wife and was paying devoted court to a lady who had once graced the Follies, and for whom he had set up and maintained an establishment in Baltimore.

"I think he went home about once in every four or five months, and when there, frankly ignored his wife—or worse. But when the negroes on the place got drunk, and she was alone; and a new servant burst in the door and chased her to the roof, and she chose the jump to the ground and death—instead of the horror that was back

of her—well, then I. Gillman Parker came back to her.

"'She was good!' he shouted. 'Good! I know her. She was *too* good to hold me.' And then he put in some frightful qualifications about his lady who lived in Baltimore, after which—he hunted the servant.

"He found him hiding in a cabin way up in a pine woods, and—there wasn't enough left of him to use for hash. Parker slashed him up as he lived, and how he did it no one ever knew, for the negro was a big, husky boy who had been a groom. But—they knew that he had suffered for the rest of the gang, and all of them began chanting their prayers. After it was finished, I. Gillman Parker came out of the cabin, dripping with blood and laughing, and then he went to a madhouse."

"Oh, *Heavens!*" I said.

"Was I a brute to tell you that?" Billy asked anxiously, bending closer to me and tightening his arm. I shook my head.

"I only wanted to explain," he continued, "why a man might avenge a wrong done a woman he *chooses to ignore*; why he might suffer all the more from it because of his own deficiencies—deficiencies which make him cruel to her, but also make him reverence her and turn a fiend at thought of her suffering."

"I don't believe Gustave did it," I said.

"That is from feeling, not reason," Billy replied. I admitted it. "We've got to see all sides," he asserted; "suspect every one, and then—perhaps we'll find the truth."

"It would be interesting if the other affair were cleared up, too. Most of us feel that perhaps they are linked."

"Perhaps," said Billy. Then he wrote down those clues; which were Frank Lethridge's pistol which had been in Judge Harkins's possession—the judge being in New York that night—and the judge's threats made on a paper to which a local divine was the one subscriber. Then he asked what companies Rudolph Loucks had been most interested in. These were an independent oil concern, the gas company, and the water company. I didn't see that Billy was getting anywhere, but I supplied facts for him, and let him jot them down.

"Then there's the corkscrew that Na-

than found where that box was dragged in," I went on, "and I found Frank Lethridge's locket there that day, too. Was that only yesterday? It seems years ago! And old Nathan thinks it really was a bear-trap. He says they're sometimes washed down in the spring, and that one of Gus Dirks's cows got tangled in one last spring and broke her leg. He followed me up to say that."

Then Billy explained how he had Jane up to the farmhouse and found Mrs. Beasley out looking for Miss Vernon, and the boy sitting down on the steps, but no trace of the trap. She hadn't seen it; he told her it was only a trap he was looking for, and there was no getting anything out of him. The boy repeated: "Trap—trap," after Billy. "Maddening and horrible," he concluded and I agreed.

I laid my cheek against his shoulder.

"Oh, you dear!" he whispered, and then we heard some one coming, and sat apart. It was Laurence, sniffing and breathing so fast that he seemed to sob.

"They want you," he said, his eyes fixed on me. "That Vernon woman—I'm sure I think she is *most* unladylike—says you did it. Says you had his locket—that she saw you boating—that your clothes were wet—"

"I?" I said, with about as much expression as the Beasley boy would employ.

Billy helped me get down to the ground. "Don't be frightened, April," he said; "this is the utmost folly, and it will be cleared up in no time. Come, dear—"

"So upsetting," said Laurence. "Suspicion's breath, like chill north winds—a pencil! Some one give me a pencil, quick!"

Billy gave him something, and then put his arm around me. "Don't be frightened, dear," he whispered, "it's absolutely crazy, and we'll clear it up in no time," and then we walked up to the bungalow. Nan was watching for us from a side window.

I felt dizzy, and horribly afraid. When we entered the living-room of the bungalow there was absolute quiet for a moment, and then Gloria Vernon spoke.

She had been crying, in the nice neat way a woman does, when she cries for effect and not for relief. She had not damaged her looks by it; in fact her tear-wet lashes even made her more beautiful than ever.

Gustave stood by the fireplace, frankly giving himself up to gazing at her. Nan had left the window when we entered, and sat by a small table, nervously fingering a little box that was supposed to hold stamps and never did. Midgette stood, Jane and Laurence were seated on the wood-box, and three strange men, the one who had asked for a cup of coffee being one of them, were there, also seated. They all looked at me, every one in that room, and the silence throbbed with their suspicions and fears. Gloria Vernon broke it with: "This kills me to do, but I saw her, and I feel that the truth must be known. She was wet, her clothes were half torn off, her hair was coming down, and—*she had that locket!*"

I felt Billy's hand tremble—it was on my arm—and then I saw Laurence's mouth move. I suppose he was planning one that he hoped would put "the female of the species" out of business. I spoke calmly, which was strange, for I was not calm inside.

"I did have the locket," I said. "You know I said I had found it. But I didn't even see Frank Lethridge until he was laid on the dock—after it happened. He was a strong man; how could I do that? And why would I want to?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," said one of the men—the one who had drunk the coffee. He had been very unpleasant since, and I could not blame him! "Nobody knows a thing," he went on, "but Frank Lethridge was coming here regular, and was with this here little party a good deal of the time, now wasn't he?"

"No," answered Gustave, "he was with that girl," and he pointed toward Jane.

"I saw April Barry with Frank Lethridge the afternoon before he was murdered," said Gloria.

I felt my knees shake.

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 Tracker



by Anice Terhune

GRAY DAWN, Miss Ellison's big merle collie, lay sprawled at ease on the cool veranda, his fluffy white front paws hanging limply over the edge and almost touching the next step.

The weather was warm, and the dog had been romping with the wild, gay spirit of a puppy, quite forgetting he was nearly two years old. He had stopped suddenly in the middle of his play to rush down to the lake for a mouthful of cool water—several mouthfuls—which he took in loud, happy gulps.

Then, his thirst slaked, he had lost all desire to romp, for the present, and had trotted over the lawn and up the steps, and thrown himself full length on the cool stone veranda floor to rest.

Presently, he knew, his mistress would come out of the house. She generally did at about this time in the afternoon. She was his idol, and as The Only Dog on The Place, life was just one happiness after another to Dawn.

Then into his Eden came, entering without warning, a small and yapping serpent, in the shape of a Boston terrier pup.

Jack Lambert, who lived next door and worshiped Miss Ellison—Dawn had always approved heartily of the man up to this moment—appeared around the corner of the house, holding a miserable atom of

smooth, mottled brown puppyhood in the crook of his arm.

And how that puppy could yelp! Dawn rose up scornfully, and sniffed at the wriggling mite with cold disdain.

"Look out, Dawn," said Jack rather shortly. "Don't get too interested—this is your new brother, and you've got to be good to him!"

The words meant nothing to Dawn; but the tone told him that the puppy was not to be molested.

He retired to the furthestmost corner of the veranda, to await developments.

A moment later his mistress appeared. To the collie's horror, she greeted the absurd apology for a dog with squeals of rapture.

"How adorable, Jack!" she cried. "Where did you get him?"

"I bought him—couldn't resist that funny mug. And now, Betty, just as I'm getting him used to me, mother's fat, woolly white enormity of a poodle has to come down with distemper—no one knows how—I suppose he got it at the show—mother *would* take him, though he's a crime to look at, and couldn't get a prize if he was the only poodle in the whole place! Well, he's got a fine case of distemper, poor old chap; and I'm going to throw myself on your mercy and ask you if you won't take

Brownie here for a few weeks—just till the danger of infection is over! Distemper does horrible things to baby dogs.”

“Why, certainly, I’ll take the little chap! Gladly!” cried Betty, holding out her arms.

Dawn’s jealous eyes saw the sleek brown puppy gathered up in his beloved mistress’s lap, and nestle down contentedly as if he had a perfect right to stay there the rest of his life. The sight was too much for the collie. Rising, he gave several brisk barks and gazed intently at a nearby tree trunk, pretending that he glimpsed a squirrel; though the tree was quite patiently squirrel-less. Having thus attracted attention to himself, he walked over to Betty, nudged her elbow with his nose, and barked again.

“Dawn, you’ve no manners at all,” said the girl. Then guarding the puppy from the big dog’s jealously inquisitive nose, she went on:

“You must be properly introduced to this baby. This is a little guest dog, Dawn, and you must not hurt him—you must not hurt him,” she repeated, gazing straight into Dawn’s soft brown eyes, then at the puppy; and speaking slowly and seriously.

“Do you imagine for a minute that collie knows what you’re talking about?” asked Jack.

“He knows just as well as you do what I am talking about,” retorted Betty, “though he may not get all the words. I wouldn’t hesitate to leave Dawn all alone with Brownie, now he knows what I want. Just watch!” And she put the puppy on the floor.

With a sad, protesting little whimper, the collie strode up to the funny, shaky pup and examined him carefully. Then he turned, intending to go back to his corner of the veranda.

Just at that moment, the pup also turned, and waddled perilously close to the edge of the top step. With the herding instinct of the best collies, Dawn leaped lightly forward, putting one silky foot directly on the step’s edge in front of the surprised Brownie. Standing thus, Dawn barked warningly—and the puppy,

understanding the bark, backed sidlingly to safety, while Dawn, following up his advantage, drove him back to Betty’s side; then, wagging his tail, waited expectantly, his eyes fixed on his mistress’s face.

At once, came his reward.

“*Splendid*, Dawn!” cried the girl, giving the big gray collie a loving pat on the head. “You’re my *good, good* dog, so you are!”

“Gee!” said Jack, “I knew Dawn was a wonder, but that beats anything I ever saw! To think of his keeping the pup from tumbling off the porch!”

“He wouldn’t have bothered if I hadn’t told him to take care of Brownie,” said Betty, “but he’ll never forget, now that he knows what I expect of him. You needn’t be in the least afraid to leave the little thing.”

So the puppy came to live at The Place, and Dawn, who loathed him, constituted himself head nurse for the youngster.

The collie was not alone in his loathing of poor Brownie. Betty, who was not blind to Jack Lambert’s adoration of herself, was fonder of Jack than she admitted; so she had agreed at once to his request that she harbor the little guest for a couple of weeks, or as long as it should be necessary.

But she did not care for Brownie as a dog. Of wonderful pedigreed lineage as he was, he seemed, somehow, most uninteresting. Collie puppies were so much prettier—and fluffier—and the newcomer appeared rather stupid than otherwise; though, on account of his wonderful ancestry, he was very, very valuable from a dog-fancier’s point of view.

Betty would, of course, take the best of care of the baby, on Jack’s account. But the fact remained. The dog appealed to her even less than he did to Dawn.

Mr. and Mrs. Ellison regarded the foolish puppy as a nuisance, and the gardener frankly labeled him a pest, for the newcomer dug up the most important flower beds with persistent patience, no matter how often he was driven away from them.

Brownie had one friend, however—and only one—Betty’s four-year-old sister, Flora. From the first moment that Flora set eyes on Brownie, she claimed him as

her own. Circling his tiny body with her soft little arms, she had nearly squeezed the breath of life out of him. And the puppy seemed thoroughly to enjoy her mauling.

So he became Flora's property, for the time being. Of course, Betty fed him, and groomed him; but she was more than content to let Flora "exercise" him.

"The only good thing I know of, about that pup—except his wonderful pedigree—is the way he romps with Flora," said Mr. Ellison.

The little girl was rather delicate, and too much inclined to sit in people's laps, instead of romping. So the puppy really earned his board and lodging by keeping Flora amused and out of doors.

Dawn still crinkled up his forehead, and looked heart-broken if Betty chanced to pat the new-comer, but his first keen jealousy gradually subsided into a tolerant scorn, and he submitted to the saucy pup's teasing with a lofty, detached air, keeping out of his way as much as possible.

Then, one morning, Dawn gamboled up the veranda steps to find dire confusion among his gods and goddesses.

His first eager glance toward Betty told him she was in distress. At once he stopped his playful leaping, and with worried, questioning eyes gazing straight into hers, softly licked the hand she held out to him.

Everybody seemed to be talking at once—everybody, that is, except baby Flora. As Dawn joined the family circle, she lifted up her voice and began to wail:

"I want my dear *Brownie*—where is my dear, dear Brownie? Oh-o-o, I want Brownie!"

Just then the gardener appeared.

"I've looked everywhere, ma'am," he said, turning to Mrs. Ellison, who was trying to stem the baby's tears. "There ain't a spot on this place that me an' the other men ain't searched! The pup's clean vanished! Must of ben stole!"

"That's just what has happened!" exclaimed Mr. Ellison. "Some one heard about his great pedigree, and lifted him! If Dawn had been loose, it couldn't have happened!"

"I always told you it was silly to let

Dawn sleep in the house, Betty," he went on, irritated. "What's the good of having a huge dog like that around if he's not to be left loose at night to guard The Place?"

Betty said nothing. Instead, she walked down the steps and around the house toward Brownie's empty kennel, with Dawn trotting sympathetically by her side.

There was ample evidence that some one with heavy boots had been inside the little wired-in paddock that held the small dog-house; but this really signified nothing, for the footprints might well belong to any of the men about The Place.

Betty saw nothing which suggested any sort of clue. That a valuable dog entrusted to her was stolen was bad enough; but that it should have been Jack Lambert's dog made it fifty times worse. And Jack had been so awfully enthusiastic about the animal.

She was plunged into deeper unhappiness than ever when she thought of that, and turned sadly away from the kennel, with Dawn at her heels.

The collie followed her with very mixed feelings. His clever brain told him at once what was the matter with everybody. That horrid little pest of a pup was gone! Personally, Dawn felt much relieved, and inclined to stretch joyously forward and backward in his relief.

On the other hand, his goddess, Betty, was most unhappy—and Dawn could not be really at ease while she gave evidence of such misery.

Then, as he walked solemnly along toward the house, his cold nose just touching Betty's finger-tips now and then, the air was rent by fresh wails from baby Flora:

"I want my Brownie — *Brownie* — *BROWNIE!*" came her quivering, heart-broken cry.

She could not be comforted; for after the family had gone in to breakfast, Dawn still heard the child crying at intervals.

Next to Betty, the gray collie loved Flora better than any one in the world. It bothered him strangely to have them both so unhappy. Though they were now out of his sight, the little girl's wails kept him from forgetting.

It was evidently all about that good for nothing dog, Brownie.

Aimlessly, Dawn trotted out to Brownie's vacant kennel. Sniffing the ground, as dogs will, in search of some enticing smell of rabbit or other wild creature, Dawn chanced upon the footprints that his mistress had noticed a few minutes earlier.

They were foreign to his sensitive nose. A single sniff told him they belonged to no one on The Place, and he followed them interestedly to the kennel. Then, with slightly bristling back, he held to the trail as it led away from the kennel, for he had picked up the scent of the lost Brownie.

A moment later Dawn's interest became more acute, as his scent powers broadened the clue. Here, at the edge of the driveway, the thief had set down or lost hold of Brownie for an instant. Scent and sight told Dawn of the puppy's awkwardly futile footscuffings in the gravel before his captor could scoop him off the ground again and hurry on with him.

And now the collie had the whole story of the theft, so far as concerned the nocturnal visit to the kennel. All that remained was to follow the easily sniffed trail to its end.

Dawn would not have bothered to do this on his own account. To him the fate of the stolen puppy was less than nothing.

But Betty, his goddess, was wretchedly upset over the loss. And, far from the house as he was, he could still hear Flora's heartsore crying. And his duty was plain.

At first, he walked slowly and carefully, nose to the ground. Then he broke into a fast gallop—still keeping his muzzle near the earth—and, all unseen by any one, hurried off up the hill, through the woods and out of the grounds. Coming to the highway, he followed it for about an eighth of a mile, then turned up a lane that led through a patch of woodland.

Once or twice he missed the scent and cast back with worried haste until he picked it up again; but in the main he lost very little time, and after a mile run, he halted suddenly on the edge of a clearing. Here he paused a moment to accustom his sensitive nostrils to the confusion of smells that interfered with his search.

He noted a number of people hurrying about; wagons, and several horses; but, as yet, he did not see Brownie, though his nose told him the end of his hunt was near.

Then, at the far side of the clearings he caught a glimpse of the puppy romping foolishly with a dirty, untidy child, exactly as he had romped the day before with dainty little Flora.

One bound, and the gray collie was in the midst of the clearing, and headed straight for the fickle Brownie.

A gipsy camp is, at best, a filthy if picturesque place. This particular one was not in the least picturesque, and was especially dirty. For its occupants were hurriedly breaking camp in response to an unexpected command from the family's head to "put all the miles you can between us and this place 'fore dinner."

No less than five more or less lucrative thefts had starred the night hours. Not the least valuable bit of loot was Brownie.

One of the unwashed youths, while prowling around for chickens, had stumbled on the tiny dog asleep in his kennel, at The Place. A gipsy knows a good dog, as he knows a good horse. The perfect little Boston promised a quick sale at a good price. And Brownie had been borne off to the camp.

There was a hasty council, and it was decided to get away with all speed. The night's various thefts had been remunerative; but they made fast travel advisable.

Though knowing nothing of all this, Dawn realized that Brownie must be taken out of such strange company, and at once. Flora was crying for him. Dashing up to the dirty gipsy child, the collie seized Brownie by the scruff of the neck right from under the very nose of the astonished gamin. Then, as Dawn started to trot away, the child burst into lusty howls:

"Shut that brat's mouth!" growled the brat's father to its mother, as he clattered down from a wagon. "We'll have the whole neighborhood about our ears next!"

Then he caught sight of Dawn and made a dash at him.

With one or two long strides, he reached the homeward bound dog, and kicked him

viciously on the side of the head, lunging at him with a horsewhip he carried.

"Drop that pup!" he snarled, kicking a second time.

Dawn dropped the pup—between his own legs—at the same time that he sank his clean white fangs into the grimy hand that held the upraised horsewhip. Dawn had never been whipped before—nor kicked—nor had he ever been snarled at.

He did not propose to stand for such treatment; also, a woman who had followed the man out of the wagon was approaching from the side, with hand outstretched to grasp Brownie the moment Dawn should give her a chance.

Down came the whip a second time, as the man howled in pain.

A second time Dawn's sharp white teeth took toll—this time of the gipsy's leg.

"T's a mad dog!" blubbered the man in sudden panic—letting go his whip and finally shaking his leg free of Dawn by parting with a generous mouthful of his trousers.

"Mad dog! Mad dog!" went up the cry.

With one accord, men and women picked up their ragamuffin children and themselves, and bolted into their curtained wagons, pulling up the steps behind them.

Dawn did not waste a second. Grabbing the tiny Brownie as before, he raced joyously home—ears flattened back, silky white paws covering the ground at his utmost speed—his thick white ruff and plummy tail floating gaily through space.

Little Flora's cheeks were still wet with tears, when her lips suddenly stopped quivering and parted in a shriek of delight.

"Why—Dawnie is bringing me back my puppy!" she crowed.

But it was at Betty's feet he laid his much shaken but quite unharmed offering; for, after all, it was for Betty that he had endured those two whip-lashings. And as he lay panting happily, his silver gray head against the toe of her white sport shoe, her hand softly patting his heaving side, Dawn knew that she understood.

HEART OF GOLD

HEART of gold, when the sun is high
O'er the drowsy earth, in the summer sky;
When the cattle doze in the shady fen
And the noonday peace thralls the souls of men—
Heart of gold, you will love me then.

When the flaming west and the dying light
Warn the world of approaching night;
When the cattle are safe in stall and pen,
And twilight gloom holds the souls of men—
Heart of gold, you will love me then.

When the night comes lowering, wild and black,
And the storm-king rages mid wreck and wrack;
When the wild beast roams from his loathly den,
And ghostly fear shrouds the souls of men—
Heart of gold, you will love me then.

Heart of gold, when the storm is past
And we wake to eternal day at last,
Where bliss or sorrow beyond our ken
Claims forever the souls of men—
Heart of gold, will you love me then?

Elliot Balestier,

Trail's End

by Edwin L. Sabin

Author of "Bad Medicine," "The Pass of Painted Rocks," etc.

CHAPTER VI.

I RECEIVE A NOTE.

"BY your leave," said the long American, as he swept the coins from the bar into the sack again. "I do not want them," I raged. "No; but somebody may," he coolly replied. "They're current yonder." And he nodded toward the gaming tables. "I'll try a play or two." "Do as you please," I said, still choking. "It is all yours, anyway."

He carelessly strolled across the room, I stalking angrily after. Then I observed that the largest and most popular gaming table was presided over by a woman as dealer.

The crowd here parted before the compelling stride of the long American. The woman casually glanced up. She was extravagantly powdered—a woman of Spanish extraction, richly attired in black, low cut. Aside from a certain hardness of features she was not ill looking. She smiled, as she delayed the game a moment. "What? *El Señor Americano largo*, again?" "Assuredly, *señora*," he answered. "Why not? Do not we all come back?" Her bold black eyes fell upon me. "But they do not always do me the credit of bringing a friend with them. It speaks well for the honesty of my game, *señor*."

"He is my luck," laughed the long American. "I present to you the *señor*, Don Ricardo Andrews, *Señora Barcelo*. He has made the trip across—has eaten his buffalo meat and killed his Indian, and is a *muy hombre*, *my compañero*."

She scanned me, with exhibit not only of her bold eyes but of her magnificent teeth,

and I thrilled to the dangerous allurements as from a purring tigress. "An Americano, young, handsome, already *muy hombre* and your comrade. The combination does him credit." Her face softened. "It is a long trail to Santa Fé, young *señor*. If you have a mother go back to her. You are from Missouri?" "Ohio, *señora*." "Ohio," she murmured. "Yes. That is a long, long way. But no matter." Her manner abruptly changed to business. "You would adventure further, *señores*? I am about to throw the cards." "I always play the red and the queen, *señora*," laughed the long American. "I call the queen of hearts." He planked down his sack.

The game was what is termed monte—played with American cards in a Spanish deck. It was simple. The table had been divided into four squares, to which the cards were apportioned as dealt, with the gamblers betting upon the fall of suit or face.

"*Basta* (enough)!" spoke the *doña*, and we all bided to watch the deal. The queen of hearts! I could scarce believe my eyes when I saw it fall to the square upon which rested the bag of coin.

"*El Americano wins!*"

The applause was generous, for the long American appeared to be a favorite. There were other winners, and there were losers, as the deal continued. The *señora* gathered some of the coins from the table, added to some watching me with strange seriousness. "The queen of hearts, young *señor*. You called her. No?" "*Por Dios*, I called her myself," reproved the long American. The *señora* smiled as she counted the contents of the sack.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for October 16.

"You? Do you think the queen of hearts comes to your call, you with the turkey neck? You have a squaw in every Indian village, I'll wager. The young *señor* wins—" and she shot me a sudden glance as she shoved the money to him.

"*Adiós*, then," he replied. "We are done. There is only one queen of hearts, for young men; I prefer a queen of diamonds, myself." He bowed, with a grin. "To another time, *señora*." "To another time, *señores*."

"Suppose we get a bit of fresh air," he proposed to me, and we went out. "Who is she?" I queried, nonplussed.

"She? The *señora*? They used to call her La Tules. She was half American; now she's all Spanish and known as the *Señora Doña Gertrudes Barcelo*—the cleverest she-gambler in the province and the richest woman west of St. Louis." "Married?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "*Quién sabe, compañero*? Nobody asks. But since the turn in her luck that boosted her to open a monte bank of her own she's all the fashion. There's none too pious to lay a stake on the table of *Doña Gertrudes*. She pays well for her privileges, gives liberally, and that's enough."

He tossed a dollar to a whining leper, who clutched it and assured us that God would reward.

"I've quarters in mind for us at the casa of an old dame I know," he remarked. "That'll be quieter than at the fonda and warmer than a blanket in the plaza or under a wagon. But first you'll make your purchases and get some plunder so you can slick up. With a fresh shirt and other trappings and a turn at my razor you'll be fit to call the queen of hearts from the baile deck, tonight. But a *señorita* would as soon smile upon an Apache as upon you in your present guise." "And I'd as soon dance with an Apache squaw as with those painted faces such as I've seen here in Santa Fé," said I.

"Oh, pshaw! 'Tis a complexion preservative. To-night you'll see every face as clean as new buckskin. And she'll be here, too—*la señorita*. Now will you pruce up?"

In the general store across the way I was speedily outfitted by a young Mexican clerk who spoke excellent English. We mounted our animals; the long American led me by a short cut from the plaza to a low house, just off the caravan trail through town, with a rickety wood-pillared porch facing upon the so-called Santa Fé River—a stream-bed bordered by trees but containing little water. A shriveled old woman received us with few words, supplemented by a ready toothless smile. We were ushered into an earthen floored and earthen walled room, of one window encased at least three feet thick.

Here I changed my clothing for the new gray-flannel shirt and the crimson neckerchief, scraped my cheeks and chin with the razor procured from among my friend's "possibles," washed in a baked-clay basin of water from the river, and lacking any such matter as a mirror must take his word for it that now I was "fit." Then we sallied to inspect the town, which appeared to withhold no secrets from the long American.

The plaza was still rife with the villagers, from the nonchalant well-to-do who seemed to have put all their wealth upon self and horse, to the wretchedness of the complaining lepers. Occasionally through the folds of a shawl I caught glimpse of a face of real beauty, but there was none which, to my fancy, equaled that of the *señorita*. Don Antonio had many a counterpart, showily astride. There were many Pedros, a sprinkling of cheaply uniformed soldiers and two or three dapper, slim-waisted officers—these from the barracks and the military headquarters on the west of the plaza.

The town, of course, centered at the plaza—a square of hard-baked bare ground, treeless and shadeless, with several of our Conestogas parked in it, small donkeys, empty or loaded, standing patient, and horsemen at full canter racing back and forth regardless of pedestrians. The public buildings, including a church, fronted it, together with stores, a huckster market, and the great fonda. Thence the mud-box dwellings stretched away in broken order, forming haphazard streets

or lanes like cow-trails. Not a few of the casas were attached by high mud walls to large yards, containing fruit trees and gardens, and entered by heavy wooden doors, and as considerable of the ground right in the town was devoted to corn and such stuff, the place somewhat resembled an extensive farm.

All in all it was rather lack-luster, being of a flatness and a monotony relieved only by festoons of bright red peppers hanging upon the singularly one-patterned houses, by the gay costumes of the caballeros, and by the white-crowned mountains immediately to the east.

The building of most interest was a long, heavily porticoed, flat-roofed structure, whose row of rooms, like cells, occupied practically the whole north side of the plaza. This was El Palacio—the legislative and executive quarters of the province. It was reputed to have been built for some two hundred years. And while the interior was closed to us, the long American took pains to show me a number of dried Indian ears strung upon cords within the portico.

"That's how they count coup—these Mexicanos," he explained. "When they kill a Pache or Comanche they fetch in his ears and get reward."

Save for rioting, bawling teamsters and their hunter and trapper cronies upon whom the "Taos lightning" whisky from the fonda bar had worked its worst, the town had quieted down as we wended back, in the wane of the afternoon, for supper at the old *señora's*. Suddenly I sighted Don Antonio at one side in the plaza. He was spurring a sweat-reeking horse, at the same time reining him short—and the cruelty enraged me. Then the large bell of the plaza church pealed the Angelus. Instantly every native stopped movement; the women bowed, the men uncovered; Don Antonio, I observed, checked his horse statuesque, his head bared, even our Americans halted to stare voiceless and wondering, and excepting for the booming of the bell and the mutter of prayers there was cessation of life as though by enchantment.

The Angelus broke into a merry chime

of several bells together. At once everybody straightened up and amidst exchanges of "*Buenas tardes* (Good evening)!" resumed where he or she had left off. Don Antonio galloped furiously away.

"That done, next for the baile," grumbled the long American. The genuine hospitality of the old crone made the house by the river a veritable oasis. I suspect that our dole for board and lodging was a Godsend to her. "To the great baile this night, *señores*?" she queried, pottering to serve us, sitting cross-legged upon the floor, with chocolate, tortillas, beans stewed in red peppers, all cooked in her corner fireplace. "*Naturalmente, señora*. And where is it?" answered my friend. "At the fonda, *señor*. They will have cleared the dining room, and it will be a grand affair. Were I young again, like this young *señor*—ah, he and I would make them all jealous."

"The caballeros would be jealous of me, *señora*," I civilly asserted. "There's life in your old legs yet, I'll wager," added the long American. "Come; we'll leave the young *señor* to the *señoritas* and you and I will cut a caper together." "No, no! God forbid," she protested; but the badinage pleased her.

In the midst of it she uttered sudden exclamation, as if more recent memory had jogged her, and extracted a note from the bosom of her chemise.

"For you," she said. I unfolded it. It was in good English script.

Young *Señor*:

Should you again play for the queen of hearts at the fonda to-night, watch out that the knave is not slipped you instead. And be prepared.

OHIO.

"Ohio?" I mused, taken aback, and passed the note to the long American. "'Ohio,'" he muttered. "*Si. 'Stá bueno*. You can remember this?" He tossed the note into the fire-place. "Such matters are better cached for keeps," he remarked. "But 'Ohio,'" I repeated. "Surely I can remember, if necessary; but what is the purpose in remembering this nonsense?" "Nonsense? The sign is as plain as a buffalo trail. There is only one person hereabouts who pricked ears at the word 'Ohio.' There is only one queen of hearts

for you—and there is the one dark knave who attends her in the pack." "But what and how does that 'Ohio' know?" I demanded.

"Wits loosen up, in the fonda, my boy, and there's little hid from the gaming table. The dealer who does not read eyes and lips goes under in short order. I don't know why the *doña* has taken a fancy to you—maybe because you're young and from the States; but you're in luck. She holds more secrets than the priest. She's smarter 'n a beaver, that woman. She can put two and two together quicker 'n an Injun on the trail. Now, shall we go to the baile?" "By all means," said I. "The note makes no difference." "Except that you'd best go prepared in case of a row. You can stick my pistol inside your shirt." "But you?" He laughed easily. "I've always found a knife handy in close quarters, and my old gizzard-tickler has served me before."

CHAPTER VII.

I DANCE AT THE BAILE.

THE baile hour had been set at eight o'clock. Attired in our bravest the long American and I proceeded to the fonda where we found the whole town gathered. Music and high-pitched clamor issued from the open door and windows. Presently we elbowed inside. The scene at the bar was more uproarious than ever; the gaming tables had been supplemented by other tables and chairs placed as if for refreshments. In the comedor beyond the musicians were tuning their instruments.

A group of the caballeros, in their gay short jackets, slashed pantaloons, broad sashes, silver-embossed hats upon head and cigarettes between lips, were peering in through the connecting doorway. We pushed on, accompanied by sundry scowls and muttered comments of no friendly bearing. A row of benches lined the wall.

Here the women were expectantly seated. Their costumes were gorgeous—red, yellow, bright blue, magenta, in scarf and daring waist, and short skirt revealing handsome ankles and tiny slippered feet. The effect

was enhanced by the black of the *duenas*, the old women watchfully interposed by the side of their charges.

There was a sprinkling of men, mainly Americans, standing awkwardly; the booted teamsters and moccasined trappers and hunters much in evidence as they laughed boisterously at the antics of a wooden-stumped mountaineer with long iron-gray hair and very red face, who pirouetted grotesquely for their amusement. Leaning gracefully against the walls, a few stripling natives smoked and gazed with languid contempt. The room was hazy with the cigarette fumes, welling from the lips of men and women alike.

Something occult summoned my eyes and I saw the Doña Gertrudes staring fixedly at me—a salient figure in daring scarlet, sitting by herself and so as to command the doors. As my gaze crossed hers she slightly becked, with scarcely perceptible nod—but on the instant the musicians struck up a lively air and the floor trembled to the rush of men seeking partners. "Grab a gal," rapped the long American to me and bolted with the rest. In a twinkling I was left confined to the doorway and to watching the dancers whirl by.

Caballero and *señorita* and *señora* glided with the very poetry of motion—the enormous hats of the men spreading above the ebon, piled-up hair of the women, and their cigarettes, as seemed to me, in dangerous proximity. The teamsters were bears, in comparison. While several of the mountain men were light on their feet they did not, as my friend would have said, "shine." Altogether, it was the strangest ball that I ever had seen, where beauty paid favor to the beast. The dust and the smoke of the cigarritos made the quivering candles dim.

On a sudden I glimpsed the *señorita* in the arms of Don Antonio. She was all in black, but with a crimson flower embedded in her luxuriant glossy hair; he wore a yellow velvet jacket, a cherry-colored sash and light-blue pantaloons slashed with the same yellow. His hat glistened with filagree. Assuredly they formed a vivid spectacle, from which I, in my linsey-woolsey, my

coarse flannel shirt and scuffed boots, must stand back. They were indeed the finest couple upon the floor. I granted them that mental tribute, and tried to avert my eyes as they slowly passed, for I would not give the don the triumphant satisfaction of my notice, nor intrude myself upon her. I had been required for my services by the money wage and dismissed.

I did not know whether they espied me or not. Then came the Doña Gertrudes, miserable—I fancied—in the clutch of a huge, whiskered Americano, whose boots constantly threatened her small feet. Her face fronted me—her brows lifted significant—she was whirled about, and as my eyes curiously followed her she faced me again, to level a look at once warning and invoking, over the flanneled shoulder of her partner. Thereupon she was lost to me in the maze of whirling couples. I had mind to retire and sit by myself until I might go to bed—for a poignant distasté of all the alien gaiety possessed me—when the music abruptly ceased in a shrill flourish, and there was another rush, this time to my doorway.

Many of the cavaliers had seated their fair ones, and were hastening as if to get refreshment for them; other couples jostled through to the tables. I sighted Don Antonio's yellow jacket in the current, and next he was directly before me and speaking. "*Buenas noches, amigo.* You are not dancing?" "*No, señor.* I am a poor dancer, but I enjoy looking on." "That is good. The floor is full enough of bears and buffalo. There will be sore feet in Santa Fé to-morrow." His face darkened, and he continued stiffly, although politely: "I ask your pardon, *señor*, for the little scene this afternoon. When liquor is in one's head, one's good sense goes out—and that Taos lightning is very strong. *Dios!* We were friends on the trail; I wish to be a caballero still, in my own country. Shall we forget this afternoon, *amigo?*"

"It is forgotten, Señor Don Antonio," I answered, matching lie with lie. "I would inquire for Don José? Is he recovering?" "Don José is well. *Gracias.*"

The long American hove near, upon his arm a flashy Spanish matron as broad as

he was tall. "Hey, *compañero!* Get into the game," he hailed, over the heads of the others. "Here's a gal for you." But I might only smile response, out of bitterness infused into me by the o'er civil Antonio. I had inquired after Don José when I rather would have inquired after the *señorita*, and I realized that neither the old don nor the *señorita* had sent me any word. Now I cursed myself for having made any inquiry whatsoever. I had been hired to a duty; I had performed the duty and had been paid; the whole affair was ended—and perhaps well ended. They might go to the devil, and if I chose I would go likewise, by my own trail.

In my covert glance, the Señorita Rosa appeared to be merely tasting of a heavy, oily sirup, and as she returned the glass to Antonio he bowed and extravagantly drained it. With his spark he lighted her cigarrito for her. I noted old Pedro sitting humbly by, as her body servant. I was about to light a cigarette myself, in bravado, and saunter away, when the long American sought me. "You stand glowering like a wounded buffalo," he accused. "Come. Ohio wants to see you." The Doña Gertrudes was at one of the tables, rather abstractedly smoking, a glass of whisky half emptied before her. She smiled as I bowed in front of her. Her companion noisily arose to make room for me.

"You're next, young feller," he remarked as he got up. The *doña* motioned to me to be seated. "Are you going to ask me to dance?" she invited, in English.

"I ask you now, *señora,*" I replied. "But I am not accustomed to dancing in boots, except at a barn-raising—in Ohio." "Oh!" She lifted her fine brows, and eyed me openly. "They still raise barns—on the Ohio? It was a long time ago that I heard about it. They raise brave young men—and good women there, too; so I understand. Do you prefer the women of the Ohio to those of New Mexico, young *señor?*"

"What have you to tell me, *señora?*" I demanded, tired of sparring. At that moment the music again struck up. With

clatter of chairs the tables were vacated instantly. We stood; the *señora* listened a moment.

"'Tis the *cuna*," she said, "a Spanish figure similar to what in your Ohio country is termed a cotillion. But there is no calling; we of New Mexico know it all by heart." "Then I can not dance it," I admitted. "I beg your pardon." "There is waltzing, too, between sets. I will try you at the waltz, *señor*. When not waltzing, we will watch."

As if by chance she seated herself near old Pedro. He glanced at me out of the wrinkled corner of his eye, but as a peón his only thought, evidently, was to serve his mistress and to enjoy to the full the galaxy of belles and beaux, in station far above him.

The dancers already were formed upon the floor, and resolving into two long lines, women opposite men. I thanked my stars that I had not been emboldened to take the floor also; for the dance proved complicated, although beautiful beyond description, and the Americans essaying it displayed only their ignorance.

Now the natives were in their glory, while *señorita* and caballero advanced, retreated, curtsied and bowed and turned out well-shod calf, to wavings of scarf and handkerchief and much eyes. Amidst this pretty exchange, all without a word of direction, the teamsters and mountain men risked the stigma of buffalo bulls in a china shop.

Rude laughter began to assail them. I saw many a *señorita* bite her lip with vexation as her clumsy partner missed the cues entirely. I saw the yellow jacket of Don Antonio playing foil to the black bodice and crimson flower of the *Señorita Rosa*—and I endeavored not to observe. Then the music broke into a lively waltz, and extending my arm to the Doña Gertrudes I invited her to dance with me.

We made the first circuit in silence. Then, "You got my note? I take an interest in you because—well, I, too, have Ohio blood in me. You are a boy of spirit. I saw you and Don Antonio at the bar. I can put one and one together. Your luck runs to the queen of hearts; are you

going to stand aside and let somebody else play for her?"

"You mean—?" I stammered. "The winning gambler doubles on his card and never minds the other faces, be they knave, king, clubs, spades, diamonds, or what," she replied. "In plain language dance with the *Señorita Rosa*. Instead of glooming in the doorway follow your luck. She has noted you here more times than you would dream. I know every flutter of her eyelash, and she is the truest-hearted little chit in Santa Fé."

"She sent no word," I faltered. Doña Gertrudes laughed softly in my arms.

"The knave wins. There is only one card between your stake and the queen—and it wins. Very well. You would best go back to the Ohio." A sudden rage inflamed me. "By God," I muttered, "I will dance with the *señorita* first, if she does not refuse. I will dance with her and prove that I am at least not a boor."

"While gazing into her face forget not your back, *señor mio*," counseled the *señora*. "Antonio is a devil and you are only a heretic. The saints gladly deliver a heretic over to the devil. But you have a pistol underneath your shirt; I have felt it. '*Stá muy bueno*.'"

The *cuna* simmered down into a sort of waltz quadrille combined with the stately minuet. The discomfiture of my countrymen was increasing right along. One of the musicians now improvised in sing-song, launching Spanish-worded twit and jest which to the vast entertainment of the natives were pointed chiefly for the Americans. The rough fellows began sheepishly to quit, giving up in despair, mock or real, and leading their displeased but not unwilling partners to the benches. Soon the floor was surrendered almost completely to the triumphant native couples. The *cuna* culminated in a slow waltz that gradually quickened until it left all breathless.

Oblivious of me, Don Antonio seated the *señorita* beside old Pedro, and joined the rush for refreshments. She was only a few yards removed from me. I sat with burning cheeks and beating heart, waiting, while Don Antonio lingered over her

and she sipped her sirup. I felt his glance, oblique, in my direction, but none from her; yet I knew that she knew.

At that moment the musicians commenced to tune their instruments anew. Thus signaled, I abruptly arose, with a short bow of withdrawal, and strode straight to the *señorita*.

"*Buenas noches, Senorita Rosa,*" I said, regardless of the don. "I would ask for the honor of the next dance with you." My voice sounded to me absurdly weak, but it may only have been drowned by the thumping of my pulses. "It is yours." She extended her partially emptied glass to Don Antonio. "With your permission, then, *segundo mio.*" "As you say, *carita.*" He bowed to me, and his smile was oddly malicious. "I resign to you my place in heaven, *amigo.* But not for long." "Thanks," I responded drily. "God will reward you, surely, as you deserve."

The music burst forth strident. It was a slow waltz. "Oh! The waltz *despacio, señor,*" the *senorita* exclaimed, delightedly, as with little shake of skirt she arose, to accept my expectant arms. But just as we made the first step a clamor swelled.

"The *cuna!* What ails you, musicians? Stop! Whoa! The *cuna!* Again the *cuna!*"

The cries were all Spanish, in voices both of men and women. Movement delayed, until in accordance with what must have been a pre-arrangement the musicians changed to the opening strains of the *cuna*. "No! No! Spanish trick! Give us a waltz," bawled the Americans, to no avail. It was confusion. The *cuna* music continued, the native couples were forming their sets. I stood hesitant, with her in my arms.

"Shall we try, *señor?*" Her little voice spoke bravely. It inspired me to be a man once more. I was not going to be balked—not by any Don Antonio and ilk.

"I watched closely before; I think I can do it, with your help, *señorita.*"

We found places. There were smiles for her, frowns for me, and blacker scowls for the other Americans who followed my example. Don Antonio was moodily leaning against the wall near the doorway into the barroom, and his steady glower burned into

my back. So resolved not to humiliate the *señorita*, I did my clumsy prettiest, while she—ah, what a miracle of grace and loveliness, clear to the heart! Thanks to her kindly promptings by smile and motion we got through the first evolutions; the music signaled for a waltz—the waltz *despacio* now; the slow waltz in which one's feet scarce might lag enough for the long beats of the time. As light as thistledown the *señorita* rested upon my arms, her scarf floating while we slowly turned, her jetty smooth hair scented as if by the flower in it. Don Antonio's burning gaze pursued, from where he leaned and smoked and chafed.

"You were long in asking me to dance, Don Ricardo."

"I did not know that it would be agreeable to you, *señorita.*"

"You preferred the Doña Gertrudes? Is she such a friend of yours?"

"I never saw her before to-day. But she has been my only friend, to date, among the Santa Féans; she, and the old *señora* with whom we are staying."

"But you received the money, by Pedro?"

"By Don Antonio, *señorita.* And also my quittance from your father's service. I welcomed neither the one nor the other."

"Oh!" she gasped. "By Antonio? Pedro did not say. It was uncivilly given?"

"Somewhat, and uncivilly declined, I fear. I did not want the pay, in money, *señorita*; and I shall always be in your service."

"But you did not come to the house, *señor.* We expected you—we expected you as a friend and guest. My father was disappointed, and is angered."

"Why should I intrude, *señorita?* I waited only the word, and lacking that—! You were in safety, at last, and naturally had no further use for me." "José was to give you the money and the word, and you were to come with Don Antonio," she quickly alleged. "The money was merely business; the rest was as friends to friend. Antonio said that you were drunk and gambling with the other wild Americans. Oh! And Pedro also lied. They shall pay for that. *Madre de Dios*, they shall! But you will now come to see us? To see my father,

anyway? He is ill, and he frets. Don Antonio is no near blood relative, yet he takes liberties with our family. Pedro, of course, is only a peon; Antonio probably threatened him. I shall side with my father in the matter. It is not our way to be rude to those we accept as friends."

"You will be there, at the house, and I may see you tomorrow?" I persisted. "I am always at home, *señor*. We Santa Fé women do not go far from our parents. Do you like our Santa Fé?" she asked. "I might be made content never to leave, *Señorita Rosa*," I straightly answered.

And the waltz ceased, for the cotillion figure again. I longed to have it resume. Man's arms never held a more delicious charge. An intoxication of conquest buoyed me to a foolish pitch. The glower of Don Antonio egged me on to madden him, and so I pirouetted and bowed and clumped and sillily grimaced, in defiance of him and the gibes shot by the improvising musician.

The don had been joined by a group of other dark-faced young caballeros. A subtle menace seemed to permeate the air, and still our sets gamboled briskly, we few Americans competing for favor and honor with the scornful natives, and a gradually increasing knot of caballeros looking on.

The figure terminated in the two long lines, like the Virginia Reel, the ladies facing the men, and each couple advancing and retiring; there was the final waltz—the waltz redondo to rapid measure—and again we circuted the room, she and I. In my ecstasy I fancied that she yielded rather more closely, as if to recompense me for that shabby treatment at other hands.

The couples broke; none more slowly than we. And at the very instant of handing our ladies to their seats the not unexpected happened; a concerted rush of the caballeros upon the floor, a burst of shouts, hoarse and shrill, mingled. Knives flashed, benches and chairs were whirled on high, girls and women fled pell mell, or cowered in their seats with their faces covered. The center of the floor space was filled with fighting men, swirling, wrestling, stabbing, striking, clubbing, cursing, and the ceiling shook to the cries.

"A scrimmage! At 'em, boys! Hooray for a scrimmage!"

"Out with the Americanos! Death to the Americanos! *Vivan los Mexicanos!*"

From the mêlée Don Antonio leaped like a cat at me, and struck with his fist—so eager as to forget his knife. He sent me staggering as I ducked and slipped, and headfirst I was engulfed in the whirlpool of combat—was shoved back and forth, buffeted by friend and foe.

Outnumbered, we were being pushed toward the exit into the street. The candles flickered; quick hands swept them aside; we were entangled in dusk, and still we struck and writhed and swore; on a sudden the room was plunged in complete darkness, as the door from the gaming room was slammed, and in a strong clutch I was dragged onward, pent amidst other perspiring bodies, into the open air.

"How goes it?" Are you hurt, *compañero*?" It was the long American, breathing fast. "No? Child's play, that. There'll be skinned faces and a few broken heads, with a knife-thrust or two, but it's only a scratch-and-bite fracas. Those damned young dens—they're a jealous parcel. Let's go our way. Have you had enough?"

Through the pitchy streets, along which frightened figures scurried homeward, we reached the casa of the old *señora*. She opened to our knock; bade us wait; then bestowed upon us a lighted candle, mumbling to us to extinguish it as soon as done with. By the glimmer we spread our blankets in our room, removed our outer garments, and settled for the night.

"Tomorrow morning? You pay your visit tomorrow morning?" asked the long American. "That is my intention."

I was just drifting off upon rosy clouds when there was a low rap, and a muffled hail from outside the casa door. The old *señora* querulously answered; rapped upon our own door, and reported.

"Some one wishes to see you, *señores*."

We drew on clothing and boots and in the darkness stumbled out. Pedro was awaiting us, shrouded in his sarape. "El Señor Don José desires you at the *casa*, *señores*. He asks your pardon for disturbing you, but it is urgent." "Tell him that

we are coming," replied the long American.

"The meat's in the pot," exulted my friend. "And I'm willing to risk burnt fingers, taking it out. Fetch along your Hawkens, though; that sort of plunder has a comfortable heft to it—and *quién sabe?*"

The town seemed asleep, all save the dogs. They yapped furiously as we moved at rapid pace like thieves. I asked no questions of the long American; but surely, I thought, this is a strangely timed summons. And I wondered, should we see the *señorita*.

CHAPTER VIII.

I RECEIVE TREASURE.

THE long American hastened onward with the assurance of a forest rover following a blazed trail. After some windings and turnings he stopped short, sought briefly, and rapped on a plank door set into the clay wall. The door swung.

Then Pedro led us through an enclosed flowery court, into the house. Here we had the light of a taper, and passing down a long hall we were ushered into the presence of Don José. He was extended upon a mattress of blankets, against the wall beside the corner fire-place from which the flicker of stacked-up piñon shone ruddily. It was a bare room. Save for the low couches and a picture or two of the saints, it contained no furnishings whatsoever.

"I must apologize for having disturbed you, *señores*, he began. "But time presses and my strength is fast ebbing away. I have asked the favor of your presence at this hour in order to relieve my mind of burdens. It is strange that I, a Spaniard of Mexico, should turn to Americans at the last. However, that is as God wills, and I recognize men when I see them. Pedro, the trunk."

Pedro uncovered the trunk of the blankets that had transformed it into a seat, and carried it across to his master's couch. The long American at my side slightly tensed, but otherwise only said, "With your permission, *señor*," and applied flint and steel to his cigarette. "There

are two treasures in this house, *señores*," the don continued. "I would place them both in good hands. The one is already disposed of, to Don Antonio. The matter is settled. He is of the *gente fina* and will be a *rico*. I apologize, young *señor*, for his treatment of you this afternoon, but the Spanish blood flows hot in the veins of youth, and he was jealous. That is past. He is content, and so is my daughter. All else that I have is yours, young *señor*. It may be little, it may be much, but you lengthened my days and you and your *compañero* who sent you deserve my best gratitude. You are true friends, each to the other?"

"We are like son and father, *señor*," I thickly uttered. "Without him I would be nothing." "That is well. Then, you will share. This will take two men—and two brave men. You have observed my trunk, *señores?*" He threw back the rickety lid, and there was exposed, as before, only the ancient sheepskin shirt and the red petticoat. "A garment of my daughter's, for winter wear. She has not yet removed it. The other—listen, *señores*. Many years ago my grandfather located a gold mine in the mountains. It is Comanche country. Half a million pesos were taken out before the savages seized it. They would permit no Spanish there. Those pesos lasted our family a long time; few remain today. My father twice attempted to reopen the mine, and was driven away. I once attempted it, and I too was driven down with loss of men. Now it is yours, *señores*, if you will accept."

"*Muchisimas gracias, señor*," my friend responded, with a suavity that concealed a little stir of exultation which I alone perceived, but did not share. "Why not Don Antonio, who will be the husband of your *señorita* daughter?" "Antonio," he replied, "will be a *rico* in the near future. He is a young man of good parts—his wildness will wear off—but he is not the man for such a venture. In some things you Americans excel us, *señores*; you are masters of the savages. You have the arms and the boldness that make them respect you; us they only hate. I would not send Antonio on the quest. I do not wish my

daughter to be a widow in her youth. And the government would take all his profits if he were successful. It is a watchful and jealous government we have, *señores*."

With his knife he ripped open the hide lining of the trunk cover to extract a piece of yellowed parchment. The long American leaned forward more intent, and drew quick breath of interest. Still I could not rise to the occasion. What were even millions in gold compared with my great loss? She was betrothed to Antonio; in light of this, all the mines of the Incas were dross. And I sickened as I sat stolid.

"You see the old Spanish grant," pursued the don. "It may be worthless now—who knows? Nothing is secure, in these days of the greedy arm stretched from the palacio. The only security for you is your rifles, and the friendship of the savages. You should make a treaty with them. You must not return to Santa Fé. As a matter of form I will sign this grant over to the young *señor*. Keep it close, and some day—but again, who knows?" He turned the shirt inside out. "Here is the map of the country and the mine, on this very shirt descended to me from my father and his father. No one not in the secret has suspected this shirt."

"A damned good scheme," praised the long American, in round English.

The parchment, creased and dingy, bore antique Spanish script. The inside of the shirt back was traced with black in curious design. "Santa Fé," pointed out the old don, with trembling finger. "The trail. These are La Sierra del Oro—the Mountains of Gold, as they are called. The mine is there. Is it plain? It all is yours. Do you accept?" "We accept, *señor*. We are in your debt."

"I would only balance accounts." And the don sighed with satisfaction. "I have endeavored to do what is right. I have disposed of my all; I can die content. I am tired now, *señores*. Permit me to say '*A Dios*.' I advise you to set out early in the morning, before the city is stirring. It will sleep late, and you will be far upon your way before there are eyes to mark you. And you will not come back to thrust your head into the jackal's mouth.

The paper and map will be waiting for you in the hands of a servant, at day-break tomorrow, upon the Cerrillos road out of the city. There will be burros and a few poor supplies. The servant will guide you to the mountains. More I cannot do. The rest lies with you. Go with God, and keep your own counsel. The mule and saddle that you already have are yours."

He had dismissed us; his voice was weakening. The long American straightened; I straightened. "We thank you, *señor*," responded my friend. "The gift is very great, but if you think that the work is for Americans, we will do it. It is a pity to let the mine waste itself because of the worthless Indians. *A Dios, señor*; may God grant you many days yet."

"*A Dios, señor; y gracias*," was all that I could stammer.

Once in the street the long American was all elation. "By thunder!" he blatted. "I felt it—we shot plumb center, again. I had a notion that the old gent was going to quit himself of that property. No Mexican will risk hair in those parts. Not by a jugful! The don's no love for the governor, either. Let that mine be reopened by a native—and good-by to it. Armijo is too smart to overlook a bet like that. The whole damned thing would be confiscated for the revenue of the province, which means Armijo, *el gobernador*. Bueno! Hey? Speak up."

"You may have it," said I, dully.

"What? Because you've lost the girl? The States are full of girls, but you don't get a gold mine thrown at you more than once in a lifetime. Maybe she fancied you, and maybe not; but you don't think the old man or the priest will let her marry a heretic, do you? Not much, *compañero*! It would be shoot and run, anyway, for you, with a pack on your heels every step to the Arkansas. The mine! That's the caper."

"This was your game, you mean? You had this in prospect when you picked me up?" "You bet yuh! The girl and the mine, or the mine alone; didn't matter."

"In other words, you sought to use me for your purpose," I challenged.

"For the purpose of doing us both good. You have no call to be sore. I took a liking

to you; I sized you up properly. What were you then? Wolf meat. What are you now? *Muy hombre*, and liable to fleece your back with gold. To tell the truth, the don was somewhat beholden to me; I had done him favors in St. Louis on several occasions."

"You knew what was in the trunk?" "No more than a guess. His mine is common report, though. 'Tis a by-word all along the trail. But, hell, the country's full of old Spanish workings. Still, the game was worth the candle. We had little to lose. Now are you satisfied?" "What can we do, yonder?" I faltered. I truly owed him health, if nothing else.

"Inside, we can load the burros, at least. We'll pack our proofs back to the States, anyhow—and there'll be men enough to draw cards with us. We'll arrange with the governor, all right; he'll take a percentage, or he'll take nothing; and he'll take nothing if he tries to take all. Sabe? Those Comanches would heap rather have the Americans with 'em against the Mexicans, than have us both to fight. By gosh, we can fetch in enough Americanos to capture the whole country; it ought to belong to the United States."

Thus he prattled on, as we strode for the *casa*. But I saw no gold in life. I should never return; she was promised to Don Antonio; she had agreed; she had played on me in sport—they all had played on me, as seemed—and I held the bag for my friend.

Well, if there was nothing in love of man for woman, there was something in friendship of man for man. I could not gainsay him in his success; I would not seem ungrateful of the opportunities afforded me. Out of troubled dreams I was aroused by his urgent voice: "Ketch up, ketch up! The old dame's cooking chocolate. I've given her hush money; she'll know nothing. Saddle your mule. My animal's ready."

I quickly dressed and stepped out. The fire was blazing in the corner fire-place; the old *señora*, mumbling, was crouched before it, preparing our breakfast. The darkness of the open was faintly tinged with gray, the air was crisp and frosty. By sense of touch as well as by that of

sight I saddled my mule, tied my blanket on, and by so much was ready also.

When after breakfast we rode away the night had so paled that the squat mud houses upon either side of the street were defined in all their ugliness; yet I looked upon them with longing, for Santa Fé had grown strangely beautiful to me. Now at this hour it was a slumberous, deathly quiet place; our hoof thuds awakened even no dogs, where they were closely curled against the chill.

"*El Camino Cerrillos*," shortly spoke the long American, turning into another street—or a road, rather. We speedily had left the bulk of the houses behind. "The don's *hombre* should be waiting somewhere ahead," he added."

A mounted figure emerged from within the shadow of a lifeless building beside the trail, forcing us to rein sharply. Our rifles sprang half to the level.

CHAPTER IX.

I FIND MY GUIDE.

"*BUENOS días, señores*." "What do you want? Who is it?" the long American demanded.

"I am from Don José, with the burros."

Of form indistinguishable in blanket cloak and huge straw hat the peón marshalled four burros—two well laden—into the road, and drove them on under cover of our rifles. With due precautions of ambush we also passed on, and were unmolested. "Wait, *hombre*," and he extended a crinkly packet. The long American unfolded it, and peered. "You have something else, *hombre*?"

The peón extended a roll tied with thongs. The long American sniffed it, hefted it, and was assured. "It is the same. Smells of two hundred years, more or less. *Bueno*. Now where to put it?" He tucked it inside his hunting-shirt and tightened his belt across it. "What is your name, *amigo*?" "Diego, *señor*; *servidor de Uds*."

Through the increasing morning we jogged along, Diego leading with the bur-

ros. The road was a country road, amidst low cedars and piñons and coarse shrubs of a wide flat, and stretching straight into the west of south where lay, I imagined, one of the bluish mountain ranges remarked upon our approach to Santa Fé, yesterday. *Dios!* How far and dead seemed yesterday, and our gay whip-popping entry into the *ciudad!* Only last night's *cuna*, and the *señorita* in my arms, were still vibrant.

The east had brightened to silver, against which the Santa Fé Mountains stood starkly etched, lightened by their blotches of white snow. Entrancing by day, now they loomed somber and cold, overlooking the town. But our trail, according to the long American, pointed toward the yellow of gold, and with town and dark range we had nothing to do. *Adiós, señorita mía.* And I welcomed a fling at the Comanches.

In the first glow of pink we had topped a rise; the *ciudad* of Santa Fé had sunken into its valley, and before us that range containing the Mountains of Gold bided yet far removed, its flanks and foothills indistinct, but its peaks hard-cut and faintly luminous in the day-beams of the upper spaces.

Our peón steadily urged on the burros. Now revealed, he was clad, as I had surmised, in sarape or blanket of coarse gray wool, through the center of which his head was thrust, so that the folds draped him from neck clear to heels. The broad brim of his large hat was clapped down upon his shoulders, and as he sat hunched upon his mule he looked misshapen. Santa Fé, I judged, had many of him—simple, humble, tax-burdened pawns who reasoned not what was the next move upon the board.

We pushed on. We met nobody, saw nothing except a coyote or two; rabbits, a humpily scurrying badger. The long American occasionally glanced behind, down our trail. "All clear as yet. But a man can't breathe at ease while he's in the open, this way. Thanks be, after the fracas they'll all sleep late, and be leery of showing themselves. If it wasn't for the burros— Anyhow, we'll have to reckon only with Mr. Don Antonio. Does that name make you wolfish?"

"I have no object in injuring him," said

I. "He'd lift your hair, nevertheless, and do it pronto," the long American rebuked. "Buck up, *hombre*. You'd have won the girl, had you been as yellow as he; by thunder, I believe you did win her, though you can't marry her. Yes, and I'd have helped you rustle her off, had it not been for this bigger stake." He must have observed my miserable face, for his tone softened. "I reckon you were far gone, in that direction, eh?"

"I loved the *señorita* more than life; a thousand gold mines do not tempt me now. I would trade with Don Antonio on almost any terms, if I might have only her."

The sunshine bathed the range first; as it flashed broader it came to meet us, but the valley of Santa Fé, behind, was still enveloped in blue shadow cast by the high mountains on its east.

The mesa had become a labyrinth of blind trails, until, as we trotted into wash and out again, they thinned, so that led by Diego we were pursuing scarce a trail at all. We were approaching the danger zone, within pouncing distance from the coverts yonder, where the savages, crouched like vultures, were prepared for forays at sight of attractive spoil.

The mountain flanks had appeared all bare, saving the snow streaks; but now serried pines were visible, stiffly alined against the sky and stationed along the amber slopes. The purplish depths of numerous cañons gradually opened. The whole barrier was brooding and mysterious, as it towered higher and higher, vaster and vaster; and before it, we, riding onward across the slightly rising, lonely mesa, with odd-detached cones, like immutable sentinels, watching our advance, were figures very small.

Although we were traveling at steady pace, uneasiness still governed the long American. From the vantage points he regularly turned to eye the horizon at rear. "The sun has waked them," he proffered. "I see the breakfast smoke. But it will be only the peóns, for a time yet. The gentry will stay abed. I hope to God that after last night the young devil Antonio has such a head he'll prefer his blankets or the sunshine to his *señorita*."

"The *señorita*? You don't think the *señorita* would set him on our trail? On mine? On yours? When her father sent us?" The long American grunted contempt. "*Quién sabe?* Those Mexicanos all herd together. The old don's a down bull; the young one has the heifer, and it's up to her to act the pretty. What else can she do? I know women. We cannot blame her, then," I reminded. "Whatever she does, I'll hear no word against her." The range was so perceptibly nearer that a stranger to the clearness of the atmosphere might deem the hither slopes within hail. Indeed the space was shorter than I had dared to figure, for at the close of another half an hour we were about to enter the foothills by means of a narrow draw.

"This is enough, *Diego*," the long American told our guide. "You may leave us, with our thanks."

The fellow sat sullen, replying no word. Then the long American said: "You were to guide us to the mountains, Bueno. That is done, go back with God, and say nothing as you value your life."

"I will continue, *señor*." His voice was low and obstinate. "Don José said to the mountains, and we are here. We go alone; you have finished. A *Dios, amigo*, and keep your lips together or—" He drew his palm edge across his lean throat. "I will continue, *señores*, and show you the way. You cannot find it." The fellow's insistence was provoking, his face difficult to see.

"That is not for you to say, *amigo*," chided the long American. "He seems possessed by the devil," he muttered, and resumed: "We have the map. You shall point out on it the way. Then go, and Don José will reward you."

Out came the roll of shirt. The long American twitched at the knotted thong to untie it. He peered, scanned the one side and the other. His face flushed. "Devil take you! What is this, you rascal? It is not the right one! You have tricked us? Where is the parcel Don José gave you?"

At the fury of the rapid words the fellow cowered. "Have patience, *señor*. Let us hasten—"

"No, by the eternal!" With a single

leap of his horse the long American had reached and clutched at the shrinking shoulder—in the shock the hat went flying. I heard a piteous cry, and saw the affrighted face and massy hair of the *Señorita Rosa*.

I, too, uttered a cry, a startled exclamation with word I know not what. The arm of the long American dropped as if paralyzed; he stared, momentarily smitten dumb. The *señorita's* eyes were veiled, downcast; a vivid blush deepened the stain with which she had tried to coarsen her lovely features. The long American burst into hot anger again, voiced in nervous English.

"Burnt fingers? The fat's afire. There's a party on our trail—I've been marking them for half an hour, and they're no *paisanos*. And here we're palavering with a girl! By thunder, where's that map, *señorita*? You *sabe*? Speak quick."

"I have it on, *señor*," she quavered; and she shot a sudden, imploring glance at me.

CHAPTER X.

I GUARD MY TREASURE.

"OFF with it, then," he bade rudely. "I care not whether you're man or woman. Off with it, or, by all the saints—" and he gathered himself threateningly. She paled.

"Not here, *señor*. I know the way. We will go on—we must hurry."

He bawled, beside himself. "*Por Dios*, no! We'll have that map in our own keeping, but we'll have no wench. I've talked enough." He sprang for her, with full horse's length. She cringed, evading. I heard her cry out—I thought that I caught my name, and I thrust in between them, forcing him back. "Take care, man!" I warned. "Don't touch her or you have to deal with me."

His brows knitted as he surveyed us both. "So! That's how the land lays, is it? She goes on with us? She goes on in the shirt, if she doesn't go back without it? An instant, now." He whirled for a spurt to view the open country beyond the mouth of the draw.

"Why did you do this, *señorita*?" I reproached, while my heart beat. She colored, and spoke with face half averted. "It was the only safety for you, *señor*. I have learned the trail so well, from my father's lips."

"Does your *señor* father know of this?"

"I bribed the real Diego. He knows now, I think—my father."

"You are—you have the map?"

"It is where it is, *señor*." She leveled brimming look upon me. "Otherwise you two would have sent me back. I hoped you would not discover, so soon."

The long American came. "They're after us," he grimly announced. "But we'll make it. Stretch out; never mind the burros. It's run or fight."

"We'll stay where we are, and wait for them," said I. "We'll not go on."

He gasped. "Not go on?"

"No. Not with the *señorita*. That's unthinkable."

"But you've wanted her, and here she is. We've lost the mine, like as not—no matter. We'll not pull out empty-handed. Name of God, boy! You've won. Her reputation's done for as it is. All Santa Fé will hoot at her. Even Antonio won't risk her. Follow your luck. Damn, if the shirt's no *bueno* you've got the petticoat, or what it stands for."

The *señorita* proudly lifted her head and straightened her young body in the cheap cloaking. "You may speak English, I understand. As for Antonio, I should never marry him, anyway." And she added, with sudden break of voice: "If I have to defend my reputation, I will make my own answers."

"You speak English, also?" I gasped.

"Certainly. I was at school in St. Louis."

So she knew, by the conversation on the trail and here, that I loved her! Hurrah! Now I could fight an army.

"Get on with us, then!" rasped the long American. "God's name! We sit, here talking nothings while they're fetching the *calabozo* to us. With you once behind lock and key in Santa Fé, young lady, and this lad *en cárcel* at Chihuahua, there'll be an end for good and all to whatever you think

to do. We can only ride, and ride like hell."

I shook my head, whereupon she spoke again, with another lift of chin.

"I lied about the map. I am not wearing it. It is only underneath my cloak. Here—you may have it. Go on without me, if that is the quickest way. Go; please go. I'll meet them, and they can take me back. That will satisfy them. I'm sure it will."

I was off my mule. "We stay here or we'll both go back," I vowed. "You've been with us merely since daybreak. I'd be no man to send you back alone—and I'd be less a man to let you go on with us. That's flat. And you," I said, to the long American, "may do as you choose. *Adiós*. You have the map; so *adiós* and good luck."

He threw himself from his horse. "Hanged if I will. I think we're all mad together—mad as squaws at a scalp dance; but here we'll fort, if that's your say, and stand 'em off while we talk a bit. It's as good a place as any."

And such it appeared to be, for the slopes approached each other, and two men might command the passage. Muttering a tart comment upon the inconvenience of women in general, the long American rapidly directed: "Turn those burros in behind us, and tie the saddle critters. And you, Miss *Señorita* Rosa—*válgame Dios!*" he exclaimed, springing to his animal. "She's away! She's taken the bit in her teeth, by Henry!" Scattering the burros, on her mule my sweetheart was bolting up the draw as if defying all pursuit.

"Confound her! It's whether or no, with her. She's a wild one, all right." He was in the saddle. "Come on. That's our trail." Forward he dashed, and I after. The draw deepened and constricted until soon it was a cañon with steep sides. The *señorita's* start had carried her around a shoulder that swallowed hoof-beats also; but as we cleared the same spot we sighted her again. We had gained a trifle; she was not quite so far in the advance, for the cañon had roughened, littered with rocks and cut by washes. Gradually we overhauled her, until the gravel spumed from

her lathered mule's big hoofs pelted us hard.

"We can't pass her," quoth the long American. He hailed: "What's the matter? Where are you going, *señorita*? Wait a bit."

She turned tear-stained indignant face. "To the mine, of course. If you're afraid of me, don't come."

"But wait, wait!" I begged.

"I'll not wait, unless you promise to go on."

So there was nothing to do, save to follow. It really was no trail, except in the few intervals that had survived rains and snows. A tortuous stream bed, now dry, formed the cañon's bottom, and the cañon's brushy sides were so irregular that sometimes we were in the stream bed itself and sometimes were clambering part way up. To push forward and head the *señorita* off was, as the long American had said, well-nigh impossible; moreover, for what good? Her mule fagged under her, slackened to a jog and walk, showed symptoms of stalling, so that after a bit she reined in, and waited, while putting up her disarranged hair. "You're coming, are you?" she accused, defiant but altogether entrancing.

"Wherever you go, I go, *querida mía*," I answered.

At the Spanish term which means rather more than simply "My dear," she smiled wondrously, then flamed again. "Not back, though. I'm not afraid, but I won't have you taken. Will you let me go back alone?"

"Never!"

She bit her lip, perplexed. "All right. Come."

"How far to that mine, *señorita*?" the long American asked.

"Several miles. I do not know exactly, but I know the landmarks. We must hurry."

"They'll find our burros and be mighty cautious for a space," he reasoned. "And it'll call on more than Mexican spunk to press fast along this kind of a trail into Comanche country. *Bueno!* Lead on, *señorita*. There's no use stopping here. What sort of region is that yonder, 'cording to your father's say? Water?"

"Yes. There's a spring, and only the one way in. A few brave men can hold it if they have the weapons."

"Between choice of devils, we'll play the red; it's been our luck," he decided. "Eh, *compañero*?"

"The mine matters little, as far as I'm concerned," I replied. "But where she goes, I go; and—"

"Oh!" she cried; and was away again, urging her mule on up the cañon.

The route was rocky and slow, compelling us to pick a path while our mounts slipped and grunted. I could mark the *señorita* peering right and left, as if searching; and we had gone perhaps three miles when she resolutely turned and entered a side cañon whose mouth opened between two buttresses of dull red rock like swollen parted lips. The side cañon, crooked and winding, tolled us onward for a mile; whereupon she stopped short to gaze. "It should be here," she panted. "*Dios mío*, it should be here. I am certain. We came in between the two red cliffs; then there was about a mile. You see the landmark—that rock like a chimney. But *Dios mío*, if I should be mistaken!" And she eyed me wildly. "I would be lost forever."

"You shall be protected with my life, dearest," I said. "Nothing shall harm you, and I will answer in person for your name."

"But the mine," rapped the long American, somewhat impatient. "You say 'here.' Well, where? What's the sign to follow?"

"Opposite that chimney, Don Juan," she panted. "It is the Mine of the Little Door. We enter through a crack—a very narrow passage in the cañon wall; the mine is beyond; on the side of a little basin. We must find the door."

"Easier said than done," he muttered, doubtfully scanning the high broken cañon wall where piñons and cedars and shrubs had found lodgment. "But we'll try. Work fast." He spurred his horse across, with an eye to the rock chimney for guidance; dismounted and began to rummage about amidst the growth. I joined him. Of human visit preceding ours there was not a trace, so that we might only poke and

peer blindly, opposed by the stiff branches and twigs.

"*Acá!* Here! I've found it. Hooray!" 'Twas the joyous summons of the long American, himself unseen. "B' gosh, you bet yuh!" he added.

We followed to the sound of his scuffling; and just as we arrived at the spot he appeared right before us, issuing from a cleft in the rock wall almost concealed by cedars.

"There's sign of a trail through," he proclaimed. "And a little basin beyond. I went far enough to see that. Let's get the animals in. Stay here, *señorita*. We'll fetch yours."

"It's the very place—the Mine of the Little Door," she breathed, her hand to her heart. "Oh, my father! But it is yours—yours. Please hurry."

When we returned with the horse and the mules she had vanished. The passage was barely wide enough for single file by man and beast. The long American entered, leading his horse. I forced my sweetheart's mule after, and pursued, tugging at my own brute. The passage slanted in sharply, like a crack in the cliff; above, it narrowed so that it gave merest glimpse of the sky. Underfoot one might descry ancient trail indeed—a slight hollowing and smoothing, relic of sole and hoof evidently in days remote. Of Indian sign there was none, thank God; for that was now my terror: the Comanche or Apache. All the Mexicans in the province I feared not a whit, as long as I had her, and my rifle. But the Indian! However, we must trust to our wits and our boldness; and if the savages did come down before we were safe out, we would meet them as Americans, not as Spaniards. The words of the old don contained a goodly measure of truth.

We squeezed through, into the open of a little basin. She was here, the *señorita*, palpitant, surveying eagerly. "It's to the right," she called. "So said my father. Two hundred paces from the entrance."

The basin was a saucer completely walled, as far as one might see, by reddish rimrock strangely castlemented, from whose bases the fragments loosened by weather

had sifted down to the steep slopes of gravelly, cedar-and-piñon-dotted earth. Some grasses grew in the bottom, but the soil showed unfertile, for even the sage had dwarfed. With the sun streaming in, and not a breath of air sensible, the retreat was burning hot, and lifeless, even menacing in its absolute stillness.

The long American quickly broke the spell. He acted briskly, as usual. "To the right, two hundred paces, eh? Wait. Let's take a squint at this map." He squinted.

"The map does not show, Don Juan," she proffered. "But I have heard my father say. He knows."

"No more it doesn't. It shows the turn in, and the chimney, and a couple of crosses for passage and mine. So we'll have to search farther on our own hook. *Dios!* There should be some old workings, to catch the eye, I reckon."

We mounted and rode to the right, following along the side, while we scanned the slope. The trail had pinched out, in the sod; then we struck it again, lost it—and the long American, leading, paused, to estimate the distance from the passage. "It should be thereabouts—" But a cry from the *señorita* cut him short.

"The old trail is here; and something else. Oh, come!" She had ridden apart from us. We might see her amidst the brush a little up the slope, staring rigid. I pricked my tired mule and made for her, in alarm at her sudden appeal.

"What is it?"

"A skeleton—a man's bones," she whispered. "See? *Santisima!*" Bones were whitely visible in the bushes beside the faint trail. The long American vaulted off to examine.

"Clean picked many a year, these," he reported. "Mexicano, I judge." He handled a grinning skull to which still clung a vestige of black hair. "*Sí*. Comanche meat, too, I'll wager. Yes, for here's the arrow point, quitted of the ribs. *Stá bueno*. Let him guard the trail. Come ahead, you two. We're on right track, or I'm poor guesser." The slight furrow of the trail conducted truly, so that as we emerged upon a little shelf the long American ut-

tered a whoop of anticipation. "The old dump and the old diggin's, sure as shootin'! Now where's the tunnel?"

CHAPTER XI.

I FIND AN EMPTY PALLET.

THERE were signs of human toil, here. The slope had been built out into a level, upon which young trees were growing, nature planted; the soil was bare save for tufts of weeds and coarse grasses, and bore indications of having been upturned or redeposited. Intense silence reigned as we stared around; and I heard my sweetheart's rapid breathing.

"The tunnel should be yon," mused the long American, peering. "Damn, I believe I see traces, too." He was hot on the quest again, toward the slope, trudging and clambering while his horse stood with drooping head.

"You must rest, *querida mía*," I said to my sweetheart, "and I'll help him. You are tired."

"No matter. Only find the mine," she bade. But tired she was, by token of her heavy eyes and drawn face and the sag to her small form as she sat the docile mule. "First I'll lift you off."

"As you wish, Ricardo," she consented, and I bestowed her in the shade of a cedar. When I reached the long American he was standing sweat-drenched, surveying apparently the goal.

"Here she is," he puffed. "Leastways, here she was." The slope had fallen in, leaving a deep depression above whose surface just the ends of several rough-hewn, weather-eaten timbers were protruding. Cedars had taken footing on even this.

"A landslide?" I hazarded.

"Landslide or cavein, she's closed tighter than a bladder trap. The devil! Shaft or tunnel—which? It 'll need twenty peónes to clear that opening in six months' time."

The *señorita* called: "Have you found it?"

"Yes, or sign of it."

She came. She had cast aside the thick, smothering sarape, and now bravely ap-

peared before us in the loose cotton trousers and blouselike shirt of the common class, her little feet encased in cumbersome brogans. "Where?"

"Here, *señorita*."

"*Madre de Dios!* There is no opening? It is useless to you?"

I felt my *compañero's* swift glance. Again we were in accord.

"Just a natural filling up, *señorita*. Pick and shovel will soon do the work."

"But you have no pick and shovel. The burros! We must get the burros."

"If not those, then other ones, *señorita*," he assured. "And tools will be an easy matter—yes, and the men, too. But first we'll scout about a trifle yet. We can accomplish little more, to-day, anyhow."

"You're satisfied? You can open the mine?" she pressed anxiously, from me to him and back.

"By all means," we responded together. "Why not?"

She relaxed, more content. "Then thanks to God. It is yours. It is very rich, my father says. You will have millions—who knows? If you had been disappointed I should have died."

"But for you we never should have found it," I encouraged.

"Main thing to do now is to make camp," the long American directed. "That sun's going to set early, in here. We got to find meat and water. If—"

"We will be safe, you think?" she asked.

He laughed easily. "Safer than if we were in Santa Fé, *señorita*. We can fort this place against a hundred from below; and as for Injuns—they'll think considerable before coming in where that skeleton's laying and ghosts walk. There's been blood spilled and lives snuffed out, hereabouts, from time to time, and it's bad medicine, I'll bet."

She shuddered and crossed herself. "True, *señor*. You are not afraid to stay?"

He tapped his rifle. "Not with this, as answer to the flesh and blood; and not with you, to charm the evil spirits into good ones. Hey, *compañero*?"

"Surely," said I. "We're well fixed."

"But water," she faltered. "There should be a spring—I told you a spring—"

"Listen! I hear it." And he strode away. Partly down the farther side of the earthen bench a little trickle oozed forth as if from a spring choked above, and flowed on to the bottom land. We might trace its course there by a thread of green, and a copse of aspens already yellowed by the frosts.

"Meat should be yonder, too, by evening," he asserted. "Deer should come in. I'll go down presently."

"How'll they come in?" I questioned.

He shot me a look. "The same way, we'll be going out. I want only to find their trail. We can haul our animals up, somehow. And then to the Arkansas, quick as we can make it. The other trail in is closed; you can depend on that. The mine's worthless to us, as we are; we've no tools and no pack critters—thanks to that wild gal of yours—so we got to get out pronto. I wouldn't be corralled in here, with her as a bait, for all the gold under ground. We'll get out, and come back better primed, if we come at all."

"I know," I answered, troubled. "But she goes with me, or I go with her; mind that."

"She'll go with us," he declared. "What else can she do? You've won her, petticoat and all, what's of more value than the shirt, damn it. She'll go; never fear. You're her man."

We scooped out a drinking place. I made shift to bear back to her some water in my hat, and thus save her steps. With the riding and the searching about, it now was well after noon. The sun bid fair to sink early in a cloud-bank to the west, above the basin rim; therefore time enjoined upon us to make camp ready and procure food.

I picketed my mule and hers, after watering them; the long American sallied down with horse and gun, to find our dinner and supper in one; and I was left to guard my sweetheart and attend to camp matters. She had accepted seat upon the blankets, under shield of her peón's cloak, whence she watched me, occasionally replying to my forced chatter, her gaze ever following my movements. And there was something in the softening of her eyes, and

a dewy wistfulness fleetingly unveiled in them, and an abstracted note in her subdued voice, that stirred me strangely, beyond the sheer thrill of heart's desire.

"You will be rich, *muy amigo*? You are happy?" she asked.

"We all will be rich, dear one. I never was so happy in my life, before."

"*Stá bueno*," she murmured, in her own language. "I shall be happy, too."

Soon she was silent, and I saw that she had dropped asleep, her cheek pillowed upon her arm. Treading cautiously I drew the cloak farther over her, and with the sweet consciousness that her bosom rose and fell under my protection, I proceeded about my work. Toward sunset the long American's rifle spoke, below. In the twilight he came toiling up, a butchered deer across his saddle. I met him on the outskirts. "I've found the trail. It's at t'other side, yonder, and a heap straight up, in parts; but where the deer can go, we'll follow with horse and mule."

"To-morrow morning?"

"Certainly. There's nothing to stay for, and that rifle shot's like to waken hell in one direction or another. For two men and a woman this whole place is a trap, and I've got a queer sort of feeling that says to pull out whilst we can. The mine's not worth staking hair and hide on, *you sabe*?"

"Yes, I know perfectly well," I answered. "'Twould take six months' digging to open it—"

"And if chock full we'd still be looking for color at the end of a year," he finished.

"But she doesn't know," I prompted. "So not a word of this to her."

"Never a peep. We may come back, we may not. Once you get her out of the country you'll be content with your own lodge fire for a spell. *Bueno!* We can't all have luck on the trail. Let's to meat before dark. You'd best wake your *señorita*."

However, she was awake, sitting up, gazing about affrighted until she saw us approach. At the long American's jovial hail: "How are you? Doing well?" she slightly smiled.

"*Me va bien, señor*." Now she smiled, with subtle appeal, at me. "I was asleep

and dreaming. I did not know you had gone. What is it—a deer?"

We three made a rude but merry meal, this evening, upon the saltless strips of venison roasted in the fire—a meal, nevertheless, not much more rude than those of the Santa Fé trail when buffalo were on hand. Yet it struck me that my sweetheart's sprightliness was in a measure forced, as if to conceal her true feelings—feelings, no doubt, of weariness, anxiety and discomfort; not, I fervently prayed, of regret. On the whole, I was at a nervous pitch, myself, desirous, mainly, that the night pass, that the morning come in peace, and that we ride safely out, she innocent of heart pain, for the freedom of that land beyond the Arkansas.

We arranged rough bed for her, but our best. From her covers she extended her hand to me. "*Buenas noches, Ricardo mio.*"

"And to you, *muy buenas noches* and pleasant dreams," I wished.

"No guard to-night, by thunder," grunted the long American. "The Comanches attack only by daylight—that's the one good thing about 'em. As for those people from below, they'll have no stomach to try us out in the dark, either. Thanks be, we get our rest, unless the ghosts walk. *Buenas noches* to you."

We all speedily fell asleep. I awakened not until daybreak, and confusedly watched the eastern sky redden until suddenly I bethought myself. The events of the past day rushed upon me; the events of the coming day quickly followed in their train. With startled intuition of something wrong, I raised upon an elbow, and sought for the couch of the *señorita*. The pallet was disarranged and empty.

CHAPTER XII.

I LOSE AND FIND AGAIN.

UP I leaped, to gaze about and listen. I did not sight her, there was no moving figure anywhere, no sound except the twitter of birds and the uneasy gurgling of the long American—on the point of awakening, himself.

She might be at the spring; she might be at the mine; might be strolling to relieve her limbs: and I had made a step or two when I noticed a bit of paper fastened to her blanket. With thumping heart I read what was written thereon in a scrawl as if by a charred twig applied in a dim light:

RICARDO MIO:

I must go to my father. I am not afraid. Do not follow. The mine is yours, but I cannot be. R.

I ran to the tethered animals. Her mule was absent, although the saddles all lay as deposited. How had she been enabled to steal away in that fashion? How long had she been gone? What cursed sluggard I had been! But I would follow her even into Santa Fé itself.

"*Que hay?*" The long American was sitting up, blinking.

"She is gone! The *señorita*! Good-by."

"What! Where?" And he stretched his lean neck.

"Back down. She left a note." I gathered my blanket and seized saddle and bridle. "I'm off. Good-by."

"What do you mean?" He staggered to his feet.

"To find her. I'll not lose her."

"You'll blunder into a jackal pack," he warned. "Let her go. It'll be the marriage or the convent for her, and the jail for you. You'll have to let her go."

I replied not, but saddled fast, tied my blanket on, was aboard—and before I had reached the gateway he came thudding after, God bless him.

"Wait!" he called. "It's a wild-geese chase, but I'm with you. Two may be better than one. Keep cool, and give me the trail."

Once outside, he dashed recklessly by. In the little cañon we soon struck the tracks of her mule; but by the dew in the hoof-prints and upon the broken brush, she had passed well before us. Fears set me half crazy: fear of Indians, of beasts, of rovers human and inhuman, of accident, of despair—what not? She was such a delicate thing to breast such a trail in the

danger hours. And that many of my fears might be foolish made no difference. Least of all was the fear that merely I had lost her, for her safety was paramount; but that fear also tore at my heart.

The cañon still slumbered, except for the birds. It lay misty and chill and lonely. The long American picked rapid way, following the tracks with the deftness of a hound, his eyes darting from side to side the while.

We arrived at the red-lipped mouth of the side cañon, and turned out. She had pursued the homeward route; now how far before she had ridden into them—those others; or circumventing them had gained the open and the road to Santa Fé?

"She's still a going," called back the long American. "But watch sharp. We can do our possible; not more; and there may be devilry ahead."

I chafed at his caution as he slackened to listen and scout around the turns. So we proceeded. The sun topped the cañon and began to pour his beams in, lighting the rocks and trees and shrubs. We were getting down. The prevailing quietude and peace of the trail stabbed me all the more with alarm; my every fiber strained for action—but naught was granted us other than this almost hopeless quest into waiting and perhaps useless peril.

The long American abruptly reined, and held up his arm. "Sh! There's something. Some critter. Careful! It's her mule!"

Hope flared, but fear wrestled it and tortured it. What now? Where was she—my girl? I sighted the mule, as we rode forward step by step, peering and listening. It was grazing at the length of the picket rope entangled in brush. It stared at our approach, but directed to no whereabouts of her. We passed, searching right and left. We passed farther, we were unmolested, the silence was watchful and ominous, as if ambush waited upon us. My taut nerves sensed tragedy at every yard. By the sign of crushed brush and disturbed rocks the mule had back-tracked some little distance. The long American, in the advance, uttered hasty cry, sprang ahead, and was off his horse.

"Here she is!" And when I galloped in, she was there, struggling to sit up, in her gray cloak, for the instant poignantly dazed, then softened again at presence of me.

"You? Oh, I told you not to!"

"That didn't matter. Nothing matters, except you," I babbled. I was down beside her, her hand in mine. "Are you hurt? Can you stand? Oh, *querido mío*, we've found you. Why did you do this? You didn't have to. Where you go, I go."

She sat up and withdrew her hand. "No. I'm going on. I must, to my father. Please let me go."

"But are you hurt?" the long American demanded.

"I've been asleep, is all. I don't remember—I think I was tired—I think I slipped off, I was so tired. But I'm rested. Where is my mule? Oh, I see. If you will bring it, then good-by, *amigos*. And *muchas gracias*. You shall go back to the mine."

"Never!" I declared. "Not I, without you. He may go. If—"

"Hark!" bade the long American, craning with head poised intent. "I hear hoofs. They're coming; don't know who, but if it's that Antonio posse we'll not be his meat without a little salt. Hey?"

The roll of stones and the clatter of hoofs sounded from down the cañon. Our animals pricked ears. The eyes of the *señorita* widened; she shrank, and cast frightened glance around, seeking refuge.

"Not here! Not now—with you!" she prayed.

The long American bestirred us with masterful orders. "They'll have to wait a bit. Tie our critters. Now you, Miss Señorita Rosa, do us the favor of sitting quiet to rear and keeping your pretty mouth closed. You, *compañero*, behind that handy chunk o' shelf rock on this side, and I cãched in the brush, opposite. I'd best cãche this other plunder, also." And he stuffed the rolled shirt-map at random into the thickness of a sprawled cedar.

We worked none too fast, for scarcely had we ensconced ourselves when the thud and rattle of hoofs, the creak of saddle-leather, and the jingle of spur and bridle

broke nearer upon us—and then around the turn immediately before us there swept the cavalcade. At our sharp hail and the glimpse of the rifle muzzles they recoiled. Clatter and jingle ceased instantly. It was a surprise.

They numbered a dozen. I saw Don Antonio, in the fore, with Captain Stanley of the caravan; I saw old Pedro—damn him!—and a priest. The rest were caballeros unknown to me, but the make-up did not augur so ill as might have been expected. Captain Stanley severed the silence, riding forward a few paces, Don Antonio at his horse's haunch.

"*Qué tiene?* What are you pointing gun at me for? Are you crazy, to set out girl stealing and risk having all New Mexico blood-hounding on your trail?"

"We'll take care of our trail, cap," the long American coolly responded. "And I ask you to keep your distance—so. As for girl stealing, that remains to be proven. If you have anything more to say, be easy with it; then go back to your *compañeros*. For if you make me touch trigger, we'll both be sorry."

"Dios! There she is, herself!" squalled Antonio, with accusing finger. "As I said, a girl without shame! *Santa María*, who would have believed it!"

I could have killed him. My blood surged so that the rifle-sight dimmed.

"Well, the fact is, that you've got the girl, whether you stole her or not," quoth Captain Stanley. "And inasmuch as you young sprig has defied bell, book and candle besides the family, you'll have to give her up. The matter can't possibly go further. She's already betrothed to a caballero of her own kind, and you've nigh ruined her, as it is. I'll stand by you, one American to another, against the civil authorities, but I'm hanged if I want a ruction with the church here."

"I wish none of her—I wish no chattel of her sort," screamed Antonio. "Look at her!"

"And you'll get none of her, you dog!" I retorted. I heard a little rustle behind me, and felt the presence of my sweetheart. There she was, crouched close to me, so that her breath came and went with mine,

and her slender hand held a fold of my sleeve.

The priest advanced upon his mule.

"You have sinned, daughter," he called. "Come home before you are lost forever. The church will take you in, and your punishment shall be in the hands of the Holy Mother. Leave those heretics, and come."

"*Señorita! Oh, mi señorita!*" It was old Pedro, pushing forward, his wrinkled face streaming. "The old man is dead. *Su señor padre* is gazing, with the saints. Come back. I am still your servant. Come back to the home and old José."

"It makes no difference," Antonio proclaimed. "I cannot marry her, of course. I am a caballero of good name. But she is of the family, and as her *segundo* I will be her guardian. She shall not lack. Or I might marry her later, when she has been home long enough for this scandal to quiet."

My sweetheart arose, small and straight, careless of her peon's cloak. "You! Thank God, I escaped marriage with you. But I have committed no sin, father. I came of my own free will, and these *señores* did not know it was I. My sin would have been in marrying Don Antonio, whom I do not love. Now that I have no home to go to, you may take me—I will confess what I have to confess, but I can confess to no sin. And these *señores* must not be seized. They are innocent of wrong doing. I swear it. Now I am ready."

I sprang before her. "She shall not enter *Santa Fé* in disgrace!" I shouted. "She shall enter it only as my wife, for all Mexico can't take her from me. Will you marry us, father?"

Her hand slipped into mine; and there we stood, braving them. Don Antonio laughed loudly, and uttered a scurvy aside for all to hear. I fairly itched to drag him down—but the priest spoke quietly.

"It is as I feared, then."

"You need have no fears, father. We are innocent—I not more than she."

"I cannot marry you. That is forbidden by the church. It would be a solution, although you are an American and a foreigner." I thought that his heavy face unbent. "You love her, my son?"

"She to me is as a saint," I answered. "There never has been another woman, except my mother."

"And you love him, my daughter?"

Her hand tightened in mine. She replied clearly, with words that I had longed to hear. "I love him, father. Indeed I love him, and I am not ashamed. He shall be my *señor*, or none."

"You are of the church, daughter." The priest reproved firmly, setting aside all sentiment.

"But I, too, father, am of the faith," I said.

She whirled to face me. She was glorified. "You? You, *muy querido mío*? *Corazon de mi corazon* (heart of my heart). You have said it. And you never said it before."

"I made no plea on that score," I defended, in English. "Why should I? I would have won you, not as a Catholic, but as a man. But even were I a Protestant I would have become a Catholic to marry you."

"And I believe that I should have become a heretic to marry you," she answered softly, in Spanish, blushing.

"Be still," the priest ordered. "Be still, before you sin farther. You say you are of the true faith, *Señor Americano*? Is that possible? Beware lest you lie."

"It is possible, father," I assured. "There are many Catholics in the United States—yes, in my own city; yes, there were some in the very caravan."

"True word," nodded Captain Stanley. "You may believe him."

"You shall confess me later, father," I pleaded. "But you have a duty to perform here, first."

"Confessed you both shall be," declared the priest. "Now a few questions." And he asked of me my parish, my parenthood, my business. He hesitated, whilst we stood side by side, fronting them, friend or foe, and I grasped my rifle. There was that, at least.

"He lies," accused Don Antonio. "I shall marry her myself. All Americans are heretics."

"That surely is a lie, Antonio," she rebuked. "For you well know that I was

in a convent of our Holy Mother in St. Louis."

"A French convent, not an American," he sneered.

"I will join you two here in solemn engagement," the priest uttered. The marriage must be performed in the parish, under the auspices of the church there; and first you must cleanse yourselves by confession and penance. And if I find that you have lied, young *señor*, think not that you have tricked me to good purpose. There are those in New Mexico who will not overlook an insult to their religion and their laws." He eyed me as if to read my very soul. I answered him frankly. "I have not lied, *padre*."

"Then I will unite you, for the time being, here and now."

"*Por Dios*, father!" laughed Don Antonio ruefully. "That being the case, I will stand by her. I am her *segundo*, and I shall represent the family."

"And by the eternal, as he is my *compañero*, and I am both father and brother to him, I shall back him to the end of the venture," delivered the long American—the first speech to be wrung from him out of his gawking amazement at the turn in events. "Yes, and kiss the bride, too, if he'll remember thirty of my years, and she'll be pleased to forget them."

A sudden change had come over the company. Now, following the lead of Antonio, they were jovial, uproarious, and complacent. Even Pedro bared his gums and mouthed his pleasure, essaying to divulge that he'd had a fondness for me after all.

So here we were joined together, in ceremony brief, until the rites should be solemnized by due form. Amidst the congratulations, heartfelt or not, Captain Stanley sought me out. "You will live in Santa Fé?"

"That I do not know."

"There is a second matter," he said. "The matter of a mine. You have the papers?"

"The mine! *Dios*, the mine!" scoffed Don Antonio, overhearing. "Keep it, *señor*. Dirt; nothing but dirt, all at your service. The foolishness of an old man."

"What of it, captain?" I challenged.

"'Twas another mad feat. Don't you know of the decree?"

"What decree?"

"That no foreigner shall mine within the province of New Mexico? Now shall you turn Mexican?"

"Never, captain. I am an American."

He addressed my wife. "And you, *señora*?"

"I," she replied proudly, "am what my *señor* is."

The long American had approached again; he extended to us the shirt map. "Your wedding present, I reckon," he grinned.

She took it—gazed inquiringly upon me—and with sudden strength tore it across, and tore it smaller, for it was brittle with age. She flung the fragments to the breeze. "Let us forget," she faltered, and put her arm within mine. "It is Comanche country. Oh, my heart! We have enough, in each other, and if you should be tempted to seek more—"

"There is no more to seek," I said. "We have found."

"Well," the long American grumbled, scratching his turkey neck, "if I could get anybody to look at me like you two look at each other, I'd end my trail at a lodge fire, myself."

(The end.)

THE HEART'S DESIRE

GIVE me, O Fate, some one to love,
And one to love me in return;
To win this blessing saints above
For old-time earthly haunts might yearn. •

Oh, for the touch of gentle hands,
The spell of accents sweet and low!
One cannot crush the heart's demands;
Nature will not be cheated so!

Man's bosom ever seeks its mate;
No soul that lives can live alone;
Unloved, the king in kingliest state
But banquets on a crust and bone.

The dream I dream may be in vain,
Mine idol be with earth alloyed,
But shield me from this deadening pain
Of seeing faith and trust destroyed!

The disenchantments learned from truth
Fall blotting life's unsullied page;
Better sweet follies born of youth
Than bitter wisdom bought of age!

Reft of its plumage sinks the dove,
Reft of its dewdrops droops the fern;
Give me, O Fate, some one to love,
And one to love me in return!

Walter Malone.

Black and White

by J.U. Giesy and Junius B. Smith

Author of "Stars of Evil," "The Black Butterfly," "Solomon's Decision," etc.

(A SEMI DUAL STORY)

CHAPTER XVII.

THE INSPECTOR IS PUZZLED.

MEANWHILE Jim and I had done our best to comply with Semi's instructions and explain what had led up to the somewhat dramatic ending of Garston's search. It wasn't exactly easy. I knew there was an explosion due on the inspector's part as we left the tower, and I didn't have long to wait.

He whirled upon us almost before we had passed the door.

"All I got to say," he began in a heavy grumble, "is that I reckon you two imagine you're an all-fired cute pair of guys. I don't wonder any longer that you acted darned queer when I put this to you. It sure must have struck you as mighty funny when I come up an' asked you to help me find Mike's girl—"

Bryce bit off the end of a black cigar and spat it out, and grinned despite the fact that Johnson's face was a dusky red.

"Well," he said, "it did. I told you the truth when I said so. It—"

"Oh, I know you're a truthful cuss," Johnson cut him off with a snort of disgust. "But—say—what sort of a deal has Dual been puttin' up?"

I really couldn't blame him. The ease with which we had been able to render the assistance he had asked for had hit him

a rather stiff jolt. And as a matter of fact I had my doubts as to how he was going to accept the only real explanation I had to offer for what had taken place. From my own knowledge of him, I hardly thought he was going to take kindly to sorcery, necromancy, black magic, devil worship, demonology, as good and sufficient reasons for Lotis Popoff's presence in the tower. And as I hesitated for a proper means of beginning my story, he went on:

"What's he mean by ravin' about a bunch of ginneys tryin' to get control of people's minds? Does he mean they're tryin' to hypnotize 'em or what? I know he pulled some of the same line of talk durin' th' Cahill matter, but nothing so strong as this."

I caught Jim's eye and it was dancing.

"Well," he said as Johnson came to a pause again, "you see, he didn't know then that th' Old Nick had bought up a job lot of souls an' turned their former owners loose to get in their work."

"Eh?" Johnson glared. "Talk sense."

"'Struth," said Jim. "One of 'em's name's Otho Khan, an' I'll say he's a pretty good shake of a devil himself."

Johnson frowned and glanced back at the tower. "Th' guy he was talking about in there—this Mongolian? I gathered he was one of the bunch Popoff belonged to, but what's this stuff about his sendin' Mike's

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kid to bump Dual off? If he did, what's he holdin' her for instead of turnin' her over?"

"Because," I seized the opening, "he says the girl didn't know what she was doing."

"What!" Johnson's jaw sagged and then he drew it up with a click. "Well I *am* damned. That's what he meant by all that talk to Garston, huh? I suppose he thinks Khan just told her to come an' kill him, an' she done it like an innocent child. Well, he sure does beat th' devil."

"Correct," Jim agreed, looking anywhere but at the inspector. "Leastwise up-to-date he has."

"Hell! Gimme a cigar an' less of your lip," Johnson rejoined with almost offensive brusqueness. "You've got your wind way up, ain't you?"

"There's a lot more to it," I suggested as Bryce handed over one of his dead-looking bits of tobacco. "Now if you two will shut up." And then I told him as best I could exactly what had occurred.

He heard me out with a face that lost its expression of self-conscious pique, and took on one of nothing so much as sheer, stark amaze. And when I was done, he removed his cigar and stared at the end of it in silence until at last he asked a question:

"Do you believe it—can you look me in th' eye and say so?"

"Well," I said, "there's something. I've told you what happened and the girl has certainly changed inside the last few days."

For a moment I thought he was going to resort to plain profanity and then he shook his head in an almost pitying fashion.

"You're dead right she is," he remarked. "She's clever. She's sized your friend up for what he is, an' she's playin' up for a getaway for a million dollars. Some smooth kid."

"I don't think so," I objected as he paused, although just for a moment I confess his suggestion gave me a somewhat sinking feeling.

"I know you don't," he retorted. "An' it's lucky I brought Garston up here. Th' way it looks to me, she's got the whole *branch* of you hypnotized—no tellin' what you can do with a baby stare an' a pretty

face. Some lay. Instead of chasin' up Pitkin, you entertain his teammate an' wait till I drag in a man who knows where this Mongolian hangs out and who he is."

"I did sort of have a feelin' that I'd like to see George," Jim said with surprising meekness.

Johnson gave him a grin. "Of course you did if you haven't forgot everything you knew when you was on th' force."

Bryce nodded. "But Dual said not to, an' that there was a new element comin' into th' thing—an element he called *love*, an' then darned if you didn't show up, luggin' this here now old sweetheart of hers."

"Huh?" For a moment Johnson eyed him with something like suspicion. "Oh, another one of his predictions?" he said. He had seen some similar examples of Semi's methods of astrological predication in the past.

Jim sighed. "Yes, I reckon it was. Th' point though is that he knew enough about this whole works to make it—and to tell me to lay off George. You see, we didn't have nothin' on him but her story, an' it was sort of doubtful if we could make that look like proof."

Inspector Johnson frowned again. Manifestly he appreciated the force of Jim's words. "Ain't you got no proof at all?" he inquired.

"Nothin' but what we've seen with our own eyes, an' heard with our own ears, an' if we was to tell it, whoever heard it would be thinkin' we'd been hittin' th' little old stem," he said. "We ain't got a thing on Khan, not a thing—or on Pitkin either, except by say so. Now maybe you can begin to get it through *your* bean why we've been sittin' tight an' watchin' th' wheels go round."

"Pitkin rented a room here, didn't he?" Johnson questioned.

"He did. There ain't anything incriminating in a man's rentin' an office, is there? —or in his lady assistant taking it into her head to kill a man either. Prove he helped her to do it without any more evidence than her claim that he done it if you can."

Johnson whistled. "Uncorroborated evidence of a self-confessed criminal, eh?" he

grumbled. "Well—lookin' at it that way, you was sort of up against it, wasn't you, Bryce?"

"We was up against it lookin' at it any way you like," said Jim. "An' I can't see that Garston helps much, even if he does know Khan and where he lives. All Khan has to do, if he is asked anything about it, is to say this girl is balmy, an' I guess almost any one who heard her story would be ready to say she was."

Johnson studied his cigar for a time again before he made any further comment. "Clever," he announced at last. "Whoever this bunch are, they're a clever gang of crooks. But—"

He broke off as Dual appeared at the door of the tower in his white-and-purple robes. We turned to him and he signed us to approach. We lost no time in complying, and he led the way back into the inner room and waited until we had taken seats.

"My friend Glace has acquainted you with what has taken place during the last few days, Mr. Johnson?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." Johnson jerked his head in affirmation. He seemed inclined to say more, but apparently thought better of it, and finally let his answer stand, turning his eyes from Semi to where Lotis was now seated between Garston and Connie on the couch.

"So that you understand Miss Popoff's presence on the roof?"

Johnson nodded again. "I ain't sayin' I understand it," he returned, "but I got the general gist of what Glace said."

"In that case," said Dual, "we will not concern ourselves so much with what is past as with what we may expect to happen next."

"You expect somethin' more to happen?" Johnson took up his words quickly, with a visible stiffening of his figure to attention.

"To-morrow night, yes." Dual inclined his head.

"That's a straight prediction, is it?" Johnson narrowed his eyes. "Based on your usual methods of sayin' somethin's goin' to happen?"

"On an astrological computation of the influences leading up to the present mo-

ment and beyond it, inspector, yes. Thus far Otho Khan, who would appear to be the head, at least locally, of the organization we are opposing, has been frustrated in his efforts, in so far as both myself and Miss Popoff are concerned. Myself he wishes removed because he is aware that I am beginning to have some conception of the extent and object of his operations. It was quite consistently, therefore, within the scope of his planning, to employ Miss Popoff as his agent, in view of the fact that if she were apprehended he had taken steps which he felt sure would result in her physical death, and were she successful, one of his objects would have been attained. Miss Popoff was the sole heir of her father, and he left her considerable funds, as well as other property, which was to revert to the society of which both Khan and Michael Popoff were members at her death."

Johnson's eyes widened.

"Holy smoke!" he remarked. "At that rate, I reckon it wouldn't have hurt his feelin's if she'd died."

"We may feel assured that it would not. In fact, in my estimation, one of his objects was to accomplish that end in a way which could in no concrete manner be brought against himself."

All at once Johnson grinned. "He was tryin' to kill two birds with one stone?"

"Something of the sort."

"But what do you mean by his takin' steps to be sure she died if you caught her tryin' to get you?" the inspector asked. "Admittin' he had a double motive, how could he do that?"

Dual answered him concisely. "By planting in her mind, before he sent her against me, a command that if she were apprehended, she would sink into a condition of suspended animation or apparent death. If she did so and could not be aroused from it, it was his intention that she should so continue until she died indeed."

I caught a meaning glance from Bryce and recalled what we had said concerning a post hypnotic suggestion. It seemed we had been somewhere close to the truth after all.

"An' you spoiled his play?" Johnson said in a tone of some excitement. "Glace said

some-thing' about your wakin' her up after she'd nearly died."

Dual smiled slightly. "Miss Lotis's presence must answer that, inspector. She is alive and has a full realization of the truth."

Johnson put up a hand and ran a finger about inside the collar of his tunic. He frankly stared at Lotis. Presently he put down his hand and once more nodded.

"An' you been keepin' her, knowin' it would sort of upset this Khan's play if you was to keep his agent here on th' roof," he suggested.

"Because of that, and for her own safety," Dual replied. "He can scarcely regard such a condition of affairs as satisfactory."

Johnson frowned. "I can see that. Well then about this deal for to-morrow night—ain't her being here a sort of danger to you?"

Dual answered slowly. "In the sense you mean, yes. Aside from that, however, it is an assurance that his next attempt will be directed here and of a nature such as will if successful destroy us both." He spoke calmly enough, but I saw his gray eyes narrow slightly.

And Johnson seemed to comprehend his purpose. "So you're sittin' tight an' waitin'. Is that it?" he said.

"That is it, Mr. Johnson," Dual agreed.

The inspector shifted himself heavily in his seat. "Well, that's all right from your side of th' matter," he remarked. "But—after what's happened, it looks to me as though this guy's got a nerve to try any-thing else."

Dual smiled rather grimly. "Thus far the struggle between us has been somewhat in the nature of a drawn battle, inspector. Admitting that Otho Khan knows that I am warned, and that he has been baffled in his attempt upon my life, and admitting still further that he knows very well that I realize exactly what part he has played in the matter, he knows equally well that in so far as my ability to make any definite move against him is concerned, he is safe. Hence, he will try again to attain his double object—the death of Miss Popoff and myself and the appropriation of her father's

estate. But if we shall succeed in laying hands upon his agent, we shall, in my opinion, eliminate one more of his servants and in so much purge the social fabric of a dangerous member at least."

"That all?" Johnson seemed disappointed.

"In addition," Dual replied, "through preserving Miss Lotis's life, we will prevent his diverting her property to his own evil ends."

"How much was it—Popoff's estate?" Johnson asked.

"Three hundred thousand in money and a large tract of real estate," Lotis answered. "But he sha'n't have it. He sha'n't. It isn't the money—I was ready to give it to him when I thought it was going to be used for the benefit of others. But he sha'n't use it to carry on his awful work of stealing souls and wrecking minds and making criminals out of men as he did with my father, and tried to do with me, after he had made me his slave. He sha'n't have it, Mr. Johnson."

Johnson nodded. He seemed a trifle surprised by her outburst and her reference to Popoff and his work. But all he said was: "He's pretty slick, miss, I guess. It was some stunt tryin' to use you an' get you put out of th' way at th' same time. Seems like he's a slippery sort of snake."

"He is the agent of Ertik," Lotis declared.

"Who? Is that another one of 'em?" Johnson questioned, his attention once more arrested.

"She means th' Devil or leastwise one of his lieutenants," Bryce explained.

"Oh," Johnson said and turned again to Dual. "Then, sir, it's your notion to wait till to-morrow an' try to grab anybody that tries to get anywhere near th' roof?"

"Exactly, inspector," Semi assented.

"Any way I can help?"

"Merely by keeping in touch to-morrow. So far as I am able to assign an hour, Otho Khan should make his next and, as I believe, his final move in the present instance, between ten and twelve. As in the instance of Miss Popoff's coming, being forewarned, I shall hope to be in a position to meet his deputy when he arrives."

And suddenly Inspector Johnson chuckled. "I don't understand you, Mr. Dual," he said. "I don't understand you at all, an' I guess I never understood you any less than I do in this, but I got a notion that 'meet' is right—though how you're going to do it I don't know an' I won't ask. But I'll keep in touch all right."

"Thank you, inspector." Once more Semi smiled. "Frankly I should not tell you were you to ask, for in the present instance we are dealing with one who possesses the power of reading thought—as perhaps you are aware I do myself—as I perceive even while I am speaking to you now, the query forming behind your lips as to why if such is the case he does not read mine and I do not read his; and answer it—that to those to whom this ability is at command, is also the power to baffle the groping mental fingers of one who tries to read—and that save when a conscious interchange of thought is desired, it is the untrained mind that is most easily read—the mind that is not on its guard and consequently places no restraint upon the diffusion of its mental waves."

Johnson grinned in an almost sheepish fashion. "All right, I guess I can't think of what I don't know," he said.

"In which instance," Dual returned, "you are in the same position, as all save only my companion Henri and myself. Him I have long since trained to restrain both his tongue and his thoughts."

"Well—all right. Comin', Garston?" Johnson rose.

"I'll see you later at the station if my continued presence for an hour or so is agreeable to Mr. Dual," Garston decided with a glance from the girl beside him to Semi, who inclined his head.

"This room is at your disposal, Mr. Garston, after the next few moments," he replied.

I caught his eye and glanced at Johnson.

He nodded and I got up. Jim followed suit.

We left the room with Johnson and made our way out of the tower.

The inspector's face was a study. "Was that on the level—about nobody but him an' th' Frenchman knowin' what steps he's

takin' toward meetin' this guy he's expectin' to-morrow night?" he inquired as we descended the stairs.

"We don't know any more than you do, which ain't sayin' a great deal," said Bryce.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GROPING FIGURES.

I DON'T really know whether I've succeeded as fully as I could wish in portraying the general atmosphere of this whole affair from first to last, but I have tried and things were as I have described them at that particular stage in the struggle Dual waged with his unseen and largely unknown antagonist to preserve his own safety and bring Lotis Popoff back to a normal mental life.

Bryce very nearly summed it up in his remark to Johnson. Of the actual intent lurking in Dual's brain—of the means he meant to employ against his adversary's next move—we knew literally no more than the inspector. And as a matter of fact we knew very little more than he did at the end of his visit to the roof, about any other phase of the case.

But right here I want to set down, point out, how Dual actually employed our very ignorance in the furtherance of his purpose, and his real object in keeping us as little informed as he did. The war is over now, but we still remember the days of camouflage. One of the methods employed was the smoke screen as applied to ships—and Semi Dual's purpose was akin to the same thing.

He created a thought screen between the mind of Otho Khan and his own. And he built it out of the almost unconscious, the almost unavoidable and involuntary mental questions which Bryce and Connie and Lotis, myself and later Johnson asked ourselves during the course of the affair. They were vague, speculative, unsatisfactory questions. They asked, but they did not evolve an answer. And back of them, Dual's real plan lay hid very much like the ship at sea, since our thoughts were directed toward Otho Khan in every case.

He knew that we were expecting some-

thing, of course. He could scarcely have known Dual as the moving mind behind the actions that opposed his own plans and not have realized that after what had happened, he was fully alive to his danger—that with Lotis in his power, he had probably learned the truth or a part of it at least.

None the less, he knew also, as Semi had pointed out, that he could not be reached in any legal fashion, and giving us credit for an understanding of conditions, he must have known equally that we might well be expecting a further move. The proposition as far as he was concerned, therefore, narrowed down to his ability to take Dual by surprise in a fashion against which he was not on guard.

Toward furthering some such action on his part, Dual had carefully refrained from any clear or definite discussion of what he actually expected, as I have already described, for once refusing to go deeply into a discussion of astrological indications as shown by his study of charted signs. Heaven knows that in the case of all save Lotis herself, it was easy enough to keep us more or less in the dark, and make of our consideration of the matter no more than a swirling vortex of contradictory thought, which, if Otho Khan sensed it at all, must have created in his mind the impression that we were baffled and perplexed.

With Lotis it was somewhat different, of course. Her experience with the man had made her sensitive to this thought waves, her own mind to him more or less of an open book. The latter condition, however, was one which by simply a process of conscious endeavor she was learning to combat. And this point is one I wish to bring out in view of what she deliberately set herself the task of accomplishing that night.

The girl was exalted. Her mental ratio of vibration was raised to about as high a potential as it had probably ever held. There had come back to her inside the past few days a sense of soul possession, of spiritual integrity, and on the afternoon just passed, the process of her rehabilitation as a normal, living, breathing, thinking woman, with all of the young and normal woman's impulses, had climaxed in the full and untrammelled reentrance into her life of love.

After the hour she spent with Garston once Johnson and Jim and I had left, she climbed to the tower room where Connie had gone back to a book she had been reading, with a face made more radiant than Connie had ever seen it—her dark eyes soft, yet fired by some subtle, inward light.

She came across to Connie and bent down and kissed her. "Is he not fine—is he not a man any woman might be proud of—this man whom Otho Khan conspired to make me put out of my life?" she said in a tone made vibrant by emotion.

"Yes, indeed. He is a real man, Lotis," Connie replied. "He is the sort of man America needs to keep her what she has always been; just, broad-minded, ready to fight for what is right, rather than from any selfish motive of greed. I admired Mr. Garston very much."

Lotis nodded. She laughed a little nervously and held out her hand. "See!" she called Connie's attention to it. "He brought back my ring." And there was a solitaire on her third finger, looped by a golden band. Her mood changed and her eyes flashed and her red lips sneered. "I think I should like to show it to Otho Khan."

"Lotis!" Connie exclaimed in something like an intuitive alarm.

And Lotis met her glance fully. "Do you think I would fear him any longer, with this upon my hand?"

"I think it's best not to even mention his name," Connie suggested.

Lotis sat down. For a time she said nothing, and then: "Oh, my dear, you know so little, and because you do, I suppose you're a great deal happier than I am."

"Aren't you happy, dear?" Connie questioned.

"Happy?" the girl repeated. "Ah, yes, I am happy—so happy that I should like to flaunt my very happiness in the face of Otho Khan."

Connie sprang up in the grip of a sudden alarm. "Lotis—for God's sake be careful!" she cautioned.

Lotis nodded. "Aye, careful," she said. "I owe it to you, dear friend, and to him—"

your friend—the strange, strong man—who works in his garden—with his companion Henri, again. Aye, I shall be careful. I promise.” And all at once she smiled and, though Connie sought to draw her out, she became more and more silent, sitting in her chair and gazing at her ring.

Nor until later that night did my wife feel fully certain that she had actually formed some plan. Then as they were on the verge of retiring for the night, Lotis took up the subject of Otho Khan again:

“Connie, dear”—they had reached the given name stage of their friendship—“Mr. Dual told Inspector Johnson this afternoon that my presence was an actual danger to him, and that whatever Otho intends doing to-morrow night would be directed against us here, and I’ve been thinking more or less ever since. Mr. Dual knows that a danger threatens and when, but I’m not sure if he knows exactly what sort of a danger it is and I’ve been wondering if it would help him if I could learn.”

“Learn what Otho intends doing?” Connie questioned. “But—Lotis, how can you?”

“In a way Otho himself taught me, maybe,” Lotis told her slowly. “He taught me a great many things—and one of them is how to send the mind, the intelligent part of it, out seeking information—feeling the minds of others with its fingers—stealing the secrets out of their brains. Many a time he has sent my mind out to gain information, by his command, and afterward he taught me to do the same thing by gazing at some object until I went to sleep, all the time thinking of what I wished to learn.”

Connie crossed to her and took her by the shoulders. “Lotis,” she said, “what are you thinking of doing?”

And Lotis smiled as she answered. “I am going to find out what Otho means to do to-morrow night. I am going to do it by putting myself to sleep, and I—I want you to sit beside me until I awaken—and be very, very quiet.” She lifted her hand. “See—I shall fasten my mind on what I wish to know, while I gaze at my ring.”

“But—but isn’t there danger?” Connie faltered, shaken by the girl’s suggestion.

“From Otho?” Lotis’s lips curled. “Connie—in my present humor, I could defy Erlik himself if I faced him—I, the slave, who am once more master of my soul.”

“Danger that Otho may read your mind while you read his?” Connie made a counter suggestion.

Lotis shook her head. “I shall read not Otho’s mind,” she said, “but that, as I think, of Otho’s tool. My friend, I have reason to think there is one beside Otho who knows, and knows not how to guard his knowledge beyond my power to gain it—yet, one to whom he was compelled to tell it. Come sit beside me till I return again, and don’t be frightened. I shall simply seem like one sleeping.”

Connie sat down. Frankly her thoughts were swirling and she scarcely knew what to do. If she were to take the girl’s words at their seeming value, she was intent merely on gaining knowledge which might prove of value on the morrow, but—as Lotis herself had admitted, she had been Otho Khan’s agent, and since she had been here she had certainly gained a considerable knowledge of Dual. Attracted by her very strongly, my wife was not inclined to be taken off her guard and treated like a fool.

“Lotis! Stop!” she commanded.

But Lotis merely shook her head. Already she was staring at the ring on her third finger with a concentrated gaze. And with a suddenness that startled Connie, she sighed deeply and relaxed against her, so that she caught and supported her body until she could lay her prone upon the cot.

“Lotis,” she called, “Lotis.”

The girl was breathing with a slow and regular respiration that lifted and dropped her bust, but save for that, she neither answered nor moved.

Connie stood beside her perplexed. She turned her eyes about the room, but found no answer to the problem by which she was faced. Responsibility weighed upon her. She debated whether to summons Semi and tell him what had happened or to wait until the girl reawakened as she had said she would. She found herself on the horns of a dilemma.

On the one hand were she to summon

Semi and he were to awaken the girl, she, if innocent, would feel herself distrusted—on the other, were she actually guilty of intentional double dealing, she might, through her peculiar powers, manage to convey to her former master information inimical to Dual's safety—or so it seemed to her then, startled, somewhat distraught, forgetting as she did for the moment that Semi had said the coming danger was to Lotis no less than himself. One may forgive her for that, I think, in view of all that had happened and the unexpectedness with which she found herself in that upper room of the tower with the sleeping girl.

In the end she brought her gaze back to Lotis herself, fastened it on her face, and found it calm, composed, its lids drooping, its lips laid gently together—a thing seemingly with no hint of evil purpose in it, and herself baffled again in thought.

Looking at the sleeper, it seemed incredible that she had brought herself to such a condition by merely gazing at Garston's engagement-ring—even though the act was akin to that of the crystal gazers who produce a state of autohypnosis through a concentration on their globes of glass. And even so, looking at the girl as she lay there, it seemed impossible to believe that the intelligent part of her mentality was being projected beyond her, to seek for, find and grasp, as she had intimated a few moments before, the thought forms generated in another's brain.

It was eerie. It was weird. Connie sat slowly down on the edge of the cot beside the sleeper and all at once she shivered, although the night was warm. Inside the last few days she had been brought into contact with forces, and those who knew how to control them, in a way of which she had never dreamed—her mind had been filled with uncanny speculation—her very spirit had been stirred.

All at once it seemed to her that the room in which she sat was filled with currents and cross currents of energy, force, real, yet intangible—cosmic things as vast as the flood and pulse of life itself. She sat watching the face of the sleeper. Her own thoughts ran to Dual, to me, to Otho Khan, to Garston, leaping from one to

another and back again without any definite sequence. Lotis, beside her, breathed with scarcely a whisper of respiration. She groped for her pulse and found it slow, but steady. And then came a step on the stairs.

It was Dual. She looked up and saw him, standing at the head of the steps, his glance running past her to the body of the girl.

He advanced. "Your thoughts are troubled. They reached me," he said. "What has occurred?"

She told him, and he smiled with an odd light in his gray eyes as he bent above the sleeper.

"Lotis," he called her gently.

She answered him most surprisingly. "Not yet," she muttered as one speaks from a disturbed slumber. "Please—not yet."

"As you will, dear child," Dual assented, straightened, drew up a chair and took a seat. "Do not disturb yourself any further, Mrs. Glace," he said. "It is a sadly troubled soul we have had to do with, but a brave one. Exactly what led up to her making this attempt?"

"She said her presence here was a danger to you and that she was not sure if you really knew what that terrible man meant to attempt," Connie gasped.

"Ah, yes," said Semi Dual softly. "Ah, yes," and turned his glance again to Lotis's face.

"Do you—do you think she may succeed?" Connie questioned.

"I think so, in all probability, yes," Dual replied. "She is exalted—there is apt to be a quality practically irresistible in her demand for knowledge. In fact, I think she is succeeding, since when she spoke to me just now, she used the words 'not yet.'"

"But is it possible?" Connie says she thinks her expression must have been that of one aghast.

"It is possible," Semi said. "It is an established fact. It is a trick employed even by hypnotists, who take a subject and render him submissive to their will and project his conscious ability of perception to any given place to gain information and report it, either during his continued hypnosis or after he awakes. Those who have

acquired the ability may vary the process, as Lotis herself has done, by putting themselves asleep."

"And—they really gain positive knowledge?" Connie asked, considerably steadied by his matter of fact acceptance of the whole occurrence.

"Positive knowledge, which can be confirmed in the experimental instances, or is confirmed by future events in others, Mrs. Glace."

"She—she put herself to sleep by looking at that ring," Connie told him.

Dual smiled. "The symbol of love—the symbol of the strongest force in all the universe—the motive impulse of creation—the force behind force, Mrs. Glace. You were wrong not to wholly trust her."

"But—" Connie began.

"I comprehend your position, your attitude and motives," Semi checked her.

Lotis stirred. As abruptly as she had fallen asleep, she opened her eyes and sat up. Her glance turned to that of Dual. She stretched out her hands and threw back her head. "I—I heard you," she said, "but I was not ready."

"But now—" he prompted.

"I have read the plan of Otho Khan."

"But not in Otho Khan's brain."

"Nay—in the brain of the one who will attempt it—one of his agents—one I have known—one I suspected this afternoon when you said he would attempt to destroy us both and at once. I thrust the fingers of my mind into his brain and found it filled with things of loathing—found it gloating because he has been promised a certain share of the money which was left me by my father if he will attempt this thing. I groped in his brain and I found the thing I was seeking, because, fool that he is, he knows no better than to sit thinking of how it shall be done."

"Do you mean you really know whom he is sending here to-morrow night, Lotis—do you mean you have really learned that?" Connie cried as the girl broke off and her red lips curled.

"Aye," Lotis nodded. "I have known him a long time." And then she glanced at Semi. "Shall I tell her?"

"Have I told her?" he returned.

"Then—"

Connie rose. "You don't want me to think about it," she said and walked to the other end of the room.

Behind her she heard Lotis resume her speaking in a lowered tone, which suddenly rose to a pitch of something like disappointment.

"You knew—you knew it already!"

Dual's voice came gently. "I but read my chartered signs—thou hast read his mind."

"I—I sought to be of service," Lotis faltered.

"Thou hast sustained my own beliefs, and proved the trust I have placed in thee. And the way is prepared before the feet of whosoever Otho Khan may send."

"You mean—" The girl's query came sharply and broke off.

"One less easy than that by which you came." Dual rose, bent over her and pressed his lips to her forehead. "Peace, child—fear not but it will lead in his case, to a different end."

CHAPTER XIX.

WAITING.

"**T**O-NIGHT'S th' night," Bryce said, coming into my office about ten the next morning and flopping down.

I turned my eyes on him and he sighed.

"How's things on th' roof?"

"Peaceful," I said.

I had left Connie and Lotis strolling about the garden, the little fountain tinkling into its basin, doves cooing about the eaves of the tower. I had even had a peaceful night, sleeping soundly and learning of what had occurred while I slumbered, only when Connie herself told me over our breakfast in Dual's inner chamber. And then Lotis had come down and greeted me, smiling—and the talk had become general and I had gone out with Connie and her to the garden, while I indulged in a morning smoke. And out there were Dual's flowers and softly muttering birds.

It had all been very peaceful, very commonplace in seeming. We might have been no more than three week-end guests in

the private grounds of our host. Lotis had bent to press a rose against her finely chiseled nostrils, and looking up from its crimson petals she had told me that Garston was coming up that morning, very much as any young girl might have said half shyly that her lover was about to seek her in her place.

Yes, it had been peaceful, as I thought at the time—hard to realize that it was anything else—that the golden light of morning which bathed the garden and gilded the white mass of the tower, might be shot through by the groping tentacles of deadly thought, directed against my friend who dwelt there, and this girl, young, fresh as the morning itself in her seeming, looking into my eyes across that crimson rose.

And Jim nodded as I answered. "Yep, I suppose it was. But it was th' peace before a storm, my son. Dual gets my angora, he does. To-night's th' night, as I was remarkin', an' what's he doin'? You said just now he was sittin' around in th' tower in what Johnson calls his bath-robe, an' lettin' Lotis have Garston up to see her, an' an' most likely sit around an' bill an' coo like a couple of his own doves. That's him, an' here am I who ain't got no personal interest in th' matter at all feelin' as comfortable as a man settin' on an open keg of TNT, smokin' a cigarette."

"TNT wouldn't hurt you under those conditions," I said as he paused to get his breath. "It requires an electric spark, I believe."

Jim grinned in rueful fashion. "Well, what if it does?" he grumbled. "It works out th' same. To-night's th' night Otto th' Devil is goin' to turn on th' juice."

I nodded. I felt a whole lot like my partner myself. I told him briefly what Lotis had done while we were sleeping. "Anyway, Connie says Dual told her the path was prepared for the feet of Otho's agent."

Jim's eyes narrowed. "He did, eh? What'd he mean by that?"

"I don't know," I confessed.

He chewed on his black cigar for a time. "Neither do I," he said at last. "Neither do any of us. Last night none of us knew but Dual an' Henri—now it's th' French-

man, an' this girl—this little she-devil with her black hair an' eyes, an' her white face—an' of course himself. Why does he trust her any more than us?"

"Mainly," I suggested, "because in regard to certain things, she knows as much as he does—is able not only to perform certain actions, but also to put up a defense against the other side."

"Meanin' that they can't read her thoughts unless she lets 'em."

"That's the way I see it."

"Well—any one what can read my thoughts at th' present is welcome to help himself," said Bryce. "Nothin' from nothin' leaves nothin' an' I wouldn't feel th' loss."

Despite the seriousness of the entire situation and the fact that my own brain was filled with a swarm of unanswered questions, I laughed. Too, as a result of my conversation with Connie, I was regardless of my continued ignorance of Semi's exact intentions, feeling a good deal more confidence in regard to whatever was going to happen somewhere between ten and twelve o'clock the succeeding night.

Dual knew his man. So much was clear. And he was not one, no matter how he might appear on the surface, to let such a crisis find him unprepared. Consequently, the conviction had been borne in upon me that he had meant exactly what he had said to Lotis—that he was absolutely ready, and that at the proper time his dispositions for meeting Otho Khan's latest move would be revealed. I said as much to Jim.

"I know," he grumbled when I was through, "but even if he gets by to-night, what's he accomplished beyond puttin' one of this guy's agents out of business?"

"He's saved the girl's life and made her over into a normal woman," I suggested.

Jim nodded. "Well, yes—that, an'—it's big, Glace—ain't it—it's big. It's big an' he's big. He's big enough to take her when she come to kill him, an' straighten her out—big enough to realize that she wasn't herself. That—that sort of makes you feel funny, don't it? It's like this double personality stuff you hear about, where there's two men in one chap an' one of 'em's good an' one is bad, an' he's a straight guy or

a crook accordin' to which one gets th' upper hand—"

"Why not," I said. "Dual himself says all force is one, and at that rate it would simply be the two halves of a man's nature—the two extremes—with the preponderance of thought, action, impulse, thrown toward one or the other. And at the same time, the two halves are nothing more after all than different manifestations of the same thing."

"Meanin' that good and bad are sort of degrees an' that bad is good to worse an' good is bad to better?" Bryce returned.

"That's one way of putting it," I accepted. "But to quote Semi again, various things have their parallels on different planes. There is a duality of good and bad in the individual manifesting as a double nature. Don't you suppose that the same thing runs through the entire Cosmic Scheme?"

"I don't know a thing about it," Jim got up and stood staring into my face, "though I reckon I know what you mean, an' I wouldn't wonder if you was right. But I do know that Dual's done a big thing in helpin' that girl to get back to th' good side of her nature, an' bringin' her an' Garston together like he has. An' I reckon it's been just because we was so full of th' party what sent her up there to croak him in th' first place, that we haven't begun till now to realize just how big that was."

"Speak for yourself," I told him. "I've had a pretty fair notion of just how big a thing it was to save a young girl's mind and soul, all along. If you'd seen her as I did when she came there that night, and were to compare her with the girl I left up there in Semi's garden this morning, you'd realize even more than you're beginning to that it was mighty well worth th' effort we all made to bring such a thing about."

Jim nodded. "I reckon—maybe we've sort of lost proportion. He's got her back to normal an' saved her life, an' kept her out of a jail or an asylum, an' he's brought her an' Garston back together, or leastways he, an' Johnson have an' he's probably plannin' to get her property out of this other ginney's clutches so he can't use it in cuttin' up his tricks, an' if every-

thing goes off all right, he'll put one of his men out of business. Lookin' at it that way, it's as much as we've done in any other case. I guess it's just that we don't get our hands on the man behind it that makes th' whole works seem like it does. Anyway, unless Lotis was stallin' last night, it would look like she an' Dual knew what was comin' off."

"You didn't hear Johnson say he thought she was stalling, after he'd seen her himself," I suggested.

"No, I didn't," said Bryce. "Old Mike left three hundred thousand besides some real estate. That's another thing we've been overlooking. That much is enough to constitute a motive for th' ordinary murder without anything else. It looks like Otto was playin' for a pretty good sized stake. Him an' Pitkin an' McDowd, an' old Popoff. Their Society for Spiritistic Research was a swell mob all right. It's plain enough to see why Otto went after th' girl as soon as old Mike died. One way or another, they meant to get rid of her an' split th' stuff between themselves—that is Otto an' Pitkin did. I honestly believe McDowd was sweet on her himself, but it's a safe bet th' other two was out for th' cash. They got part of it accordin' to her own admission an' they was after th' rest—but—they decided to use her to get Dual out of the way first if they could. Slick work, Glace."

"Decidedly, if it had worked," I agreed.

"Eh?" said Jim, and chuckled. "Well, yes." He turned away to a window and stood looking down at the street below him and after a bit he announced his intention of going out for lunch.

Nothing more happened till well into the afternoon. The routine work of our office went along in routine fashion. Jim came back and I went out for my own mid-day meal and returned.

And after that, time dragged. I use the word advisedly because as hour followed hour, Bryce grew more and more irascible, if I was to judge by the sounds of sundry grunts and movements emanating from his room from time to time, and I was in little better case. The whole af-

fair was getting on our nerves, and frankly, great as was my faith in Dual, I confess that I couldn't forget that Connie was my wife and that she was up there in the spot Semi himself had admitted was menaced by a danger hatched in the brain of a man one might well call a modern sorcerer at least—even though what was sorcery once was now no more than the intelligent employment of higher types of still material force.

She was there, and despite the fact that I actually realized Dual's intention in keeping his plans as nearly secret as he could, the mere fact of her presence in the tower filled me with a personal unrest. I tried to bury myself in the details of the office, but I couldn't. I tried to think connectedly about the whole weird condition which had held my attention to the practical exclusion of all else during the last few days, with no better result.

My thoughts ran in a circle and came back always to the starting point—which was simply that as Bryce had said in the morning, to-night was the night, and that now toward the end of the afternoon before it, I was still as densely ignorant of exactly what was going to happen, or what steps had been taken to meet it, as I had been from the first.

Jim came mooning in again on my futile speculations, like a homeless cat. He threw himself into a chair with a grunt, pulled out his watch and glanced at its dial.

"Quarter to five," he complained. "My Gawd."

I gave him a glance, and nearly jumped out of my seat from a sheer reaction of nerves.

Once more, as on that other day when the whole thing started, my little private telephone had buzzed.

I was up and crossing to it in an instant. I took the receiver down with a hand that wasn't quite steady.

"Glance," I said and realized that my voice was husky.

"Patience," Dual's calm tones cautioned. "Gordon—direct Mr. Bryce to find Inspector Johnson and ask him to bring Mr. Garston to your office at a

quarter to ten to-night. Mr. Bryce will meet them and they will remain there waiting further directions. At nine-thirty, but not before, you will come to the tower yourself. Leave your office at the usual hour and do not return. Instruct Mr. Bryce that he shall remain away also until the time for his meeting with the others. Do you comprehend?"

"Yes—perfectly," I answered.

"Then see that it is accomplished," he returned and I heard him hang up.

I followed suit and turned to Bryce, who was leaning forward, all attention.

"What does he say?" he burst out.

I told him and he mouthed the gist of my answer: "Find Johnson—meet him an' Garston here at a quarter to ten. Was that all? Wasn't there anything else?"

"Wait for orders," I added.

"I'm tired of waitin' without knowin' what I'm waitin' for," he grumbled. "Migosh!—"

"Orders are orders," I suggested.

He nodded. "Oh, sure. An' they also serve who only stand an' wait, as th' coon said on th' dining car, but—Migosh! I wonder what his notion is in planting us down here instead of on th' roof."

"Isn't it quite possible," I said, "that he is planting you where you wouldn't be quite so obviously apt to be planted—where, in other words, anybody looking for a possible interference with his own particular objects, would be more apt to pass you up?"

"Eh?" Bryce paused and regarded me in silence, and presently he grinned. "Son," he declared in a tone of satisfaction, "darned if I don't believe that after several days' rest, you're beginnin' to talk sense. Darned if you haven't got it. We're a stopper—that's what we are—an' it's up to us to close th' mouth of th' sack."

I nodded. It really began to look to me as though in so much at least we were at last in touch with Semi's plan of defense.

"Except for the fact that your metaphor is a little shaky," I agreed, "I've an idea you're right."

"An' with that little phone he can get us easy," he went on with complete conviction. "Easy—as fallin' off a log. All

right, I'll go down an' get Johnson and Garston, an' when you go up there you can tell him that when he wants to call out th' reserves, all he's got to do is buzz. Migosh! S'long. I'm off." He turned and hurried out. That was Bryce. Delay, uncertainty, drove him into garrulity without exception, but action was his life.

I watched him vanish and then I got up. It was five o'clock and I decided that I would go out. I went down and walked about the street in a somewhat aimless fashion. In the end, I took a car and rode out to my house. I hadn't seen it for days and I found its atmosphere musty, the interior already showing the effects of neglect. I opened the windows and aired it out. And then I locked it up again and left. I rode back down-town and had my dinner in a café, and in such fashion I found I had killed time for about three hours, and it was nearly eight o'clock.

I dropped into a movie to use up the interval between eight and nine or a few minutes after. But the film served to hold my attention not at all save that the flicker of its rapidly changing scenes seemed in a way to be somewhat akin to the episodes of the last few days.

Rather than the picture I saw them running out their course again in retrospect—the interview between me and Semi, the actual appearance of Lotis in the tower, the weird scene between her and Dual, Connie's coming to his assistance—the afternoon when he had battled for the life of the girl against Otho Khan's deadly suggestion, aimed against her—and all the rest. And I thought of Jim's and my conversation about Dual's course of action throughout the entire unbelievable happening from the first.

We had said he had done a wonderful thing in bringing Lotis back from the state Otho Khan had wrought upon her, to something like her normal self—but as I sat there in the darkened auditorium, I recalled something else. He had done that, but he was doing even more. Not only had he saved the girl from her individual danger, but he was fighting against something so very much greater than the mere thought of it served to slow the heart's beating.

He was fighting against Otho Khan and the coterie of his associates, men like him—men who had deliberately prostituted their soul forces and powers to a campaign of what amounted to soul sabotage in the world—men who were attacking the very mentality of their race, perverting the mental balance of their fellows—men who were aiming at the establishment of a sort of social chaos, appalling in its horrifying possibilities—those of the Silent Towers, as both Dual and Lotis, one of their victims, had called them—who were working like some terrible human blight beneath the surface of the social body—a dread disease of the body politic—unseen—unrecognized, but none the less deadly.

I glanced at my watch. It was a quarter past nine.

I rose and left the theater and walked rapidly along the street. It was nine-twenty-five when I entered the Urania entrance and made my way back to a cage.

Five minutes later, I was passing through the garden to reach Dual's own particular apartment—that inner room of the tower, where he sat with Lotis and my wife.

CHAPTER XX.

FLAME AND SMOKE.

THEY sat there, Semi in his customary garments, Lotis in her white robe, like some brooding young priestess, Connie beside her on the couch, in the subdued light of the golden apple in Venus' hand, very much as Dual and I had done on the night when we waited for Lotis herself and I had watched the slow creep of the old clock's hands around its dial.

They were creeping on again now toward another hour—and before Semi Dual on the desk was a tiny electric lamp, such as one sees in the instrument board of an automobile, set into a socket at the bottom of a little black-walled box.

It blazed there—and that was all. There was nothing else. But he sat there before it like one on watch. And as I marked it, there came upon me the conviction that here was the thing through which he was prepared to grapple once more with a force

that was threatening the moral and social overturning of the world.

As I came in, he glanced up and let a slow smile light his face and his deep gray eyes.

"You are punctual to the minute, my friend," he said. "And you came by the usual path?"

His intonation made the last of his remark a question.

"Why—yes," I answered.

"And as you did so, the tiny lamp winked and steadied again to a continued blazing. Yet are you the last who shall pass so," he went on. "And now the path is closed."

Understanding came upon me in a flash as instant, as vivid, as the winking of the lamp. I recalled the afternoon when I had come upon him and Henri working with their little sticks and wires. It had been more, as I now saw, than a mending of the flowers and shrubs the feet of a girl had crushed as she stole up in the night to slay him.

That then was what he had meant the night before when he said that the way before the feet of Otho Khan's agent was prepared. The approaches to the tower were wired, and the tiny lamp was the means by which any tampering with the wires would be disclosed. I looked into his eyes and nodded and drew a deep breath of relief. Whoever the man we were fighting was sending against us, would hardly come upon us by surprise.

Yet some way the time seemed hardly one for conversation. I went across toward Connie and her companion.

As I approached they drew apart, and I sat down between them. My wife slipped her hand into mine, without other greeting—and without any feeling of surprise, I felt other soft little fingers groping inside my palm and took them wholly into my clasp. I sat there holding a hand each of my wife and Lotis—and in a way it seemed natural enough—as though thereby we were linked together as we waited for what might come.

No one spoke. There was scarcely a sound in the room. Dual sat motionless in his chair. The little lamp blazed out of

its black-lined box before him. Only the old clock ticked softly in the corner, and the breathing of the two women on either side of me whispered in my ears.

And then Dual's voice came in softly modulated accents. "Go to the telephone, my friend. Inform your partner that he is to bring his companions to the head of the garden stairs when next they hear the instrument buzz. Say to him not to answer then, but to accept its sound as his summons, and come up quickly."

I rose and went to the little box. Bryce answered my signal at once. I gave him the message and made him repeat it to me, hung up and went back to the couch.

We sat on silent again—after that, simply waiting, until suddenly I sensed a change in the form of the girl beside me, a quick, sharp, stiffening of her slender frame. She drew herself up, till it seemed she grew actually rigid, and glancing at her, I found her dark eyes slightly narrowed, and staring straight before her.

Abruptly she began speaking:

"Fire and flame—My mind has felt his brain again with its fingers and his brain is filled with fire and flame. He is waiting for them to come against us. And there is smoke—do you not smell it?"

Involuntarily I sniffed. The suggestion of her words was so acutely vivid that I drew in the air through my nostrils and found it to my excited fancy freighted with a faintly smoky tang.

I glanced at Dual. He had altered his position. I saw his nostrils also expand.

"Do you not smell it?" Lotis repeated. She rose. "I looked into his brain and it was full of fire. It eddied and swirled in his evil mind like prisoned flames in a room. It was a room full of fire and smoke." She broke off, and her eyes widened swiftly in comprehension. Her body swelled in a sudden inhalation.

"That devil—that devil!" she exclaimed. I sprang up also. At last I found my tongue. "Good God!" I gasped. For now there was no longer any doubt that the smoke tang was growing stronger with every minute, "do you mean they've set fire to the building?"

I flung out my question and stood wait-

ing for an answer. I glanced at Connie and she rose and stood there beside me. The whole terrible meaning of our situation burst upon me. If the building were afire beneath us, we were trapped, doomed, unless—unless we were to seize on what few precious moments of safety might yet lie between us and the time when any possible means of escape were to be cut off by the flames.

"Semi," I began when he did not answer.

"Peace," he said, "this is the beginning, not the end."

"But—" I mouthed and broke off at a pressure from Connie's fingers, gripping down upon my arm. I turned and ran to the end of the room. Smoke—smoke! I could smell it beyond any possible question. I flung up the window and looked out and I saw it. I saw it, curling above the parapet of the building beyond the garden—lifting clouds of it, that swirled and drifted. It swung toward me even as I stood there. A wisp of it crept ghostlike past me into the room. A clanging as of beating bells grew up about me. It came up from the *canyon* of the street.

"Close the window," Dual's voice again directed.

I drew down the sash and turned.

He rose and extinguished the light in the golden apple in Venus' hand. Only the tiny lamp in the black-lined box burned on.

I made my way back to Connie. She was pale and silent. She, too, must have heard the beating of the distant gongs. The Urania was afire. Below us men were fighting with the flames. My brain itself on fire with anxiety for her, I asked myself if this thing were a coincidence merely or indeed the carrying out of Otho Khan's fiendish plans.

As if in answer to the query, Lotis' lips moved in a muttered speaking. She was standing midway between the desk and the couch, her hands clasped before her, with interlocking fingers, her dark brows contracted.

"That devil," she said. "My friends they are coming—I feel them. There is murder in their brains—"

The little light winked in its black box and went out, plunging the room into utter gloom.

"The telephone. Summon the others," Semi spoke in the darkness.

I stumbled toward the box on the wall and sounded the signal in a sort of desperation, again and again.

Lotis' voice went on. "They are coming. I—I don't understand it. He tricked me. Besides his mind there are others—Their thoughts run before them. They are in the garden—"

"Peace," Dual said again.

A rapping fell on the door of the outer room.

"Inside there. Turn out. The building's on fire," a man's voice called with a gruffly authoritative ring.

"Careful," Lotis cautioned in a sibilant whisper. "It's a trick. I am looking into their minds."

"Aye, daughter," Dual said calmly, and lifted his voice in response to the summons: "Who calls? What is wrong?"

"The building's on fire. We're firemen," came back the answer. "Get out while you can."

"One moment," Semi called, and switched on every light in the inner and outer rooms.

"They are not firemen," Lotis whispered. "Their task is murder. Their thoughts are beating against my brain. Be careful."

"Aye, Lotis," Dual replied and stepped into the outer room.

I followed.

Lotis herself pressed forward just behind me.

In that moment I felt a full conception of Otho Khan's diabolically plausible scheme. These men of his were to call us out in the guise of firemen sent to warn us—trick us out of the tower—and cut us down. They had doubtless crept into the building under cover of the excitement attendant on the conflagration and made their way to the roof without any hindrance. It was a plan worthy of the devil himself, I found myself thinking.

And then Dual had swung the outer door open to show the forms of two men in uni-

form and helmet, each with a fire axe in his hand.

From the blades of those heavy weapons, the light of the room struck off in dully reflected gleams. It glistened on the helmets, pricked out little flecks of metallic color from the buttons of the uniforms. Surely the men were firemen in all seeming. No detail had been overlooked.

Dual addressed them. "What are you doing in my garden?"

I saw them glance one at the other, and then one of them answered: "Well, that's rich. Th' building's on fire an' we was sent up here to watch. You better get out while you can."

"Yes, yes," said Semi, "but there are gold and jewels in the tower. Surely there is time to get them together."

Once more I saw a quick glance pass between the men. "Maybe if you hurry," said he who had spoken before. "Kin we help you?"

Dual stepped back from the door, leaving it a dark rectangle before him. "If you will help me to preserve a very great treasure," he accepted the suggestion, "come in."

They stepped inside. I noted that they held the helms of their axes gripped in tightened fingers. I saw it with an odd sensation. Strange, weird, horrible pictures leaped into my brain, stories I had heard of Oriental means of killing—of the so-called hatchet men. All at once those bits of fire-fighting equipment became to my whirling imagination weapons of a far more deadly nature—bits of steel to be whirled aloft and sunk through flesh and bone deep into the quivering substance of fellow mortals' brains. I glanced at Lotis, as I drew aside, and Semi led the two apparent firemen into the inner room.

And she smiled back at me, oddly, strangely, with lips that curled even as they smiled, and long, dark, narrowed slits of eyes. "Come," she framed the word without sound, and led back into the other room, where Connie was still standing, and the uniformed men were watching Semi Dual while he ran through the combination of a small safe sunk into the wall.

I stole to her side—and Lotis went

straight on. She paused two or three steps behind the men and stood seemingly watching the play of Dual's fingers.

He completed his work with the dial of the safe and swung the door back on its hinges. Through it he plunged his hands. He drew them out, each holding a heavy bag such as is used in banks. He extended them to the men. It was a natural action and they took the sacks in an almost eager fashion, hefting them as it seemed to me, as they held them.

Dual reached into the safe again—and again he drew out a couple of bags similar to the others. His voice came in swift direction. "Lay aside your axes if you mean to help me."

For a moment it seemed to me they stood reluctant, and then they bent and laid their weapons on the floor. For I could not help thinking of those heavy blades as weapons.

Dual had turned to the safe again as before. And now he brought out a single box in his hands.

"See," he said and opened the lid, to reveal a monstrous ruby—a thing as big as the egg of a pigeon—a king's ransom—a great drop of crimson. He lifted it out of the box that held it and turned it in his hands, twisting it this way and that till its facets caught the light in a hundred rays of ruddy color—and the jewel became a marvelous crimson blaze. "It is worth many thousands of dollars," he went on softly—"many, many thousands of dollars. Look at it—is it not a wonderful treasure—a wonderful, wonderful treasure? Look at it, men—look at it closely—and—" abruptly his tones altered, became sharply commanding—"having looked at it, look at your feet—careful—don't move!"

Startled by his change of manner as it seemed, in that instant they obeyed. And then one of them screamed out hoarsely, and his fellow merely stood staring, staring, without apparent ability for motion at what seemed two monster, flat, and broad-headed snakes!

Oh, yes, I saw it, too. There where they had dropped their axes, I saw those deadly serpents lying, stirring slowly, with gently undulating coils that hinted of dulled, rep-

tilian minds waking slowly to a purpose of attack. I saw them—and I glanced at the face of Lotis Popoff. I recalled her trick with the bit of thread she had played on Connie. I saw in a flash Dual's entire purpose in fixing the full attention of the men before him on the flashing ruby he still held. He had turned their axes into serpents. I understood it. I felt Connie shiver beside me and knew she saw them also.

"Remember the little white snake with the red eyes," I whispered.

And once more Lotis Popoff smiled.

Dual stepped past them. He had turned their axes into serpents, and in case they had other weapons—he had filled their arms with gold. Now he bent and placed the blazing ruby on the floor.

"Do not move till I return again to release you," he said in level accents, straightened, turned his back upon them and passed into the other room.

Lotis followed swiftly.

"Come," I prompted Connie and led her with me.

Already Dual was lifting a hand toward a switch set close beside the outer door.

He turned it. The garden was flooded with light. It leaped out suddenly from lamps set in reflectors about the parapet, half-hidden among the vines. It tore the night to tatters, drove it back. It pricked out every detail of the garden—showed the figure of a man crouching down in a quick attempt at taking cover beside the little fountain—a man with what appeared to be an ordinary suit-case in his hands. And beyond him—at the head of the stairs—closing the only egress from the garden—it showed a group of men. There were four of them. Bryce, Garston, Johnson, of course, and—Henri.

I recognized his figure and I recognized also that he had been in the garden all the time, to meet and counsel the others when they came, and, of course, to close the wires after I myself had come up the stairs at the winking of the little lamp after my arrival had shown he had done. All that I saw as I saw him standing there with the others, and I saw, too, Lotis touch Semi's arm.

"Leave this to me," she requested, and

I became conscious that she now held in her fingers the deadly little dagger she had clutched that night when she came to the tower the first time.

Dual, too, must have seen it, for he cautioned her quickly: "No violence, daughter."

And her reply came instantly: "Think you I would stain my hands with the blood of yonder swine?"

Her words smacked of the idiom she had used that first night, too, and gave an index of her state of mind. She was tense, her whole being a-quiver with purpose as tight-strung as the string of a violin.

"I with thee, Lotis," said Semi.

She nodded and stepped through the door of the tower, advancing swiftly toward where the man by the fountain was now fumbling with the catch of his suit-case in what seemed a frantic haste.

"Hold!" she addressed him, flinging out her arm in that strange arresting gesture she employed—that odd backward, palm forward tilting of the hand, while with the other hand she pointed the dagger at him till the light winked from its blade and turned it into a glistening silver line. "Hold, Pitkin—"

I had followed with Dual and Connie and I caught my breath. Pitkin—the man who had plotted Semi's death with her—had rented the office—the office—my brain reeled and steadied—the office which no doubt now, through the man's perverted chemical cunning, was filled with smoke and flame—Pitkin—who, no doubt, after the first failure of their plans, had been sent back here to complete his task by Otho Khan.

And even as I realized the meaning of the man's presence there beside the fountain, I heard Lotis' continued speaking:

"For the men you sent to call us forth so that thou couldst slay us, stand now guarded in the tower by two serpents—chilled with fear and horror and afraid to move lest the weapons they carried turn and bite them. Hold, Pitkin—agent of Otho Khan, who makes his obeisance to Erlik instead of to the true God—the Holy One."

He raised his eyes to her without rising.

It was an evil face, 'gross, its small eyes blinking in a crafty fashion, disfigured by a dark brown mole beside the nose. And now it was distorted.

"You have done that—curse you, you she-devil—you sorceress!" he cried.

"Nay," Lotis shook her head slowly, "not I but another, Pitkin—the man you and I were to destroy, who baffled my endeavor, even as to-night he has baffled yours. He it is who has turned their axes into serpents and their blood into water in their veins, so that they are frozen with horror and a great fear of their skins." Abruptly she broke off laughing, and went on again in taunting fashion. "See, Pitkin, here is the dagger I brought with me to slay him—yet he and I are still alive and I hold it in my hands."

"Hold it still!" Pitkin started to his feet and flung a hand over his eyes. "Quit moving it around, you traitress—you damned jade—Stop it—You can't frighten me with your tricks—as you frightened those fools. Hold your cursed hand still, you fiend of a woman—whose fingers I felt last night feeling their way into my brain—"

"Thou felt it, didst thou, Pitkin," Lotis taunted. "You were a brave man to come here after I had read your mind. But you seem not so brave now when you face me, with your suit-case full of bombs—those things you meant to explode within the tower after we were slain. For, see—I am reading your brain again—the fingers of my mind are deep within it, and you are afraid, Pitkin—you are afraid—afraid because I wave the little dagger to and fro in my hand. Is it not bright, Pitkin—is it not like a little tongue of flame—a tongue of flame to burn you, Pitkin, as the souls of the guilty burn in the pit of the damned? Be careful, Pitkin, or it will scorch you—"

Out of her hand there shot a single, long-reaching jet of fire that stabbed with the swiftness of lightning itself, straight toward the man.

He leaped backward. His mouth fell open. Foul words, unspeakable terms for a woman to hear, burst from his filthy lips in a stream.

But leap as he would, the jet of fire followed, writhing about him like a flaming whip, licking against his clothing, his head and face.

Lotis Popoff laughed again.

Seeking escape from that darting menace, Pitkin dodged like a hunted creature, until stupefied and unnerved, he seemed suddenly to behold the fountain—to associate its liquid-filled basin with some fantastic conception of safety from the fiery danger—and flung himself headlong in.

Dual spoke. I heard him without a full realization of what he actually said.

There was a rush of feet from the stair head.

Johnson himself reached into the fountain and dragged Pitkin out, soaked, dripping, gasping and half-drowned.

Lotis turned with a sound between tears and laughter to Garston's waiting arms.

And Johnson's voice came rasping with excitement.

"Pitkin! This here ain't Pitkin. It's Georges Pitrininski—and he's wanted for murder ever since he did in a government D. J. man somethin' over two years ago. All right for you, George. You got some more of them up here, Mr. Dual? Henri here said there was."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DEBT PAID.

"THEY are waiting our return in the tower," Semi answered. "Come."

There was no least trace of tension in his voice. So far as one could judge from his intonation we might not have recently passed through a gripping crisis wherein the issues at stake had been life and death.

But as we turned in a body toward the tower, Pitkin began once more to curse: "You damned traitress, wait till the Master hears of this!—do you think you can double-cross *him*? — you — you—" he trailed off again into a flood of rage-engendered foul-mouthed expletives.

"Shut up!" Johnson shook him by one of his handcuffed arms. "You'll have to excuse him, Miss," he said to Lotis. "He

seems sort of excited—an' no wonder. Just how did you do it?"

"With this." She held up the little dagger. "He only thought he saw it, inspector."

Johnson nodded. "I know. I thought I saw it, too, but I've seen Dual do th' same thing before. It's the same as these here East Indian fakirs who make folks see a boy climb up a rope—I guess. Bryce, bring that suit-case. Miss Popoff seemed to think it had bombs in it from what she said to George, an' I reckon we better see if it does. If it does, we got him with th' goods, not that we need 'em, 'seem' he's already wanted." He was in high good humor, was Johnson, and he chuckled. "Come along, Pitriniski—you was wantin' to get into th' tower, an' here's where you get your wish."

With Johnson and his prisoner in the lead, Lotis and Garston behind them, and Connie, Jim and the suit-case and myself, we moved back up the tower path. Henri brought up the rear.

For the first time in minutes I remembered the danger of the fire beneath us and sniffed. There was only a faint smell of smoke any longer and the clouds of it were no longer rising above the parapet. Whatever sort of camouflage to cover the movements of his associates and himself Pitkin had started—for I no longer doubted he was behind it and that the whole thing had been a trick—that danger, too, was seemingly passed.

Bryce rumbled into comment beside me. "Migosh, it was all we could do to hold Garston steady when that fire alarm broke out. He was all for coming up here an' be darned to waitin' for any signal. He darned near had a fit till we got your buzz."

I saw Lotis press herself closer to Garston's side and I fancied she had heard.

"I know," I said. "That fire was worthy of the brain that planned it."

"Some stunt. I'll tell th' world it was," Jim grunted and shifted the suit-case to his other hand. I reckon George must have fixed up some sort of a contraption to make all that smoke in his office at th' right time. Him bein' a chemist, he could do it."

I nodded, looking at the slender back of

the girl walking before me with her lover—and recalling her mention of a room full of fire and flame—the picture of which she had seen in some one's brain. Pitkin's? I wondered. I thought it likely, because last night she had said she read the mind of one she had known for a long time, and the man in his mouthings there beside the fountain had referred to the same thing.

Johnson and his prisoner entered the door of the tower, and we pressed in behind them. Dual led the way across to the other room. I swept my eyes about it quickly to find it exactly as we had left it—or not quite. There was a minor change.

The two men stood as we had left them, their arms full of bags of money—their gaze fastened in a dreadful fascination on the two axes, the fiery spot of the ruby on the floor. But—the axes now were axes to my eyes. I fancied to those of the others with me, no matter how they still appeared to the two thugs, their more deadly seeming chained.

"One moment," said Dual, and advanced directly toward the men, stooped and took up the ruby, gathered out of their unresisting arms the bags of gold, carried them to the safe and replaced them, closed the door.

"Mr. Bryce, if you will search them for arms," he suggested.

Jim put down his suit-case and stepped forward, running his hands swiftly over the clothing of Pitkin's helpless lieutenants and removing a couple of wicked little automatic guns.

And all the time they stood there impassive, gazing fixedly at the axes on the floor.

Bryce glanced at Dual and drew a pair of handcuffs from his pocket. At Semi's nod, he snapped them fast, binding the men together, each by a single arm.

Then, and then only Semi stooped and took up the axes while the gunmen followed his every movement.

"And now in their true guise you see them," he intoned.

They sighed. Their breath came out of their lips in a rustling whisper. They started apart and stopped with a surpris-

ing suddenness due to their manacled hands.

"What th'—" one of them rasped out hoarsely, and caught sight of Pitkin, and stood staring at him, until he broke out again in a tone of startled accusation—"Say—what th' hell have you done? What have you steered us into? Where's them damned snakes—an' that there ruby an' th' coin?"

"Here are the serpents," said Semi Dual, and held the axes toward them.

They drew back. "Nix—nix—lay off of it," the more loquacious stammered. "By God, I see it. It was that damned ruby." He spoke again to Pitkin. "Did they get you th' same way, bo? What was it you thought you seen?" And then as Pitkin only glowered, he turned on Johnson. "Look here, officer, we ain't done nothing. This guy invited us in here. We didn't do nothing but agree to help him save his jewelry an' money—not a thing."

"An' what did you agree to do for this bird I'm holdin'?" Johnson snapped back sharply. "Come clear if you want to get off easy. What did he hire you to come up here for an' wear them uniforms?"

"S'posin' we tell you," the former speaker suggested.

"I'll listen," Johnson said gruffly. "I know what this guy I've got here come for—an' I reckon them guns of yours an' th' axes speak for themselves."

The gunmen consulted together, appeared to reach an agreement. "We was to call these folks out like as if we was firemen, an' croak 'em once they was outside," said he who had done all the talking. "That guy you got there showed up to-day an' hired us for th' job."

"It's a lie," said Pitkin, breaking his silence for the first time since he had entered the room. "They're both crooks. They can't prove it. They're trying to buy themselves off."

"It's Gawd's truth," the gunman protested, licking his lips. "We was to croak them an' carry their bodies back inside here. We was to chop 'em down as they come out of th' door. Only th' big fellow there—" he jerked his head at Semi—"didn't come outside—an' he stalled us

into thinkin' he had a lot of coin an' jewels. He said he wanted to save 'em an' asked us in to help him—an' we thought we might as well find out where it was. We was hired to get him, but we wasn't hired to fight th' devil."

Dual's voice came calmly. "I told them there were gold and jewels in the tower, inspector, and that I wished to save a great treasure, in all of which I spoke no more than the truth. For as they saw, there were gold and jewels—and the treasure I wished to save was past any price of human comprehension—my own and another's life."

"You fools—you fools!" Pitkin cried out shrilly. He lifted his manacled hands, a little line of froth came out on his mouth. "You fools—you poor fools, you let him trick you—but not as I, Georges Pitriniski, meant to trick you—for after you had slain them and carried them into the tower—I meant to hurl my bombs in after you and close the door—and send you all to the devil, your master together. I meant to silence you both. Did I not say I would pay you well for your assistance? Aye—and I meant to pay you. I meant to pay you with death!"

"An' now," said Johnson pulling down his shaking arms while the two thugs grew actually pale as they recognized the fate that would have befallen them if they had carried out their terrible task, "I reckon, George, that you're goin' to get that same payment a little later yourself."

Pitkin glared. He sneered. "I care not—it is nothing to me," he raved. "There is yet another and another behind me when I am gone to carry on the work. There is always the Master—him who will avenge my death, yes even a thousandfold on them who dare to harm me—him who will yet wipe out all law, and all who represent it, from the world. If I die, I die a martyr—as this traitress's"—he fixed his insanely fanatical eyes on Lotis—"father died a martyr. A martyr—a martyr!" His voice rose to an almost animal scream. "Up Chaos! Down with all Laws!"

"Well, George, I reckon you can die as anything you like," said Johnson, and glanced at the two shaken gunmen. "Nice

little side kick you seem to be trainin' with, boys. Good thing Mr. Dual here hypnotized you into thinkin' you was seein' snakes. If I can use your telephone, Mr. Dual, I reckon I'll be callin' a little help to get this bunch out."

Semi produced the instrument and Johnson got the station while Bryce and Garston and I mounted guard over Pitkin and the others. Fifteen minutes later, during which Pitkin continued to rave insanely despite any effort to subdue him, Henri ushered in a squad of stalwart roundsmen who led the trio out.

"Good night, sir," said Johnson to Dual as he was leaving. "Good night, ladies. See you in th' mornin' maybe Garston. Good night, Glace. S'-long, Bryce."

"S'-long, Johnson," Jim returned, and watched him vanish before he turned to Dual with a characteristic utterance. "Well, that's a good night's work, but I sure would like to see that Immutable Justice you're talkin' about so often, get its hooks into th' man what made possible Johnson's little bag."

And Dual answered from his seat beside his desk: "Otho Khan's fate has already been brought upon Otho Khan, by Otho Khan himself. For in the nature of such things, it is needful that the knowledge dwells with him that he is doomed to a soul dissolution when his physical life shall be blotted out—and that such knowledge shall follow him without one instant of remission, through each moment of his life. That life he shall preserve so long as he may—and in the very prolonging, he condemns himself to the continued horror of knowing that there shall come a time when he will be no longer able to prolong it, and that after that, there is nothing—that he who is Otho Khan shall sink into nothingness.

"Hence are gold and power but ashes in his hands, when all is said—and the savor of living is tainted with the approaching odor of death. Thus is Immutable Justice at work upon Otho Khan already—and life grows empty—but because there is naught beyond it, he continues to cling to life. Around and around his mind runs ever in a circle, like a pris-

oned squirrel in a cage. And his mind knows in its ceaseless running that it has done this thing itself. Can you, Mr. Bryce, think of a greater punishment to bring upon him—of a more frightful mental condition—of a greater Hell?"

"Migosh, no," said Bryce.

"There is none," said Semi Dual, "for the Force of Evil deceives even its own disciples and exacts payment for the power it gives, even during the interval in which that power is enjoyed. Otho Khan is an example of this truth. Power is his, but what will it avail him? Pitkin is an example. Even the two gunmen, who came at his bidding to do murder—they are examples of the great truth that all force is one. Pitkin offered to pay them for a murder.

"I but used the same argument to undo them, speaking once more to them the luring word of gold. I showed it to them, I flaunted a costly jewel before their eyes, and while their greedy minds were fastened on it, I used it as a means to take their minds by surprise. Miss Popoff herself employed the same means of procedure. Pitkin built a fire in a room of the building. He came here with a mind inflamed by thoughts of fire and incendiary bombs with which both the doers of his crime and the evidence of the crime itself were to be destroyed. And she—holding a dagger before him—made use of his fiery thoughts to center his attention on it and cause him to think for the time that its gleaming blade was a tongue of fire. Thus may the same force be used to accomplish evil or to prevent evil being done. Such is the alchemy of Creation, which harmonizes the seeming paradox that heat and cold, light and darkness, good and evil, are but manifestations of the vast sea of force in which we live and move, and are therefore *One*."

He rose. He lifted his strong face. His voice rang softly through the room. "And over all Force, is there One Eternal. Who has created it in His wisdom, Who pours it out from His plentiful hand—Who watches over and directs it—to Whom having gone forth from Him, in His own time it must return. Who knows it, weighs it, must be accounted to for it, be it as vast as the

sweep of the planets in their courses, or as small as the life of a germ in a seed. It is to Him we lift our voices in recognition of His All Knowledge, crying Om, Om, and again Om, through Whom we have our being, and by Whom are we uplifted and we ask it in faith."

Lotis Popoff rose. She had been sitting with Connie and Garston, but now she left her place and went and stood before him. Flame slender she was, her hands clasped together before her—and her mouth was like a flame, too, in the whiteness of her face, and her eyes were dark as she raised them—tilting backward her head a little.

This was the climax between those two, I felt, as I saw her and caught my breath.

And then: "Master," she called him for the third time, and sank suddenly down before him, and caught his hand and pressed it to her lips and released it sobbing, kneeling with down-bent head, on the dark crown of which Semi Dual laid his hand for an instant before he bent and raised her and drew her slender form once more back onto its feet.

"Lotis—thou woman—daughter of God—let there be no talk of masters between thee and me," he said. "For there is but one Master, and He that One by Whose mercy and for Whose own divine purpose the priceless treasure of thy life and thy womanhood is preserved—that One by Whom, as I lift thy body, thy soul is also raised."

"But—you gave my soul back to me," she faltered. "You—you have saved it from destruction, and my body from that living death which even like Otho Khan himself I have known what it was to face.

You have given it back to me, who came to slay you, and how—how may one repay such a debt?"

Semi shook his head slightly.

"Nay, there is no debt any longer," he said.

"No debt?" She drew back a step to look, as it seemed, more fully into his face. "Have you not written it at the entrance to your garden that he who comes against you with evil intent, shall live to rue it until the uttermost part of his debt shall be paid? Do you think I have forgotten—that the thought of what I came to do that night does not haunt me—that I shall ever forget it—that it will not follow me, torture me, sicken the very soul you have given back to me with repentance through all the years? Mr. Dual, for God's sake, tell me that you know I am going to carry the burden of that debt with me as long as I shall live—that you know I know that I owe you my soul, my right to lift its voice to the God Who gave it—my life and all it shall ever hold—"

"Aye," said Dual, "I know. And thereby, Lotis, thou flower of womanhood, the debt is cancelled."

"Cancelled?" the girl repeated, and lifted her hands in a sudden gesture, to clasp them against her breast.

"Aye," Semi Dual smiled. "Hast thou not lived to rue it, Lotis?—and is it not thereby paid, in the only way the soul may make full payment—through the desire that such payment may be made—through the fire of the spirit, which purifies, cleanseth and exalteth—through thine own cry of repentance?" he said.

(The end.)

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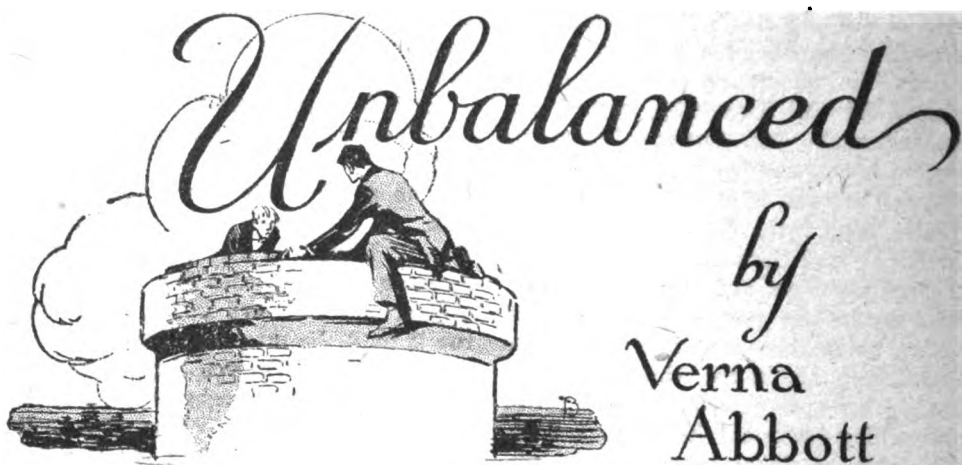
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LOVE

LIKE anthem rolling at the vaulted nave,
So swelled the volume of the love you gave.
At first so faint, so far away it seemed,
I dared not stir—I thought perchance I dreamed;
And then it grew as grows the swelling tide;
I knew that I was loved, forgot all else beside!

Helen Roslyn Macaulay.



I HAD known Hylon during my last year in college where a special course in structural engineering had brought us together. I recall his many eccentricities that held him apart from the rank and file, but as a student he excelled many in the class for his doggish and persevering persistence in mastering the subject at hand.

On one occasion I had an opportunity to judge as to the inner man that seldom showed through his deep-set eyes. It was an essay upon the tensile strength of materials in relation to the vibrations and strains of air currents as applied to buildings of great heights. It was competitive among all the students in the class, and I knew to what lengths Hylon had sat up through several nights of hard study in the preparation of his essay. Considerable honor was attached to the writer of the successful paper. It meant little to me, but the subject was one upon which I had at different times given considerable thought, and as often happens, the least efforts are awarded unexpected results. I was sitting next to Hylon on the day of the award. Upon the assembly platform sat some of the distinguished engineers of the time, judges of the essays.

The professor was about to read off the names of the winners. I saw, or rather felt the tenseness of Hylon, the muscles of his face twitched, his eyes seemed to recede still further into their sockets, and he leaned forward in expectation.

The room was hushed as the professor

read off my name as recipient of the award of the judges, and at the same time giving honorary mention to the essay by James Hylon.

I saw Hylon grip the back of the seat in front of him, his finger-nails fairly biting into the varnished back. His face convulsed and grew a sickening pallor. His lips seemed to shrink away from his teeth as he turned to me and, hissing out the words in my ear: "You cheat, I alone deserved that honor," got up as one in a delirium and left the room.

I admit that he deserved the honor from the standpoint of work, but the meaning of the word "cheat" I could not understand. The horror of the look he gave me so unexpectedly petrified me for the moment, until I realized that the professor was calling on me to come forward.

From that day on Hylon avoided me completely, but on many occasions I knew that he had passed close by; seeming to sense his presence like an evil spirit.

I have not meant to tire the patience of my readers upon a subject that is not in any way a part of this story, except in view of the fact that I was to live to see this same face again in later years with all of the ghastly features of the maniac, and to actually feel the horror of a distorted and jealous mind, as I felt it in that one half glance.

A three days' convention of the American Society of Engineers was to take place the

first part of June in the City of Philadelphia. Shortly after leaving college I had been called to one of the South American republics for the purpose of installing a complete municipal lighting, water, and drainage system, a job that had engaged me in active work for the past four years. This was my first attendance since admission into the society, and many important subjects were under discussion. The program also provided for the inspection of several large power plants that were nearing completion in the city.

Upon the second day of the convention I stood in the lobby of the hotel with several other brother engineers waiting for the elevator to take us to the assembly hall. My back was toward the entry door of the hotel, when all at once I felt as if something was boring into my back between the shoulder blades. Turning to see who could possibly force such an effect upon me, I was amazed to see none other than James Hylon. He was standing there some three yards away just looking straight at or through me. He made no sign of coming forward to greet me by the hand, just nodded, turned, and went on down the corridor.

During the session it was announced that a committee of three would be appointed to inspect and pass opinion on the gravitation, construction and recent improvements of protection against lightning, of one of the tallest brick chimneys then in existence, having just been completed as a part of the great plant of the Scott-Brown Foundry Company.

As I had passed down the aisle I had recognized several of the judges present at the time of the college essay competition, and one in particular called me over to say a few words of praise for the work I had done. As the subject of gravitation was along the lines of the essay, it was quite natural that I was mentioned as one of the committee by my good friend with whom I had so recently spoken. Much to my surprise, however, besides a man I did not know, except by reputation, the name of James Hylon was proposed and accepted. We two, therefore, were to meet again.

The last day of the meeting was set aside for inspection by the several committees on

various subjects, so at the appointed hour, we all met at the plant of the Scott-Brown Foundry Company.

Hylon was there, together with a number of engineers interested in the wonderful power plant then nearing completion. The third man on the committee, however, did not put in an appearance for some unknown reason.

As the chimney under consideration was none too large on the inside, it was decided that Hylon and myself should make the ascent alone. The bricklayers had just the day before finished the top, but no ladder irons had as yet been placed, the only means of reaching the top being by way of a breeches buoy pulled up inside the chimney by steel cables running through a block suspended on a heavy plank placed across the top of the chimney. The hoisting device was a single windlass controlled by two husky laborers.

I distinctly remember the feeling of confinement as we slowly started toward the top, and it clearly reminded me of viewing the heavens through the big end of a telescope. It was like going through a perpendicular tunnel, the higher one climbed, the smaller was the light below. I had no fear of rising to great heights, as I had climbed about in the air before on high buildings. I knew that one in such perilous positions should never look below. Only once did I peer down past my feet dangling in the air, while guiding the tackle from jamming us against the walls, and it was then that I really realized to what a height we were going. The men turning the windlass looked like pigmies, and I could just make out the outline of their backs as they stooped with each turn. I knew they dared not look up because of filling their eyes with the cement that kept dusting down as we went up.

In the gloom of the inside of the great chimney, I could but indistinctly make out the features of Hylon, who had not spoken a word since we left the ground. Neither one of us cared to look up for the same reason that kept the men on the windlass looking down. I knew the danger of allowing the cables to become twisted, so that it was just as well that we were both occupied

with keeping our central position in the chimney by guiding our travel upward with feet and hands.

A little light struck downward upon Hylon's face, and I knew we were not many feet from the top. He seemed very nervous, and would not look at me at all. His right hand, like mine, was gripping the cable when I felt a tremor and a slight irregular jerk of the strands which held us so firmly to life.

I saw Hylon suddenly look up, and in the half light, every bit of color left his face.

"My God, we're gone," came from his lips.

I heard a rasping, grinding sound. Without knowing the cause, I was instantly overcome by the look of hopeless horror depicted upon my companion's face. I knew we could not be many feet from the top. Looking up quickly I saw in an instant the awful hopelessness of the situation. The steel cable had jumped in the block and was cutting on its edge the cable, strand by strand. I realized that as the two tackle-blocks came together the strain would be greatly increased, and that any second the entire remaining strands might give way. To attempt to signal to the men at the windlass to stop winding would have been useless. Their backs were all that could be seen, and they knew that when the blocks jammed together then we were at the top.

When the blocks jammed together, or at any second, we would not be at the top, but an unrecognizable mass at the bottom.

We dared not look up. The shock of each snapping strand was telegraphed down the cable to our right hands still holding to something that yet had strength to save.

I heard a shrieking sound, and saw Hylon's eyes close. I felt my time had come and vaguely wondered if he or I would be the first to reach the stones below. Motion had suddenly ceased. The pulleys had jammed and become clogged with the broken strands that had curled and wound themselves about the upper block. I felt a wave of fresh air that brought me out of a dazed condition that my overtense mind had caused. I saw the edge of the top of the chimney a few inches above my head. With one thought we both instinctively grabbed

the top of the chimney, throwing our bodies flat across its face. With a snap, the tackles parted, the extra strain of our rising to grasp the chimney-top severing the remaining strands completely, and with a crash and hissing sound, the heavy blocks and cables went curling to the ground three hundred feet beneath. I heard a noise come up from below as one hears the clamor in a city street through a partly closed window, stories above.

Hylon had climbed up on the opposite side to me, and lay there on his stomach as one dead. His arms and head hanging over the outside edge, his legs dangling limply inside.

For several minutes I lay there, not daring to look down, not daring to even think of the desperate position in which both Hylon and myself were placed. I was laying very close on the chimney-top, my eyes following the circumference of the concrete coping that finished it off. I judged the diameter was a good five feet, while the top some fifteen feet in circumference, was at least eighteen inches wide. Slowly I began to feel that while I had so miraculously escaped a horrible death only a moment before, that the situation was not so bad after all. At least, I felt that if I could but keep my head and not lose consciousness that those below would in some way effect a means of rescue.

Feeling renewed courage, I sat upright with one leg out and one in astride the chimney-top, and with my hands in front of me slowly started around toward Hylon, who had not moved since the cable plunged downward. The slightest unbalance on his part would have meant instant death, as there was absolutely nothing to cling to except the cross girder straddling the chimney.

I was thus painfully working my way toward him when I became suddenly nauseated, and felt for the first time that the chimney was swaying back and forth very gently, almost impossible of discernment, except from the position we were in on the top. A new sense of insecurity and fear came over me. I seemed to sway in time to the chimney. I was sick. Then everything went black. How long I lay there I never

shall know. Perhaps only seconds. What made me awake was the same awful feeling of a pair of eyes boring me in the back. I came to slowly with the sense of a terrible danger. Luckily, I had swooned forward upon my hands, and in some unknown way preserved my balance. When I awoke my eyes opened slowly, following the edge of the concrete coping to where Hylon had lain.

To my surprise he was gone. I remembered the slate roof of the boiler-house directly in line below where he had fallen across the top.

If I had looked down I knew I would have seen him there dead, parts of him at least in an awful condition. I knew I could not hold out under the strain much longer. If I looked at the slate roof I felt sure I could not resist plunging out into space.

With these thoughts coursing through my brain I felt there was a danger still more somber than the slate roof below. I turned my head, and there, crouching on hands and knees not two feet away, was Hylon. It was not the face of an animal enraged with pain or that of a man at bay fighting for life. No trace of fear showed from his eyes, yet I saw his finger-nails dig deep into the fresh concrete of the chimney as I saw them once before in the class-room mar the varnish from the seat in front. The same look of hatred was in his eyes. He had changed into a fiend.

When he saw me turn toward him he started to crawl to where I sat now upright as I straddled the chimney-top, and I noticed that a thin stream of froth was oozing out of the corners of his mouth. I knew that a maniac, a mad man of past generations had taken the place of James Hylon.

Faintly I could hear shouts from below. I knew it would take time to get a line up, perhaps hours. I also knew that my chance for life was even less than the parting of the cables. This mad man valued no life, he had but one thought, and I saw him come at me. Should he but succeed in grabbing a part of my clothing, the struggle could be of but a moment's duration, and I was determined that I would not die on the slate roof below.

I knew, too, that we would die together.

As he came, I moved away, my back still toward him. It was possible to creep forward faster than backward, so I dared not turn to face him. Around the top of the chimney we went, three, four, five times, until I could scarcely go another time. My knees and hands were bleeding terribly from the rough concrete that soon dug into them.

Once he turned and came at me around the other way. This was a relief to see his face, yet it was the beginning of the end, for he seemed to know that he could get me by going forward, forcing me to retreat in a backward position.

He gained so fast that I prepared myself for a final lunge. My head now was very clear, I was fighting for my life, and at tremendous odds. I had heard of the power of the eye over a maniac at times.

As he came at me on hands and knees, I bent forward. We were face to face. I summed up all the will-power I possessed. I gazed fixedly into his wild, bloodshot eyes and shouted his name. For an instant he returned my look, hesitated, undecided.

"Hylon," I screamed, "don't you know me?"

"Yes, I know you, you damned cheat!"

Was he rational again? I prayed to God that I had held him if only but for a pause.

Then he suddenly jumped to his feet on the narrow coping, threw his hands wildly into the air, swayed as though he was about to fall upon me and tear me limb from limb; then, with a cry of horrible terror, sprang out wildly into the air.

I heard his body strike the slate roof of the boiler-house with a dull thud. I looked overfascinated at the awful thought. There below was only a jagged hole through the roof, and I saw men like ants rushing from all directions toward the building.

When I awoke, I felt again two eyes peering at me as if from the unknown. I looked around. I was apparently in a room of some hospital.

"Did I go through that hole in the roof?" I asked, still dazed.

"No," came the reply, so sweetly that it sounded a long way off, "you were fortunately rescued before it grew dark."

And the pair of eyes that looked down upon me were not those of James Hylon.

Sleeping Acres

by Brayton Norton

CHAPTER XX (Continued).

"LET'S GO!"

"KEEP going. Double up in a ball and let it take you!" Terry cried to Ruth as the wave broke a few feet behind them. He tightened his hold on Myron's shoulder as the foaming sea caught him in its grip and hurled him downward to the bottom. He felt the helpless body of his friend wrenched from his grasp by the force of the water which sang about his ears.

The sand gritted against him. He shot upward and was sucked down again. His lungs were bursting. Would he never come to the surface? Struggling to overcome the numb feeling which was stealing over him, he threshed his limbs weakly and his foot came in contact with the smooth sands of the beach. He thrust his aching head upward and gulped the air with wide-open mouth.

Hands reached out from the gray void and he felt himself being carried in some one's arms. When he came to, he was lying on the beach and people were rubbing his arms and legs.

He struggled and sat up.

"The girl?" he whispered.

"She's all right—shook up about like you. She came to a minute ago, and her father, I guess it was, carried her up to the hotel."

"And the boy?"

A man nodded to a crowd of people knotted together on the beach.

"They're working on him now," he said.

Terry tottered to his feet and walked

slowly to the group. Seeing his wet clothes, the crowd made way respectfully. In a moment he was kneeling by Myron's side.

"How is he?" Terry asked.

"Coming along fine," the doctor answered.

Under the influence of the powerful oxygen which was forced into his lungs, faint streaks of color began to tinge Myron's neck, and his pulse grew stronger.

"Are you Mr. Terry?" asked a woman pushing her way through the crowd.

Terry nodded.

"Well, there's a girl in my house that's been asking for you. Could you come in for a minute?"

Terry followed the woman into a near-by cottage and was met at the door by Helen Benson.

"How is he?" she asked in a quavering voice.

"Doing fine," answered Terry.

"They won't let me go out there. They are going to bring him in here as soon as they can move him. We have a place all fixed up."

Excitedly she related to Terry the incidents leading up to Myron's accident, stating that it was Slade who made known Myron's identity to her father.

"I'm afraid Myron was drinking," she concluded. "I heard a man in the crowd telling Slade he ought to be ashamed to let Myron go in the surf that way."

"What did Slade have to do with it?"

"I don't know, except what the man said. He seemed to think it was Slade's fault. He said he saw him drinking with Myron."

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Terry started for the door.

"I'm going to find out," he said. "I thought I saw Slade as I came in. I'm not sure."

As Terry came out of the cottage he met Sackett.

"How is your daughter?" he asked. "I've had my hands full or I would have found you sooner."

"Doing nicely," answered Sackett; and Terry noticed that Sackett's clothes were wet and that he was shivering. "I'm taking her home right away," continued Ruth's father. "This excitement has completely unnerved me. I'm afraid of a setback. You'll remain with your friend, I suppose? I just learned who he was, and I understand he is getting along famously." Sackett blinked rapidly for a moment. Then he extended his hand. "I want to thank you," he said in a voice choking with emotion. Then as if ashamed to betray such feeling he added: "Well, I must hurry away," and as he hastened off down the boardwalk Terry caught sight of the bloated features of Klune's secretary hovering about the edge of the crowd.

Slade turned and, meeting Terry's eye, started to move away.

"Slade."

The secretary pretended not to hear and kept walking on. Terry called again. Slade stopped and turned about, looking back inquiringly.

"I want to talk with you a minute."

"I'm in a hurry," Slade exclaimed sourly, walking on.

"You'll take the time to talk with me."

"Is that a threat?"

"You can take it any way you like," answered Terry as they turned into a side street. He grasped Slade roughly by the shoulder and whirled him around. "You've got to listen to me if you'd rather I put it that way," he said. "I want to know if you were drinking with Myron Masters this morning."

Slade's bleary eyes brightened and his hand stole slowly to a sagging pocket of his coat.

"That's none of your damned business," he snapped, "if you—"

Terry's fist crashed to Slade's jaw before

he had time to finish his sentence or draw his automatic. The secretary felt his knees giving way under him, and he fumbled with the gun in his pocket as Terry's left caught him fairly in the eye. Then he collapsed completely and sank to the ground in a sprawling heap.

Terry leaned over him and deftly relieved him of the automatic, and removing the clip, tossed it far away into the sand. Then he handed the gun back to its owner, with the words:

"You've been a good dog to-day, Slade. Now get up and run home and tell your master I knocked you down."

CHAPTER XXI.

VOICES OF THE COUNTRY.

OUT of the frying-pan into the fire." Terry spoke the words with mock gravity, looking at the flushed faces of Myron and his bride as they stood before the minister in the little cottage at the beach a few days later.

"It's no use, Helen," he said. "I've done everything I could for him. I've been pulling him out of scrapes ever since I've known him. Now I'm going to pass the buck. It's up to you."

He laughed happily as he gripped Myron's hand and kissed Helen.

"I'm tickled to death," he said. "Bless you, my children. Go and be happy."

A shadow passed over Myron's glowing face.

"You had better come along with us, Terry," he said. "I don't like the idea of leaving you here."

Helen echoed the invitation, but Terry shook his head.

"It isn't done," he replied gravely. "Honeymoons weren't meant for three. When you get nicely settled in your new home in Los Baños I'll come and visit you. In the mean time I'll stay around here and find myself a job."

During the wedding breakfast Terry sought the opportunity to converse confidentially with his friend.

"Don't worry about anything," he said. "I sent a cable to your dad. If I get an

answer before you leave, I'll get it on to you. I'll go out to Benson's this afternoon and pack up your clothes and Helen's and send them to you."

Myron's eyes filled.

"I don't know, Terry," he said, "how I can ever get square with you for all you've done."

Terry became serious at once.

"Then I'll tell you," he said. "All you have to do is to make good. That will more than square us." He looked Myron full in the eyes. "And I know you will, old pal," he concluded. "Whatever you do, remember I'm with you. If you get up against it, all you've got to do is to let me know."

He looked at the clock and rose. "We'd better be starting," he observed, "if you're going to get that bus in time to connect with the noon train out of Masters."

Taking leave of their kind hostess who watched them go with tears shining in her eyes, Myron and Helen walked together out of the cottage as man and wife, with Terry bringing up the rear. At the bus station they halted, and Terry said:

"While you're waiting, I'm going to run in and see if there is any answer from your father. They told me yesterday afternoon we surely ought to hear this morning."

When Terry entered the little telegraph office the girl behind the desk held up a yellow envelope.

"At last," she said, with a smile.

Tearing open the message with eager fingers, Terry saw that it was dated the day previous, from Honolulu, and it read:

Cabling Klune one thousand dollars for Ruth Sackett.

JAMES MASTERS.

Terry leaned against the counter, while the girl watched his face sympathetically. She had taken quite an interest in the red-headed boy who had called so insistently to receive an answer to his cablegram.

"No bad news, I hope?" she volunteered.

Terry crumpled the message savagely in his hand. So this was the answer of a man whose son had narrowly escaped death! No words of sympathy, no expression of thankfulness. Just money. A faint spot of red

appeared in his cheeks as he met the girl's eyes. Then he laughed shortly.

"Oh, no," he replied. "It isn't any more than could be expected."

As he went out he reflected that possibly Masters had wired his son, and he stopped and asked:

"Is there anything for Myron Masters?"

"Nothing," she said.

Terry turned bitterly away and went out into the street to rejoin the bridal couple.

"Hear anything?" asked Myron and Helen together.

Terry strove to put on a cheerful front.

"Only this," he said, handing Myron the message, then he added: "He has probably wired you already at Masters. I'll have them send it to you."

Myron read the few words, then he looked up and met Terry's eyes steadily.

"There won't be anything more," he said. "I wouldn't even take the trouble to bother." He set his jaw firmly. "We won't worry about what my dad will or will not say, Terry," he added, "for from now on he is as of the same importance to me as I evidently am to him. I am going to work to pay him back that thousand dollars he sends Klune. Then I'll be through with him for keeps. I'll show him that I can get along by the name of Streeter."

He paused and looked at his friend with renewed determination shining in his eyes.

"I had to be married under his name to make it legal, I suppose," he continued. "but that is all I intend to use it. We are going to a strange place, and I guess I can get along quite as well by the name Helen knew me by first. How about it?" he asked the girl.

She nodded emphatically.

"We don't need his old name," she answered. "I'd much rather be Mrs. Streeter than Mrs. Masters."

The arrival of the bus cut short any further conversation, and Terry followed Myron and his wife to the car.

"Send me your address to the general delivery at Masters," he said. "I don't know where I'll be yet. I'll send your stuff through by express." He fumbled in his shirt and extended his hand to Myron.

"Good-by, old pal," he said. "Don't forget to write and let me know how things are going." He placed his hand affectionately on Myron's shoulder and whispered: "Now is your chance; buck up and be a man."

When Myron withdrew his hand he blinked the moisture from his eyes and found himself holding a fifty-dollar bill. He was about to protest, when the bus started, and as the machine rolled off he saw Terry standing by the curb, waving and shouting:

"Good-by and good luck."

Terry arrived at the Benson ranch during the noon hour and delivered the note Helen had given him to her father. Benson surveyed him with a scowl, and as he read he snapped:

"I reckon you had a hand in this, too."

"Yes, I did, and I'm as proud of it as you will be later on."

Benson snorted.

"Any old time," he answered, "that I'm proud of having a kid of Jim Masters for a son-in-law you'll be gray-headed."

"The boy can't help it," Terry defended. "He's as much ashamed of it as you are. In fact, he only used his father's name to be married under. At Los Banos he'll be known by the name of Streeter. That doesn't look as if he was very proud of the family, does it?" he challenged.

Benson growled an unintelligible reply, then he grumbled:

"It's pretty tough to have all this on top of losing everything I got."

He looked regretfully at Terry.

"I wish I could offer you a job," he said, "but I haven't a thing. I'm down and out. In a few days I'll be hitting the trail for Los Banos myself. Then I'll look up Myron and Helen, and we'll see what we can do."

"You'll be back to-night?" called Mrs. Benson from the doorway, as Terry moved off.

Terry nodded.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm just going over to Sackett's for a while to see how they are getting along."

"Well, well, you're quite a stranger," Sackett greeted him from the porch as

Terry drew near. "We thought maybe you'd decided to go into the business of life-saving and stayed at the beach."

"I had to stay for the wedding," answered Terry with a smile as he joined Sackett on the porch.

Ruth Sackett stopped short in the doorway at his words.

"What wedding?" inquired her father.

"Myron Masters was married this morning," announced Terry. "I stayed to see them started on their journey."

"Where did they go?" asked Sackett quickly.

"To Los Banos. He is going there to try and get something to do."

Ruth came out on the porch, and Terry rose and took the hand she held out to him.

"I hope you are feeling all right again now," he said. He realized it was an inane remark and not at all what he wanted to say.

Ruth smiled.

"I'm fine," she answered. "I had the easiest part of it. You did most of the work."

Terry modestly declined to take any credit whatsoever, and described Ruth's part in the affair in glowing terms to her father.

Sackett listened absent-mindedly. Then he returned to the subject of Myron's marriage.

"Strange that young Masters should leave his father's ranch," he said, "to seek employment elsewhere. Does he know any one in the place you mention?"

Terry shook his head.

"Not a soul that I know of," he answered. "He said he wanted to go to a new place where he could start all over again with a new name."

"What do you mean?" Ruth asked.

Terry explained Myron's dislike of his father, adding that Myron had declared his intention of making good without any help from him. When he had concluded, his listeners were silent for a few minutes, and Terry was about to turn the conversation to other channels when Sackett inquired:

"Do you think he can make a go of it alone?"

"I am sure of it," Terry replied. "If he doesn't, I'll hear from him. It is just what he needs, and I think it will bring out the very best there is in him. I shouldn't wonder but what he'll make James Masters sit up and take notice."

Darkness crept into the cañon as they sat talking on the porch, and when Terry rose to go Sackett cordially pressed him to stay and have supper.

"Then I'll drive you home later in the car," he said.

Terry consented gladly. It was quite dark when they resumed their seats on the porch, and when Sackett's temporary absence afforded Terry the opportunity he desired to talk with Ruth he burst out with:

"You're the best girl swimmer I've ever seen. And a mighty game girl, too."

He couldn't see Ruth's face, but he thought he heard a low laugh.

Then she replied:

"I'm anything but that. When you came this afternoon I was wondering whether I could stay in this place another day."

"Don't you like it any better than you did?"

"I simply detest it. I don't see what people find to do that have to live on ranches. I can't see anything interesting in it."

"That's because you can't hear the voice of the growing things," Terry answered softly. "I couldn't myself for a while. It has only been lately that I've been able to. You see, the country is rather shy," he went on. "It doesn't talk very loud. I've seen people who have been here for years that never have heard its voice. They are too busy working for the dollars to stop to listen to anything else."

"I guess I'm like them," rejoined Ruth. "It only looks hot and dry to me. I guess I was never intended to be a country girl."

Terry shook his head in the darkness.

"You never can tell," he replied. "The city people are the ones who like the country the best. All they have to do is to understand it."

The lamps of a motor-car appeared over

the rim of the hill and lighted up the winding road leading down into the cañon.

"It looks as if we were to have company," Ruth observed as the car drew up at the gate and a man climbed out and walked up the path.

She rose and went to the steps to greet the visitor.

"Good evening," she said. "Did you wish to see Mr. Sackett?"

"I wished to see Miss Ruth Sackett."

Terry started at the familiar sound of the voice.

"I'm Mr. Klune," the newcomer announced when his hostess had made herself known. "The manager of the San Miguel Ranch. I called to see you concerning your rescue of Myron Masters, the owner's son. He wired me to-day from Honolulu."

Ruth invited him to a seat on the porch and introduced him to Terry.

Klune nodded formally.

"I have met Mr. Terry before," he said shortly.

"You do not mind our sitting out here, do you, Mr. Klune?" Ruth asked. "We find it much pleasanter than indoors."

Klune acquiesced gladly and took the chair Ruth indicated. Then he said:

"I have the good fortune to be the bearer of a little present from Mr. James Masters which he sent me to-day from the Islands."

"I have never met Mr. Masters," Ruth answered, "consequently I cannot accept his gift. I hope you will thank him for me and explain why."

Klune gasped with astonishment, and Terry smiled to himself in the darkness. "I guess that will hold him," he thought.

"But this is on behalf of his son, Myron," pursued Klune. "Mr. Masters cables me a thousand dollars to deliver into your hands for saving his son's life."

"I have never had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Myron Masters either," Ruth answered. "If Mr. Masters desires to reward the savior of his son's life, why does he not give the money to Mr. Terry? He did far more than I."

"That is up to Mr. Masters," Klune replied. "I am only his agent in the matter. If you so desire I will inform him

of your opinion. Doubtless he will reward Mr. Terry, too; that is, if he has not already done so."

Terry was about to make a quick retort when Ruth said quietly:

"I feel quite sure he has not, Mr. Klune. I should like you to call his attention to the matter."

"Then you will not take the money?"

"Most assuredly not."

"Don't you think that is rather foolish? Masters is a very wealthy man, and it is his desire that you accept."

"I must decline with thanks," Ruth laughed. "Please break the news as gently as you can."

Klune's business was evidently over, but he showed no signs of going. He changed the subject adroitly and congratulated Ruth upon her famous rescue, overlooking Terry's connection with the affair entirely. Then he spoke of the ranch and the surrounding country, relating many amusing incidents connected with the neighborhood.

Terry listened in silence, and as he heard Klune's stories rewarded occasionally by Ruth's cheery laugh he hated Klune more than ever. At length Klune led the conversation to Sackett's purchase of the Mocking Bird Cañon property.

"I hope for your sake, Miss Sackett," he said, "that Sawyer was more careful in his proving than others have been with homesteads hereabout."

"How is that?" inquired Ruth.

"Homesteading on this old Spanish grant land is fraught with many difficulties," explained Klune. "Only about one man in twenty, I guess, is successful in getting a clear title. We have purchased some land which men tried to homestead or bought from others who had, and we have found a good deal of legal work and expense necessary in order to perfect the title."

"Do you know anything about our property?" Ruth inquired.

"Very little," Klune replied. "Except that it was Spanish grant stuff too, and as I say that is often troublesome. If you like I'll have Mr. Carston, the ranch lawyer, look it up for your father."

"I know he wouldn't wish to put you to all that trouble," Ruth rejoined.

"No trouble at all; we are glad to help people out, notwithstanding reports you will doubtless hear to the contrary. I'll instruct Carston to look the matter up immediately and let your father know how things stand."

A few minutes after Klune had taken his leave Sackett returned.

"Went out to change that confounded tire," he explained. "Who was it?"

Ruth told her father briefly of her visitor and his errand with Terry, supplementing her words with Klune's observations concerning homesteads in general and Mocking Bird Cañon in particular.

Sackett listened quietly, but made no comment. When Terry rose, his host went at once for the car.

Ruth stood leaning against a vine-covered post of the porch looking out into the blackness of the cañon. For a moment neither spoke. Then the girl said:

"You may be right about the country having a voice, but if it has, it speaks too low for me to hear. I can hear the other voices you spoke of, but here the only sound is the croaking of the frogs."

Terry laughed. Then he saw his chance.

"I can teach you," he said in a low tone, "so that when Nature speaks you will listen and understand."

"If you can make me like the country, you will perform a miracle," retorted Ruth.

"I'll show you," declared Terry.

"You mean you will try," laughed Ruth, as her father drove up with the car.

During the drive to Benson's, Sackett spoke but little, and Terry, busied with his thoughts, was content to enjoy the ride in silence. How could he best show Ruth? Could he make her like the country? Klune evidently had started his preliminary skirmish with Sackett for the possession of the Sawyer homestead. Did Sackett realize it? Would he remember what Terry had told him about the ranch's policy with homesteaders? That Sackett was thinking of the same matter was evidenced by his question:

"What do you think the chances are that my title is clear?"

"About ten to one. The same odds that Carston says it is not," Terry replied quickly.

"You think the ranch intends trying to force me out?"

Terry considered for a moment; then he said earnestly:

"Mr. Sackett, I have about seven dollars and a half between me and the grit. I'll bet that money with any one against seventy-five cents that Klune will try to beat you out of your property."

"You evidently haven't much doubt when you risk your entire fortune on one throw," Sackett observed. Then he added quickly: "By the way, what do you intend doing now that your friend has left?"

"I don't know," Terry answered. "I'm going to try to get work on some of these ranches."

"How would you like to work for me?"

Terry sat up sharply.

"I'd like it fine," he replied. "Do you mean it?"

Sackett laughed at his eagerness.

"I have to hire some one," he said. "I don't see why it shouldn't be you. You look like you were not afraid of work. I'll pay you at the standard rate of wages for the same class of work. You can live in the little room in the tank-house and board yourself. How would that suit you and when would you be ready to start in?"

"To-morrow morning," Terry replied promptly. "It won't be any trouble for me to move. All I want to do is to tell Benson and his wife good-by. If you want me to start early I can be there by six o'clock."

Sackett laughed.

"I guess there will be no occasion for you to stay up all night to do that," he said. "Besides, we'll have to get your room ready for you. Come any time after noon."

He let Terry out at Benson's entrance, and with a cheery "good night" drove away across the plains.

Terry stood leaning on the gate watching the tail-lights of the car disappear in the distance. Then he went into the house and tried to sleep, but into his restless dreams two faces constantly intruded. He was fighting Klune at close quarters for the pos-

session of the Sackett homestead, while Ruth Sackett, attired as an Indian princess, waited expectantly in the twilight for him to show her many things.

CHAPTER XXII.

CROPS AND CHICKENS AND SAND.

TWO weeks is a short time in paradise. Terry leaned on his hoe in Sackett's garden and reflected. Was it possible he had been in Mocking Bird Cañon that long? Through the open windows of the ranch-house came the melody of Ruth's voice, singing an old ballad. For fourteen short days he had worked from dawn until dark and his heart had sung with a happiness hitherto unknown. His paradise was complete.

The weed-grown garden was transformed into a second Eden by the sound of the woman's voice. His eyes glowed with happiness as he listened. Then the song ceased abruptly, and he heard a screen-door slam. A vision of a girl in pink, with wavy black hair and dark-brown eyes appeared coming into the garden. There was a dimple in her chin, and she was smiling gleefully.

"How are my cucumbers?"

Terry swept his cap from his head and turned to meet her.

"They should be up to-morrow," he announced.

The smile disappeared from Ruth's face.

"They should be up to-day," she exclaimed with conviction. "The directions on the package said so."

Terry laughed as they walked across the garden to a small patch of rich, brown earth, screened about by fine mesh wire.

"It hasn't been quite warm enough," he answered. "I'm afraid you are getting anxious."

Ruth dropped to the ground and peered eagerly at the little spot of carefully cultivated earth. Then she reached over the enclosure and pulverized a tiny clod with her slender finger.

"I'd rather have one of these cucumbers come up than dad's whole garden," she said.

"Are you as fond of them as all that?" Terry asked with a smile.

"It isn't that," Ruth replied quickly. "I guess it is just because I've spent so much time on them."

Terry laughed.

"That's partly it," he admitted. "The best reason is that you planted the seed."

His brow wrinkled in earnest thought.

"Do you know," he went on, "it's a funny thing about people and growing things. A fellow can plant a whole garden and have it up in first-class shape, and people won't take the least bit of interest in it; but just let them plant one seed and water it until it comes up, and they would not trade that one little plant for a five-acre truck-patch. Why do you suppose people plant gardens anyway?" he asked soberly. "Nine out of ten of them can buy the stuff cheaper from those who know the game and just make a business of it, but they don't."

"The first thing a man thinks of when he gets a little two-by-four patch of ground is a garden. He tells himself it will be cheaper than buying vegetables, but he knows all the time it won't. But he doesn't care. He wants the fun of making things grow. He wants the satisfaction of knowing he grew something himself. They all want to do it. You can't talk them out of it, and they won't quit as long as they can watch the things they planted with their own hands come above the ground."

"Did you ever notice," he went on with a laugh, "how proud a man is when he brings his first vegetables or fruit into the house? His wife may tell him, if she's the kind that looks at things that way, what that one half-ripe strawberry cost him in dollars and cents; although the chances are she'll be as tickled as he over it. But no matter what she thinks, he doesn't care. He's happy, for he raised it."

Ruth smiled at his enthusiasm, and Terry continued:

"Think of the satisfaction it will give you when those cucumbers you planted come above ground. Just a few seeds on a few square feet of land. Then think of all the hundreds of thousands of acres that are lying about here uncared for, when

there are thousands of families just waiting and wishing for a chance to make something grow. Think how happy it would make them to wake up those sleeping acres and make the land come alive."

Terry kicked the dirt disgustedly with his foot.

"I wish I could get James Masters to plant a garden," he added.

Ruth watched him curiously, and Terry went on with his reflections.

"After a man succeeds in making something grow, the next step is chickens," he said with a laugh. "I never saw a man yet that didn't have the idea tucked away somewhere of getting a little ground and raising a few chickens. People can tell him there is no money in it, and that he is foolish, but that doesn't make any difference. He saves up his money in the city so that when he gets old he can go out in the country and raise chickens. He may die before he gets enough, but all his life he looks forward to it."

Ruth interrupted him suddenly.

"Oh, Terry," she exclaimed. "I just happened to think. This is Wednesday, and that hen dad set when he first came here ought to have some little chickens."

Terry threw down his hoe at once.

"I believe you're right," he answered. "Let's go and see."

The big Rhode Island red, peevish from her long vigil, properly resented their interference by raising her feathers and clucking angrily at their approach, pecking viciously at Terry's hand as he raised her from the nest.

"Don't let her hurt you," cautioned Ruth, peering over his shoulder.

Terry held up a warning hand.

"Listen," he said.

Together they bent their heads over the nest and listened to the tremulous peep of a tiny chick.

"There he is," whispered Terry, "in that egg there; the cracked one. He has picked a hole in the shell and he is trying to get out."

Ruth leaned against Terry in her excitement.

"Hadn't we better help him?" she asked.

Terry shook his head dubiously.

"I don't know," he replied. "He doesn't seem to be making much headway, but maybe the hen can do it better than we could."

He drew the egg from the nest and they examined it closely.

"I think he needs help," diagnosed Ruth. "Even if he did get out, she would probably step on him. Let's pick him out."

Taking the egg out into the warm sunshine, Terry experimented; picking at the shell.

The chick raised his voice in protest, and Ruth cried:

"You're hurting him. Let me try it."

Terry passed the egg over silently, realizing his fingers were too clumsy for surgical work. Ruth resumed the operation, bending low over her work with breathless interest.

"It's that thin white lining that is holding him," she observed. "Look!"

Terry leaned nearer.

"Couldn't we cut it with the scissors?" he suggested.

"That might hurt him," she answered, picking gently at the brittle shell. "Look, Terry, at the way he is curled up in that small space!" She stopped chipping and surveyed the egg with wonderment. "Isn't that wonderful?"

Terry nodded, a strange feeling of awkwardness stealing over him as he watched Ruth's fingers rapidly freeing the chick from his prison.

"What will we put him in?" he asked.

Ruth spread out her handkerchief on the ground.

"We'll take him to the house in this," she said. "Then I'll wrap him up in one of dad's shirts." She deposited the feeble little body in the filmy folds and surveyed it tenderly.

"I'm afraid he's dead," she observed.

Terry bent low over the chick.

"He's breathing," he announced at last. "We'd better put him in the sun. He'll live if he has strength enough. He doesn't seem to be hurt any."

"Wouldn't it be better to put him in the oven?" asked Ruth as they carried their patient to the house.

"There is more life in the sun," Terry

maintained. "Besides, you might have the oven too hot."

They had just finished wrapping the chick in one of Sackett's silk shirts when Ruth's father approached, his face darkened by an angry scowl.

"Those confounded Mexicans are stealing all my beans," he announced. "What's this you have here?" he added as he saw the bundle lying in the sunshine.

"One of your little chicks," Ruth answered. "We saved his life. Terry and I picked him out of the shell."

"I completely forgot that this was the day Biddy was to come off," he said, turning and hurrying for the hen-house. The Mexicans stealing his beans was a daily occurrence. It was not every day that he had a hen hatching out.

Ruth and Terry were about to return to the garden when a wagon drove into the yard, piled high with wood, and Benson jumped to the ground and joined them. When Terry had introduced Ruth, Benson asked:

"Do you know if Mr. Sackett wants to buy any wood? I picked up a little in the cañon, and as I'm leaving I'd like to turn it into cash. It's about the only thing I've got that isn't sewed up by the San Miguel."

"I think he does," Ruth answered. "He'll be back in a minute. He has just gone to look after a setting hen."

Benson squatted on the ground in silence for a moment then he asked Terry.

"Heard anything from Myron lately?"

"Got a letter last night," Terry answered. "They are both well, and Myron says he was never so happy in his life. He has a good job in a wholesale house."

Benson's sober face lighted at the news.

"I may be joining them before long," he said. "That is, if I can raise enough to get there on."

As they talked, Sackett returned from the hen-house and called cheerily:

"Good morning, neighbor, are you in the wood business this morning?"

Benson explained his predicament and Sackett at once named a figure for his load, which made the man look at him with astonishment.

"It isn't worth much more than half

that, Mr. Sackett," he said. "Just because I'm up against it is no reason why I should try to beat my neighbors."

Sackett laughed.

"No harm in a man being a fool once in a while if he wants to be, is there?" he retorted. "Throw it off right over there when you get ready." He looked at Benson's sun-browned face and asked: "Where do you intend to go when you leave here?"

"That's a question that is causing mother and me some worry right now," he answered. "We was figuring to go to Los Banos if we can raise enough to move on. My son-in-law's got a pretty good job there and I might get one at the same place."

"Can't you get any satisfaction out of the ranch?" inquired Sackett. "Do they still refuse to meet you half-way?"

Benson snorted with disgust.

"There's only one way Bill Klune will meet anybody, Mr. Sackett," he said. "That's his way. It's the only way he knows, and he's always been able to get what he wants by it. I reckon maybe old Masters is putting the screws on me too," he added, "if he knows my daughter married his son. I reckon maybe he thinks she wasn't good enough for him."

"Would you care to work for me?" Sackett asked abruptly.

"I'd like to work for anybody," Benson rejoined quickly.

"I need a man just now," Sackett continued, "who has had practical experience in the farming of these cañons, and if your wife so desires, I could use her as house-keeper. I will pay you a hundred and fifty dollars a month and board you both. Is that agreeable?"

Benson's eyes shone.

"Agreeable?" he repeated. "Why, man, I never heard anything in my life that sounded any better, and mother will be as tickled over it as I am. She's been worrying a lot lately, but this 'll set her on her feet again."

"All right," said Sackett, "then that's settled. You can come over any time you are ready. I need a man pretty bad now to get my beans in before the Mexicans steal them all. I suppose you've had some experience with their thievery?"

"I sure have," Benson replied. "That was just one of the things I had to buck. They used to steal anything that was lying around loose, and I wasn't as close as you are to them either," he added. "It's only a few miles to the border from your south line, isn't it?"

Sackett nodded. Then he drew out a grimy handkerchief from his pocket in which was wrapped some coarse black sand. "By the way," he asked, "do you know anything about oil?"

"Too much and not enough," he replied. "I dropped all I had prospecting for it in Oklahoma. I can't ever pass it up if I see a trace, but I reckon I don't know enough to get anything good."

Sackett laid the contents of his handkerchief on the ground while the rest of the party looked curiously on.

"It don't look so bad," said Benson at last. "But you never can tell. They all say they ought to be oil around here, but nobody has ever been able to find any. They claim the outlet of the big Sanchez fields ought to be somewhere down here near the coast."

"If you have time I'd like to take you up and show you where I found it," suggested Sackett. "It's not far." He turned to Terry and Ruth. "Do you want to go?" he asked.

Ruth's eye roved to the bundle of silk lying in the sun and thence to the garden. Then she shook her head.

"I guess not," she said.

Terry was torn between a desire to look at Sackett's oil prospect and render first aid to the chick and Ruth's garden. He looked at the girl and made up his mind suddenly.

"I'll see it again," he answered.

He stood on guard by the chick while Ruth went into the house to try to find something for it to eat. He was much pleased with the prospect of Benson coming to the ranch. Benson knew how to farm. Better than that, he knew local conditions. Still better, he knew Klune and Carston. He was a fighter, too, and with some one to back him, the chances were he would be a valuable man in an emergency. His wife, too, would be a pleasing addition

to the household. It would give Ruth more time to devote to her garden.

Ruth hurried from the house with her hands filled with bread-crumbs. A great bird flew low overhead. Looking up, she cried:

"Watch him, Terry. There's a chicken-hawk."

"It's an eagle," Terry corrected. "They have a nest somewhere up the cañon. I saw them going to it the other day."

Ruth stopped suddenly.

"Will you take me to see it?"

Terry nodded briskly.

"How would you like to go next Sunday?" he asked. "It is quite a distance, and we could take our lunch and stay all day."

Ruth's face glowed.

"Better than that," she replied. "Let's start in the afternoon and cook our supper outside and come back by moonlight."

When the two men returned from the cañon, Sackett's cheeks burned with excitement. He hurried toward the garden.

"Benson says it's the best sand he ever saw," he declared with enthusiasm.

His remarks passed unnoticed by the couple peering at the ground.

"I say I believe I've struck oil," he exclaimed. "What's the matter with you people? Can't you hear?"

Ruth jumped to her feet and grasped her father's arm. Directing his gaze downward, she pointed with her finger.

"Look!" she cried.

Sackett looked.

"I don't see anything but a weed," he said. "Why don't you pull it out instead of just staring at it?"

"A weed!" cried Ruth indignantly. "Why, dad, you're getting nearsighted. Stoop down and look. It's my cucumber."

CHAPTER XXIII.

PARADISE TO INFERNO.

YOUTH and October sunshine; nature smiling from the rocks and laughing through the throats of song-birds and the coming of the woman to make the paradise complete.

Terry and Ruth walked together in silence until they came suddenly upon the first profaning touch of man's hand in the wilderness. From a cleared space upon the cañon side, a massive derrick raised its head above a bleached thicket of dry mustard. Ruth stopped and stared.

"It seems a shame to spoil all this with an ugly oil well," she exclaimed, pointing up the hillside. Then she added admiringly as a white column of smoke drifted upward: "I had no idea they had done so much."

"Your father didn't lose any time," said Terry. "If we had come here when we first planned there wouldn't have been anything here but a pile of lumber. Now they are down nearly three thousand feet and have one big reservoir built and another half done. Your father is giving the drillers a bonus for speeding things up, and they are sure doing it by the looks of things."

"I never saw father so excited before," said Ruth. "His interest in the well and that herd of fancy cattle he bought last week has made a different man of him entirely. He looks ten years younger at least."

When they arrived beneath the spreading branches of a big sycamore, Terry stopped and placed the basket on the ground and they sat down on the dry grass. Ruth looked curiously at the ring on the boy's finger as he sat with his hands crossed over his knees.

"Where did you get your ring?" she asked.

Terry started and looked down at the swastika. A dull-red flush spread over his freckled cheeks as he related the circumstances attending the finding of the princess's ring.

"So you think it has brought you luck?"

"I'm sure of it," he returned quickly. "I've never had such luck before in all my life." He stopped and looked keenly at Ruth. "By the way," he asked, "have you ever been in Pico? I've meaning to ask you."

"We came through there on our way to the ranch," Ruth replied. "Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered," Terry explained

awkwardly. "It was silly, I know, but I just thought—well, you see you kind of reminded me of the Indian princess the first time I saw you, and I never could find out who she was."

Ruth laughed.

"I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you," she said. "Although I am getting almost as brown as an Indian, I never was a princess."

"You are my princess," thought Terry; but as he raised his eyes to Ruth's face, the words stuck in his throat. The girl changed the subject at once.

"What did you do before you came to the ranch?" she asked.

"A little of everything and not enough of anything," Terry replied soberly.

Ruth sat up with interest.

"Tell me about it," she said. "Begin at the beginning."

Terry was silent for a moment. Then he said slowly:

"I don't know very much about the beginning. The first thing I can remember was an orphan asylum in San Francisco with a big stone wall running around it. I used to stand at the gate looking through at the other children playing outside. Then I began to feel shut in. After that the wall wasn't high enough to hold me. I climbed over one night and struck out for myself. I was about eight years old then, and I started in selling papers on the streets. One day an old man came along and talked to me, and after that I used to see him every night and sell him a paper. He used to tell me about his grandson who he said was about my age. For a long time I didn't see him, and when he came again he asked me if I would like to go and live at his house. The little boy had died, he said, and I guess he was lonesome; so I went with him to his house, and he bought me a lot of clothes and sent me to school.

"I lived with him until I was fifteen years old. Then he died. When his son-in-law came to live in the house, he gave me a hundred dollars and told me to go to work. After that I began to roam around, doing first one thing and then another. I went to night school when I could, and I had to fight pretty hard for everything.

Then I guess I formed the habit of fighting and I took it up as a business. For a while I liked it, and everybody said I was a 'comer.' Then I began to see what a crooked game it was, and as I always wanted to be a 'square-shooter,' as the boys say, I quit and came to Pico on a freight, landing with only a dime and a desire to do something worth while."

Ruth listened intently while Terry talked.

"Don't you ever find it dull on a ranch after what you've been through?" she asked. "Don't you ever long for excitement and want to get back into your old life?"

Terry shook his head. He could not conceive of any place being dull where Ruth was. But of course he couldn't tell her that, so he said:

"No, it is never dull to me. I always liked the country. I like to plant things on land that never had a chance before and watch them grow. That seemed like it was worth while to me."

He looked earnestly at the girl and his brow wrinkled in a little frown.

"You speak as if you thought there was no chance for excitement on a ranch. Did you ever stop to think that there might be a great deal of it about here?"

Ruth was interested at once.

"No," she replied. "I can't see a chance. What could there be exciting about living in Mocking Bird Cañon?"

Terry hastened to explain.

"Well, for one thing," he said, "there is the San Miguel. They have the reputation of furnishing quite a bit of excitement at times for lots of poor devils. Then there are the Mexicans. You see we are pretty close, and they are beginning to stir up trouble. Between the ranch and the greasers a farmer around here never knows from day to day just what he has."

Ruth considered the possibility hopefully for a moment, then she said in a regretful tone:

"I can't see much chance of our having any excitement. Father owns his property, so of course there is no chance of his having any difficulty with the ranch, and outside of stealing a few of his beans, I guess

there isn't much probability of his having any trouble with the Mexicans."

Ruth's ignorance of local conditions made Terry hasten to enlighten her.

"The ranch and the greasers make a bad combination," Terry affirmed soberly. "Your father's owning his land makes it all the worse if the San Miguel wants it. The ranchers around here will tell you all kinds of stories of how Klune gets hold of land he wants. I'll bet if Mr. Sackett strikes oil it won't be long until he will have some trouble with the ranch.

"It is hard to believe that about Mr. Klune," said Ruth. "He seems to me like a very interesting man. I meet him almost every day when I'm in town, and several times he has taken me out with him in his car when he drives over the ranch. He seems greatly interested in the place, and he has told me a lot of how some day he means to develop it."

Terry's hatred of Klune increased as he noted the girl's evident interest in the ranch manager.

"If Klune has such big ideas of developing the ranch, why doesn't he get busy? He has the chance of a lifetime. Instead of that he sits tight and blames it all on Masters. All the while he is feathering his own nest and using Masters's money and influence to do it. There is a lot of property around here that the San Miguel has the credit of stealing that they don't pay taxes on. Klune pays them for he owns the land."

Terry paused and the scowl deepened on his face.

"I can't figure him out," he said at last. "He's playing some game besides just stealing land. I think he is double-crossing James Masters in more ways than one. He tried his best to ruin Myron, and I believe he framed up the accident at the beach. His secretary was the one who filled Myron up and then dared him to go in the surf. José Vigas is his right-hand man now, and Benson says he is doing all Klune's dirty work. Maybe he has always done it. You can't tell. And José tried to kill Myron twice.

"How was that?" Ruth asked quickly.

Terry related the incidents surrounding

the tragic death of Reinita, telling Ruth of José's oath to be revenged upon the family of Masters. Then he concluded:

"And when a woman beat him, and he saw that she was making a man out of Myron, he tried to get rid of the woman. That is why Benson is afoot to-day. Klune doesn't want Myron to be a man for some reason or other, and I have an idea I know why, though of course I'm only guessing."

As Ruth said nothing, Terry went on:

"You see Masters has a daughter, and it is just possible Klune is figuring on some day becoming a member of the family. Myron said Klune was always asking him about his sister, and seemed very anxious to meet her. Then, as Masters's son-in-law, and with Myron out of the way, or disgraced, he could go ahead with his plans for development and get all the credit and perhaps inherit all the property."

"Have you heard that Mr. Klune is trying to do this?" asked Ruth quickly.

Terry shook his head. "No," he answered. "I'm only guessing. I don't know anything about Masters's daughter. I have never even seen her."

"I think you are prejudiced," Ruth observed. "You don't like Mr. Klune, and you imagine him guilty of all manner of frightful things. But I can't believe it, that's all."

A wall seemed suddenly to have been reared between them, and the conversation became rather stilted as the shadows lengthened in the cañon. Far away an owl hooted dismally, and the girl moved nearer to Terry's side as he built the fire between two flat rocks and fanned the blaze softly with his cap.

"It is kind of lonesome up here, isn't it?" Ruth observed, more cordially.

The blaze sprang up through the dry mesquite and dispelled the atmosphere of gloom which enveloped them.

"It's the loneliest time of the day," replied Terry. "Did you ever notice that you are apt to get blue when you are alone at dusk?"

A gentle breeze rustled the dry leaves about them and the fire crackled merrily. Terry squatted by the blaze, feeding dry sticks until it burned down into a small bed

of glowing coals. Then he went to the basket and produced a blackened coffee-pot and a small frying-pan. Ruth watched him measure the coffee with his eye and fill the pot from the canteen and place it over the coals.

There was just bacon and eggs, coffee, and bread toasted over the coals on a stick; yet no *chef* could have pleased their palates more. Ruth had never cared for bacon and eggs particularly. Now it seemed she couldn't get enough.

"It's wonderful," she exclaimed, munching a crisp slice of bacon. "I had no idea a human being could eat so much. Why, we've made away with a dozen eggs!"

They sat by the fire after supper looking into the coals and talking only at intervals. Ruth moved closer to Terry's side as darkness crowded nearer the fire and the wail of a coyote sounded from the brush.

"I wonder what it is about firelight that makes people quiet," she said at last. "We haven't said a word for fully five minutes."

Terry roused himself from his contemplation of the embers.

"It's the pictures in the coals, I guess," he answered. "I've squatted by a fire for hours, looking at them and dreaming that they were real."

"What kind of a picture do you see now?" Ruth asked. "Do you mind telling me?"

A crooked little smile played over Terry's face and he hesitated.

"You'd only laugh if I told you," he said.

"I promise not to laugh," and Ruth leaned closer. "Please tell me."

Terry looked fixedly into the fire.

"I can see a little bungalow with trees and flowers in the yard and a fence running around it with vines growing all over it."

"Is that all?" asked Ruth softly, when he stopped and hesitated.

Terry shook his head.

"There's a woman standing on the steps holding a little kiddie in her arms that looks like me. There's another one hanging on her skirt that looks like her." A tiny flame leaped up and under the consuming heat—the coals snapped and set-

tled into a shapeless mass. Terry smiled faintly.

"There goes my bungalow," he said. "It always tumbles to pieces."

"Some day maybe it won't," rejoined Ruth in a low voice. "Then you will be very happy when your dreams come true."

The ridge to the eastward was lighted by faint streaks of silver, and when the great round moon peeped over the crest of the hill, it looked down upon a youth and a maiden seated close together by the burned-out embers of a dying camp-fire, gazing intently into the graying coals. Together they watched the transfiguration of the cañon, and as the rocks and trees crept out from the retreating curtain of darkness, Ruth suggested with reluctance:

"I'm afraid we should be starting home or father will be worrying about what has become of us."

Down the winding trail they walked, keeping close together to protect themselves from the scraggly bushes which grew over the path, and Terry was obliged at times to put his arm about the girl's waist to prevent her from falling upon the loose stones. When they reached the oil well, Terry stopped abruptly and pointed to a lonely figure silhouetted against the background of pale moonlight.

"It's the driller," whispered Ruth.

Terry shook his head.

"It may be," he answered, "but I don't think so. They don't work a night shift on Sunday. I'm going up and find out," he added quickly. "Will you wait here for me?"

"I'm going too!" exclaimed Ruth.

"It's no place for you up there."

"Then it's no place for you either. We'll go together or we won't go at all," said Ruth.

Terry saw that it was useless to argue, so he reluctantly consented.

"Keep close behind me," he whispered.

"Don't make any noise."

Silently they crept up the trail leading to the well and soon reached the shadows of the derrick within a few steps of the motionless figure. Taking Ruth's hand, Terry led her around the building.

"I want to get on the other side," he whispered, "where I can see his face."

Keeping within the shadow of the overhanging roof, they reached the corner of the tool-house and looked out into the bright moonlight. The man was only a few feet away. He was small in stature and clad in loose-fitting clothes. He wore a cap jammed down over his face. In his hand he carried a small bucket.

For some time he stood looking at the lights of the ranch-house which gleamed faintly in the ravine. Then he stooped to the little drain and scooped up a bucket of soft mud from the ditch. As the light fell full upon his face, Terry's grasp tightened on Ruth's arm, then relaxed as the silent figure shuffled toward the edge of the cañon and disappeared in the darkness.

"What a terrible face!" whispered Ruth. "Do you know who he was?"

"That was José Vidas," answered Terry. "He may be crazy, but he is not too crazy to be of use yet. Klune is getting anxious to know how the oil well is coming along, and what kind of sand your father is getting. Sunday night was a good time to find out."

Ruth turned angrily about.

"I'm sick of hearing you talk about Mr. Klune," she exclaimed. "I don't think you know what you are saying. I don't know why you dislike him, and I do not care. I like him, and he is coming to see me."

"You'll find out I'm right," Terry retorted, his jealousy mounding at Ruth's words. "You'll see that whatever he wants he will take."

"That is the kind of man I like," Ruth flashed back, and marched off in the darkness.

Terry left her with her father on the porch, and after telling Sackett about finding José at the oil well, he bade them good night and walked to his room in the tank-house. Throwing himself on his bed he watched the moonbeams pierce the thick curtain of vines and creep across the floor, while he heard Ruth's voice whisper: "I like him, and he is coming to see me."

Klune was a crook. He was trying to rob Sackett of everything he had, even his

daughter. But how could he make her see it? Klune had a way about him women liked.

A bright ray of light flashed across the floor and mingled with the moonlight for a second, then disappeared. Terry jumped to his feet and walking to the door, watched the lights of an automobile coming down the hill. Then he heard the sound of Klune's voice and the scraping of a chair on the porch.

For hours it seemed to him, Terry lay on his bed listening to the faint hum of the voices until they mingled with his dreams and he tossed about in the throes of a horrible nightmare.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TESTING KLUNE.

NOTHING was the same, Terry reflected bitterly as he sat on the steps of the tank-house and gazed moodily out into the moonlight. Indoors Ruth was singing, but even her voice sounded different. She had been away a great deal during the last few days, with Klune probably. Yesterday she didn't come into the garden at all. He looked at the hill road, and his brow darkened as two lights appeared over the crest.

When the auto drew up at the door, he saw two men climb out and walk up the steps. The singing ceased abruptly, and he heard Ruth greet the visitors. Only one of the men entered the house. The other waited without, walking restlessly up and down. A girl in white came down the steps and disappeared with the man into the shadows. As Terry looked after the departing figures, he saw Sackett approaching.

"Will you come inside for a little while?" he asked. "I'd like to have some one else hear what Carston has to say, and Billy has gone out."

Terry followed Sackett into the house. When they arrived in the little sitting-room, Carston rose and came forward, smiling.

"Mr. Carston, this is Mr. Terry," Sackett introduced, turning up the light which

was burning low, and removing the big paper shade.

Carston bowed gracefully.

"I have had the pleasure before," he said. "I am glad to see Mr. Terry again." He surveyed Terry intently with his round blue eyes and Terry noticed that the lawyer was as pink-faced and prosperous-looking as ever.

"Now Mr. Carston," said Sackett, when the lawyer and Terry were seated, "we are ready to hear what you have to say."

Carston cleared his throat and looked at Terry.

"You will understand, Mr. Terry, that the matter of which I am going to speak of to Mr. Sackett is entirely confidential and strictly speaking, only between counsel and client."

Terry nodded.

"I understand," he said shortly. Carston was beginning to rub him the wrong way already. He moved his chair away to free himself of the scent of perfume which enveloped the lawyer.

Carston regarded his white fingers thoughtfully. Then he turned to Sackett and began to speak.

"I am more than sorry, Mr. Sackett," he drawled, "to be obliged to inform you that your title is not all you could hope for. Do not misunderstand me to say it is bad, for it is not. You have a valid claim to the property, but there are many technicalities involved which render your claim extremely faulty. In this way it is no different from many others I have examined in which the men who took up the original grants were very careless in their proving. While I would not go so far as to say that you may not be able to straighten out the irregularities which I have discovered in Sawyer's homestead claim, still that procedure would be, to say the least, fraught with tedious litigation and great expense."

"Well, I must confess, Mr. Carston, this is a surprise to me," said Sackett, "for I have heard that Mr. Sawyer was a very careful man."

"Quite right, too, Mr. Sackett," replied the lawyer. "He was probably more careful than the average, but entirely ignorant of the technicalities of the law. Without

doubt he did his best, and had every reason to suppose his title was unclouded when he transferred it to you."

Sackett was silent for a moment, then he asked:

"What is the nature of the defect? Is the matter so serious that I may not be able to straighten out the tangle?"

Carston lowered his voice to a more confidential tone and leaned forward.

"I could explain much better to you in my office," he said, "where I have my maps. When you come in I will be glad to go over the matter with you if you so desire. However, it is purely a question of business policy, Mr. Sackett. Mr. Klune asked me to give you an opinion, and I am therefore advising you, I sincerely hope, in your own interests. The cost of clearing your title, added to the purchase price of the property, would bring it to a figure which would be prohibitive to any investor."

"What would you advise me to do, then?" asked Sackett.

"I should advise you to sell; to accept any reasonable offer for your property. Let the new owner assume all risk."

"But who would be foolish enough to make an offer knowing these things?" questioned Sackett. "Even if I were disposed to sell?"

Carston's voice sank lower.

"I talked it over with Mr. Klune," he said. "He thought he might be able to interest Mr. Masters in buying the property to fill out two odd ranch sections to the west of you. He only heard from Mr. Masters last evening, and the owner of the ranch is willing to take the property off your hands at the original purchase price of eight thousand dollars. That will get you out in pretty good shape."

"But I have spent over two thousand on the place already, and that is not counting the oil well," Sackett rejoined quickly.

"Your oil well is only a prospect, Mr. Sackett. It is purely problematical whether you will strike oil, and experience about here is all to the contrary."

Sackett considered the offer for a moment. Then he said:

"If there is money in it for Masters there is money in it for me."

"Not necessarily. There is a great difference between your position and that of James Masters. The owner of the San Miguel maintains a large legal department of which I am the local head, consequently he could perfect the title at a minimum of expense. Also the land is worth more to him than it would be to any one else for the reason that it lies adjacent to his own lands and would thus enable him to lease to better advantage."

Carston ceased speaking for a moment and tapped the arm of the chair thoughtfully with his white fingers.

"Then there is another thing, Mr. Sackett," he resumed, "that I did not mention, and that is the possibility or rather I should say probability of trouble with the Mexicans. They have been causing a great deal of annoyance during the past few weeks, and they appear to be getting bolder every day. Now the ranch, with its large force of employees, would be in a much better position to protect its interests than you would be in your isolated location out here."

Sackett leaned back in his chair in deep thought.

"There may be something in what you say, Mr. Carston," he said at last. "I'll think it over."

"In the mean time I'm afraid Mr. Masters may change his mind," demurred the lawyer. He leaned forward again and spoke with great earnestness. "My dear sir, if I were you I would not let this chance slip. To-morrow it may be gone."

"Are you prepared to close the matter to-night?" asked Sackett.

Carston nodded and drew a paper from his pocket.

"I have here," he said, "a quit-claim of your interest in the property herein listed. When you sign it in my presence as a notary public, the money is yours."

Sackett extended his hand for the paper. Terry watched him take it with disappointment written clearly on every line of his face. Sackett bent low over the deed. Then he exclaimed suddenly:

"Who is this Mr. Thomason mentioned

as the purchaser? I thought I was selling to the San Miguel."

"That is merely a matter of form," answered Carston quickly. "You see there is at the present time a very strong although wholly unwarranted prejudice existing among the farmers of the county against any further acquisitions of property by the San Miguel Ranch Company. So in order to protect the interests of Mr. Masters in this regard, all lands which have been acquired for some time past have been held in other names to avoid the arousing of popular feeling and also unjust discrimination in the assessment of the ranch holdings."

"That is rather clever of Masters," said Sackett. Then he added: "However, it is immaterial to me to whom I sell if I decide to do so. I'll consult my brother, Carston, and let you know my answer within a few days."

Carston accepted the deed with great reluctance and stood standing close by Sackett's chair.

"I can assure you, Mr. Sackett," he said very earnestly, "that although I am retained by the ranch I could give no better advice were you the best friend I had in the world. I should be glad if you would come down to my office where we can go over the matter with Mr. Klune. He came with me to-night, but he wandered away with your daughter before I had a chance to bring him inside."

Carston shook Sackett warmly by the hand and bowed to Terry. Then he moved to the door.

While the ranch lawyer talked with Sackett, Klune walked with Ruth to the rustic bench beneath the willow tree.

"What's the idea of your burying yourself in a God-forsaken hole like this," he began abruptly, "when you could be so much happier somewhere else?"

"I am happy here," said Ruth. "I do not understand what you mean."

"You are not happy here," Klune contradicted. "You may think you are, but you are not. You couldn't be. You belong in a better world than this."

Ruth laughed softly.

"What world do I belong in?" she asked.

"You belong in the world of bright lights and laughing faces. The world of music and lace, where eyes sparkle and hearts are light. You are not a farmer's daughter. I saw that the first time I met you. You could never be happy here. Don't you ever long for the city with its roar of excitement, its luxuries and its continual round of pleasures, always new?"

"Sometimes," admitted Ruth seriously. "I used to get homesick for the city, but lately I'm becoming quite accustomed to my new surroundings. I guess I am getting to be a regular country girl."

"That would be a crime," exclaimed Klune, "against all natural laws. There is a great world waiting just outside, holding out its hands to you, offering its treasure to make you happy."

He leaned closer and his voice vibrated with suppressed feeling: "Let me be your guide into the new kingdom which is waiting for its queen. You may think it is foolish for me to speak as I do, when I have known you no longer than I have. But it seems to me, Ruth, as if I had known you all my life. I am impetuous, if knowing what I want is impetuous. I make up my mind quickly. I've always been that way. I do it in business, and I've found my first judgment of a man or woman is my best. When I know what I want I go after it. I knew that I wanted you the first time I looked into your eyes, and I have never wanted you so much, or anything as much as I want you now."

Ruth started to reply, but he went on hurriedly:

"Listen to me before you speak. I am not a poor man. I can give you everything you want. I have dreamed great dreams, and I shall make those dreams come true."

He paused suddenly and leaned closer. "Listen," he went on, "all about us is a great tract of land lying dormant awaiting only the master hand to cause it to burst forth into fruit and flower. The broad acres of the San Miguel, now barren and fallow, will spring at my touch into a garden of peace and plenty. Then I shall be rich and powerful, the most talked of man in all the southland."

Ruth watched him with shining eyes. There was something masterful about him. He was big, dominant. Terry's suspicion of Klune seemed to her suddenly as very vague and ill founded. Klune loved her, and was asking her to be his wife.

She paused abruptly in her reasoning. Had Klune asked her to be his wife? She remembered Terry's guess as to the man's motive. Was Terry right?

She resolved to try a chance shot. She raised her eyes and met Klune's.

"What about Miss Masters?" she hazarded.

Klune drew in his breath sharply.

"What do you know of her?" he asked quickly, and without waiting for the girl to answer, he went on, speaking rapidly.

"If you have heard anything concerning Miss Masters and myself, I can assure you it is idle gossip. I have never even seen James Masters's daughter."

"And you never had any idea of marrying her?" persisted Ruth, a sudden consciousness stealing over her that Klune's words did not ring true.

He rose abruptly and walked slowly up and down. Then he said in a low voice:

"Love and marriage are often very separate and distinct things. It sometimes happens that we cannot find both in one person. But is that any reason why we should not marry if it suits our purpose, and still love? If I should marry another it would not be because I loved her, but for reasons which are my own. I am not saying that I intend to marry Masters's daughter or any one else. I am only trying to tell you that I love you." He dropped to the bench and leaned closer.

"Why should we bother our heads about Cenith Masters or any one else?" he said softly, "when we have the opportunity which comes to people but once in a lifetime to enjoy happiness together. I will never tire of you, Ruth. All my life you will be the only one I love."

"Even though you were married to another!"

Klune paused abruptly.

"Don't be foolish," he said, "and let the chance of real happiness slip through your fingers on account of the old-fash-

ioned ideas of what is right and what is wrong. Love makes anything right."

Ruth clenched her hands and turned away her face. Klune construed her attitude as one of weakening.

"Listen," he said. "I have it in my power to save your father's property here. If you say but one word, I will. I can swing the ranch's influence behind him and put him on his feet with more than enough to support him all his life. Would it make you happy to see him turned out without a dollar? Don't hesitate, girl. If you don't love me now as I love you—"

Ruth rose quickly and faced Klune.

"Don't profane the word any longer," she cried. "I only wanted to see how far you would go. How thoroughly contemptible you are! Why, if I told my father what you have told me, he would kill you. You insult me almost within the sound of his voice. You think to bend me to your will by threatening him.

She drew herself up proudly and poised rigid, looking into Klune's eyes.

"There isn't a thing in the world I can

liken you to," she said slowly, "without insulting it, but I will tell you that you are, in addition to everything else, a coward, and that I am not afraid of you, no matter what you do."

She surveyed the silent figure on the bench with hatred and disgust shining from her eyes. Then she turned and walked to the house. Klune sprang to his feet and hurried after her.

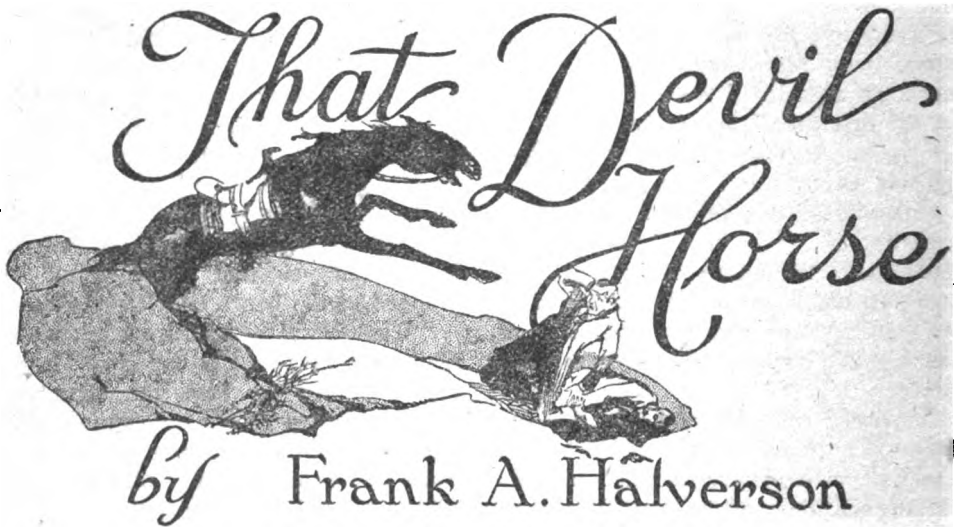
"I'm sorry I said that," he said, catching hold of her arm. "I will help your father no matter what happens. But I won't give you up. I'll give up anything else first." He caught her in his arms and held her close. "I want you, girl, and I'm going to get you if it costs me everything."

Ruth struggled in his arms. The door opened and Carston came down the steps. Klune released the girl at once and took a step forward.

"Ready to go?" he asked coolly.

Carston nodded, and Klune walked to the car in silence while the lawyer stood looking after Ruth as she ran up the steps and disappeared within the house.

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,



SHERIFF RINGER of Greenland County, whistled uncomprehendingly. A look of scorn was traceable on his shrewd, hard face. For the last fifteen minutes he had been listening to the stories

told by the coal mining delegation. Big Stanley, a Polish worker, had been doing most of the talking. Others had broken into the narrative, yet when Sheriff Ringer had heard the whole thing it established

the fact that the miners of Coalville and of Stanley's boarding-house had been held up the night before.

The robbers had come in a big automobile, and they had impersonated Sheriff Ringer. They had told Big Stanley that they were officers of the law, and that they were searching for firearms. In this manner they had ransacked and robbed the house by planting a revolver in one of the boarder's trunks; they had taken all the money as security and placed the men under a bogus arrest with instructions to come to the sheriff's office the following morning. The foreigners were now demanding their money.

Before the day was half spent three other mining delegations called on the sheriff and told the same story. They had all been robbed of their savings by a band of auto bandits who had claimed to be the sheriff and two deputies. It had been done legally. The foreigners not being citizens, were not permitted to have firearms in their homes. On the pretext of searching for weapons had the robbery been conducted.

The auto bandits had selected the boarding-houses where the foreigners, who were afraid to put their savings in local banks, were reputed to have the most cash hoarded in their trunks. Big Stanley said that they had taken "one inch of twenty-dollar bills."

"Got 'em all?" asked Sheriff Ringer shrewdly.

"Sure," replied Big Stanley. "Clean 'em out everybody."

"Didn't see the auto number, did you?" inquired the officer guardedly.

"Number?" questioned Stanley. "What do you mean?"

The sheriff shook his head. The robbers had gotten off clean. Their victims had been too ignorant to question the legality of the affair; they had been too excited to look for any distinguishing marks or to notice any clues. There wasn't a thing to work on.

"Boobs!" said the sheriff with fine scorn. "You've been fleeced properly. Get out! I'll see what I can do."

When they had gone Sheriff Ringer

winked his eye quickly at one of the deputies. The latter looked wise.

"Pretty mess," commented the officer. "Not a shred of information to follow. Guess I'll put the State police on this case. They're so clever, let them find the auto robbers. Old Captain Eams will locate nothing but air when he tries to run the case down; and his troopers will be chasing shadows and rainbows."

A murmur of assent came from the men in the sheriff's office. The State troopers were not popular with them.

Cranking his flivver and receiving a chugging reply from the pony of to-day's officer, Sheriff Ringer drove toward the constabulary barracks. But hardly had he reached the main roadway before he saw Trooper Morgan mounted on Black Ned—the devil horse of the troop—coming at breakneck speed in a cloud of dust. While yet far away, the sheriff began flagging Black Ned and Trooper Morgan. The horse and flivver met and stopped in a swirl of sand.

"Morgan," said the sheriff solemnly, "that horse ought to have killed you before this, but lady luck must surely be perched upon your shoulder."

"What," exclaimed Trooper Morgan with the blandest smile creasing his weather-tanned face, "this li'l hoss! He's as gentle as a lamb and as lovin' as a vamp. Why, sheriff, your remarks are plumb insultin' to his friendly nature."

"Yeah," grinned the sheriff sarcastically, "he's some dove."

Black Ned, spirited and full of life, was prancing around the sheriff's flivver. Trooper Morgan spoke to him soothingly. The horse obeyed for a brief spell only to dance around once more a bit later.

"Well, sheriff," laughed Trooper Morgan, "Ned thinks you've been speeding, and he's wantin' me to get your license number."

A quick curse broke over the sheriff's lips.

"There, ol' boy," cooed the trooper, taking his note-book out of his pocket and marking the number down on the fly-leaf. "I got him."

Black Ned quieted down instantly. He

knew from past experiences that his master wanted the number of every car that they stopped on the highway. He had done his duty.

"'Course," laughed Trooper Morgan, "I humor him; he doesn't know you are an officer."

Black Ned had his eye on the sheriff's means of locomotion. It was a wicked eye, full of life and animation. His black head was bobbing up and down while he pranced around in a lively two-step. His sleek, shining flanks, black as coal, were aquiver, and the muscles of his long, speedy legs were straining to be off. His every action indicated speed. Young life stirred in his veins. He was impatiently waiting to be set free. The open road, sun-kissed, called him. He wanted to respond, but Trooper Morgan's hand on the bridle rein held him against his will, because in the rider he recognized his only master.

Morgan had conquered him, and Morgan was the only one who could handle Black Ned. His fame was such that in Greenland County, Black Ned was given a wide berth and a clean right-of-way wherever he happened to be. "The Devil Horse" was what the foreigners called him. The name stuck because it was descriptive of his nature. The man-hunting game of the State Trooper's work appealed to Black Ned in the same manner as it did to Trooper Morgan. Both loved the chase, the fight, and the possible capture of the criminal at the end of the trail.

If the guilty offender offered a stiff resistance, so much the better, and, therefore, when Black Ned finally received the loose rein—his signal to go—he accepted the privilege with a wild burst of speed.

"Steady, Ned," whispered Trooper Morgan, "the day's young yet. From what the sheriff told me, we're likely to have a long shift. For, old boy, you may have to match your speed with a high-powered auto before this day is done, because I reckon the captain will be telling us to be on the lookout for that party coming into the city from a marauding trip."

But Trooper Morgan's surmise did not prove correct until late that night; then a message reached him at the Snake Hollow

hotel. It was brief, just simply: "Stop Car 96006. Arrest occupants."

"Huh!" mused Morgan, saddling Black Ned. "96006—what? What State? Well, it doesn't matter; needle in a haystack, anyway."

Black Ned rubbed his nose up and down against the dark-gray uniform of the trooper as if answering his query.

"Yes, ol' hoss," drawled Morgan, "if 96006 contains those auto-robbers we'll have a sweet time. You and me against a bunch of them. You can bet, ol' scout, that they're a bad lot. Plumb handy with the run an' real quick in usin' it."

Trooper Morgan, a Western cowboy who had drifted from the open plains to the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains, always used his Western dialect in speaking to Black Ned. It seemed to have a soothing influence upon the restless spirit of the horse. And, too, the softly spoken words of the trooper could put the speed of the wind into the fleet legs of Black Ned, while a command from the trooper would transform the horse into a biting, shrieking charger which had earned him the name of "The Devil Horse."

"I wonder what that 96006 party is wanted for," speculated Trooper Morgan, taking up his post duty by the forks of the road. "The captain must have information that they're headin' in this way. Reckon somebody's got their number, and that's why we were routed out of the hay to get them, ol' boy."

Black Ned whinnied.

"Action; plenty of it," continued the trooper, "is what tickles your wild soul, Ned. Don't you ever get enough?"

Black Ned danced around the trooper in a circle. He pawed the dirt, whinnied, reared, and kicked. In the white moonlight that gilded the gray mists of the valley road, he appeared as a sinister shadow of blackness hovering around the lone State Trooper.

"Ned, listen here," commanded Morgan. Ned obeyed. "If that car passes us, we can't stop it, nor can we catch it. This right-hand road leads across to the main highway. It's rough, too bumpy and holey for a car. For us, it's a cinch. It's only

two miles straight over, whereas the Lincoln Highway is about six or seven, 'cause it turns and twists in getting around these hills. That's our bet—this short cut. Listen, Ned."

Through the golden-hued setting of moonlight on the hills there came a sound that struck a thrill to the trooper's ears. It was a deep, vibrating drone. It grew louder. The hills caught the sound and megaphoned it to the trooper, echoing.

"Somebody comin' as if the devil were chasin' 'em," said Morgan quietly.

The purr of the great car in the midnight stillness came on apace with the echoes that it aroused from the shady nooks and sleepy moon-kissed dells of the mountain road. The roar increased; a bright spear of white light mingled with the moonbeams above the trees of the wooded hills and gilded the roadway in a broad swath of illumination that darted and danced in its onward rush. Nearer it came to Trooper Morgan and Black Ned.

"Only two kinds of men ride that way," mused the trooper, "fools and criminals. Watch 'em, Ned."

With a swish the great car passed the trooper and his horse. It was useless to attempt to see the number on the front of the car in the glare of the headlights. Trooper Morgan bent low, shielding his eyes from the light, and so caught a fleeting glimpse of the rear license number from the red tail-light. Indistinctly he noted 96006. The State initials seemed to be plastered with mud, which accounted, doubtless, for their not being mentioned in his orders. Anyway, it was his car, the one that he was to stop and to arrest the occupants of. The roar of its powerful motor came back to the trooper as if laughing at him. It sang the song of the open road as it sped away farther and farther into the distance.

"Go, Ned!"

Morgan had leaped on to Black Ned's saddle, and the wild liberated horse cleared the road in a mighty spring. Up the long hilly trail he raced like a black shadow in the night. The trooper stuck close to his back so that the overhanging branches would not sweep him off. Black Ned, sure-

footed, darted forward with incredible speed. Some instinct told him that Trooper Morgan wanted to intercept the speeding car. He needed no urging. On the crest of the hill the car's spot-light was visible far to the right. He chuckled.

"We've got 'em, old boy," laughed the trooper. "The main road makes a big detour, and they're out at the farthest point right now. They've got to come in on us and pass before we get down, which can't be done. And if the ol' red lantern's still by the rock, I reckon we'll have another look at their license number, eh, boy?"

Black Ned neither paused nor tarried when the rein was loose and the road open before him. Down the sloping incline of the soft, leafy road he traveled with the speed of the wind. In a few minutes he was on the main highway and ahead of the speeding car. Its drone and purr could be heard in the distance.

It took a few seconds for the trooper to find the red lantern and to light it, and almost at the same time he unearthed a wooden tripod from which he soon had the red danger signal swinging.

"Pretty clever stunt, this," laughed the trooper. "First, one stands by the Snake Hollow road to see the speeders. Having seen them, one rides over the hill and swings the red light. Bet you, ol' boy, if the captain knew this stunt he would have some of the other boys pulling it."

The speeding car appeared. It bore toward the red light. Trooper Morgan heard a faint shout of warning. The brakes were applied and the car stopped a few feet away from the red lantern. A big, muscular man sprang out on the road.

"Hell's Bell's! A trick!" yelled the autoist; but the trooper's heavy revolver was shoved against his back.

"Ask the rest to come out," commanded the trooper quietly.

"Pile out," bawled the big autoist. The occupants complied sullenly.

"What's the idea?" demanded the big man.

"That auto number," replied the trooper. "The captain of the State Police wants you-all."

Trooper Morgan thought he had the six

autoists pretty well covered with his six-shooter, but in an instant he realized that his vigilance had a loophole, because just before a wicked blow struck him behind the ear, he fancied he heard a somewhat familiar voice hissing, "D——n you, Morgan!" He was carried down. A strong arm pinioned him to the road. He fought to get up, but the odds were too great; his best endeavors were of no avail.

"Brain him!" yelled some one.

Trooper Morgan, the master of many battles, sensed that this was a desperate outfit. Therefore, he fought in tooth and fang fashion to keep down so that no one could deal him the fatal blow. However, in the turmoil he heard a sound that chased a thrill of joy through his bruised body. It was a high, piercing whinney, Black Ned's battle cry.

"Come on, Ned," called the sorely pressed trooper.

Into the glare of the auto's headlight came Black Ned, a mad, shrieking, two-stepping terror.

"That devil horse!" cried the familiar voice who had issued the command to "brain Morgan."

Up-reared, his teeth snapping, Black Ned knocked the big autoist down: The steel-clad hoof giving him a blow that put him into the land of the fighter's quietus. With a moan he fell by the side of the road.

"Stop that devil!" shouted the men who were holding Trooper Morgan. "We'll give up. Stop him!"

"Whow, ol' fellow," cooed Morgan. "We've got 'em. They don't want your game."

Ned ceased his shrill trumpeting and vicious snapping while Trooper Morgan lined the men, hands up-raised in front of the car.

"Watch 'em!" commanded the trooper.

Black Ned took up his guard instantly. He pranced before the terror-stricken men as a thing of sinister vengeance. None of them dared to even move an inch for fear of the black terror.

By the side of the road Trooper Morgan was kneeling near the man who Black Ned had knocked out. His heart was still beat-

ing. Picking him up and carrying him to the car the trooper gave a gasp of surprise when the bright light shone on the insensible man's pale face.

It was Sheriff Ringer of Greenland County.

"What the—" ejaculated the trooper.

Small wonder that Trooper Morgan had thought the voice familiar that had given the command to kill him. But, why? Wasn't the sheriff to uphold the law? Wasn't he the one to bring lawbreakers to justice? On his breast there hung the badge of his honorable office! There must be some mistake—and yet his voice had ordered his men to finish the trooper. Was he, and this gang, the auto bandits? Was that the reason he had questioned the foreigners so closely and had smiled because there was no evidence to turn over to the State Troopers?

Leaving the men guarded by Black Ned, he stooped to examine more closely the license number. The number was plain enough 96006; instinctively he picked away the hardened mud caked over the State initials, and then he gasped—the plate was swung upside down. Instead of 96006 it should have read 90096.

With suddenly dawning understanding he took his note-book from his pocket. On the fly leaf was the number of the sheriff's flivver taken by him that morning. It was 90096. It was clear enough now. It would not have done for the bandit car to attract attention on the road by being without any license plate, so the sheriff, after removing the legal plate from the car, had simply obliterated the state initials of his flivver license with sticky clay mud, and reversed the plate.

Sheriff Ringer stirred and looked up just as Trooper Morgan had made this discovery.

"Morgan," whispered the sheriff, "that devil horse was my undoing."

"Well, I'll be whipped," drawled Trooper Morgan, "if this isn't like the book I once read of a man who was a doctor by day and a fiend by night; and Ringer, I reckon my li'l' hoss sort o' interfered with your game of being a sheriff by day and an auto bandit by night, eh?"

THE GENERAL UTILITY MAN

O H, I am the general utility man,
The finest invention since time began!
There's nothing about that I cannot do,
From darning a stocking to mending a shoe.
I take on myself all the cares of life,
And free every house of domestic strife.
I order your dinners, and bounce the cook;
I keep a strict eye on the grocer's book.
I spank the children, and cut their locks;
I tune the piano, and wind the clocks.
I fill up the lamps, and trim the wicks;
And, if you can't do it, I kill the chicks.

I wash the windows and sweep the floors;
I tend the furnace, and all the chores,
Whatever their kind, in the modern home
I cheerfully do from cellar to dome.
I know how to hammer a carpet-tack;
If so you would travel, I neatly pack.
I'm up in the gas-fitter's noble art;
I know how to run a naphtha-cart.
I've studied the science of chafing-dish,
And know how to cook whatever you wish.
I iron and press coats, collars, and pants,
And if you are blue I can sing and dance.

In matters of state I am on the fence;
For party or faction I've no prepense,
And vote as my boss shall incline to say
On every succeeding election-day.
If so you're a lady, a suffragette,
Your ballot at once you will straightway get,
And spite of the law which imposes a ban,
You can speak your will through your hired man.
I serve as a butler at suppers and teas,
And, if I am asked, can converse with ease
On any old point from the polar ridge
To the latest leads in the game of bridge.

I tennis and golf, I billiard and pool;
I'm a splendid man in a Sunday-school.
When burglars come I am bold and brave;
I'm quite an adept at the Marcelle wave.
I spin and tat, embroider and knit;
I've got quite a little of pretty wit;
And winter nights, when my work is done,
And leisure affords a good chance for fun,
I've a thousand tales all ready to tell
Of ghosts, and heroines 'neath their spell.
Apply as soon as you possibly can
To "C. Q. D., the Utility Man!"

Carlyle Smith.

The Night Horseman

by Max Brand

Author of "Clung," "Trallin'," "Children of the Night," etc.

A Sequel to "The Untamed"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MESSAGE.

BUCK DANIELS opened his eyes and sat bolt-upright in bed. He had dreamed the dream again and awakened before the end. If a shower of cold water had been dashed upon him he could not have rallied from sound slumber so suddenly. His first movement was to snatch his gun from under his mattress. The pressure of the butt against his palm was reassuring. It was better than the grip of his friend—a strong man.

It was the first gray of dawn, but it fell with power upon an old, dusty bridle that hung against the wall, and it made the steel glitter like a watchful eye. A great dryness held his throat and his big body shook with the pounding of his heart.

Presently he caught a faint and regular creaking of the stairs. Some one was mounting with an excessively cautious step.

Usually the crazy stairs that led up to this garret room of the Rafferty house creaked and groaned a protest at every footfall. Now the footfall paused at the head of the stairs, as when one stops to listen.

Daniels raised his revolver and leveled it on the door, but his hand was shaking

and the muzzle kept veering back and forth across the door. He seized his right hand with his left, and crushed it with a desperate pressure. The quivering of the two hands counteracted each other and he managed to keep some sort of a bead.

Now the step continued again, down the short hall. A hand fell on the knob of the door and pressed it slowly open. Against the deeper blackness of the hall beyond Buck saw a tall figure, hatless. His finger curved about the trigger, and still he did not fire. Even to his hysterical brain it occurred that Dan Barry would be wearing a hat—and moreover the form was tall.

"Buck!" called a guarded voice.

The muzzle of Daniels's revolver dropped; he threw the gun on his bed and stood up.

"Jim Rafferty!" he cried, with something like a groan in his voice. "What in the name of God are you doin' here at this hour?"

"Some one come here and banged on the door a while ago. Had a letter for you. Must have rid a long ways and come fast; while he was givin' me the letter at the door I heard his hoss pantin' outside. He wouldn't stay, but went right back. Here's the letter, Buck. Hope it ain't no bad news. Got a light here, ain't you?"

This story began in the *Argosy-Allstory Weekly* for September 18.

Daniels, taking the letter, kindled his lantern. By that light he read:

Dear Buck:

Last night at supper Dan found out where you are. In the morning he's leaving the ranch and we know that he intends to ride for Rafferty's place; he'll probably be there before noon. The moment you get this, saddle your horse and ride. Oh, Buck, why did you stay so close to us?

Relay your horses. Don't stop until you're over the mountains. Black Bart is well enough to take the trail and Dan will use him to follow you. You know what that means.

Ride, ride, ride!

KATE.

He crumpled up the paper and sank back upon the bed.

"Why did you stay so close?"

He had wondered at that himself many times in the past few days. Like the hunted rabbit, he expected to find safety under the very nose of danger. In a sort of daze he uncrumpled the note again and read the wrinkled writing word by word. He had caught the faintest breath of perfume from the paper. It was a small thing, but it made Buck Daniels drop his head and crush the paper against his face. At first his dazed brain caught only part of the note's significance. Then it dawned on him that the girl thought he had fled from the Cumberland Ranch through fear of Dan Barry.

Aye, there had been fear in it. Every day at the ranch he had shuddered at the thought that the destroyer might ride up on that devil of black silken grace, Satan. But every day he had convinced himself that even then Dan Barry remembered the past and was cursing himself for the ingratitude he had shown his old friend. Now the truth swept coldly home to Buck Daniels. Barry was as fierce as ever upon the trail, and Kate Cumberland thought that he—Buck Daniels—had fled like a cur from danger.

He seized his head between his hands and beat his knuckles against the corrugated flesh of his forehead. She had thought that!

Desire for action, action, action, beset him like thirst. To close with this devil, this wolf-man, to set his big fingers in the

smooth, almost girlish throat, to choke the yellow light out of those eyes—or else to die, but like a man proving his manhood before the girl.

Catching up his hat and his belt he rushed wildly from the room, thundered down the crazy stairs, and out to the stable.

Long Bess, the tall, bay mare, raised her aristocratic head above the side of the stall and whinnied. For answer he shook his fist at her and cursed insanely.

The saddle he jerked by one stirrup leather from the wall and flung it on her back, and when she cringed to the far side of the stall, he cursed her again, bitterly, and drew up the cinch with a lunge that made her groan. He did not wait to lead her to the door before mounting, but sprang into the saddle.

Here he whirled her about and drove home the spurs. Cruel usage, for Long Bess had never denied him the utmost of her speed and strength at the mere sound of his voice. Now, half-mad with fear and surprise, she sprang forward at full gallop, slipped and almost sprawled on the floor, and then thundered out of the door.

At once the soft sandy soil received and deadened the impact of her hoofs. Off she flew through the gray of the morning, soundless as a racing ghost.

Yet to Buck Daniels her fastest gait seemed slower than a walk. Already his thoughts were flying far before. Already he stood before the ranch house calling to Dan Barry. Aye, at the very door of the place they should meet and one of them must die.

CHAPTER XXXII.

VICTORY.

THE gray light which Daniels saw that morning hardly brightened as the day grew, for the sky was overcast. Wung Lu, his celestial, slant eyes now yellow with cold, built a fire on the big hearth in the living-room. It was a roaring blaze, for the wood was so dry that it flamed as though soaked in oil, and tumbled a mass of yellow fire up the chimney. So bright was the fire, indeed, that its

light quite overshadowed the meager day which looked in at the window, and every chair cast its shadow away from the hearth. Later on Kate Cumberland came down the backstairs and slipped into the kitchen.

"Have you seen Dan?" she asked of the cook.

"Wung Lu make nice fire," grinned the Chinaman. "Misser Dan in there."

She thought for an instant.

"Is breakfast ready, Wung?"

"Pretty soon quick," nodded Wung Lu.

"Then throw out the coffee or the eggs," she said quickly. "I don't want breakfast served yet; wait till I send you word."

As the door closed behind her, the eyebrows of Wung rose into perfect Roman arches.

"Ho!" grunted Wung Lu, "Oh ho!"

In the hall Kate met Randall Byrne coming down the stairs. He was dressed in white and he had found a little yellow wildflower and stuck it in his button-hole. He seemed ten years younger than the day he rode with her to the ranch, and now he came to her with a quick step, smiling.

"Dr. Byrne," she said quietly, "breakfast will be late this morning. Also, I want no one to go into the living-room for a while. Will you keep them out?"

The doctor was instantly gone.

She nodded her thanks, and went on; but passing the mirror in the hall the sight of her face made her stop abruptly. There was no vestige of color in it, and the shadows beneath her eyes made them seem inhumanly large and deep. The bright hair, to be sure, waved over her head and coiled on her neck, but it was like a futile shaft of sunlight falling on a dreary moor in winter. She went on thoughtfully to the door of the living-room, but there she paused again with her hand upon the knob, and while she stood there she remembered herself as she had been only a few months before, with the color flushing in her face and a continual light in her eyes. In a quiet despair, she said to herself: "As I am—I must win or lose—as I am!" and she opened the door and stepped in.

She had been cold with fear and excite-

ment when she entered the room to make her last stand for happiness, but once she was in, it was not so hard. Dan Barry lay on the couch at the far end of the room with his hands thrown under his head, and he was smiling in a way which she well knew; it had been a danger signal in the old days, and when he turned his face and said good-morning to her, she caught that singular glimmer of yellow which sometimes came up behind his eyes. In reply to his greeting she merely nodded, and then walked slowly to the window and turned her back to him.

She noted with a blank eye that the landscape was a single mass of gray. Something must be done. There he lay in the same room with her. Perhaps, after this day, she should never see him again; every moment was precious beyond the price of gold, and yet there she stood at the window, doing nothing. What *could* she do?

Should she go to him and fall on her knees beside him and pour out her heart, telling him again of the old days. No, it would be like striking on a wooden bell; no echo would rise; and she knew beforehand the deadly blackness of his eyes. So Black Bart lay often in the sun, staring at infinite distance and seeing nothing but his dreams of battle. What were appeals and what were words to Black Bart? What were they to Dan Barry? Yet once, by sitting still—the thought made her blood leap with a great, joyous pulse that set her cheeks tingling.

She waited till the first impulse of excitement had subsided, and then turned back and sat down in a chair near the fire. From a corner of her eye she was aware that Whistling Dan had turned his head again to await her first speech. Then she fixed her gaze on the wall of yellow flame. The impulse to speak to him was like a hand tugging to turn her around, and the words came up and swelled in her throat, but still she would not stir.

In a moment of rationality she felt in an overwhelming wave of mental coldness the folly of her course, but she shut out the thought with a slight shudder. Silence, to Dan Barry, had a louder voice and more meaning than any words.

Then she knew that he was sitting up on the couch. Was he about to stand up and walk out of the room? For moment after moment he did not stir; and at length she knew with a breathless certainty that he was staring fixedly at her!

She had now the same emotion she had had when Black Bart slunk toward her under the tree—if a single perceptible tremor shook her, if she showed the slightest awareness of the subtle approach, she was undone. It was only her apparent unconsciousness which could draw either the wolf-dog or the master.

She remembered what her father had told her of hunting young deer—how he had lain in the grass and thrust up a leg above the grass in sight of the deer and how they would first run away but finally come back step by step, drawn by an invincible curiosity, until at length they were within range for a point blank shot.

Now she must concentrate on the flames of the fireplace, see nothing but them, think of nothing but the swiftly changing domes and walls and pinnacles they made. She leaned a little forward and rested her cheek upon her right hand—and thereby she shut out the sight of Dan Barry effectually. Also it made a brace to keep her from turning her head toward him. She needed every support, physical and mental.

The faintest creaking sound told her that he had risen, slowly, from the couch. He stepped suddenly and noiselessly into the range of her vision and sat down on a low bench at one side of the hearth. If the strain had been tense before, it now became terrible; for there he sat almost facing her, and looking intently at her, yet she must keep all awareness of him out of her eyes. In the excitement a strong pulse began to beat in the hollow of her throat, as if her heart were rising. She had won; she had kept him in the room; she had brought him to a keen thought of her. A Pyrrhic victory, for she was poised on the very edge of a cliff of hysteria. She began to feel a tremor of the hand which supported her cheek. If that should become visible to him he would instantly know that all her apparent unconsciousness was a

sham, and then she would have lost him truly.

Something sounded at one of the doors—and then the door opened softly. She was almost glad of the interruption, for another instant might have swept away the last reserve of her strength. So this, then, was the end.

But the footfall which sounded in the apartment was a soft, padding step, with a little scratching sound, light as a finger running on a frosty window pane. And then a long, shaggy head slipped close to Whistling Dan. It was Black Bart!

A wave of terror swept through her. She remembered another scene, not many months before, when Black Bart had drawn his master away from her and led him south, south, after the wild geese. The wolf-dog had come again like a demoniac spirit to undo her plans!

Only an instant—the crisis of a battle—then the great beast turned slowly, faced her, slunk with his long stride closer, and then a cold nose touched the hand which gripped the arm of her chair. It gave her a welcome excuse for action of some sort; she reached out her hand, slowly, and touched the forehead of Black Bart. He winced back, and the long fangs flashed; her hand remained tremulously poised in air, and then the long head approached again, cautiously, and once more she touched it, and since it did not stir, she trailed the tips of her fingers backwards towards the ears. Black Bart snarled again, but it was a sound so subdued as to be almost like the purring of a great cat. He sank down, and the weight of his head came upon her feet. Victory!

In the full tide of conscious power she was able to drop her hand from her face, raise her head, turn her glance carelessly upon Dan Barry; she was met by ominously glowing eyes. Anger—at least it was not indifference.

He rose and stepped in his noiseless way behind her, but he reappeared instantly on the other side, and reached out his hand to where her fingers trailed limp from the arm of the chair. There he let them lie, white and cool, against the darkness of his palm. It was as if he sought in the hand

for the secret of her power over the wolf-dog. She let her head rest against the back of the chair and watched the nervous and sinewy hand upon which her own rested. She had seen those hands fixed in the throat of Black Bart himself, once upon a time. A grim simile came to her; the tips of her fingers touched the paw of the panther. The steel-sharp claws were sheathed, but suppose once they were bared, and clutched! What would happen?

Presently the hand released her fingers, and Dan Barry stepped back and stood with folded arms, frowning at the fire. In the weakness which overcame her, in the grip of the wild excitement, she dared not stay near him longer. She rose and walked into the dining-room.

"Serve breakfast now, Wung," she commanded, and at once the gong was struck by the cook.

Before the long vibrations had died away the guests were gathered around the table, and the noisy marshal was the first to come. He slammed back a chair and sat down with a grunt of expectancy.

"Mornin', Dan," he said, whetting his knife across the table-cloth. "I hear you're ridin' this mornin'? Ain't goin' away, are you?"

Dan Barry sat frowning steadily down at the table. It was a moment before he answered.

"I ain't leavin'," he said softly, at length. "Postponed my trip."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DR. BYRNE SHOWS THE TRUTH.

ON this day of low-lying mists there was no graver place than the room of old Joe Cumberland; even lamp-light was more merciful in the room, for it left the corners of the big apartment in obscurity, but this meager daylight stripped away all illusion and left the room naked and ugly. Like autumn, was the face of Joe Cumberland, with a color neither flushed nor pale, but a dull sallow which foretells death. Beside his bed sat Dr. Randall Byrne and kept the pressure of two fingers upon the wrist of the rancher.

"You feel a little better?" asked Byrne. "They ain't no feelin'. But I ain't hot; jest sort of middlin' cold."

Dr. Byrne glanced down at the thermometer with a frown, and then shook down the mercury.

"No," he admitted, "there is no fever."

Joe Cumberland opened his eyes a trifle and peered up at Byrne.

"You ain't satisfied, doc?"

Byrne was of that merciless modern school which believes in acquainting the patient with the truth.

"I am not," he said.

"H-m-m!" murmured the sick man.

"And what might be wrong?"

"Your pulse is uneven and weak," said the doctor.

"I been feelin' sort of weak since I seen Dan last night," admitted the other. "But that news Kate brought me will bring me up! She's kept him here, lad, think of that!"

"I am thinking of it," answered the doctor coldly. "Your last interview with him nearly—killed you. If you see him again I shall wash my hands of the case. When he first came you felt better at once—in fact, I admit that you *seemed* to do better both in body and mind. But the thing could not last. It was a false stimulus, and when the first effects had passed away, it left you in this condition. Mr. Cumberland, you must see him no more!"

But Joe Cumberland laughed long and softly.

"Life," he murmured, "ain't worth that much! Not half!"

"I can do no more than advise," said the doctor. "I cannot command."

"A bit peeved, doc?" queried the old man. "Well, sir, I know they ain't much longer for me. Lord, man, I can feel myself going out like a flame in a lamp when the oil runs up. I can feel life jest makin' its last few jumps in me like the flame up the chimney. But listen to me—" he reached out a long, large knuckled, claw-like hand and drew the doctor down over him, and his eyes were earnest—"I got to live till I see 'em standin' here beside me, hand in hand, doc!"

The doctor, even by that dim light, had

changed color. He passed his hand slowly across his forehead.

"You expect to see that?"

"I expect nothin'. I only hope!"

The bitterness of Byrne's heart came up in his throat.

"It will be an oddly suited match," he said, "if they marry. But they will not marry."

"Ha!" cried Cumberland, and starting up in bed he braced himself on a quaking elbow. "What's that?"

"Lie down!" ordered the doctor, and pressed the ranchman back against the pillows.

"But what d'you mean?"

"It would be a long story—the scientific explanation."

"Doc, where Dan is concerned I got more patience than Job."

"In brief, then, I will prove to you that there is no mystery in this Daniel Barry."

"If you can do that, doc, you're more of a man than I been guessing you for. Start now!"

"In primitive times," said Byrne, "man was nearly related to what we now call the lower animals. In those days he could not surround himself with an artificial protective environment. He depended on the unassisted strength of his body. His muscular and sensuous development, therefore, was far in advance of that of the modern man. For modern man has used his mind at the expense of his body. The very *quality* of his muscles is altered, and the senses of sight and hearing, for instance, are much blunted. For in the primitive days the ear kept guard over man even when he slept in terror of a thousand deadly enemies, each stronger than he, and the eye had to be keenly attuned to probe the shadows of the forest for lurking foes.

"Now, sir, there is in biology the thing known as the sport. You will have heard that all living organisms undergo gradual processes of change. Season by season and year by year, environment affects the individual; yet these gradual changes are extremely slow. Between steps of noticeable change there elapse periods many times longer than the life of historic man. All

speed in changes such as these comes in what we call 'sports.' That is, a particular plant, for instance, gradually tends to have fewer leaves and a thicker bark, but the change is slight from age to age until suddenly a single instance occurs of a plant which realizes suddenly in a single step the 'ideal' toward which the species has been striving. In a word, it has very, very few leaves, and an extraordinarily thick bark.

"Now, there is the reverse of the sport. Instead of jumping a long distance ahead, an individual may lapse back toward the primitive. That individual is called an atavism. For instance, in this mountain-desert there has for several generations been a pressure of environment calling for a species of man equipped with such powerful organisms that he will be as much at home in the heart of the desert as an ordinary man would be in a drawing-room. You gather the drift of my argument.

"I have observed this man Barry carefully. I am thoroughly convinced that he is such an atavism. Among other men he seems strange. He is different and therefore he seems mysterious. As a matter of fact, he is quite a common freak.

"You see the result of this? Daniel Barry is a man to whom the desert is necessary, because he was made for the desert. He is lonely among crowds—you have said it yourself—but he is at home in a wilderness with a horse and a dog."

"Doc, you talk well," broke in Joe Cumberland, "but if he ain't human, why do humans like him so much? Why does he mean so much to me—to Kate?"

"Simply because he is different. You get from him what you could get from no other man in the world, perhaps, and you fail to see that the fellow is really more akin to his wolf-dog than he is to a man."

"Supposin' I said you was right," murmured the old man, frowning, "how d'you explain why he likes other folks. According to you, the desert and the mountains and animals is what he wants. Then how is it that he took so much care of me when he come back this time? How is it that he likes Kate enough to give up a trail of blood to stay here with her?"

"It is easy to explain the girl's attrac-

tion," said the doctor. "All animals wish to mate, Mr. Cumberland, and an age old instinct is now working out in Dan Barry. But while you and Kate may please him, you are not necessary to him. He left you once before and he was quite happy in his desert. And I tell you, Mr. Cumberland, that he will leave you again. You cannot tame the untameable. It is not habit that rules this man. It is instinct a million years old. The call which he will hear is the call of the wilderness, and to answer it he will leave father and wife and children and ride out with his horse and his dog!"

The old man lay staring at the ceiling.

"I don't want to believe you," he said slowly, "but before God I think you're right. Oh, lad, why was I bound up in a tangle like this one? And Kate—what will she do?"

The doctor was all aquiver.

"Let the man stay with her. In time she will come to see the brute nature of Daniel Barry. That will be the end of him with her."

"Brute! Doc, they ain't nobody as gentle as Dan!"

"Till he tastes blood, a lion can be raised like a house-dog," answered the doctor.

"Then she mustn't marry him? Aye, I've felt it—jest what you've put in words. It's livin' death for Kate if she marries him! She's kept him here to-day. To-morrow something may cross him, and the minute he feels the pull of it, he'll be off on the trail—the blow of a man, the hollering out of the wild geese—God knows what it'll take to start him wild again and forget us all—jest the way a child forgets its parents!"

A voice broke in upon them, calling far away: "Dan! Dan Barry!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE ACID TEST.

IN the living-room below they heard it, Dan and Kate Cumberland. All day she had sat by the fire which still blazed on the hearth, replenished from time to time

by the care of Wung Lu. She had taken up some sewing, and she worked at it steadily. Some of that time Dan Barry was in the room, sitting through long intervals, watching her with lynx-eyed attention. Very rarely did he speak—almost never; and she could have numbered upon her two hands the words he had spoken—aye, and she could have repeated them one by one. Now and again he rose and went out, and the wolf-dog went with him each time. But toward the last Black Bart preferred to stay in the room, crouched in front of her and blinking at the fire, as if he knew that each time his master would return. With each return of Dan Barry she felt again surrounded as if by invisible arms. Something was prying at her, striving to win a secret from her.

As the day wore on, a great, singing happiness rose in her throat, and at about the same time she heard a faint sound, impalpable, from the farther side of the room where Dan Barry sat. He was whistling.

A simple thing for a man to do, to be sure, but the astonishment of it nearly stopped the heart of Kate Cumberland. For in all her life she had never before heard him whistle except when he was in the open, and preferably when he was astride of Satan, with Black Bart scouting ahead. But now he whistled here by the warmth of the fire. To be sure the sound was small and thin, but there was such music in it as she had never heard before. It was so thin that it was almost ghostly, as if the soul of wild Paganini played here on a muted violin. No tune that might be repeated, but as always when she heard it, a picture rose before the eyes of Kate. It wavered at first against the yellow glow of the firelight. Then it quite shut out all else.

It was deep night, starry night. The black horse and his rider wound up a deep ravine. To one side a bold mountain tumbled up to an infinite height, bristling with misshapen trees here and there, and losing its head against the very stars. On the other side were jagged hills, all carved in the solid rock. And down the valley, between the mountains and the stars, blew a soft wind; as if that wind made the music.

They were climbing up, up, up, and now they reach—the music rising also to a soft but triumphant outburst—a high plateau. They were pressed up against the heart of the sky. The stars burned low, and low. Around them the whole earth seemed in prospect at their feet. The moon burst through a mass of clouds, and she saw, far off, a great river running silver through the night.

Happy? Aye, and he was happy, too, and his happiness was one with hers. He was not even looking out the window while he whistled, but his eyes were fixed steadily, unchangingly, upon her face.

It was then that they heard it: "Dan! Dan Barry! Come out!"

A hoarse, ringing cry, as of one who is shouting against a great wind: "Dan! Dan Barry! Come out!"

Dan Barry was on his feet and gliding to the wall, where he took down his belt from a nail and buckled it swiftly around him. And Kate ran to the window with the wolf-dog snarling beside her and saw standing in front of the house, his hat off, his black hair wildly tumbled, and two guns in his hands, Buck Daniels! Behind him the tall bay mare shook with her panting and glistened with the sweat of the long ride.

She heard a scratching next and saw the wolf-dog rear up and paw at the door. Once through that door and he would be at the throat of the man outside. Nor he alone, for Dan Barry was coming swiftly across the room with that strange, padding step. He had no eye for her. He was smiling, and she had rather have seen him in a cursing fury than to see this smile. It curled the upper lip with something like a sneer, and she caught the white glint of his teeth; the wolf-dog snarled back over his shoulder to hurry his master. It was the crisis which she had known all day was coming, sooner or later. She had only prayed that it might be delayed for a little time. And confronting the danger was like stepping into the path of runaway horses. Fear ruled her with an iron hand, and she swayed back against the wall and supported herself with an outstretched hand.

What was there to be done? If she

stepped in between him and his man, he would brush her aside from his path and out of his life forever. If he went on to his vengeance he would no less be started on the path which led around the world away from her. The law would be the hound which pursued him and relentlessly nipped at his heels—an eternal terror and unrest. No thought of Buck Daniels who had done so much for her. She cast his services out of her mind with the natural cruelty of woman. Her whole thought was, selfishly, for the man before her, and for herself.

He was there—his hand was upon the knob of the door. And then she remembered how the teeth of Black Bart had closed over her arm—and how they had not broken even the skin. In an instant she was pressed against the door before Dan Barry—her arms outstretched.

He fell back the slightest bit before her, and then he came again and brushed her slowly, gently, to one side, with an irresistible strength. She had to meet his eyes now—there was no help for it—and she saw there that swirl of yellow light—that insatiable hunger. And she knew, fully and bitterly, that she had failed. With the wolf-dog, indeed, she had conquered, but the man escaped her.

If time had been granted her, she would have won, she knew, but the hand of Buck Daniels, so long her ally, had destroyed her chances. It was his hand now which shook the knob of the door, and she turned with a sob of despair to face the new danger.

In her wildest dreams she had never visioned Buck Daniels transformed like this. She knew that in his past, as one of those long-riders who roam the mountain-desert, their hand against the hands of every man, Buck Daniels had been known and feared by the strongest.

But all she had seen of Buck had been gentleness itself. Yet what faced her as the door flew wide was a nightmare thing with haggard face and shadow-buried, glittering eyes—unshaven, unkempt of hair, his shirt open at the throat, his great hands clenched for the battle. The wolf-dog, at that familiar sight, whined a low greeting, but with a glance at his master knew that there was

a change—the old alliance was broken—so he bared his teeth and changed his whine to a snarl of hate.

Then a strange terror struck Kate Cumberland. She had never dreamed that she could fear for Dan Barry at the hands of any man, but now the desperate resolve which breathed from every line of Daniels chilled her blood at the heart. She sprang back before Dan Barry. Facing him, she saw that demoniac glitter of yellow rising momentarily brighter in his eyes, and he was smiling.

No execration or loud-voiced curse could have contained the distilled malignancy of that smile. All this she caught in a single glimpse. The next instant she had whirled and stood before Dan, shielding him with outspread arms and facing Daniels. The latter thrust back into the holster the gun which he had drawn when he entered the room.

"Stand away from him, Kate," he commanded, and his eyes went past her to dwell on the face of Barry. "Stand away from him. It's been comin' for a long time, and now it's here. Barry, I'm takin' no start on you. Stand away from the girl and pull your gun—and I'll pump you full of lead."

The softest of voices murmured behind her:

"I been waitin' for you, Buck, days and days and days. I ain't never been so glad to see anybody!"

And she felt Barry slip shadowlike to one side. She sprang in front of him again with a wild cry.

"Buck," she begged, "don't shoot!"

Laughter, ringing and inhuman, filled the throat of Buck Daniels.

"Is it him you're beggin' for?" he sneered at her. "Is it him you got your fears for? Ain't you got a word of pity for poor Buck that sneaked off like a whipped puppy? Bah! Dan Barry, the time is come. I been leadin' the life of a houn' dog for your sake. But it's ended. Pull your gun and get out from behind the skirts of that girl!"

As long as they faced each other with the challenge in their eyes, nothing on earth could avert the fight, she knew, but if she could delay them for one moment—she felt

that swift moving form slipping away from behind her—she could follow Barry's movements by the light in Buck's eyes.

"Buck," she cried, "for God's sake—for my sake—turn away from him—and—roll another cigarette!"

For she remembered the story—how Daniels had turned under the very nose of danger and done this insane thing in the saloon at Brownsville, and in her despair she could think of no other appeal.

It was the very strangeness of it that gave it point. Daniels turned on his heel.

"It's the last kindness I do you, Dan," he said, with his broad back to them. "But before you die you got to know why I'm killin' you. I'm goin' to roll one cigarette and smoke it, and while I smoke it I'm goin' to tell you the concentrated truth about your worthless self, and when I'm done smokin' I'm goin' to turn around and drop you where you stand. D'ye hear?"

"There's no need of waitin'," answered the soft voice of Barry. "Talkin' don't mean much."

But Kate Cumberland turned and faced him. He was fairly aquiver with eagerness, and the hate blazed in his eyes; his face was pale—very pale—and it seemed to her that she could make out in the pallor the print of the fingers of Daniels and that blow those many days before. And she feared him as she had never feared him before—yet she blocked his way still with the outspread arms.

They could hear the crinkle of the cigarette paper as Buck rolled his smoke.

"No," said Buck, his voice suddenly altered to an almost casual moderation, "talk don't mean nothin' to you. Talk is human, and nothin' human means nothin' to you. But I got to tell you why you ought to die, Barry."

"I started out this mornin' hatin' the ground you walked on, but now I see that they ain't no use to hate you. Is they any use hatin' a mountain-lion that kills calves? No, you don't hate it, but you get a gun and trail it and shoot it down. And that's the way with you."

They heard the scratch of his match.

"That's the way with you. I got my back to you right now because if I looked

you in the eye—I couldn't let you live no more'n I could let a mountain-lion live. I know you're faster with your gun than I am and stronger than I am, and made to fight. But I know I'm going to kill you. You've done your work—you've left hell on all sides of you—it's your time to die. I know it! You been lyin' like a snake in the rocks with your poison ready for any man that walks past you. Now your poison is about used up."

He paused, and when he spoke again there was a ring of exultation in his voice:

"I tell you, Dan, I don't fear you, and I know that the bullet in this gun here on my hip is the one that's going to tear your heart out. I *know* it!"

Something like a sob came from the lips of Dan Barry. His hands moved out toward Daniels as though he were plucking something from the empty air.

"You've said enough," he said. "You said plenty. Now turn around here and fight!"

And Kate Cumberland stepped back, out of line of the two. She knew that in what followed she could not play the part of the protector or the delayer. Here they stood, hungry for battle, and there was no power in her weak hands to separate them. She stood far back and fumbled with her hands at the wall for support. She tried to close her eyes, but the fascination of the horror forced her to watch against her strongest will.

And the chief part of that dreadful suspense lay in the even, calm voice of Daniels as he went on:

"I'll turn around and fight soon enough. But Kate asked me to smoke another cigarette. I know what she means. She wants me to leave you the way I done in the saloon that day. I ain't goin' to leave, Dan. But I'm glad she asked me to turn away, because it gives me a chance to tell you some things you got to know before you go west.

"Dan, you been like a fire that burns every hand that touches you." He inhaled a long breath of smoke and blew it up toward the ceiling. "You've busted the heart of the friend that follered you; you've busted the heart of the girl that loves you." He

paused again, for another long inhalation, and Kate Cumberland, staring in fearful suspense, waiting for the instant when Buck should at last turn and when the shots should explode, saw that the yellow glow was now somewhat misted in the eyes of Barry. He frowned, as one bewildered.

"Think of her, Dan!" went on Daniels. "Think of her wasting herself on a no-good houn'-dog like you—a no-good wild *wolf*! My God! she might 'a' made some good man happy—some man with a soul and a heart—but, instead of that, God sent you like a blast across her—you with your damned soul of wind and your heart of stone! Think of it! When you see what you been, Barry, I wonder you don't go out and take your own gun and blow off your head."

"Buck," called Dan Barry, "so help me God, if you don't turn your face to me—I'll shoot you through the back!"

"I knew," said the imperturbable Daniels, "that you'd come to that in the end. You used to fight like a man, but now you're followin' your instincts, and you fight like a huntin' wolf. Look at the brute that's slinkin' up to me there! That's what you are. You kill for the sake of killin'—like the beasts.

"If you was a man, could you treat me like you've done? Your damned cold heart and your yaller eyes and all would of burned up in the barn the other night—you and your wolf and your damned hoss. Why didn't I let you burn? Because I was a fool. Because I still thought they was something of the man in you. But I seen afterward what you was, and I rode off to get out of your way—to keep your hands from gettin' red with my blood. And then you plan on follerin' me—damn you!—on follerin' *me*!

"So that, Dan, is why I've come to put you out of the world—as I'm goin' to do now! Once you hated to give pain, and if you hurt people it was because you couldn't help it. But now you live on torturin' others. Barry, pull your gun!"

And as he spoke, he whirled, the heavy revolver leaping into his hand.

Still, Kate Cumberland could not close

her eyes on the horror. She could not even cry out; she was frozen.

But there was no report—no spurt of smoke—no form of a man stumbling blindly toward death. Dan Barry stood with one hand pressed over his eyes and the other dangled at his side, harmless, while he frowned in bewilderment at the floor. He said slowly, at length:

"Buck, I kind of think you're right. They ain't no use in me. I been rememberin', Buck, how you sent Kate to me when I was sick."

There was a loud clatter; the revolver dropped from the hand of Daniels. The musical voice of Dan Barry murmured again:

"And I remember how you stood up to Jim Silent, for my sake. Buck, what's come between us since them days? You hit me a while back, and since then I been wantin' your blood—but hearin' you talk now, somehow—I feel sort of lost and lonesome—like I'd thrown somethin' away that I valued most."

Daniels threw out his great arms and his voice was broken terribly.

"Oh, God, Dan," he cried, "jest take one step back to me and I'll come all the way around the world to meet you!"

He stumbled across the floor and grasped at the hand of Barry, for a mist had half-blinded his eyes.

"Dan," he pleaded, "ain't things as they once was? D'you forgive me?"

"Why, Buck," murmured Dan Barry, in that same bewildered fashion, "seems like we was bunkies once."

"Dan," muttered Daniels, choking, "Dan—" But he dared not trust his voice further, and, turning, he fairly fled from the room.

The dazed eyes of Dan Barry followed him. Then they moved until they encountered the face of Kate Cumberland. A shock, as if of surprise, widened the lids. For a long moment they stared in silence, and then he began to walk, very slowly, a step at a time, toward the girl. Now, as he faced her, she saw that there was no longer a hint of the yellow in his eyes, but he stepped closer and closer; he was

right before her, watching her with an expression of mute suffering that made her heart grow large.

He said, more to himself than to her: "Seems like I been away a long time."

"A very long time," she whispered.

He drew a great breath.

"Is it true, what Buck said? About you?"

"Oh, my dear—my dear!" she cried.

"Don't you see?"

He started a little, and, taking both her hands, he made her face the dull light from the windows.

"Seems like you're kind of pale, Kate."

"The color went while I waited for you, Dan."

"But there comes a touch of red—like morning—in your throat, and runnin' up your cheeks."

"Don't you see? It's because you've come back!"

He closed his eyes and murmured:

"I remember we was close—closer than this. We were sittin' here—in this room—by a fire. And then something called me out and I follered it."

"The wild geese—yes."

"Wild geese?" he repeated blankly, and then shook his head. "How could wild geese call me? But things happened. I was kept away. Sometimes I wanted to come back to you, but somehow I could never get started. Was it ten years ago that I left?"

"Months—months that were longer than years."

"What was it?" he asked. "I been watchin' you, and waitin' to find out what was different in you. Black Bart seen something in you. I dunno what. To-day I sort of guessed what it is. I can feel it now. It's something like a pain. It starts sort of in the stomach, Kate. It's like bein' away from a place where you want to be. Queer, ain't it? I ain't far from you. I've got your hands in mine, but somehow you don't feel near. I want to walk—a long ways—closer. And the pain keeps growin'."

His voice fell away to a murmur, and now a deadly silence lay between them, and it seemed as if lights were varying upon

their faces, so swift and subtle were the changes of expression. And they drew closer by imperceptible degrees. So his arms, fumbling, found their way about her, drew her closer, till her head drooped back, and her face was close beneath his.

"Was it true," he whispered, "what Buck said?"

"There's nothing true except that we're together."

"But your eyes are brimful of tears!"

"The same pain you feel, Dan—the same loneliness and the hurt."

"But it's going now. I feel as if I'd been riding three days without more'n enough water to moisten my tongue every hour; with the sand white hot, and my hoss staggerin', and the sun droppin' closer and closer till the mountains are touched with white fire. Then I come, in the evenin', to a valley with cool shadows beginning to slip across from the western side, and I stand in the shadow and feel the red-hot blood go smashin', smashin', smashin' in my temples—and then—a sound of runnin' water somewhere up the hillside. Runnin', cool, fresh, sparkling water whispering over the rocks. Ah, God, that's what it means to me to stand here close to you, Kate! And it's like standin' up in the mornin' on the top of a high hill and seein' the light jump up quick in the east, and there lies all the world at my feet, mile after mile of it—they's a river like silver away off yonder—and they's range after range walkin' off into a blue nothing.

"That's what it's like to stand here and look down into them blue eyes of yours, Kate—miles and miles into 'em, till I feel as if I seen your heart beneath. And they's the rose of the mornin' on your cheeks, and the breath of the mornin' stirrin' between your lips, and the light of the risin' sun comes flarin' in your eyes. And I own the world—I own the world.

"Two burnin' pieces of wood, that's you and me, and when I was away from you the fire went down to a smolder; but now that we're close a wind hits us, and the flames come together and rise and jump and twine together. Two pieces of burnin' wood, but only one flame—d'you feel it? Oh, Kate, our bodies is ashes and dust, and

all that's worth while is that flame blowin' up from us, settin' the world on fire!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

"PALE ANNIE."

EVEN in Elkhead there were fires this day. In the Gilead saloon one might have thought that the liquid heat which the men imbibed would serve in place of stoves; but the proprietor, "Pale Annie," had an eye to form, and when the sky was gray he always lighted the stove. Pale Annie he was called because his real name was Anderson Hawberry Sandringham. That name had been a great aid to him when he was an undertaker in Kansas City; but he had fallen from the straight and narrow path of good undertakers some years before and sought refuge in the mountain-desert.

He was fully six inches more than six feet in height, and his face was so long and pale that even Haw-Haw Langley seemed cheerful beside the ex-undertaker. People came out of curiosity to see Pale Annie behind the bar with his tall silk hat—which he could never bring himself to lay aside. They came out of curiosity, and they remained to drink—which is a habit in the mountain-desert.

This day was even more prosperous than usual for Pale Annie, for the gray weather and the chilly air made men glad of the warmth which his bar-room possessed. Since Pale Annie's crowd had been in the place fully half the day, by ten in the evening sounds of hilarity began to rise from the saloon. Solemn-faced men who had remained in their places for hour after hour, industriously putting away the red-eye, now showed symptoms of life.

Some of them discovered hitherto hidden talents as singers, and they would rise from their places, remove their hats, open their bearded mouths, and burst into song. An antiquarian who had washed gold in 1849 and done nothing the rest of his life save grow a prodigious set of pure white whiskers, sprang from his place and did a hoe-down that ravished the beholders. Thrice he was compelled to return to the floor;

and in the end his performance was only stopped by an attack of sciatica. Two strong men carried him back to his chair and wept over him, and there was another drink all around.

In this scene of universal joy there were two places of shadow. For at the rear end of the room, almost out of reach of the lantern-light, sat Haw-Haw Langley and Mac Strann. The more Langley drank the more cadaverous grew his face, until in the end it was almost as solemn as that of Pale Annie himself; as for Mac Strann, he seldom drank at all.

A full hour had just elapsed since either of them spoke, yet Langley said, as if in answer to a remark: "He's heard too much about you, Mac. He ain't no such fool as to come to Elkhead."

"He ain't had time," answered the giant.

"Ain't had time? All these days?"

"Wait till the dog gets well. He'll follow the dog to Elkhead."

"Why, Mac, the trail's been washed out long ago. That wind the other day would of knocked out any trail less'n a big wagon."

"It won't wash out the trail for *that* dog," said Mac Strann calmly.

"Well," snarled Haw-Haw, "I got to be gettin' back home pretty soon. I ain't rollin' in coin the way you are, Mac."

The other returned no answer, but let his eyes rove vacantly over the room, and since his head was turned the other way, Langley allowed a sneer to twist at his lips for a moment.

"If I had the price," he said, "we'd have another drink."

"I ain't drinkin'," answered the giant monotonously.

"Then I'll go up and bum one off'n Pale Annie. About time he come through with a little charity."

So he unfurled his length and stalked through the crowd up to the bar. Here he leaned and confidentially whispered in the ear of Pale Annie.

"Partner, I been sprinklin' dust for a long time in here, and there ain't been any reward. I'm dry, Annie."

Pale Annie regarded him with grave disapproval.

"My friend," he said solemnly, "liquor is the real root of all evil. For my part, I quench my thirst with water. They's a tub over there in the corner with a dipper handy. Don't mention it."

"I didn't thank you," said Langley furiously. "Damn a tightwad, say I!"

The long hand of Pale Annie curled affectionately around the neck of an empty bottle.

"I didn't quite gather what you said," he remarked courteously, and leaned across the bar—within striking distance.

"I'll tell you later," remarked Haw-Haw sullenly, and turned his shoulder to the bar.

As he did so two comparatively recent arrivals came up beside him. They were fresh from a couple of months of range-finding, and they had been quenching a concentrated thirst by concentrated effort. Langley looked them over, sighed with relief, and then instantly produced tobacco and the brown papers. He paused in the midst of rolling his cigarette and offered them to the nearest fellow.

"Smoke?" he asked.

Now, a man of the mountain-desert knows a great many things, but he does not know how to refuse. The proffer of a gift embarrasses him, but he knows no way of avoiding it; also he never rests easy until he has made some return.

"Sure," said the man, and gathered in the tobacco and papers. "Thanks!"

He covertly dropped the cigarette which he had just lighted, and stepped on it; then he rolled another from Haw-Haw's materials. The while, he kept an uneasy eye on his new companion.

"Drinkin'?" he asked at length.

"Not jest now," said Haw-Haw carelessly.

"Always got room for another," protested the other, still more in earnest as he saw his chance of a return disappearing.

"All right, then," said Haw-Haw. "Jest one more."

And he poured a glass to the brim, waved it gracefully toward the others without spilling a drop, and downed it at a gulp.

"Been in town long?" he asked.

"Not long enough to find any action," answered the other.

The eye of Langley brightened. He looked over the two carefully. The one had black hair and the other red, but they were obviously brothers, both tall, thick-shouldered, square jawed, and pug-nosed. There was Irish blood in that twain; the fire in their eyes could have come from only one place on earth. And Haw-Haw grinned and looked down the length of the room to where Mac Strann sat, a heavy, inert mass, his fleshy forehead puckered into a half-frown of animal wistfulness.

"You ain't the only ones," he said to his companion at the bar. "They's a man in town who says they don't turn out any two men in this range that could give him action."

"The hell!" grunted he of the red hair. And he looked down to his blunt-knuckled hands.

"S matter of fact," continued Haw-Haw easily, "he's right here now!"

He looked again toward Mac Strann and remembered once more the drink which Mac might so easily have purchased for him.

"It ain't Pale Annie, is it?" asked the black-haired man, casting a dubious glance up and down the vast frame of the undertaker.

"Him? Not half!" grinned Haw-Haw. "It's a fat feller down to the end of the bar. I guess he's been drinkin' some. Kind of off his nut."

He indicated Mac Strann.

"He looks to me," said the red-haired man, setting his jaw, "like a feller that ain't any too old to learn one more thing about the range in these parts."

"He looks to me," chimed in the black-haired brother, "like a feller that might be taught something right here in Pale Annie's barroom. Anyway, he's got room at his table for two more."

So saying, the two swallowed their drinks and rumbled casually down the length of the room until they came to the table where Mac Strann sat. Langley followed at a discreet distance and came within ear-shot to hear the voice of Mac Strann rumbling:

"Sorry, gents, but that chair is took."

The black-haired man sank into the indicated chair.

"You're right," he announced calmly. "Anybody could see with half an eye that you ain't a fool. It's took by me!"

And he grinned impudently in the face of Mac Strann. The latter, who had been sitting with slightly bent head, now raised it and looked the pair over carelessly; there was in his eye the same dumb curiosity which Langley had seen many a time in the eye of a bull, leader of the herd. The giant explained carefully:

"I mean, they's a friend of mine that's been sittin' in that chair."

"If I ain't your friend," answered the black-haired brother instantly, "it ain't any fault of mine. Lay it to yourself; partner!"

Mac Strann stretched out his hand on the surface of the table. He said:

"I got an idea you better get out of that chair."

The other turned his head slowly on all sides and then looked Mac Strann full in the face.

"Maybe they's been something wrong with my eyes," he said, "but I don't see no reason."

The little dialogue had lasted long enough to focus all eyes on the table at the end of the room, and therefore there were many witnesses to what followed. The arm of Mac Strann shot out; his hand fastened in the collar of the black-haired man's shirt, and the latter was raised from his seat and propelled to one side by a convulsive jerk.

He probably would have been sent crashing into the bar had not his shirt failed under the strain. It ripped in two at the shoulders, and the seeker after action, naked to the waist, went reeling back to the middle of the room, before he gained his balance.

After him went Mac Strann, with an agility astonishing in that squat, formless bulk. His long arms were outstretched and his fingers tensed, and in his face there was an uncanny joy; his lip had lifted in that peculiarly disheartening sneer.

He was not a pace from him of the black

hair when a yell of rage behind him and the other brother leaped through the air and landed on Mac Strann's back. He doubled up, slipped his arms behind him, and the next instant, without visible reason, the red-haired man hurtled through the air and smashed against the bar with a jolt that set the glassware shivering and singing. Then he relaxed on the floor, a twisted and foolish-looking mass.

As for the seeker after action, he had at first reached after his revolver; but he changed his mind at the last instant, and instead picked up the great poker which leaned against the stove. It was a ponderous weapon, and he had to wield it in both hands.

As he swung it around his head there was a yell from men ducking out of the way, and Pale Annie curled his hand again around his favorite empty bottle. He had no good opportunity to demonstrate its efficiency, however. Mac Strann, crouching in the position from which he had catapulted the red-haired man, cast upward a single glance at the other brother, and then he sprang in. The poker hissed through the air with the vigor of a strong man's arms behind it, and it would have cracked the head of Mac Strann like an empty egg-shell if it had hit its mark. But it was heaved too high, and Mac Strann went in like a football player rushing the line, almost doubled up against the floor as he ran.

His shoulders struck the other hardly higher than the knees, and they went down together, but so doing the head of Mac Strann's victim cracked against the floor, and he also was still.

The exploit was greeted by a yell of applause, and then some one proposed a cheer, and it was given. It died off short on the lips of the applauders, however, for it was seen that Mac Strann was not yet done with his work, and he went about it in a manner which made him sober suddenly and exchange glances.

First the stranger dragged the two brothers together, laying one of them face down on the floor. The second he placed over the first, back to back. Next he picked up the long poker from the floor and slipped

it under the head and down to the neck of the first man. The bystanders watched in utter silence, with a touch of horror coming now in their eyes.

Now Mac Strann caught the ends of the iron and began to twist up on them. There was no result at first. He refreshed his hold and tried again. The sleeves of his shirt were seen to swell and then grow hard and taut with vast play of muscle beneath. His head bowed lower between his shoulders, and those shoulders trembled, and the muscles over them quivered like heat-waves, rising of a spring morning. There was a creaking, now, and then the iron was seen to shiver and then bend slowly, and, once it was wrenched out of the horizontal, the motion was more and more rapid. Until, when the giant was done with his labor, the ends of the iron overlapped around the necks of the two luckless brothers. Mac Strann stepped back and surveyed his work. The rest of the room was in silence, saving that the red-haired man was coming back to consciousness and now writhed and groaned feebly. He could not rise; that was manifest, for the thick band of iron tied his neck to the neck of his brother.

Upon this scene Mac Strann gazed with a thoughtful air and then stepped to the side of the room where stood a bucket of dirty water, recently used for mopping behind the bar. This he caught up, returned, and dashed the black, greasy water over the pair.

If it had been electricity it could not have operated more effectively. The two awoke with one mind, and with a tremendous spluttering and cursing struggled to regain their feet. It was no easy thing, however, for when one stood up the other slipped and in his fall involved the brother. In the mean time it made a jest exactly suited to the mind of Elkhead, and shrieks of hysterical laughter rewarded their struggles. Until at length they sat solemnly, back to back, easing the pressure of the iron as best they might with their hands. Assembled Elkhead reeled about the room, drunken with laughter. But Mac Strann went quietly back to his table and paid no attention to the scene.

There is an end to all good things, how-

ever, and finally the two brothers concerted action together, rose, and then side-stepped toward the door, dripping the mop-water at every step. Obviously they were bound for the blacksmith's to lose their collar; and every one in the saloon knew that the blacksmith was not in town.

The old man who had done the hoe-down hobbled to the end of the barroom and before the table of Mac Strann made a speech to the effect that Elkhead had everything it needed except laughter, that Mac Strann had come to their assistance in that respect, and that if he, the old man, had the power, he would pension such an efficient jester and keep him permanently in the town. To all of this Mac Strann paid not the slightest heed, but with his fleshy brow puckered considered the infinite distance.

Even the drink which Pale Annie, grateful for the averted riot, placed on the table before him Mac Strann allowed to stand untasted. And it was private stock! It was at this time that Langley made his way back to the table and occupied the contested seat.

"That was a bum play," he said solemnly to Mac Strann. "When Barry hears about what you done here to two men, d'you think that he'll ever hit your trail?"

The other started.

"I never thought about it," he murmured, his thick lips, as always, framing speech with difficulty. "D'you suppose

I'd ought to go back to the Cumberland place for him?"

A yell rose at the farther end of the room.

"A wolf! Hey! Shoot the damn wolf!"

"You fool!" cried another. "He ain't skinny enough to be a wolf. Besides, who ever heard of a tame wolf comin' into a barroom?"

Nevertheless, many a gun was held in readiness, and the men, even the most drunken, fell back to one side and allowed a free passage for the animal. It seemed, indeed, to be a wolf, and a giant of its kind, and it slunk now with soundless step through the silence of the barroom, glancing neither to right nor to left, until it came before the table of Mac Strann.

There it halted and slunk back a little, the upper lip lifted away from the long fangs, its eyes glittered upon the face of the giant, and then it swung about and slipped out of the barroom as it had come, in silence.

Mac Strann leaned across the table to Langley.

"He's come alone this time," he said, "but the next time he'll bring his master with him. We'll wait!"

The Adam's apple rose and fell in the throat of Haw-Haw.

"We'll wait," he nodded, and he burst into the harsh laughter which had given him his name.

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 WARDERS

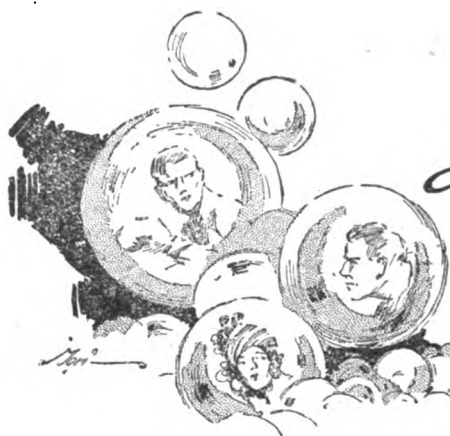
FOR all dear treasured things that we forget
Beneath the stress of life, its toil and fret,

The wise years keep a place and hold a key
In patient kind, with faithful surety.

Vain hands may seek the treasure gathered there
And bribe the years to end their guarded care;

But ruling that each heart shall have its own,
The wise years yield the key to love alone!

Arthur Wallace Peach.



Lather

by Clair
Kenamore

FIRST came a properly clad bell-boy, carrying bundles; then a barefoot Yaqui Indian youth, also carrying bundles; then a big outdoors man in corduroys. His head was held high in the noonday sun, and his hat was on the back of his head.

Through the florid portals of the Montana del Sur the procession passed. It wound its way through the red and green pillars, past the entrance to the bar, past the desk and the news-stand, and down the marble stairs which led to the Turkish bath. The enthusiastic Easterner who built the hotel had spent a lot of money on the baths before he finally departed sadly for the East again.

In the reception-room the procession halted and the bearers laid their burdens down. The big man had been in the baths before, months ago, but the clerk who showed him where to register, received his valuables, and gave him a steel key on an elastic band, was unknown to him. The customer was affluent. His pockets gave up a roll of bills, a pocketbook, and a handful of silver and gold coins. Each of the carriers received a silver dollar and departed.

"I want to put on these new clothes," he said, pointing to the parcels, "and leave my old ones here."

The clerk touched a bell and a small young man appeared. He was clad only in a towel which was wrapped about his middle.

"The rubber will show you your booth.

John, take care of Mr."—the clerk glanced at the register—"Gleason."

Mr. Gleason was not charmed with the appearance of his attendant, a wisp of a man with long, wiry arms.

"Take these things," he said, pointing to the parcels, and the rubber picked them up and led the way to the deeper recesses of the baths. There was an oppressive wet heat, very different from the good dry air outside. In the electric lights, the humid atmosphere and the sound of sizzling steam, there was an impression forced upon Gleason that it was not really noon, but somewhere in the hours which follow soon after midnight, and that he was not merely a few feet below the level of Santa Fé Avenue, but hundreds of yards under the surface of the earth.

The attendant was very deferential and anxious to please, but the feeling of oppression was increased by the little cubby-hole in which Mr. Gleason disrobed, and over the door of which he cast each garment as he removed it. When he came forth to receive the bath towel from the hands of the waiting John, his only garment, he felt, petulantly, that he was at a disadvantage. It was his custom to go about fully clothed. This creature of the burrows, the attendant, lived half his life in a towel. He was at ease. Mr. Gleason needed the moral support of his accustomed raiment.

"You must weigh just about twice what I do, Mr. Gleason," John said as they proceeded to the bath-room. John's voice had

a flat rasp to it which the customer found unpleasant.

"Yes, I guess I do."

The heat was terrific there. Mr. Gleason had felt higher temperatures out in the open desert, but there it was dry. Here there was a wetness which weighed upon him like lead.

"How's business?" Gleason asked after John had made him comfortable upon a rattan couch. He decided to remove the oppression by entering upon the spirit of the place.

"Pretty good; but of course there is nothing doing at noon. We are the only people in the baths now. Crowds come at night."

"Do you and that clerk stay down here all the time?"

"I do when I'm on duty. He works upstairs in the barber-shop, and only comes down when there is a customer. Night clerk stays here all night."

"I would surely hate to stay under the ground all the time."

"Are you Mr. Gleason from the Altar district?"

"Yes. I've been here several times before, always come here when I'm in town; but I don't remember seeing you. How did you know me?"

"Oh, I've heard about you a lot. You are the man who whipped Dick O'Donnell."

"Heard about that, did you? Well, it was a pretty fight. He knew more about fighting than I did, and I had a little edge on weight and reach. It was a pretty fight."

The big man was beginning to perspire, and the welcome and familiar topic helped to ease slightly the oppression.

"Both of you wanted the same girl, fellow said that came up here from Altar."

"Well, she did have something to do with it," Mr. Gleason conceded.

"Name was Maria Gomez, he said."

"Yes, Maria was the girl. I sort of get beat, at that, because she turned me down in a couple of weeks and went on South."

"It must have been a pretty close match from all accounts."

"It sure was, but I'm the best."

"Some of the fellows said that from the way O'Donnell's eyes swelled up there might have been some pepper or some sort of drug on your hands."

"No, nothing in that."

"Did you have anything on your hands?"

"Nothing but some tire tape wrapped around them."

"Maybe your helper put some stuff on the tire tape."

"I heard something like that, too. Well, you never can tell. Soto is a shifty sort of guy."

"Think you are likely ever to fight him again?"

"Well, now, that is a funny thing, for I am going to have to whip that fellow again."

"Is that so? Well! What are you going to fight about this time?"

"Well, we're both claiming the same set of claims."

"Reckon you can put it over him again?"

"Sure, not a bit of doubt of it. Say, how long do I have to stay in this hole?"

"I guess you've had about enough. Come on with me."

The attendant threw a sheet about Gleason's shoulders and preceded him through a passageway lined on both sides with numbered booths, similar to the one in which Gleason had undressed. After two turnings into other aisles, they passed out of the carpeted region, and rubber runs gave footing on the marble floor.

Gleason lost his sense of direction in the many turns, and the ramifications gave to the baths an impression of vastness under the low ceiling. He felt like a beetle wandering between two close-lying slabs of marble.

The attendant, for whom Gleason's dull dislike and mistrust was disappearing, led the way to a quarter in which the noise of hissing steam was louder. They passed the swimming-pool, an ample thing which seemed cool and inviting, and entered an apartment where marble slabs, like great gravestones, served as couches, and upright slabs of marble made low walls between them.

Gleason's whole idea of the place was vague. He had no conception of how many halls and aisles and doors he had passed through, or how many turnings he had made since leaving the bake-room, and he could not tell which way was north, a thing the man of the desert must always know.

The attendant laid a thin rubber mat upon a slab, and Gleason stretched his form upon the mat. The mat was the only piece of all the fittings or furnishings that was not hard as iron and as immovable as granite. The little man told Gleason to lie face downward, and once he was prone and his eyes closed, all mental vision of the size and shape of the room passed from him.

The little man made splashings in a large bucket, and soon began to work on Gleason's broad back in a craftsmanlike manner. The warm water creamed into soapy foam, as the sinewy fingers dug into the big muscles, and creased and kneaded the skin. The slap, slap, slap of his hands played a primitive tune. From neck to heel, the big man felt the energetic working of the little man, whose talk seldom ceased, and whose thirst for gossip was insatiable.

"Funny you never hear of any shooting scrapes in Altar," he said.

"Well, not so funny, either," Gleason responded, "when you think that there is not a gun in the whole American outfit. Mexican government has not given a single permit to an American to take in firearms. One fellow smuggled in a six-gun and he got three months in jail. We'll do our fighting with our fists for a good while yet."

"Guess that's right. The best man gets what he wants."

"Yes, if he has got any sort of claim at all to it. Mexican government don't bother unless somebody kicks to the American consul at Nogales. Even that does not do much good unless you are man enough to hold on to what they rule to you."

"Guess that's right. Turn over on your back now."

Gleason turned, and soon from chin to toe his body had received the same gen-

erous treatment with warm water and soap, the brisk friction of the fiber palm, and the deft manipulation of muscles. The garrulous worker knew his trade.

Under the skilled hands, Gleason became a soap-steeped plastic statue. From his head down, he was coated with a film of soapy water and froth. His fingers rubbed together with unparalleled slickness, and he tried to pinch his leg, but the skin evaded him.

The attendant ran an inquisitive finger through Gleason's hair back of the ear.

"Sit up now," he said. "Guess I'd better wash out your hair and make a good job of it."

"You can let that go," the soapy giant replied. "Going to get it cut."

The little man looked closer.

"It's not much trouble, and I can clean it out a lot better than the barber can. Considerable sand and dust in there."

"All right. Go ahead."

"Shut your eyes tight," the attendant said as Gleason sat on the edge of the marble couch. A sponge full of water was worked into the hair, and the soap rubbed upon it made a frenzy of lather. More warm water and more soap and more work soon had the suds dripping from eyebrow and ear. John certainly knew his business. He worked the soapy foam over ears, eyes, and face until the mask of lather was complete.

"Keep your eyes shut tight."

Gleason felt of his hair. It stood out like a hood. He instinctively tried to brush the foam from his eyes, but his fingers were as soapy as his face.

A sudden sense of danger struck him.

"Here, wash this stuff out of my eyes," he commanded.

"Stand down here now and steady yourself."

Gleason obeyed sullenly and mutely. The sound of the rubber mat being pulled from the slab was a menacing note. Gleason reached out a hand to touch his attendant but could not find him.

There was a wait which might have been minutes or only ten seconds.

"Now come around this way," said the attendant's unpleasant voice. He took

hold of Gleason's wrist, but, driven by his forward, bully soul as much as by a growing feeling of panic, Gleason seized the attendant by the wrist with both hands. The attendant did not struggle or speak, but gently led his charge around slabs, along a wall, through a door, and turned him slowly as one would a horse.

The big man submitted, holding tightly to the guide's forearm, and filled with a dull, blind wonder and fear. Suddenly the turning movement brought his bare shoulder against a searingly hot steam-pipe, and at the instant, as Gleason leaped away and yelled in pain, the attendant with a quick, powerful movement, wrenched his arm from the big man's soapy grasp.

In the sharp agony of the burning, Gleason had half opened his eyes, but had closed them again, unseeing, at the sting of the soap on the lids.

"Now stand right still and listen," commanded the implike voice, and the helpless Gleason obeyed.

"Dick O'Donnell is my brother."

The big man swore a big oath of helplessness rage, but it simmered down to a whisper.

"I came here from Los Angeles six weeks ago to lay for you. I've been working in this place a month, waiting for you to come."

Gleason made a noise that might have been a whimper or a whine, but it was wordless.

"Listen! My brother has been working in the Altar district for two years. I don't care if you did take the girl away from him. Guess she did not amount to much, anyway. But he staked out these claims, and he is going to keep them. Get that? He supports the old folks. I haven't ever amounted to much, and now he has got a chance to make a stake. No big yellow dub is going to beat him out of his chance.

Gleason's broken voice put in a plea for peace.

"Well, say, let's talk it over. I'm reasonable. Wipe this stuff out of my eyes, won't you? Let me have a towel or something."

"Shut up. There is only one chance

for you to get out of here alive. That is to do exactly as I say. Are you willing to do that?"

"Yes, yes," was the quick response.

"Turn a little to the left and put your hands out in front of you."

Gleason turned slowly, trying to force obedience from his quivering muscles.

"Not too far there!" snapped the implike voice. "Look out for that steam-pipe!"

A deeper pang of fear shot through the big body, and then the hands found the edge of another of the barren marble slabs.

He was a stranger in a strange land, in a cavern with many dark aisles and swinging doors, now hidden from him. He was bereft of the clothing which he wore among men—garments essential to his mental poise and control. Normally, he was a creature of the open air and the sandy surface of the desert. Here was only the close oppression of closed places, and everywhere the smooth, solid marble which became slick as glass the instant he touched it with his soapy hands. There was not place or thing with which he could wipe the soap from his hands that he might use his fingers to clear his dripping eyes. His footing was the glassy polished marble of the floor, thrice dangerous to his soaped, bare feet. He dared not move for fear of falling against the hissing steampipes.

As he heard the bare feet of his foe slithering over the floor again, a great sense of helplessness descended upon him, a fearful thing when it takes possession of a strong man.

Holding on to the marble slab before him, he screamed for help, but the voice which was used to bellowing across the wastes was shrill and weak, like that of a harassed woman.

His cry was cut short by a sharp blow on the mouth, delivered by a fist which held a sting. He crouched back with a whimper and shielded his face with his arm.

"Shut up! I'm not going to hit you again," said the devilish voice, "but cut out that yelling. It will not help you any. There is nobody here but us. Shut up. Be a man."

"Give me a towel and let me wipe the soap out of my eyes," pleaded the big man. "I'll give you a hundred dollars and call it square. Honest I will. I'll just put on my clothes and leave. Come on, won't you? Lead me out of these steam-pipes and fix me so I can see again. Please do. Won't you?"

"Hold out your hand!" the imp commanded.

Into the outstretched hand fell the end of a small dog-chain.

"Now don't try any funny business, or I'll cave in your head with this hammer. Just follow along as I lead you with this chain. It is eight feet long and you can't reach me."

"Not into the steam-pipes," Gleason moaned.

"No, fool! I could turn the live steam on you if I wanted to. Do as I tell you and quit crying."

The big man obeyed. He was as helpless as a blind elephant in a forest full of mice.

The procession went around the end of a slab, along a blank marble wall which Gleason vainly tried to seize with his fingers, then out into the perilous open spaces of the unknown room, where there was nothing to hold on to. With a little, hopeless moan, the quaking man sank to his knees and moved on all fours, like an animal. The imp laughed scornfully. Many yards of marble floor were covered, but it seemed to Gleason that the sizzling steam-pipes were always just at his elbow.

The swinging chain hit an upright, and

the voice commanded the blinded man to rise and hold against it. It was another slab, or the same one. They were all just alike.

"Now walk sidewise to the right. Drop that chain. Hold on to the edge of the slab. Now down the other side. Now stop."

The sound of slipping feet told that the fiend was changing his position again. When the voice spoke, it was in a different quarter.

"Now listen. I am standing right behind you, ten feet away. There are three naked steam-pipes between us, hot as hell. If you should fall back this way, they would just about burn your big body in pieces."

Gleason gripped more tightly the horribly smooth edge of the marble slab. He felt the need of two hands full of desert sand to give him bearing surface.

"One of them would catch you at the neck, one at the waist, and one at the knees. Want to try to crawl through them?"

"No, no, no. Please don't hurt me any more."

The sound of the fast feet slipping over the floor was heard again.

The voice came next from the front.

"Listen. Dick will whip you next time. He will beat you into a pulp if you ever try to stand before him again. Want to know why? Because he will know you are yellow. He will know just what kind of a coward you are in your heart. I am starting for Altar right now to tell him."



TO A FOREST SEEN FROM A TRAIN

YOU are my roof, you little sky
Between the quiet trees,
You shelter me from wind of grief
And rain of memories.

Straight pines, you are my shielding walls
That push the world outside;
Remembered wood, you are my house
And I dwell safe inside.

Mary Carolyn Davies.

Pesos and Punctuation Marks

by James W. Egan



I WAS quite firm with Ace. In accents polite but positive I unburdened my soul to him.

"Thumbs reversed on Mexico!" I said. "I wouldn't cross that border again if they promised me free *frijoles* the rest of my life and some years additional. I'm through with the land of cutthroats and throats otherwise mutilated, I want to warble to the world."

"Aw, now, George, listen!" commenced my partner in crime and sin. "Mexico is full of live ones—"

"And crowded with those not so live!" I butted in. "The cemeteries are hanging out the S. R. O. sign. I feel no craving to use up footage in an unhallowed grave. Perhaps we could persuade the plaintive peons to part with their *pesos*, but I shall never trade my neck for thirty pieces of silver, Mex. Hardly!"

But Ace was as stubborn as a mountain burro who has suddenly turned Bolshevik.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Mexico is a lot safer for us than this land of the free and home of the misguided. They're all crooks down there and they don't get sore because another bird comes along and works at his trade. There's not so much danger as there is competition."

"Sing on!" I entreated him. "Sing merrily on, Mr. Flushing. None are so blind as those who leave their glasses at home. I

may be slightly understocked with the commodity known as human intelligence, but in my dumb, stumbling, faltering way I can take the hint when a red flag reaches out and slaps me between the organs of vision. I have not forgotten a previous excursion into Comrade Garraza's dubious domain, even if your memory has worn out. Have you forgotten the lovely Pepita and her less lovely husband? We almost went to sleep with our cold, waxen faces staring at the sky. No more jolly little episodes like that. I aim to stay right here in this grand, glorious and somewhat sunburned commonwealth of Texas, take it from me. Not for all the gold of King Midas or even a butcher's annual income would I stray again within those *chile con carne* confines!"

"Well, what can we do here?" asked Ace. "It has gotten so an able-bodied crook trying to make an honest living by swindling his neighbor is backed off the board by profiteers and their protectors. How can we get by?"

"Sell oil stock," I suggested. "Can't you see how kerosene and benzine has boomed in this particular section of geography? All you need to do to sell an old-fashioned gold-brick now is dip it in oil. The jack comes easy. It gushes in like the wells are supposed to. Everybody's cutting the pie. Let's get a piece for ourselves."

"It's liable to turn out lemon pie,"

gloomed my comrade in vice and corruption. "I still nominate Mexico."

"The motion's lost. There'll be no red peppers and revolutions for us."

That's what I thought, all right; but you never can tell when Fate is going to pull one on you. The old hen dropped a match in our oil, you might say, and we had to beat it to keep from getting burned. An industrious postal inspector with a strong sense of smell dropped into Dallas one day and allowed his nose to become his guide. He opened our closet and located a whole family of skeletons. Rather than be indulged with free board and room for a vague and indefinite period we packed our toothbrushes and safety razors and fled for a locale on the order of the razors.

We ended in Mexico City. Not that I yearned to settle there, but a guy who's drowning is willing to grab at the stuff they make into straw hats. Our respected Uncle Samuel wasn't likely to get us from Carranza—the Mexican skipper had troubles of his own.

Still, life in that restless burg wasn't such a sweet *siesta*. Our pack was fading away faster than the colors in a cheap shirt. It cost lots of cold fish to keep us in daily *tortillas*, and the birds who ran the hotels seemed to have been educated in Manhattan.

Ace Flushing tried to divert a doubloon or two into the coffers by playing with the pasteboards. Ace knows poker backwards, sideways, and under the table—American style.

The Mexicans had their own rules and regulations, however, and thought nothing of decorating a guy with a few knives when the game went wrong; so Ace laid off the cards pretty pronto.

I rounded up my partner in business and bunkum one twilight eve and uncorked a little heart-to-heart stuff.

"Our funds are running lower than my spirits," I observed. "The old sock will soon be as empty as that expression on your simple, rugged features. We are at the end of our rope, and we are apt to be at the end of a couple of them unless we pick up a few pesos. Lightning can't strike quicker than greasers when they figure something is due

to be struck. The pot's open. Are we coming in?"

Ace set fire to a Mexican cigar composed of equal parts of hay and horsehair, and allowed me a tolerating grin.

"Be calm," he said, "be calm. Try to appreciate what life is doing for you. Breathe in the warm, languorous breezes from the equator. Watch night draw her dark mantilla over the jeweled heavens. And if you don't care for that, give me your ears like the Romans of old, and I'll spill something to you. I know where we can make the equivalent of a thousand glittering fish in Yankee currency, any old time we want!"

"How?" I wanted to know.

"Do you recall that skinny *hombre*, Señor Mezalla, I took out to a *frijole* feast the other night? Well, he's head of the secret service or some such layout here, and terrible anxious to lay hands on a bad, bold bandit named Juan Colon. This Colon is hard-boiled henfruit. He's done so much profiteering that Carranza is sorer than a blistered back. A nice, juicy reward is the result—and it's up to us to get it."

I looked at my corrupted companion, and shook my head.

"You certainly win the concrete bicycle!" I asserted. "Here you and I have been crooks all our lives, and you want us to turn policemen and grab a bandit who could probably eat us both with or without gravy. You've inhaled too much *mescal* or something!"

"A thousand bucks is a thousand bucks," remonstrated Ace. "I'm going after it, too, as sure as little apples will always be found at the bottom of the barrel!"

"You talk like a half-witted halibut! Suppose they do pay over that jack for this yokel?"

"How could a couple of gophers like us, who speak Spanish as gracefully as a duck transports herself, hope to hook this Señor Semi-Colon? He'll just make nice corpses out of us. Why doesn't the secret service nail him? The cement doughnuts go to you, all right!"

Ace threw his olfactory offense into the *patio*.

"You are worse than the native bean when it comes to wild jumping," he re-

marked. "No denying this Colon is a desperate baby. A few murders more or less are nothing in his blithe existence. He'd just as soon carve us up as flip *pesos* for pulque. Oh, he's a tough gump, all right."

"Ain't that nice?" I sneered. "And I suppose we'll dance out into the jungles and meet him, carrying garlands of flowers and chanting free verse. For this welcome on our part he'll probably be courteous enough to allow us to choose our favorite form of death. Perfectly splendid!"

"Still bounding away," Ace grew sarcastic. "You ain't heard the meat of it yet. Here comes the roast beef: Señor Colon has a weak spot. He is as superstitious as a left-handed baseball pitcher. He believes in magic and spirits."

"He must be friendly with all the Mexican bootleggers," I tossed in.

"Don't get comical. Just keep your ears unbuttoned. Colon believes in all the saints in the calendar, a bunch that ain't spooks, ghosts, black art, and the whole works."

"Well, what if he does? How—"

"I'm the accomplished and artistic little performer who can tie Señor Colon into a square hitch. You know I'm a nifty card palmer and a sleight-of-hand mechanic. I have enough stuff on hand to jazz up some tricks which will make him shake the shimmy with fright. He'll think the devil has him sure. No fooling, I'll scare him."

"And you are willing to hoof it out into the tall and unshorn after this bullet on a chance you can bluff him with a few punk tricks?" I demanded. "Help, help! Assistance! You're nuttier than a sack of fresh roasted!"

"Well, you don't need to make the trip unless you want to," Ace growled. "I'm going, and I'm going to get this gopher. Suit yourself as to what you do. I'll not coax you!"

Seeing that he put it this way, I decided I might as well go bandit stalking with my partner as remain in Mexico City.

"Where do we go to find this hard-boiled bandit who is afraid of ghosts?" I queried.

"He is supposed to be hanging around a village called El Coro right now."

"Sounds like an apple center. Where is it?"

"About one hundred miles north. We'll have to get horses and other junk, and we'll have to move lively, too."

A couple of days later saw us prancing out of Mexico City, bound for El Coro and the superstitious Señor Colon. We had chartered a pair of veteran steeds and a Bolshevik mule, and didn't burn up the road with our speed. El Coro was not to be reached by rail.

When we blew into the burg one morning I didn't blame the railroads for staying away. El Coro was about as miserable an excuse for a town as any spot I ever lamped, and the population didn't grade any higher.

Ace and I passed ourselves as prospectors, and I suppose the El Coro gossips hung around the courtyards and bawled us out in pure Castilian. Ace was trying to excite a little comment and curiosity, anyway. He went about with a highly mysterious air, carrying a rod presumed to have magic qualities when it came to detecting precious metals lurking in the soil. Not that he figured on coaxing gold from the barren hills around El Coro. He had other ideas. The simple natives were to be put in awe of the "gringo devil," as he put it.

I don't know how awed the village yokels were, but a couple of days dragged by without anything happening to us. We were unable to learn much about our bandit friend, Señor Colon, save that he was roosting somewhere in the neighborhood.

Ace and myself had moved into an adobe shack on the edge of the hamlet. We were trying to throw a supper together the evening of the second day, and I wasn't in the best of humor.

"The well-known pursuit of the untamed geese has nothing on this futile and furtive excursion," I remarked. "This blot on the tropical landscape snares my ibex. A day goes by like a decade. If I linger twenty-four hours more I'll be as crazy as your idea of coming here."

"Quite pessimizing," said my partner. "Just wait until we get our hands on Brother Colon. We'll—"

"*Buenos noches!*" somebody bellowed out of the darkness, and a pair of Mexicans breezed into our quarters. Our one candle-power light revealed the fact that they were

a couple of fine-looking cutthroats. One was a big, husky fellow with a black beard and the tender, gentle expression of a rattler about to strike; the other, a little shrimp with "jailbird" painted all over his ugly visage.

"I'm Señor Colon!" growled the big fellow, in mighty good American. "Who is de guy who was squawkin' his nut off about me when I strolled in?" He started playing with the young arsenal he had belted around him.

I must give Ace credit. He acted promptly.

"You are speaking to a prince of Montezuma—one of the favored of the gods!" he announced sternly, and plunged his hand into the bandit's beard. He seemed to pluck forth a handful of colored beads. It was a neat bit of legerdemain.

The little shrimp crossed himself rapidly. The big bruiser's unkind countenance grew several shades unkind.

"Say, how do you get that way?" he demanded, but his eyes seemed a little uneasy I thought. Maybe I imagined it.

"Beware of how you address an immortal, lest the vengeance of the gods be visited upon you!" Ace thundered. He pulled a yard of bright ribbon from Colon's jacket.

"Cut the bunk, gringo!" advised the bandit. "None of this sideshow stuff goes with me. Think I never saw a vodyvil show in my life? I'll say I have. Come on, Jose! We need these guys!"

The two Mexicans fell upon us, and in a jiffy we were fairly well trussed up. Out of our shack they marched us, and through the jungle for a mile or two. We finally stopped at a good-sized *hacienda*, and were bundled into a room where a young woman was cooking a meal. Leaving Jose to watch us, Juan Colon swaggered out.

The young woman looked up from her *chile* long enough to favor us with a stare. I gathered that she was the wife of Jose from some of the hot tamale talk he pulled on her. She was not beautiful, and a Mexican girl who is not beautiful—well, she can put a lot of timepieces out of commission. Mrs. Jose had a kinder visage than our two male captors, however.

"Pretty kettle of sardines!" I whispered to Ace. "Our dash after Colon seems to end with a question mark. You surely have a wonderful head on you. If I could get two dozen more like it I'd fill a pin cushion. So this bandit is scared of magic, eh? Like Kelly is. Why, he even talks like a guy who has been in the more or less United States! What made me listen to you, anyway?"

"Aw, now," began Ace.

"Yes, come on with your alibi. You'll have one, I suppose. You always do. I wonder if he'll poison us or shoot us. Bullets make a messy job, so I trust—"

"I haven't given up yet. I still think Colon is superstitious, for all his noisy gabble. I didn't try the right stuff. Next time—"

"There won't be any next time!" I butted in. "That's what Napoleon squawked after the scramble at Waterloo. The kaiser gargled the same after a famous Eleventh of November. Next time! But it never comes!"

"Maybe the girl will help us," Ace speculated. "She is not very smart, though, I'm afraid."

"Forget her!" I advised. "Get wise to the blank look on her face. She probably doesn't know noon from evening!"

Just then Colon tramped in, and dished us out a few words.

"I don't know why you guys were hangin' around El Coro," he said, "but the bunch tell me you have been lookin' for gold. That's what I'm lookin' for, and gringos usually have it. If they don't pack it around with them they have friends. Somebody'll have to kick in or the undertaker gets a couple of jobs. How about it, *amigos*?"

Ace squawked before I could say a word.

"You have been warned!" he uttered solemnly. "You have been warned! Tread not on the toes of an immortal!"

"The poor *hombre* must be loco!" growled the bandit. "Loosen them up, Jose, and let them take a little chow. I'll come back again and if they don't talk business—*Caramba*!"

Jose untied us, and his wife dosed out a couple of bowls of *chile*. Something the

young lady did irritated the ugly little shrimp, and he suddenly jumped at her. He smashed her with both fists, driving her into a corner, and there started to beat her without mercy.

Neither Ace nor I could be called soft-shelled, but some things weren't in our book. This happened to be one of them. We leaped up from the *chile* and tore into Mr. Jose. For about thirty seconds we mussed up that Mexican, making him practically a total wreck. Then Señor Colon blew in, attracted by the confusion.

The bandit made short work of us, and badly battered, we were again tied up and thrown into a corner. There we were left as the hours dragged on. Toward morning I had fallen into a doze, when I was aroused by a shake.

"I'm loose!" whispered Ace. "Somebody cut the ropes."

"Mrs. Jose!" I breathed. "Let's get out of this, if we can!"

As soon as he released me from my bonds the pair of us started to steal out of the *hacienda*. We got out of the house, all right, and had reached a corral where there were some horses, when the alarm was given.

Grabbing a couple of steeds at random, we mounted them and endeavored to meander rapidly out of that locality. Colon and Jose were not going to let us get away so easily, however. We could hear them galloping after us a few seconds after the *hacienda* had dropped from sight.

Ace and I are far from accomplished horsemen, but with a couple of bloodthirsty bandits in the rear we saw to it that our nags kept hitting along on high.

We failed to lose that ruffian with the punctuated name or his miserable satellite, however. Daylight found them close at our heels. We were tearing along in the hills, and there was plenty of vegetation and timber.

"Let's ditch these foaming mustangs and take to the brush before they nail us," yelled Ace.

"Why not stop and let you tell them you are immortal again!" I growled, sourly enough. But I bounded from my horse and joined my boneheaded comrade in his dive for the uncut.

Plunging through a Mexican jungle is poor outdoor sport, though. We seemed to have gone from worse to unutterably bad. We had lost ourselves, but apparently had slipped our pursuers.

"We've ducked them!" Ace declared, happily.

"Great!" I enthused, bitterly. "We'll probably starve to death if some ambitious snake doesn't see us first, but we have eluded Señor Colon and that comma with him. Oh, yes; it's great!"

We walked out upon a hillside—and came face to face with Señor Colon and Jose! They were less than twenty feet from us.

Before Ace or I could even think, the bearded Colon was blazing away at us with two massive revolvers. Dazed by the suddenness of the catastrophe, we walked right into that rain of fire—and not a bullet touched us!

I saw the dark visage of Colon turn gray. He dropped his weapons and screamed something in Spanish that means ten thousand or ten million devils. Jose, yelping, scuttled from sight, and never once looked back.

"What the—" I began, but Ace interrupted.

"He thinks I'm immortal, you boob. Bullets don't harm me—or you. Grab one of those guns, quick! I think we'll take Mr. Colon along with us now."

The bandit never said a word as we tied his hands and marched him down to where Jose and he had parked their horses. He was scared stiff. After all, he had been superstitious. He couldn't understand why we didn't drop when he pumped a string of shots at us. You couldn't blame him. I didn't understand it myself. We had been too close for him to miss.

"I've always heard that these greasers couldn't shoot for spoiled peaches," I observed to Ace, after we had begun to ride with our captor in front of us. "We should have been hit a dozen times, but we weren't. Which saved our lives and for a few thousand *pesos* besides. Maybe we are immortal, huh?"

"Quit kidding, and look at that revolver you took from Mr. Bandit," Ace advised.

"I looked at the one I got, and reloaded it right pronto from Colon's belt. The fine Spencerian hand of Mrs. Jose comes in again.

"She may have had a blank look on her face, but she sure slipped another kind of blank into Colon's guns. And blank shells never killed anybody, immortal or otherwise."

I examined the revolver I had picked up. One unexploded shell still lingered in the chambers, and it was as blank as dominoes.

The mystery of that marksmanship was quite clear.

"A clever woman, that!" sighed Mr. Flushing. "Too bad she isn't good looking. Oh, well—we can't have sorghum and boney, too. Get along there, Mr. Bad Man, and keep still!"

For we had forgotten our bandit spoke the American tongue. He had just tumbled to the situation, and how he cursed! But we let him rave. We figured we had just about put a period after Colon, anyway.



"WHY DON'T YOU WRITE?"

THE postman passes by; his steps tell plainly
He hasn't any mail to leave for me;
Or, should he stop, my eyes must still seek vainly
The one handwriting I so long to see.
Even a picture postal card were better
Than leaving me without a single sign;
Another day gone by, and still no letter—
I think you might have written me a line!

Why are you silent? I have often written
When it was, strictly speaking, "not my turn."
Have you with pen-paralysis been smitten?
Or what new lesson would you have me learn?
Am I impatient—in too great a hurry—
You pressed with duties harder to decline?
Granted, poor boy, you're eaten up with worry,
I think you might have written me a line!

Or has our intercourse, a once dear pleasure,
Become a bugbear, a repugnant task?
Will it encroach upon some half-grudged leisure?
Then I the sacrifice will never ask.
Past benefits we sometimes would forget here—
I do not care to cut my words too fine;
It really doesn't matter much—and yet, dear,
I think you should have written me a line!

Perhaps there's some mistake; a heedless sentence
Penned without thinking may have caused you pain;
Perhaps I rate too high my independence,
Perhaps you think me frivolous and vain;
Or my poor jests in earnest you were taking.
Ah, could you read this secret heart of mine,
And know how nearly—nearly—it is breaking,
You would be after writing me a line!

Harry F. Bowling.

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