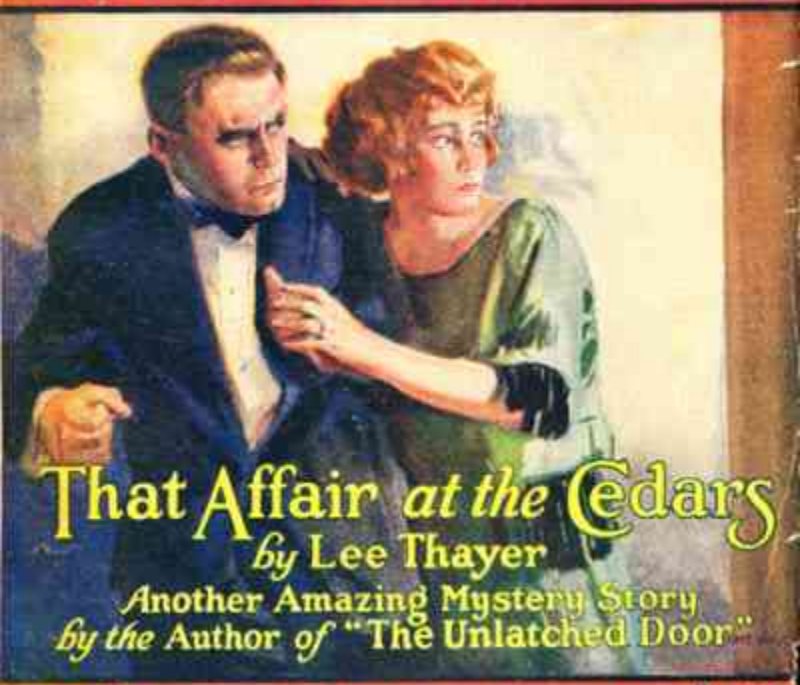
ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY



That Affair *at the* Cedars

by Lee Thayer

Another Amazing Mystery Story by the Author of "The Unlatched Door"

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

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That Affair at the Cedars

by Lee Thayer

Author of "The Unlatched Door," "The Mystery of the Thirteenth Floor," etc.

CHAPTER I.

RETURNED FROM THE GRAVE.

"OH, my dear, my dear! If I had only known!" A woman's voice, lowered to a whisper, thrilled through the shadows of the dark, spacious room.

A French window stood open, framing a faint oblong of starlight. No human figure broke its outline, but beside it, in the dense darkness, a man groaned aloud.

"It's like a nightmare," the woman's voice went on shudderingly. "I can't make it seem real that you are back and safe after all this time. And I—" Her voice broke for a second. "Oh, my dear, what have we ever done to deserve this awful punishment? You, especially, who have been so good and brave all your dear life and have suffered so much! When the news came that you were missing I knew that it was true. I had an awful vision of a shell-torn battle-field and of you, lying far to the front, wounded and forgotten. The next few days are a black blank even now. Then came the news of your death."

"Don't, don't go over it again, sweetheart, dear little girl. It wasn't true. Try to put it out of your mind. There is the future to face. We must think of that now."

"I know, Billy; I know. But it's all so hopeless. There is nothing to be done."

"Betty, there must be some way out!" The man's voice was low, tender, impassioned, but determined as fate. "If we put the whole thing up to Raymond, surely, surely—"

"It's no use, dear. Even you don't know Raymond as I do. Even you cannot realize his strength and determination to get and to keep whatever he desires. There is no hope from him. When you came over to tea this afternoon—and oh, my dear, it was hard to see you for the first time with all those people about!—I knew then, from the look in your eyes, that you thought there might be some hope still. That was why I insisted on your coming over tonight. Raymond was going to town, and I wanted to talk to you when we could be secure from interruption.

"I wanted to talk to you—and I wanted to give you back your letters, dear. I thought it was all right to keep them when

we were sure that you were dead. The War Office had confirmed the news, and, for me, there was nothing more to hope for in all the dreary, dark world. But now that you are alive, I don't dare to keep them. Raymond might find them, and—" She shuddered and was silent.

"Betty, I'm not going to stand it! Nothing in heaven or earth shall come between you and me. God! I wish the man were dead. I always hated him. He's such a cold-hearted, selfish brute. And you, my dear, fine little girl! How could you—"

There was a faint movement in the darkness, and the girl laid her hand on the man's lips.

"Don't say any more, Billy. I can't bear it. If there had been the faintest shadow of a doubt, I would have resisted everything mother said, even her prayers and tears. She was so tired of being poor—poor mother!

"I thought my heart was dead, and nothing seemed to matter any more. I waited and waited, but there was no news for those two long years. Nothing but the letter from your colonel, sent to me because you had named me as the person to be notified, telling of your bravery and of your distinguished service. It was a beautiful letter. I know it by heart—and it ended: 'His life was an honor to his country, for whom he has had the honor to die.'"

The man groaned again.

"Would to God I had died," he said. "It would have been far better so."

"Oh, no, no, Billy. Nothing could be as bad as that! I can see you sometimes, perhaps. I can know you are somewhere on this bitter, sorrowful earth," the girl sobbed.

The man, standing tensely beside her, took her suddenly in his arms.

"I will not let you go, Betty. I can't. I've suffered enough. The long black months of brutal ill-treatment in that hideous German prison, the weeks and weeks of delirium and unconsciousness in the hospital when I didn't know who I was or where I came from, all the illness and wounds were nothing to the thought of being the cause of sorrow to you, my dearest in all the world." His lips rested against her hair. "I'll find a way out, sweetheart. I'll force a way out if necessary. I'll appeal to Raymond, and if he will not free you I'll—"

"Hush, dear. It's of no use. As long as Raymond lives he'll keep his hold on me."

"As long as Raymond lives," the man repeated slowly.

For a moment the stillness of the room was absolutely unbroken. It was as if the two shadows among the darker shadows had ceased to breathe—as if they were no longer living, sentient beings.

At last the girl spoke in a whisper:

"There is no way out, Billy. Give it up, dear, once and for all. No good can come from anything we can do. We must accept things as they are and make no sign. We must not see each other alone again. Raymond must never suspect. He is my husband now. Nothing can alter that. Take your letters, dear. They are more to me than my heart's blood, but I don't dare to keep them now. And go, dear. Go while I have the courage—"

A sudden flash—and the room which had been in total darkness lay flooded with soft, brilliant light. The man and woman near the window stood as if turned to stone. There was no movement in all the length of the quiet room. Only at the far end the heavy curtains drawn across the doorway swayed slightly and against the trim at the left a man's hand appeared, the forefinger resting on the button of the light-switch. For an instant it remained immovable; then it shifted slowly from the white button to the black—and swift darkness fell again upon the room.

A faint sound of some one advancing. The low thud of two colliding bodies.

A sharp struggle—a groan. The sound of ominous footfalls retreating swiftly down the room, and all was still—still as death itself.

CHAPTER II.

A SHOT.

THE warm, slanting rays of a late October sun lay calmly on gold and russet woodland and on lawns vivid with the emerald of autumn grass. Across

a narrow roadway which skirted Potonquet Bay, the deep-blue water at the lawn's foot sparkled and danced. Nearer the house, under a great beech which stood apart in gracious dignity, the fallen leaves, beaten flat by the morning's heavy rain, lay like a silver-gilt pavement, curiously wrought, reflecting a delicate warm light upon the massive silver bole.

The lawns led upward with a gentle sweep to a wide terrace paved with smooth tiles and guarded by a broad stone balustrade. Behind this stood a beautiful old house. It had been built at the earliest period of the renaissance of American architecture, and was an exact copy of an old English country seat with which the original owner had fallen in love on one of many visits to the land of his forefathers. It had changed hands some years before, but had remained unaltered.

The first story was low, with windows coming down to the floor. The walls were of warm red brick with weathered white wooden pilasters and cornices in the Georgian style. Vines grew thick between the lower windows and threw their tendrils up along the wall, reaching ever higher and higher, their glistening leaves turned crimson by the declining sun.

The house was built around three sides of a square, forming a deep bay in the long terrace which ran its full length and faced due south. At the end of the west wing and sheltered by the house from the breeze, which blew clear and cool off the Sound, stood a tea-table. Beside it sat a pretty, cheerily colored young girl with a merry face and glistening curly hair.

"Won't you have some more tea, Mrs. Norman?" she asked, addressing an older woman who sat a little apart. "I don't do the honors as well as Cousin Betty. I should have asked you long ago, but Paul put it out of my head, he teases so!"

A long, thin youth with a delicate, girlish face rose lazily from the depths of a wicker chair.

"I never do anything so childish as to tease, Dottie," he said with an assumption of dignity which his laughing eyes denied. "I'm really going to have a room like that some day. Just think, Mrs. Norman, how beautiful it would be." He advanced to take her cup. "Imagine a floor paved with great slabs of black and white marble and empty—oh, deliciously and adorably empty—except at the end.

"And there, at the end, on a dais of silver and ebony mosaic, would be a bed done in the Egyptian style, with great pieces of turquoise set in silver. It would be hung with mauve velvet curtains—and across the bed a coverlid of—let me see—oh, yes—a coverlid of sulfur-colored marabou!"

"Paul Elliot, you're too perfectly absurd! Isn't he, Mrs. Norman?" said the girl with a little frown and a half laugh, glancing up at the window just above her head. "Jack thinks he's crazy. Don't you, Jack?"

The man in the window, thus appealed to, leaned a little way out.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say 'crazy,' Dottie, he answered with a laugh. "'Nutty' would better express my opinion of all artists, whether of the decorating or painting persuasion. But I've lived so much in the wilds that my ideas aren't worth much."

Mrs. Norman glanced up at the speaker's bronzed face, and back at the youth beside her, as if comparing them in her mind.

"No more tea, Paul," she said gently. "Just put my cup down, if you please. Oh, look," she spoke in an altered tone—"there's Dr. Pryor at last."

"So it is. Hello, doctor!" cried Paul, waving his arm.

The advancing figure lifted his hat at arm's length in response, and, leaving the driveway, rapidly crossed the lawn and ascended the broad, shallow steps at the end of the terrace.

Paul Elliot sat on the arm of a chair, swinging his flannel-clad legs.

"Well, doctor, and here you are at last! My word, but we've missed you at home—we've missed you," he sang in a rich voice. "Where have you been all day? When a house-party is as small as this one, none of the guests can stay away without giving an account of himself. And I needed you to help me out. Our respected friend, Miss Dorothy White, is as cross as two sticks.

She's trying to be the complete hostess's understudy, but I'll bet she's let the tea get cold. Maybe she'll make some more for you. I know she wouldn't for me. I'm clean out of luck to-day."

He looked down, laughing at the amusedly annoyed face of the girl.

"Look at her, Dr. Stephen," the boy went on teasingly. "She's been cross with me all the afternoon because I said that I thought it rather inconsistent in a girl who makes a boast of scorning art to get herself up to match the scenery, even to her hair. I'll leave it to you if it isn't just the same russet as that oak over there, and her sweater is the exact shade of the fallen beech-leaves."

"Hush, Paul dear. Stop your nonsense for a little while. The doctor's tired." There was something compelling in Mrs. Norman's quiet voice. Dark, clear-eyed, and strong, she had a look of self-contained completeness that spoke of years spent on the open battle-fields of life from which she had come wounded, perhaps, for there were lines of suffering in her face, but unbeaten and unembittered.

The doctor, a small, spare man in the late forties, glanced at her gratefully, and, laughingly designating the quarrel of the two youngsters as a "continuous performance," seated himself beside the older woman.

"Where have you been all day, Dr. Pryor?" called out the man in the window, and the doctor looked up quickly.

"Why, hello, John! What are you doing up in your room with this lovely sunset coming on and a feast spread below your feet? Why don't you come out?"

"Oh, I can see the sunset through my west window better than you can down there," he answered, glancing toward his right; "and Mrs. Norman has hurt my feelings by not insisting on my coming down. Besides, I think too much of my personal safety to venture to get mixed up with those scrapping children."

"You needn't put on such airs, Jack Austin. I'm seventeen, and if you had any consideration for my feelings you'd come down and protect me."

The young girl's face took on a look of momentary annoyance as she glanced up again at the handsome figure in the window.

The doctor shifted his chair to face the house.

"Oh, come on out, John. The air is heavenly." he said, lighting a cigarette. "No, don't trouble, Dorothy. I don't care for any tea, thank you." Then, in answer to a question from Mrs. Norman: "Yes, I am a bit tired, Jane. I didn't get much sleep last night."

"Mosquitoes," called down Jack from his window. "I told Betty that we ought not to come down till the screens were in, but she insisted."

"And quite right, too," said Paul with a wave of his thin hand. "You don't understand what a lot of work there is to do in making a big house like this habitable after the five years that Raymond has owned it and neglected it. In spite of being down here, off and on, all the time, I don't believe he has put in so much as one new curtain. Too much taken up with being captain of the home guard and all that kind of rot.

"Excuse me, Jack. I don't want to seem to criticise your brother, and I suppose it was patriotic to set an example to the merry villagers, but when I see an opportunity like this house just gone to waste I can hardly express myself politely. And look what Betty and I have done even in this short time. We never could have accomplished it if we hadn't been on the spot. Betty's room is a dream, if I do say it *as* shouldn't. That northwest room is going to be wonderful, and Betty—"

"By the way, where is Betty?" asked Dr. Pryor, interrupting Paul's flow of eloquence. When embarked upon the question of housefurnishings the young enthusiast was likely to go on forever.

"Had a headache and went up to her room to lie down. She's been looking badly all day, and Paul has bothered her continuously with his old chintses and things," said Dorothy, with a reproving look at the boy.

This remark opened a sparring-match between them, which was broken occasionally by a desultory bit of banter from the

man in the window. The first story was so low that he scarcely had to raise his voice to join in the conversation.

"Did anything happen last night, Stephen?" asked Jane Norman quietly, turning to the doctor.

"Galled out on a case," he replied in a low tone. "Pretty painful affair. No use saying anything about it before those children, and I can't talk about it now. I got in late, after Raymond came home. I saw his car standing in front of the garage. He must have driven himself out from town. Wasn't it rather unexpected? I thought he wasn't coming back till to-morrow."

"I thought so, too, but he was at the breakfast-table this morning and didn't vouchsafe any explanation as usual. He's up in the library now, I think. He didn't come out to tea."

Dr. Pryor glanced along the wide façade of the house toward the eastern wing, and back at his companion.

"He's probably there," he said; "shut up inside of himself. Queer contradiction, he is. I never could understand that sort of man. As unlike John"—he looked up at the virile face in the window—"as two men could be. It's hard to realize, when you see them together, that they are brothers."

The man above, meeting his eyes, called down to him again:

"I say, doctor, you haven't told us yet where you've been hiding all day. Your not showing up at breakfast is understandable in one of your conspicuously lazy habits, but what about lunch? You aren't usually among the missing at that time."

"Oh, I had lunch with Billy Wainwright," answered Dr. Pryor, "and breakfast, too, if you must know. I scorn your aspersion of my habits. I was up before any one in the house. Billy sent over for me early this morning. He'd had a fall, poor lad, and hurt that bad left shoulder of his again.

"I fixed it up for him and stayed to see that he kept quiet for a little while, at least. I think it's going to be all right now, if he'll take care of it. Too awfully bad to have it happen the first night after he got home. He promised to keep still all the afternoon, and I went for a walk. The country around here is wonderfully beautiful at this season of the year. There is something rich and restrained about the coloring that appeals to a quiet old taste like mine."

"'Old taste' is good," said Paul, laughing. "You're nothing but a kid, Dr. Stephen. But I know what you mean. The gaudy effects you see in the mountains are sometimes perfectly rotten. Paint just squeezed out of the tube, cadmiums and vermilions and chrome-greens. When you're lucky enough to get a violet haze it pulls it together. But it's rarely as chaste and harmonious as the colorings here."

Dr. Pryor laughed at the boy's enthusiasm.

"Glad we agree for once, Paul," he said. "We don't always, but I found a place out at the end of the point overlooking the Sound that I don't believe even you would criticise. It almost took my breath away. I'd forgotten how beautiful it was. You can see Potonquet Bay on one side and Saint's Orchard Bay on the other. Do you remember it, Jane? It's easy to get to. The woods are still very wet, but these sandy back roads are never so good as just after a rain. You go out past Billy's little house and along the wood road that leads north and—"

"I think I know the place, and I'll go with you to-morrow, Stephen," said Mrs. Norman eagerly. "I'd love to see it again, and perhaps Betty will come too if we can succeed in loosening Paul's clutches on her. Why don't we all go, if it's a good day, and have a picnic—"

"I won't be here, Jane. I must go back to town to-night."

"Why, Stephen, I thought you were going to stay for the next week or so!" Mrs. Norman showed her disappointment.

"I can't stay, Jane," said Stephen Pryor. His tone was too low for the others to hear. His jaw set and his eyes grew hard. "I'm not squeamish, God knows, but there are some things—"

"Stephen! What do you mean?" There was a note of alarm in Jane Norman's voice, though it was quiet and her face controlled.

"Come in the house a little later, and I'll tell you. I must see Raymond before I go. I have something to say to him." His face was very stern. "And I want to say good-by to Betty."

He half rose from his chair.

"What was that?" exclaimed Jack Austin, leaning suddenly far out of the window and speaking in uncontrolled excitement. "It sounded like a shot!"

They had all heard it—a sharp detonation.

"Somebody's tire gone," laughed Paul Elliot carelessly. "You aren't on the battle-fields of France any more, Jack. People don't do much shooting around this part of Long Island at this season of the year. It's too early even for rabbits."

"It was a shot, I'll swear it!" cried Jack breathlessly. "Where's Raymond? It sounded over to the east. Dr. Pryor, do you know where Raymond is?"

With reckless energy he had thrown himself across the window-sill and, catching a twisted rope of heavy old wistaria-vine, swung himself to the terrace tiles.

"Steady, old chap," said the doctor quietly. "No reason to be alarmed. It was probably a tire, as Paul says, or some one may be practising shooting over by the garage. It sounded out that way. Raymond's in the library, Mrs. Norman thinks."

"I must find him," said Jack, shaking off the doctor's calming hand and catching him by the elbow. "Come on with me!"

But Stephen Pryor hung back.

"Don't go in to Raymond all excited like this John," he said kindly. "You know how he hates any kind of a scene. I wouldn't like to be the man, old as I am, who disturbed him for a trifle."

"I'm not afraid of old Raymond!" cried Paul. "I'll go up and tell him his little brother is all 'het up' about a tire blow-out. Do you dare me?"

"Yes, I dare you, Paul!" said Dorothy White scornfully. "You wouldn't do it in a thousand years. You'll just go in and pretend you did it."

"Come in and watch, then, Miss Thomas the Doubtress," called Paul tauntingly as he ran along the terrace.

Dorothy, jumping up from her chair, followed him.

"We must stop this fooling, doctor," said Jack sharply. "It's a serious matter. No one ought to be shooting so near the house."

His face was pale and he started to run toward the courtyard in which was the main entrance of the house.

"I've got to see to him, Jane. He's horribly nervous. No use in his getting himself any further into Raymond's black books," called Stephen Pryor over his shoulder as he passed swiftly in the direction of the flying figures.

He caught up with them on the great staircase, where Jack had stopped for a moment to expostulate with Dorothy. Paul stood just above them at the top of the stairs.

"Let her come, Jack," he whispered, laughing. "I'll show her whether I'm afraid to tempt fate or not!" And he turned and ran on tiptoe down the hall.

The rest followed close upon his heels. They saw him pause an instant before the library door. He straightened his shoulders, opened it softly, and, with another grin in their direction, thrust his head around the panel.

"My God!" he cried. "Oh, my God!" And, pulling the door shut, he fell against it with arms outspread, his white figure gleaming against the dark mahogany like a figure on a cross.

CHAPTER III.

"IS RAYMOND DEAD?"

"WHAT is it, Paul? What is it, lad?" cried Dr. Pryor, leaping quickly forward and catching the boy's sinking form in his strong, supple hands.

"It's—it's in there by the table," panted the boy, trembling from head to foot, but striving hard to regain his lost self-control. "Oh, take Dottie away, Jack! This is no place for her. Oh, my God!" He leaned heavily on the doctor's shoulder.

John Austin caught him roughly by the arm.

"What is it, Paul? What did you see? Raymond—is he—"

The boy bowed his head and closed his eyes, while a shudder shook him from head to foot.

"Dead," he whispered.

"Take care of him, John," said Dr. Pryor in a stern, grave voice, thrusting the lad toward him. "I must see—" The sentence was punctuated by the closing door.

In a moment he returned, his face set and white.

"He is quite dead," he said quietly. "There isn't a shadow of hope."

"Then it's as I thought," breathed John Austin, white to the lips. "I've been afraid something like this would happen ever since yesterday, when—"

"Hush, John," said the doctor sharply. "Keep your thoughts to yourself, for God's sake. It was suicide, without doubt. Best keep it as quiet as we can. Bad enough at that."

He paused long enough to lock the library door, placing the key in an inner pocket. With his hand on John's arm, he drew him a few steps down the hall to the place where, clinging to each other, the boy and girl stood, pale and trembling.

"Come down-stairs, all of you," said Dr. Pryor kindly. "We can do no good here."

At the foot of the staircase stood Mrs. Norman. Stephen Pryor went down to her swiftly.

"John was right about the shot, Jane," he said gravely. "Raymond—is dead."

Jane Norman gasped and covered her mouth with her strong, white hand. Her eyes were full of horror.

"Betty! Dear Betty!" she whispered. "That such a thing should come to her! Who will tell her?"

"We must, Jane. We're the oldest friends she has. Thank God, we're here to do it. But that can wait. John, we must notify the coroner at once. Have you any idea how to get him?"

"Not the slightest. But the telephone operator—"

"Oh, I know," broke in the doctor. "Gregory's the man. He'll know just whom to call and won't make any unnecessary talk. He knows everybody about here. Hope he hasn't gone back to town yet. I'd better get him on the phone myself."

In a few minutes Dr. Pryor came back.

Mrs. Norman had taken the two young people into the living-room. Austin still stood in the hall.

The doctor spoke quickly:

"Gregory was there, and he'll notify the coroner and the local police, direct. Then he's coming over here to see if he can be of any use. He insists on bringing over with him his old protégé, Peter Clancy, the detective, who is visiting him. I told Gregory that I thought it was suicide, but he said he'd bring him over, anyway, in case he might be of service. It will be all right. Clancy's immensely clever and will keep a still tongue in his head if it proves to be suicide, as we think. And if it should, by any chance, turn out to be murder"—his voice was very serious—"it would be a great advantage to have a man like this at once, before the local police have a chance to muddle things. I was right, John, in saying that he could come? You don't think I've been officious?"

"No, doctor, no," answered Jack quickly. "Only since you think it's suicide, it would seem a pity to have a stranger—"

"He's discreet, I promise you. Gregory is very proud of what the young man has done, and Philip Gregory is a person of discernment. He wouldn't have suggested it if he hadn't been sure of his man. He and I are too good friends for that."

"Well, it's just as you say, doctor. I suppose it is best. If it weren't for the coincidence of—"

"Stop, John," said Stephen Pryor peremptorily. "Put that thought out of your head. It may be a reason for suicide, perhaps, I grant you that. But it couldn't have anything to do with—"

"Stephen." Jane Norman spoke as she appeared at the entrance of the living-room. She moved quietly across the broad hall to the foot of the stairs, where the two men stood. "I've got those two children calmed down a little. They can take care of themselves and each other now. Don't you think we'd better wake Betty and break this horrible thing to her before any one

comes? I dread to do it, but the sooner we get it over the better."

"Yes, we must tell her. We can't leave her in peace any longer, poor child. Are you all right, John. Do you mind—"

"No, no, doctor. Don't bother about me. I'll come up with you and lie down in my room until these men get here. I'm afraid I am a bit knocked up."

"Yes, John, get yourself together, old chap." Stephen Pryor put his hand on the young man's shoulder as they all three went up the stairs together. "I'll call you as soon as they come."

With a murmured word of thanks, John passed on to his room.

"I wish I could spare you this, dear," said Stephen softly, as they paused before the first door on the landing. "But I can't get along without you when I can get you, you know."

Jane Norman shook her head. The faintest shadow of a sad smile passed across her lips, leaving them more tenderly sad than before. She knocked gently at the door. There was no answer.

"She's still asleep, poor dear," she whispered, and quietly opened the door.

The room was a bedroom, charmingly appointed and bright with polished mahogany and quaintly flowered chints. The pieces of furniture were few and sparsely set with comforting wide spaces between. And the room was empty.

"Why, I was sure she was here," said Mrs. Norman, startled. "Perhaps she's fallen asleep on the chaise-longue in her sitting-room."

With quiet footsteps they crossed the room and opened the door at the right.

On the farther side of the sitting-room, crouching with her back to the wall, the open palms of her hands pressed hard against it, knelt a girl. Her beautiful face was set and her great eyes were wide open, fixed and staring.

They did not change when Jane Norman called her name, but her parted lips moved stiffly.

"Is—Raymond—dead?"

The voice sounded rigid and hollow and as if it came from far away.

For an instant the two friends, to both of whom the girl was dear, gazed at each other in horror. How had she known? She might have heard the report of the pistol, but how could she be so sure who it was that had been hit?

They both knew the house well, had known it years before it came into the possession of Raymond Austin, and for a flash the same thought was in their minds. The room they had just left had a door between it and Raymond Austin's suite, which consisted of a bedroom and a dressing-room, and the former opened through a small door into the library.

Had she been there? Could she have seen?

With sorrow and sympathy too deep for words, they knelt and lifted the stricken girl. At the touch of their gentle hands something in her consciousness seemed to break. She laid her head on the doctor's shoulder, and her body was shaken by long sobs, but her eyes were dry.

They comforted her in silence for a long time. At last she said:

"Tell me. I must know."

"Raymond is dead," said Dr. Pryor gently.

The slender figure, encircled by his protecting arm, relaxed suddenly. The head fell back. The girl had fainted.

CHAPTER IV.

PETER CLANCY.

"THIS is good of you, Gregory," said Dr. Pryor, advancing to meet a plump little old man, whose eyes, undimmed by years, met the doctor's with frank and friendly concern. "And this is Mr. Clancy," he continued gravely, addressing a young man who had stood for a moment at the open doorway, his slight, active figure darkly silhouetted against the glowing sky.

"Glad to know any friend of Mr. Gregory's, I'm sure," said Clancy, his bright-blue Irish eyes glancing at the doctor with interest as he shook his hand, "even under such terrible circumstances."

The doctor's face was very grave and sad.

"I'll call Captain Austin at once," he said. "The shock of his brother's death has been a fearful thing for him—for us all. He's in his room. I'll be back in a moment."

The old man and the young one stood in the hall talking in an undertone, oppressed by the heavy silence which brooded over the house. The spacious hall, with its evidences of wealth and comfort, was deserted.

No sound broke the blank stillness until the doctor reappeared at the head of the stairs and came down quickly, closely followed by a younger man.

"Let me present Captain John Austin, whom I think you haven't met," said Stephen Pryor, addressing Mr. Gregory.

"Haven't had that pleasure," said the old man cordially, "but we've heard a lot about you, Captain Austin. The whole neighborhood has been thrilled by accounts of your hair-raising adventures 'over there,' and we're glad to welcome you among us."

The gravity of John Austin's face lightened just perceptibly as he shook Gregory's hand.

"And I want you to know my young friend, Peter Clancy," the old man continued—"a boy to be proud of, too, though what he did to the boches was of so secret a character that it didn't get into the newspapers."

"Glad to know you, Captain Austin," said Clancy, modestly ignoring his old friend's praises.

"It's very good of you to come to our assistance, Mr. Clancy," said John Austin with a coldness which belied his words. The suggestion of the secret service, implied by Gregory, was evidently not much of a recommendation to the mind of an active and adventurous soldier.

"Always glad to help, if I can." Clancy's tone was both friendly and cordial.

"I think it will be found that my brother killed himself," said Austin heavily.

Dr. Pryor glanced up sharply. Was there a look of surprise and relief in his eyes? If there was, the detective apparently took no notice.

"Probably, probably. Much more common than—the other thing," said Clancy. "But, perhaps, since I'm here, I'd better just take a look around in case of—well, of anything turning up that you don't expect. Might save trouble in the end. Shall we get to work?" he added quietly, after a short pause. "The coroner and the local police will soon be here, and if I'm to be of any use—"

With a slight motion of acquiescence, John Austin silently led the way.

They passed up a few broad steps to a landing from either end of which the stair returned, completing the short ascent to the second floor. Austin turned to his right and went on up the stairway, across the end of a wide hall, railed at the stairwell, and down a narrower passage in the east wing of the house. At the end he paused before a closed door in the left wall.

"Dr. Pryor has the key," he said in a subdued voice.

In silence the doctor unlocked and opened the door, and in silence the four men entered.

The room was high and very large, occupying most of the east wing, with windows facing east, south, and west. Through them the last embers of day, suffusing the sky, shone blood red.

"There," said Dr. Pryor, pointing.

In front of a narrow library table standing in the embrasure of a window part way down the room, half fallen from a chair, lay a ghastly figure.

A man in the prime of life, tall and well built, with a face which must have been handsome before Death's swift-winged messenger had struck it and made of it a thing of horror.

"I did not move the body, of course," said Dr. Pryor in a low voice, "but even a layman would know that death was instantaneous."

He pointed to a bullet-hole just above and back of the ear, and to the evidence of its shattering exit on the other side of the head.

Clancy nodded without speaking. Gregory, after one horrified glance at the body, moved back and sank into a chair, where he remained a silent and interested spectator.

Peter Clancy stood for a moment regarding the awful figure in the chair. Then, stepping back, he raised his head and glanced all about the room.

"Can we have some light here? It's growing dark," he said.

Dr. Pryor went back to the door and pressed a button. Instantly the shadows in the corners of the room leaped away and all the great space lay clear in a blaze of light, from which the poor, marred thing that had once been a man seemed to shrink.

"Look! Look here!" cried John Austin suddenly, and, springing forward, he lifted from under the chair on which the body rested something which shone dully in the light. "One cartridge gone from the clip," he added as he rapidly drew it out. "Oh, my poor brother! I think I can guess—"

But Dr. Pryor had covertly touched his arm, and he did not finish the sentence.

Clancy spoke sharply in a tone of authority:

"Put back the pistol exactly where you found it, if you please, Captain Austin. Nothing must be moved before the coroner comes."

With a frown and a murmur of apology, Austin knelt beside the chair and replaced the weapon.

Clancy, after one comprehensive look at the automatic as it lay on the floor, turned back to the body.

"Your brother was left-handed, Captain Austin?" He spoke with a rising inflection.

"No—I don't think that he was," John spoke slowly. "Why do you ask?"

"The bullet went in at the left side of the head and toward the back, as you see. If your brother killed himself, he must have done it with his left hand. That's perfectly clear."

"I—see." Austin's brows drew together in an intent frown. "I didn't think. Yes, yes—the left side, of course. I see now."

He thought a moment. Then his brow cleared and he turned frankly to Clancy.

"Mr. Clancy," he said, "I haven't seen much of my brother since we were boys until a few months ago. I can't be sure whether or not he might be able to use his left hand freely. I know that when we were boys we used to practise target shooting with either hand, and he may have kept it up and become an expert. Who can say?"

"Somebody must know," said Clancy quickly. "You, Dr. Pryor, you are an old friend. What do you say?"

"I am a very old friend of his wife and her family, but I scarcely knew Raymond Austin before she married him a few months ago."

"H-m," said the detective slowly. Then, as if making up his mind: "I don't want to seem to be butting in in a family affair, but was there any reason why a man rich and healthy as this man seems to have been should commit suicide?"

Glancing up quickly, he surprised a look exchanged between John Austin and the doctor.

At the same instant Austin, catching Clancy's eye, turned to Dr. Pryor and said: "Mr. Clancy is a man of honor, I am sure, and what we tell him will go no further. It makes serious complications in a family sometimes, Mr. Clancy, when the dead return to life."

"Hush, John," interrupted the doctor sternly. "It is only necessary that Mr. Clancy should understand that we are both agreed that there may have been a reason why Raymond Austin should wish to die. That it may even have been in part a generous wish—" The doctor stopped suddenly, as if afraid he had said too much.

Clancy's face wore no expression except that of infinite candor and a desire to be of service. He seemed to radiate goodwill from every freckle of his earnest, prepossessing countenance.

"Taking everything into consideration, it seems probable, then, that your brother died by his own hand, Captain Austin," he said. "If so, I can be of no further use to you, unless you would like me to stay and see the coroner. It might be as well."

The evening silence of the outer world was broken by the labored panting of an inadequate engine, and a small car stopped at the broad steps in the middle of the terrace.

"Here is the coroner at last," said Dr. Pryor with an expression of relief.

CHAPTER V.

A CLEAR CASE.

"HE'S dead, all right," said the coroner, straightening his long, thin back and looking down at the body. "If anybody has any doubts about it, you can take it from me, he's gone," he added pompously, with an elaborate and mournful sigh.

In addition to his post as coroner, he filled that of village undertaker, and prided himself on his sympathetic bearing.

Clancy, who, like the coroner, had been carefully examining the body, turned aside to conceal his contempt.

"We were quite sure of that," said Dr. Pryor gravely.

"Yes, yes, I suppose you were." The coroner spoke indulgently.

"And how did he die? I suppose you know that, too," said the deputy sheriff, a burly young farmer in neat, plain clothes, who stood close to his colleague. His coat was thrown back on one side and his thumb, thrust through the armhole of his waistcoat, had pulled out the portion of his suspender to which his badge of office was attached and from which it gleamed truculently. Somewhat quicker witted than his companion, he had noted the doctor's sarcasm and resented it.

"We were discussing it when you came," replied Dr. Pryor gravely, "and Mr.—" He met Clancy's eye and paused.

"Grady," said Clancy smoothly. "It is a hard name to remember. William Grady, at your service. Not much of a detective yet, I'm afraid, but hoping to learn." He smiled ingratiatingly.

The deputy sheriff melted.

"Oh, I guess you'll get there, all right. You look like a bright kind of a feller. But how about this case? Looks like suicide to me."

"You've said it," said Clancy easily.

"Looks like it, I said, but you mustn't jump too quick."

The deputy sheriff's attitude was judicial. He had read a great many detective stories of the cheaper sort, and meant to distinguish himself, if possible. An opportunity like this didn't come a man's way every day in the year. Nothing like it had ever come his way before, nor, in all likelihood, would ever come again. He was on his mettle.

Captain Austin stood aside, his eyes weary and frowning. Gregory did not move from his chair. Dr. Pryor looked worn and troubled. The presence of these clumsy men in the chamber of death seemed like a desecration.

"You must look about to see if there are any clues," went on the deputy sheriff, whose name was Davis. "Have you seen anything suspicious lying around, Mr. Grady?"

"Nothing but that," said Clancy, pointing to the automatic lying almost under the center of the chair, but a little over toward the left of the body. "That seems pretty well to fix what happened."

"Sure does," Davis agreed, stooping to pick up the pistol, which he held gingerly while he examined it. "I ain't used to these newfangled weapons. How do you open the thing?"

Clancy showed him.

"Only one shot been fired out of this," said Davis alertly. "Was more'n one shot heard?"

Dr. Pryor shook his head. "Only one shot," he answered.

Davis nodded wisely and glanced about the room.

"No sign of a struggle," he murmured. "Nothing here but books and books and books. Gee-whiz! I never seen so many books before. No place for anybody to hide in the room. How about that door? Where does it go to?"

"To Mr. Raymond Austin's bedroom," said the doctor resignedly.

Davis opened the door and peeped in.

"Nobody there," he said, closing it again.

"If it was murder," suggested Clancy at his elbow, "he'd hardly be sticking around, would he?"

"Best to make sure," said Davis indulgently. "That's the door we come in by.

But what's that on the little balcony? Ain't that a door?"

He stepped back to get a better view. Over his head, from side to side of the room, ran a light balcony giving easy access, by means of a small circular stairway, to the bookshelves, which at this end ran to the ceiling.

"Yes," replied the doctor. "It leads to one of the rooms on the third floor. This room is two stories high."

"Ain't that a funny way to build a house?" said Davis, appealing to the coroner, who only grunted. He had made up his mind as to the nature of the disaster, and thought Davis rather presuming. He left the sheriff and "Mr. Grady" to make their own investigations and went back to talk to Captain Austin, who delighted him by placing the immediate care of the dead man in his hands.

The subdued conversation was interrupted by a sharp exclamation which drew their attention to the far corner of the room. Behind the small winding stair under the balcony a light had suddenly appeared, shining through the open treads. Davis's voice was raised excitedly.

"A secret staircase, by Jinks!" he cried, turning back into the room. "Come and look!"

"Nothing secret about it. It's just a private entrance to the library. Everybody knows about it, though I believe it's seldom used now," said Dr. Pryor quietly as he crossed the room. The other men followed him.

Clancy stood by the open door. An ordinary door, in plain view once the stairway was passed. As the doctor had said, there was nothing secret about it. Why, then, for a fleeting instant, did Mr. Grady's face wear such a strange expression? It was gone in a flash, and no one noted it, for his back was turned to the others.

He leaned against the door-jamb, looking down the "secret" stairs, which he himself had just lit by pressing a button in the trim. After he had pressed it his hand had unconsciously moved up on the woodwork to steady himself as he leaned around the edge of the wall.

His hand moved up—and stopped—and Clancy's whole figure stiffened. After a moment it relaxed, and he turned to Davis, who was again at his side.

"Nothing would show on stone stairs—if there was anything to show," Clancy grumbled. "We're clean out of luck."

He went down first, in spite of this, and examined every part of the stairs with a magnifying glass.

Davis watched admiringly. "That looks like the real cheese," he said, grinning. "Find anything?"

"Not a thing," said Clancy, in deep disgust. "I guess there's nothing to find."

Nevertheless, after having scrutinized the handle, he opened the door, which was unlocked, and looked carefully outside.

"Gravel!" he exclaimed. "Ain't that hell? Even an elephant wouldn't leave much of a print on that. Anyhow, I guess it's all bunk, and there's nothing to find." Mr. Grady closed the door and locked it.

CHAPTER VI.

AT 3 A.M.

A CLEAR, dark night followed the cloudless setting of the sun. A high wind, roaring through the trees, seemed to have swept free the lower spaces of the sky; and far, far above, in the black vault, tiny, bright, rayless stars hoarded their light.

The great house which Raymond Austin had for years coveted and finally gained lay dark and silent, sheltering its shattered master. He lay now in his own room, uncaring and uncared for. The only watcher Davis, the deputy sheriff, left in charge had made himself comfortable in the dressing-room, which lay between the bedroom and the hall, and now attested the gravity of his vigil by loud, sepulchral snores. All the household, servants and guests alike, worn out with excitement, slept heavily.

And the mistress, widowed now—what of her?

Fainting and ill, she had been put to bed by Jane Norman's loving hands. Under the influence of an opiate, administered by Dr. Pryor, she had slept for some hours. When she awoke she seemed to have recovered much of her natural strength, though

her eyes wore a haunted look and her whole face was still, with a tense quietness which spoke of the awful strain she had undergone.

With perfect sympathy and understanding of her character, her two old friends had refrained from question and had acceded to her slightest wish. So that when, at a late hour, she had said that she knew she could sleep, and insisted that they should leave her, they acquiesced. A bell at the head of her bed connected with the room of her old nurse, who slept on the top floor, and she promised to use it in case she needed the least thing. The doctor left an opiate for her to take should she be wakeful, and, at her earnest entreaty, left her to herself.

"Better not to cross her, Jane," said Dr. Pryor, as they passed into the hall. "Rest and quiet are what she needs most, and she's too unselfish to be at peace if she knows that we are losing sleep on her account. Poor girl! There seems to be a horrible fatality about this countryside since yesterday."

"Since yesterday? You mean to-day!"

"Yes, yes," said the doctor hurriedly. "I mean to-day."

He said no more until they had reached the upper floor, on which, owing to the dismantled condition of the two guest-rooms on the floor below, they had taken up temporary quarters. There he paused in front of Mrs. Norman's door.

"Jane dear," he said very gently, "you look tired to death." He put his strong hands on her shoulders and gazed deep into her eyes.

She returned his look unfalteringly, but her face was very sad. Ever since Stephen had come back from doing his able part in healing shattered limbs and bodies in the aftermath of battle on the blood-stained fields of Flanders she had been striving to avoid that look.

Now her self-control had been shaken by the tragedy which had passed so close to the girl they both loved, and she needed the assurance of strength and devotion which she saw in his face.

It might not be fair to him, but it would serve to brace her waning courage. They stood thus for a long moment; then Stephen Pryor said vehemently:

"How long is this going to last, dear? I don't mean Betty's troubles. We'll take them up again to-morrow, together. But you—oh, you brave, dear woman! Why, my dear—"

"Hush, Stephen! It's no use! I know you can't see it as I do, but I can't help the way I'm made. I love you, Stephen—"

He drew in his breath sharply and his hands tightened on her shoulders; but she went on:

"I think you know it—have known it ever since you came back. But it's no use. I—"

He tried to draw her toward him, but she resisted, her firm hands on his arms keeping the distance between them.

"I can't talk about it to-night," she continued wearily. "But things must remain as they are, Stephen. Some time, perhaps—"

He looked for a long time in her tired eyes. At last, with a deep sigh, he released her gently.

"You're all in, poor girl," he said. "I won't trouble you about my old self to-night. There are other days coming, and you need rest. But I'm not going to submit patiently, dear, after what you've just admitted." He closed his eyes as if the light which he saw, far ahead, had blinded him for the moment. Then he opened them again and looked at her with a half smile. "Sleep well, dear woman, dearest in all the world. We must hold our courage in both hands and see Betty through. She must be the first consideration for both of us now. Good night, dear Jane."

"Good night, Stephen."

And the two friends went their several ways, to sleep as strong people sleep when strength will be needed for the service of others on the morrow.

A faint stirring in the darkness—and again the silence of the house was unbroken, save for the heavy, regularly obstructed breathing of the police officer. The tall clock in the hall struck thrice and was still.

Again the slight stirring—and a latch,

cautiously turned, clicked softly. Then the door which connected Raymond Austin's room with the library swung slowly back, and a large round spot of light wavered a few feet from the floor. Behind it a white figure gleamed indistinctly. The door closed softly and the figure advanced into the room. The light flashed swiftly about, disclosing for an instant the several walls and the floor. Then, with a long-drawn breath, the holder of the light moved quickly to the table before which Raymond Austin had met with death.

The light fell on the table and on the floor in front of it. The rug which had been there had been removed with the other hideous traces of the tragedy. After a moment's examination the drawer of the table was pulled cautiously open, and a slender, white hand moved the papers it contained.

"Ah!"—a deep sigh. "But one, only one!" The whisper, though scarcely above a breath, was tense with agony. "Where are the others? I must find them! Who knows what may happen if others find them first! Oh, Billy, Billy!"

The light lay clear on an open letter held in a trembling hand.

"No date! And who would know that it wasn't written yesterday? Oh, God—God help me!"

There had been no sound. Not the slightest hint of warning, but a circle of brilliant light fell suddenly full upon the white figure, disclosing it from head to foot.

"Betty! Betty! What are you doing here?"

"Oh, Jack! How you frightened me!"

With a swift motion, Betty Austin dropped her hand, still holding the letter, into the pocket of her white silk dressing-gown as her brother-in-law advanced down the long room.

"Why are you here?" he repeated sternly. "Answer me, Betty."

"I might as well ask why you are here, Jack," she answered with courage. "Why are you?"

"I couldn't sleep, and I heard some one moving. I had to find out what it was."

"You heard me, Jack?"

"Yes."

"And I thought I had been so quiet. I was restless, and I didn't want to disturb anybody—"

"And so you came here, Betty, of all places in the world. And through that room where he lies! You did come that way, didn't you?"

"I thought some one might hear me if I came through the hall." Her voice sounded far away and tired, deadly tired. "I didn't want to disturb—"

He placed his electric torch on the table and came close to her. With a quick movement he caught the hand which was hidden in her pocket and drew it out.

"I saw you try to hide it," he whispered as he held her hand and the letter closed in his. "What is it, Betty? I only want to help you, dear! Is it from Wainwright? I won't look at it, but you must tell me. He was here this afternoon. That much I know. And, of course, I've heard his story—and yours.

"Dorothy told me when there was no thought of his coming back. Oh, forget him, dear, forget him! You must not think of him any more—after this! You knew that he was here, too, then—at the time the thing happened—didn't you?"

A spasm of pain crossed the girl's heavy-lidded eyes and made them look quite black, but she said no word.

"You know what I've known all along. There can be no doubt about the facts—but it seems now that we can make it appear that Raymond died by his own hand. The coroner is quite convinced. So, apparently, is the detective that old Gregory insisted on bringing over with him."

"A detective! I didn't know—"

"Yes, but I think he's harmless. He was a Department of Justice man during the war, and has just come back, I understand. He seemed a rather decent sort of chap in spite of being a spy, and it wasn't hard to convince him. I gave him a hint about Wainwright—"

The girl looked up at his face with terror in her eyes.

"Don't be afraid, dear," Austin continued tenderly. "He was almost certain to learn something of the story, and I only

suggested it when he asked, pointblank, if there was any reason why Raymond should have taken his own life. It seemed safest. There had to be a reason. I did only what was best for you. I had no thought but for you, believe me!"

Betty Austin looked up into the fervent, dominant face bent above her. Her long, dark hair swept about her shoulders. The soft, white folds of her negligee clung to her delicate, supple figure. She was very near.

With a smothered cry Jack Austin took her suddenly in his arms and held her fast.

"Oh, my darling, my darling!" he whispered with his lips against her hair. "Forget it all, my dearest! Forget Raymond, whom you never could have loved, I know—and forget this other man, who has done—what he has done. Put all the old life behind you. There is nothing in it now that it will not pain you to remember. I, who have seen you wincing under the lash of Raymond's bitter sarcasm and cold, fiendish temper, I want to see you free from it all—and happy—as I could make you if you belonged—belonged to me.

"Oh, I love you—love you, love you. I would go through hell to get you! This is not the time or place, I know; I ought not to speak yet. I ought to wait. But it isn't in me."

He crushed her against his breast. She could hear the heavy, uneven beating of his heart through the folds of his thick robe. She was too worn out, too exhausted, to struggle. She lay still and passive in his arms while the flood of his passion poured over her like a sea when the dykes have been rent asunder. Her face was very white and her eyes burned through him when, at last, the torrent of words ceased and he forced her chin upward so that she met his passionate gaze.

"You—you'll help me to save Billy Wainwright, won't you?" she whispered, panting.

"I will, so help me God," he said, and, bending, crushed her lips against his own.

The girl did not flinch, but when he at length released her she staggered a little and, groping, leaned on the table for support.

"What shall I do with this?" She raised, as if it were a great weight, the letter which she still held in her hand.

"Burn it as quickly as you can. You had a fire in your room to-night?"

She nodded.

"Burn it completely and put the ashes in the fireplace. Then no one will know." He spoke swiftly, with strong, sure command.

"But there were others. Raymond—he surprised—" She hesitated. "Jack, will you help me?"

"Yes," hurriedly.

"Billy was here last night—late. I wanted to return his letters. Raymond went away—but he must have come back without my knowing it. We were in the living-room. It was dark. They struggled. Billy, in his condition, was no match for Raymond. He got the letters."

Jack's eyes never left her face.

"We must find them," he said. "They may be—" He turned to the half-open drawer.

"No, they're not there," she said dully.

"Are you sure?" He ransacked the drawer and turned back to her with a helpless gesture. "They may be anywhere—in his room, perhaps. But we can do nothing to-night. It's too dangerous. Go to bed, sweetheart, and sleep in peace. We'll find them to-morrow. Though it won't be necessary. I'm sure that there's no danger now. Leave it to me. Can you go back this way?" His hand was on the bedroom door. "It would be safer, perhaps."

With a long sigh Betty Austin raised her head and drew her slight figure to its full height.

"I can do anything that is best," she said.

He also threw back his head and squared his shoulders, gazing at her with the admiration of courage for courage.

Silently he opened the door and crossed the room with her, neither of them looking to right or left. Then he opened her own door with great care and, when she had passed through, closed it softly.

For many minutes after John Austin had

retired to his room there was no sound in all the length of the great library. The pale starlight glimmered more faintly outside and the wind, which rests at dawn, was stilled.

The wisdom of all the ages, garnered in many volumes, looked down from the high walls, voiceless witnesses of the restless passions of men, unheeding and unheeded.

After a time, without a sound, a man rose from the floor of the balcony and slipped noiselessly down the little winding stair and through the door at its foot. Like a wraith, he passed down the stone stairs and out into the open air.

Stooping, he felt with his hand the turf at the side of the gravel path and, seeming satisfied, stepped forth upon the thick grass boldly.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WAGE OF SIN.

"I WANT to have a little talk with you, Jane, before Betty wakes up," said Stephen Pryor, as he and Mrs. Norman rose from the breakfast-table, where they had tried, for each other's sake, to make a pretense of eating. "I'm glad she's sleeping late, poor girl. Nothing else would do her so much good. Come out into the fresh air. It will cheer you up. The morning is glorious."

The doctor's face was pale and worn. His clear, gray eyes that had looked on so much sorrow and suffering were tired and sad, and his clean-cut lips were pressed firmly together.

"I hope those two children will take a real long walk, as I told them to. This has been a terrible experience for them. Yes, Parker," the doctor broke off as they met the butler in the hall. "What is it?"

"A wire for Mrs. Norman, sir."

"Thank you, Parker." Jane Norman took the yellow envelope from the tray and turned to Stephen with a quizzical smile. "What does she say, Stephen? Will you bet?"

"That she won't come, please God," he answered devoutly.

She opened the message and read aloud:

"Prostrated by news. Impossible to come. Thankful you and Stephen and Dorothy are with my child. Will fly to her when able. Love. GWENDOLINE BOSWELL.

"Now, isn't that just like her, Stephen? How can she dare to be 'prostrated' when our dear old Betty needs us all so much? And she's done everything in the world for her mother, even— Oh, what's the use?"

"Well, thank Heaven, she isn't coming, anyway!" said Dr. Pryor fervently. "We're spared that much. We'll stay and see Betty through, Jane."

"Of course, Stephen."

They had passed out on to the terrace, and she glanced up at the windows of the west wing.

"John's still asleep, evidently," she said with a motion toward the drawn curtains.

The doctor nodded, and they said no more until they had reached the driveway, where they began to pace slowly up and down, breathing in gratefully the crisp autumn air.

"They can see us from the house if they want us," he said, and fell silent, studying her pale face, his own full of concern. At last he broke out fiercely:

"I can't help it, Jane. I can't help it! It wasn't what I brought you out here for, but I must speak! It isn't right, dear. It isn't right that we should waste what there is left to us of life! We could be so happy! God, how I want you! And I've waited so long to hear you say what you said last night. Do you think I'm made of stone? We could do so much together, you and I. And you're sticking out a lonely existence for what—will you tell me? Just an idea."

"It isn't just an idea, Stephen." Her face, worn with emotion, was sad but determined. "It's a working principle. When I promised for better or worse, until death—"

Her voice trailed off to silence.

The sun threw transparent golden shadows on the grass. The wind whipped the black-blue waters of the bay into pointed crisscrosses of white. They could hear the crisp rush of waves among the pebbles of the beach below the road, and as they

turned toward the north they could see the water foaming white against the rocks of the breakwater near the end of the point.

"It was a mad infatuation, that I grant you," Jane Norman resumed at last, "but I thought I loved him. I didn't know. And he needed me. He was so unhappy—and so weak. I realize it now—so weak. All the more, he needed me. And that's a strong appeal to a girl who, in her inexperience, thinks herself strong enough for two."

She smiled a little bitterly, not looking at him, and shrugged her shoulders. "Pity—and passion," she went on; "that was all there was. I know now. And only the pity left, after all these years. He was my child, Stephen!" She looked at him now, throwing out her hands with an impetuous gesture. "The only child I had. I guarded and helped him—and when he took that money from the bank—he meant to pay it back, Stephen, I'm sure. He had been speculating wildly—and I never knew. And then he disappeared, and they failed to trace him. I only heard from him once—"

"Money, of course," interrupted Stephen Pryor grimly.

"Yes. He was poor and ill. I wired the money and went to him. He was gone again—and I haven't seen him since. I don't know whether he's alive or dead. But until I know, Stephen, until I know that he doesn't need me any more—"

"And what about me?" said Stephen despondently. "A divorce would be easy to get in the circumstances. And I need you, too."

Jane Norman looked at him with a sad smile, and shook her head.

"You don't need me, Stephen. You only want me. You are strong, and have your own fine, helpful life to lead. But I—oh, Stephen, sometimes I'm very tired of being good. Help me to do the thing I know to be right. There would be no happiness for either of us if I failed. Believe me. I would make you miserable. And if Bruce should come back—"

"He never will. He wouldn't dare."

"Don't talk about it, Stephen. I've made up my mind. I've argued it out with myself through long, sleepless nights. He trusted me—always—I said I would never fail him, and I never will."

There was finality in her look and gesture, and Stephen Pryor fell into a brooding silence. After a while, with a great effort, he roused himself.

"I am in your hands, Jane," he said, his voice vibrant with feeling. "Do with me as you will. I have my work, thank God! It has stood by me all these years, and it will stand by me to the end. And we are friends, the best friends," he smiled whimsically, "that were ever seen on sea or land.

"And now," he added after a slight pause and in a different tone, "we must stop thinking about ourselves. There are other people in the world far worse off than we are, and perhaps, together, we can help some of them a little."

Again he paused, and they took two or three turns up and down before he spoke: "You know how I hate to tell you anything to distress you, dear, but you'll have to learn it some time, and I'd rather you'd hear it from me. I was going to tell you yesterday afternoon, but so much happened. You were saying only the other day that you thought it strange that Alice Hull hadn't been over to see you, though you'd written to tell her you were coming down. I didn't know myself then why she never came."

"Oh, don't tell me that anything has happened to dear little Alice, Stephen. That would be too much," cried Jane, raising distressed eyes to the doctor's face. "I haven't seen her for five years or more, but I've never forgotten her. She was such a dear child!"

"And you did so much for her. I remember well all about it, Jane. That's why I hate to tell you, but I must."

He paused an instant, then went on quickly: "I told you yesterday afternoon that I had been out on a case the night before."

"Alice!"

"Yes. The poor child was very ill, and her father came for me. He knew I was resting down here, but he guessed rightly

that I wouldn't refuse to help him. And he couldn't call in a local man. He's very proud—"

"Stephen!" There was a look of fear and comprehension in her eyes.

Dr. Pryor nodded slowly.

"She—and her child—died that night," he said sadly. "She died with her father's arms about her. He was a good father to her—but he's bitter, bitter as death. I want you to go to him. You were a great friend of his in the old days, and I know you could do more with him now than any one else. He *must* not talk—for his own sake, he must not."

Jane Norman stared at him, uncomprehending.

"Don't you see, Jane? Can't you guess? The father of Alice's child died under suspicious circumstances"—he nodded in the direction of the house—"yesterday evening."

Jane gasped and caught her lower lip between her strong, white teeth.

"Raymond Austin!" she breathed bitterly. "And he could bring Betty here! The cynical, cold-hearted beast! Is there no decency in men?"

"Very little in him, I'm afraid. He was sure that Alice and her father wouldn't talk—and they haven't. He may not even have known about the child. At any rate, he met his just deserts, and I, for one, have no pity to waste upon him. The coroner thinks he shot himself, and so apparently do the rest. I did, myself, at the very first. But, Jane, did you ever see Raymond use his left hand freely as most men use the right? Did you ever see him eat with it, or write with it? You have seen him shoot—did you ever see him shoot with it?"

"No. Certainly not. Why do you ask?"

"The wound in his head was here"—the doctor put his finger on a spot just above and back of his ear. "The course of the bullet was straight through the head. I didn't realize myself what it meant till that clever young friend of Gregory's pointed it out. I was too completely stunned by what I saw when I first went into the library. One can't think of that sort of thing in connection with people one knows. Well, when Clancy pointed it out I saw at once what it meant. Now, look here, Jane. Supposing anything so unnatural as that a man bent on suicide, and holding a pistol in his right hand, would turn his head and inflict a wound on the left side, the course of the bullet would be necessarily toward the back—you see that, don't you? There is no question about it. Either he fired that pistol with his left hand, which I believe was impossible—or he was murdered."

Jane Norman shuddered.

"And you think George Hull—"

"No, no! I only want you to use your influence to keep him quiet. He might harm himself if he talks just now. I don't suspect him in the least. I almost wish I could!"

"Why, Stephen, how can you say a thing like that?"

Dr. Pryor looked back at the house sadly.

"I am thinking of Betty," he said. "I've seen her grow to womanhood, and I've loved her as you have. Jane!" He turned suddenly and took both her hands in his. "You know all my heart. I've shared all my joys and sorrows with you since we were children. You are so wise and brave. Help me now. You will see clearer than I can, and I'm worried, worried to death."

She looked at him, questioning, troubled, but ready with all her heart and mind to give him the help he required.

"Tell me, Stephen," she said quietly.

"Jane, when Billy Wainwright told me, yesterday morning, that he had hurt himself by a fall, I accepted it as a matter of course. But when I examined him, I found that his injuries were those of a man who had been hurt in a brutal struggle. They weren't actually dangerous, but must have been terribly painful. He was quite all right when he was over here at tea-time, so that, whatever it was, it happened afterward—probably during the night.

"It set me to thinking, naturally. You remember that Raymond had come back unexpectedly in his car. I could think of no one else who could have felt any enmity against the boy, and who but a beast like Raymond would have attacked a man whose wounds were known to be imperfectly healed?

"Billy made no further explanation, though he must have known that I could not be deceived; and I, of course, asked for none."

"We both know, Stephen, that they had cause to hate each other. But we can only guess at what might have happened; and even granting all you say—"

"That isn't all, Jane. When I left Billy he promised that he would stay quiet all the afternoon, and I believe that at the time he meant what he said. I went for a long walk. I wanted to have time to sort things out before I saw Raymond again, and I had made up my mind that in spite of my affection for Betty I couldn't stay another night under the roof of a man who had done—all that he had done.

"I couldn't sit at the same table with him and eat his salt, knowing what I knew—about Alice Hull—and everything. I determined to have it out with Raymond and to tell you. It seemed best to do that, on Betty's account. And then to go into town at once, in my car. I was hardly thinking of Billy when I passed his house on my way back. Just hoped that he was sleeping and would be all right again soon—and when I turned into the road, what was my surprise to see him go through at the little gate in the woods over there and strike into the path that leads up to the east side of the house.

"I saw him plainly, though he did not see me. There could be no mistake. I thought Betty must have sent for him, and I expected to find him here before me. The path is a short cut, but I always did hate to walk on gravel. I wasn't in any particular hurry, so I came around by the shore road.

"When I found that he wasn't there I said nothing, for I feared, God help me, that he and Betty might have planned to meet somewhere in the grounds. Youth is youth, and Heaven knows fate has treated them cruelly."

There was silence between them for a moment. It was impossible to evade or belittle the significance of the doctor's words. The coincidence of time and place was too serious. Jane Norman faced it with knitted brows. After a time she raised her head.

"I see what's in your mind, Stephen, but I don't believe it," she said, with a lift of her firm chin. "I don't believe it for an instant. We've both known Billy Wainwright and his father and mother before him, and when did we ever know any of them to do a dishonorable deed? Billy was always a manly, straightforward boy with the courage and decency of his race.

"When the Lusitania was torpedoed, he did not wait for his country to rouse itself, but went to Canada and enlisted as a common soldier. Not from recklessness and a love of adventure, as so many did. He told me, just before he went, with such quiet simplicity, that he hated being a soldier, but he felt that no decent man could stay out of the war. He was so bitter about America's slowness in going in that he didn't let any one know who he was, further than his name. Billy thought it unpatriotic to imply that his sense of honor was greater than his country's. And it was an English colonel who wrote to Betty—and such a letter, too! This is beside the point, perhaps, but do you think a man like that capable of *murder?*"

"Not then, certainly," said Dr. Pryor wearily. "But he's been through so much since. I know! I saw in the hospitals, during the war, what you never could believe. He suffered from delirium and amnesia over there, and when he came back he found the girl he loved married to a man he had reason, already, to hate. And who can tell how accountable he is?"

"Well," said Jane Norman firmly, with a generous flush on her handsome face, "if you think that Billy Wainwright is a criminal, whether he's sane or not, we differ for the first time, Stephen. I'll never believe it, never!"

Dr. Pryor gazed at her for a moment earnestly. Then a light broke over his face. Every trace of fear and doubt was routed by the confidence in her eyes.

"God bless you for saying that, dear old Jane!" he cried, fervently wringing her hands. "I don't believe it myself!"

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

A Symbol of Deceit

by Robert J. Horton

BLACK night cloaked the narrow cañon between the high, rear walls of the warehouses. Iron doors and iron-shuttered windows yielded no chance ray of light. High above a few scattered stars showed but dimly in the fog that was drifting in from the bay. There was no sound; in the stone-paved, iron-and-brick-bound alley the stillness was the stillness of death itself.

And, as though lending its indorsement to the environment, death seemed to vibrate in the dank and darkness of that deserted down-town district.

Hark!

The low hum of a muffled motor now carried in the breeze.

The sound suddenly was silenced.

Hackleton Binny drew back into the deeper shadow of a narrow loading platform. His hat-brim was drawn down over his eyes and his coat-collar was turned up about his neck. He balanced lithe and catlike, as if to spring, upon his rubber heels.

An orange-colored shaft of light pierced the velvet black a few yards away as an iron door swung back with a metallic creak. The automobile was revealed in the glow. Two men appeared from within the building bearing between them a body. Another appeared dragging a heavy bag. The driver of the car threw open the doors on the side toward the building and moved to lend assistance.

Hackleton Binny darted from his place of vigil with an automatic in his right hand and—

"Mr. Binny, are you coming down to supper?"

Zounds!

Hackleton raised an eyelid and squinted at the lamp on the small table beside him.

"Are you asleep, Mr. Binny?" was the query in a feminine voice.

He raised the other lid and glared at the closed door across the room.

"In a minute," he exclaimed harshly.

"Oh, I didn't know but what you had fallen asleep," came the voice, retreating. "The bell rang fifteen minutes ago."

Hackleton Binny grunted.

It was getting so that a fellow couldn't even indulge his thoughts in his own room—paid for in advance—without suffering interruptions at the most inopportune moments.

He picked up the paper in his lap and glanced again at the account of the daring robbery in the warehouse district which had netted the thieves twenty thousand dollars' worth of silks and cost one of them his life.

Now, if Binny could have been there when it all took place; if he could have happened on the spot with that fine, new automatic pistol that reposed in his top,

right bureau-drawer; if—ah, there was the rub, confound it—just *if!*

And he hadn't even been allowed to *imagine* the result.

Food—always food. And boarding-house food at that. Food, sleep, and work seemed all that most of Mrs. Whitney's boarders thought of. Where was the romance of life? Where was the love and the laughter; where were the tears and tragedies? And what were they to them—the others in the house? Nothing! Where were the things that made life worth while? Certainly not in Mrs. Whitney's boarding-house, for here there was nothing but monotony.

So thought Hackleton Binny as he smoothed his hair into place before the diminutive mirror in his second-floor hall room; and so he thought as he sat at table and partook of the regular Monday night fare—corned-beef and cabbage. So, too, he reflected afterward when he returned to his room and took from the top shelf in his wardrobe a paper-bound volume entitled:

"THE MYSTERY OF THE SEVENTH CANE."

For Hackleton read detective stories with a zest that belied his occupation, which was that of salesman in an art store.

Denied the possible adventures of one of more strenuous vocations, he made up the deficiency by seeking thrills which, though purely typographical, were nevertheless mentally exciting. This venial trait endowed him with an insatiable thirst for two experiences: a meeting with a real detective and—to be preferred above all things—a meeting with a genuine crook.

He sought these two experiences in the highways and byways of the big city, but to no avail. He went abroad at night, roving here and there about Manhattan Island, with an imitation gold chain hanging from his vest-pocket wherein was an imitation gold watch, but no pickpocket took the lure. He would gladly have welcomed the sensation of having his pocket picked for the thrill of a look at the crook; but there was nothing doing.

He looked in vain for the "furtive, crafty, shifting glance" of the master crooks among the law-abiding citizens from whom they were reported to exact toll.

And the closest he got to a detective—for all he knew—was when he paused for a friendly word with the policeman on the beat.

The world of crime revolved, apparently, far outside his sheltered little orbit of Mrs. Whitney's boarding-house and the art store on Madison Avenue.

II.

Now don't get Hackleton Binny wrong. He didn't yearn to be a great detective any more than he yearned to be a crook; and there wasn't a crooked hair in his head, nor one that could be coaxed to resemble one. He craved thrills. His life was singularly devoid of them. He was young and fully equipped with the imagination that goes with youth and a hall room.

Like all youths, similarly situated, he had to have diversion. There are various ways of getting this. Binny got his between the covers of novels depicting highly colored careers of highly colored sleuths; and something of whatever it was *they* had went to make up for something which *he* didn't have. And there it ended. Except, of course, the natural desire to meet in the flesh some of the remarkable characters with whom he was on such intimate terms in type.

But then there had been certain little achievements, too, in the way of applying such knowledge of criminals and their habits as he had acquired in the course of his reading.

Indeed, hadn't he rendered Mrs. Whitney a signal service in detecting the intention of the Second Floor Back to beat a three-weeks' board bill?

This had been accomplished by shrewd deduction and some clever shadowing of his movements.

He had seen Second Floor Back going out with a fat bundle under his arm. The bundle had been left at a laundry.

Next the man had gone out with two pairs of shoes conspicuously displayed and had left these at a cobbler's shop.

But then Second Floor Back had boldly departed with two suits over his arm, and Binny had followed him to—a tailor's.

A hat-cleaner called for two hats to be cleaned and took them away.

Hackleton then had taken the liberty of peeping into the gentleman's room. A comb, tooth-brush, dilapidated fiber suit-case, some soap, and three frazzled neck-ties were all that remained of the gentleman's effects.

So he had notified Mrs. Whitney.

Ostensibly Second Floor Back had taken the things out to be put in shape, cleaned or repaired. But it would be an easy matter, he pointed out, for the man to get them back and take them to a new boarding-house or have them sent there; and unpaid board bills are sometimes easily forgotten.

Mrs. Whitney agreed with him—especially as to the latter—and accompanied the gentleman in question upon an excursion a few minutes later to retrieve the scattered wardrobe, which was put back in the room. There it had remained, together with the man, under the watchful eye of Binny. They still were there—only now the man was six weeks in arrears.

Following the discovery of the Second Floor Back's perfidy Binny began to take a livelier interest in Mrs. Whitney's other boarders. But for the most part their virtues and their faults were so apparent and harmless that the rewards of these observations were practically nil.

He did discover, however, the dark secret in the life of the bookkeeper who sat across from him at table. Glancing casually into that gentleman's room early one evening he saw him putting it on and for Binny, at least, the mystery of how the bookkeeper kept the part in his dark, wavy, brown hair so exact was solved.

The bookkeeper wore a wig. But it was a case of necessity and not of disguise, so the discovery was without merit or possibilities. Indeed, there was no reason why the man should want to disguise himself.

So Binny gave the boarding-house up as a bad job and looked farther a-field for his diversion. He simply had to have it. It compensated for his droll business of selling imitation parchment lamp-shades and Mexican drawn work executed in Trenton, New Jersey.

For selling artistic, or near-artistic, articles in an art store of like character is about as exciting as eating ice-cream with a fork!

III.

THEN there came to Mrs. Whitney's boarding-house one who at once arrested attention, inspired comment, overawed the women and flustered the men.

He took the second floor front and his name as he gave it to Mrs. Whitney was Francis C. J. Devon, with the accent on the last syllable.

For some inexplicable reason Mrs. Whitney could not resist affixing the "Esq." after his name when she made out his first receipt.

And from the moment Francis C. J. Devon first entered the dining-room, and, after a gracious nod of greeting and a word or two of persiflage, pulled out his chair with easy swagger and seated himself with a confident hitch of the arms, he was under the keen observation of Hackleton Binny.

His light-checked suit, his gray spats, his silk shirt, his lavender knitted tie with the diamond scarfpin, his sleek hair, the flower in his buttonhole, the lavender-bordered kerchief that peeped from the bosom pocket of his coat, his thin, gold watch-chain—all were mentally catalogued by Hackleton, who noted each fresh detail with mingled feelings of admiration, perplexity and suspicion.

A man of the world this—and perhaps something more.

"Mr. Binny, meet Mr. Devon," was Mrs. Whitney's introduction after dinner.

"Delighted!" exclaimed Devon, grasping Binny's hand.

"Interested to meet you," said Binny carefully.

"Eh—what? Oh, *interested*—to be sure," said Devon heartily. "The word seemed a bit unusual, that's all."

"Yes, I suppose it is when used in that connection," exclaimed Binny. "Ah, I never say 'pleased to meet you' because we can't tell right off-hand if we're pleased to meet a person or not. I avoid those stereotyped phrases in introductions; it takes time to become acquainted."

"I guess you're right," he agreed in a soft voice. "I don't believe I ever thought of that. Do you think it will be hard to get acquainted in our case?" He looked at Binny shrewdly.

"Ah, perhaps not," replied Binny cautiously. Then he felt the urge to inquire as to the other's occupation.

"Theatrical?" he asked politely.

The clean-cut features of the newcomer clouded slightly.

"I have no position at present," he said somewhat wearily. "But I hope to have work soon."

"Professional engagement?"

"Yes; you might call it that," was the evasive answer.

Mr. Devon took his hat from the rack in the hall.

"Rather warm to-night," he said as he left.

"An interesting character," remarked Binny to Mrs. Whitney.

"Yes, he has a fine leather bag," observed Mrs. Whitney.

"No trunk?"

"That bag is worth more than some trunks in the house," said the landlady pointedly.

"No doubt." Binny felt snubbed and therefore nettled.

"He paid me out of a twenty-dollar bill."

"But he waited for the change, didn't he?"

"He's got a gold-plated razor," she continued.

"He looks prosperous," observed Binny dryly.

"He asked for the front room."

"Seems pretty well dressed for a boarding-house at that!" snapped Binny.

"*No* one is too good for my house," said Mrs. Whitney severely. "I buy the best of everything; I just wish you could see my weekly meat bill!"

"No offense, Mrs. Whitney," Binny soothed, "I didn't mean that."

"Did you notice what a beautiful diamond pin he had in his tie?" asked Mrs. Whitney, allowing her glance to rest for a moment on the clouded moonstone in Binny's cravat.

The glance was not lost on Hackleton.

"A symbol of deceit," he rasped in retaliation.

"Nevertheless, I wouldn't mind if more of my boarders displayed the same kind of symbols," was Mrs. Whitney's parting shot in a voice loud enough to penetrate to the second floor back.

Binny retired to his quarters, filled his pipe, and turned to where he had left off on page 105 of

"THE MISSING AUTO NUMBER."

By midnight he knew the missing number.

He set the alarm for seven, glanced in the drawer where he kept his automatic pistol, turned out the light, and went to bed.

IV.

DURING the next week Binny had little opportunity to study Mrs. Whitney's latest and most interesting boarder except during the dinner hour.

Devon proved to be a night bird.

He never got up for breakfast, and as Binny did not come home for lunch, the only time the two met was at the six o'clock meal. It was not an occasion which lent itself readily to anything like scientific observation either, Binny reflected.

Devon went out evenings.

He not only went out evenings, but he *stayed* out. Now and then Binny would hear him coming in during the early morning hours, sometimes stealthily and again a bit carelessly.

He seemed cheerful, despite the fact that he had no engagement; and he always was polite.

"Best mannered man I ever had in my house," was the way Mrs. Whitney put it.

At times, though, as he went out for the evening, Binny thought he caught a gloomy look on Devon's face; and at the end of the week his two suits were sadly in need of pressing and his shoes lacked the luster they had possessed when he first came.

He nonchalantly broke Mrs. Whitney's rule about paying in advance, too, although Binny did not know this and Mrs. Whitney was loth to cast any reflection upon her new guest's elegance by referring to the matter in public.

Any man who wore a diamond in his tie would hardly be planning to beat a board bill, she told herself. And there was the sole-leather bag, and the gold-plated safety-razor. No; it doubtless was merely thoughtlessness or a temporary crimp. These temporary crimps were nothing new in Mrs. Whitney's experience.

And then Devon quit going out evenings.

He dropped into Binny's room, next door to his own, with a polite request for a match after supper one night.

Binny was in hard pursuit of the king of opium smugglers at the time, but he laid aside the book and directed Devon to help himself from the match-box on the dresser.

As Devon reached for the matches he noticed a volume on the dresser entitled, "Methods of Great Detectives."

"Do you go in for that sort of thing?" he inquired, indicating the volume.

Binny colored.

"Just bought it out of curiosity," he explained lamely, trying to conceal the book he had been reading.

But Devon had scanned its cover.

"Do you know," he said as he lit a cigarette, "I've always been interested in crime."

Binny brightened perceptibly.

"Have you made any study of it?" he asked.

"No, can't say that I have—except through accounts in the papers; and I suppose one can't believe half what one reads."

"Newspaper accounts are treacherous," observed Binny. "I usually read them in an effort to fix upon the motive for the act."

"Ah! Then you have had some experience with criminals and their ways?"

"Yes—and no," said Binny in a superior tone. Certainly he was not the one to tell this new acquaintance that he never had met a great detective or any kind of a crook and would willingly give a week's pay to do so.

"But I've made a considerable study of it," he continued. "No; newspaper details often are very shady."

"Don't you think lack of education makes a great many crooks?" asked Devon, dropping into a chair.

"Undoubtedly—no question of it," replied Binny warmly. His guest had touched upon a favorite topic. "Low brows make for low deeds," he said impressively as he launched himself into a discourse upon the making of a crook.

His listener showed such genuine interest that Binny's heart warmed toward him. This fellow Devon was a pretty good sort, after all. Well educated, too; apparently considerably traveled, as he had mentioned Paris, London, and Nice in his conversation at the dinner-table.

"I believe *you* would make a good detective," said Devon when Binny paused after driving home the point that the Bowery was a veritable incubator for crooks.

"What makes you think so?" fluttered Binny, secretly pleased—very much pleased.

"Oh, you know so much about the methods of criminals; and then you have a way of looking at people—taking them *all* in, as 'twere," said Devon casually. "I don't believe any one in this house, for instance, would think of trying to put one over with you around."

"One man tried it," said Binny meaningly.

"Yes, I heard about that. Sneaked out all his things, eh? Well, you didn't let him get away with it."

Binny waved a hand in a deprecating gesture.

"Wouldn't hardly have been right to let Mrs. Whitney get cheated; of course, personally—"

"I know; you wouldn't care; you're a good sort."

While Devon listened, and occasionally interjected a remark, he played with a small knife attached to his watch-chain. It was a peculiar knife, somewhat barrel-shaped, with a ruby setting, and it attracted Binny's attention to an extent that he remarked upon it.

"Yes, a trifle—trinket—I picked up in Rome," said Devon casually. Oh, yes; he had traveled a lot.

Devon put the knife away and lit another cigarette.

"Have you learned any infallible trait or traits about crooks in the course of your investigations?" he asked.

Here was flattery. At last some one was showing the proper appreciation of his—Binny's—reading course and the knowledge so derived.

"Several," answered the delighted Binny, "and the most important one is that there is never a crime committed but what the perpetrator leaves some clue. It may be hard to find, but it is there."

Devon seemed much interested.

"Never fails, you say?"

"Never!" smiled Binny.

Then followed a further detailed expression of his views which involved the deductions, experiences and views of a score of man-hunters who carried on their varied operations between the covers of paper-backed novels.

It was midnight when Devon left, saying that he had spent a most enjoyable evening. Binny's invitation to call again was sincere and enthusiastic. It was a pleasure to talk with a fellow like Devon—a man who *knew* something.

And Devon called every evening that week!

V.

On Tuesday evenings Binny made a practise of going to the movies. Usually he selected some film which gave promise of keeping in line with his reading. Crook dramas were his favorites because he could see on the screen some of the characters which he couldn't meet in real life—especially crooks.

The following Tuesday evening he returned from the movies somewhat later than usual. There was a light in Devon's room and the door was slightly ajar. Binny peered within as he put the key in his own door—and gasped.

Devon was standing before his dresser, on which lay an oblong black case, opened flat. Devon was examining something under the light. From his fingers shot rays of irridescency. The object he held was a diamond; and on the black velvet lining of the case on the dresser-top were other diamonds, Binny didn't know how many.

Binny opened his door and slid into his own room noiselessly.

He donned his bath-robe and, until early morning, he smoked his best pipe, pondering on what he had seen. What was Devon doing with so many diamonds? Where did he keep them? How did he get them? Why—how—what—

He gave it up. It was too much for him. Things certainly were coming a bit thick. Perhaps on the following evening he could betray Devon into an explanation. He would try it anyhow. He went to sleep on the resolution.

But next morning on the crosstown car on his way to work Binny received another shock as he read the headlines in the morning paper.

The Rawlins apartment hotel two blocks from Mrs. Whitney's establishment had reported the theft from an apartment some time the night before between the hours of eight o'clock and midnight of diamonds valued at ten thousand dollars or more.

It was the theory of the police that the thief was acquainted with the place and that entrance had been effected by means of picking the lock. The gems had been taken from a small wall safe and were contained in a black leather case, the article stated. No clue had been found up to time of the paper going to press. The occupants of the apartment had been at the theater when the robbery took place.

That, in substance, was all there was to it. Oh, yes; a reward of one thousand dollars was offered for the return of the stones and no questions asked. An advertisement to that effect had been inserted by the owner of the gems, it was stated.

Binny got off the car at Fifth Avenue and walked back into Bryant Park.

He sat down on a bench and thought.

The robbery had been effected some time before midnight. He had returned home about midnight the night before. The gems had been contained in a black leather case. Why—why—

Devon had been in his room when Binny arrived and he had been examining some diamonds in a black case!

A coincidence?

Binny went to a drug-store and telephoned his place of employment that he could not be down that day. "Business of extraordinary importance," he gave as an

excuse. He obtained permission to remain away for the day.

He made his way back to the boarding-house as quick as he could.

Francis C. J. Devon was just leaving as Binny came in sight of the regulation brown-stone front.

Keeping the prescribed distance for such work, Binny followed Devon to a pawnshop on Sixth Avenue and just as the man was about to enter he tapped him on the shoulder.

Devon turned with a start.

"I wouldnt' go in there just now," said Binny, looking hard at the other. "Suppose we go over to your room; I want to talk to you."

Genuine surprise was mirrored in Devon's face.

"Can't you wait until I step in here a minute?" he asked.

"I think it would be better if we went right now," was Binny's reply. "It means quite a bit to you."

"Oh, all right," said Devon wonderingly, "if it's as important as all that we won't put it off."

They walked back to the boarding-house in silence. Not until they had gained Devon's room did Binny venture to speak again.

"Devon, I—I didn't think it of you," he began with some hesitation. "I'll tell you frankly that I didn't intend to spy upon you, but last night when I came home your—your—ah, door was partly open and I couldn't help seeing you as you were examining the night's haul."

Devon's brow was puckered and he stared at Binny wide-eyed.

"The night's haul?"

"Exactly," said Binny evenly. "The diamonds."

"Diamonds!" exclaimed Devon incredulously.

Binny could not help betraying his admiration with a glance of appreciation. Here was a master crook indeed!

"I saw you standing before your dresser on which was the black leather case containing the gems that you stole from the Rawlins apartment hotel," continued Binny, enjoying the other's look of astonishment. "You were examining one of the stones as I went into my room. I didn't intend to spy upon you, as I said, but as the door was partly open I couldn't help but see."

Somehow the apology seemed to be in place.

And now Devon's face was lit with a rare smile. He slapped his knee and chuckled. Then he lit a cigarette and looked at Binny with laughing eyes.

"Tell me about the robbery," he said.

"I'll tell you about it just so that you may know that I know all about it," said Binny; and he did.

"There's a thousand dollars' reward for the return of the gems," he concluded, "but if I were you I wouldn't bother about the reward. I'd just send 'em back by registered mail. And if you do that I don't know as I would feel called upon to take a hand in the matter, seeing that we have known each other—" To have known a crook; to have been on intimate terms with one! It was a thrilling thought.

Devon dropped into a chair.

"Sit down, Binny," he invited. "Do you know, you're a mighty fine sort. Do you mean to say you'd keep mum and let me get away if I returned the—ah—plunder?"

"Under the circumstances, having known you and everything, I will," replied Binny.

"Now that's what I call being white! But, Binny, I'm afraid they wouldn't accept these stones I've got here." He tossed the black case upon the bed, picked it up, and handed it to Binny.

Binny opened it and stared with glistening eyes at the sparkling gems.

"They'd be mighty glad to get 'em back and no questions asked," he declared.

"No, they wouldn't—not those things," sighed Devon. "I wish they were what you think because I need the thousand—and I'd take it, believe me. But those aren't diamonds; they're imitations; good imitations, however. They're made by the Sparklite Company, and I got a job with them yesterday as an agent. Those are the samples they gave me. I am going to solicit business from the theatrical people and try to make expenses until I can get something better. I started out last night

looking for orders, but didn't have much success. Oh, I'll sell some."

It was Binny's turn to stare in astonishment.

"But you were taking them to a pawnshop when—"

"No, I wasn't expecting to pawn *those*," interrupted Devon. "I was going over there to pawn my watch. I haven't even got breakfast money, and a man who gets up too late to eat breakfast in his boarding-house has to eat breakfast *somewhere*. But I'll get on my feet again."

"But these stones—" Binny just couldn't realize that he had jumped to the wrong conclusion.

"They are just what I say they are—mighty good imitations," declared Devon. "If you don't believe it you can take them out and price them. This stone in *my* tie is one—you'd take it for the genuine article, wouldn't you?"

Binny looked long into Devon's serious blue eyes.

"I don't blame you for being suspicious," said Devon. "It did look mighty bad for me—I can see that after hearing about the robbery and knowing that you accidentally saw me with that truck last night. And—but say, if I had turned that trick you could have got a thousand dollars by turning me over to the police; didn't you think of that?"

Binny started. He hadn't thought of that! Still he doubted if he would have turned Devon over.

"Now if you still think that those are the stolen Rawlins diamonds and that I am the thief you can make an easy thousand."

Binny laughed. It had just occurred to him that he had given Devon ample opportunity to cover him with a gun—which a thief would be certain to carry—and make his getaway despite him. It was the clincher.

"I guess I'll let the thousand go," he smiled, rising from the chair and handing back the case with the Sparklite stones. "And now I'm going back to work before I get docked for a day."

"I'll walk along with you as far as Sixth Avenue if you're going that way," said Devon. "I've just got to have that breakfast money and some to spare and then I'm going to try and get action on those samples."

"Would you accept a little loan from me?" asked Binny, timidly.

"No, thanks ever so much, old man; but I've got to hit 'my uncle' sooner or later and it might as well be now."

"I hope you'll pardon me for my—my mistake," said Binny in evident embarrassment.

"Don't mention it—under the circumstances it was the most natural thing in the world. Let's shake hands on it and forget it."

They clasped hands on the front steps of the boarding-house.

"I've got to run and get a crosstown car," said Binny. "See you to-night."

"So long," called Devon as he turned toward Sixth Avenue.

VI.

BINNY hurried home that night. He felt that another apology was due from him. He had been hasty—too hasty. On the face of it, after due reflection, the whole affair took on a hue of impossible presumption on his part. And he had been flattering himself that he had met and hobnobbed with a crook!

He blushed for shame as he hurried up to Devon's room.

It was empty of Devon and his effects.

Binny hunted up Mrs. Whitney.

"Has Mr. Devon changed his room?" he asked.

"No, he's left," said Mrs. Whitney. "Took that fellow in the second floor back along with him. They've got a job down in Jersey."

"Why—did Second Floor Back pay his rent?" Binny could not hold back the question.

"No; but Mr. Devon gave me a diamond as security for what the two of them owed me. I told 'em I'd hold it three months and if they didn't redeem it by then I'd sell it for the rent."

Binny's mouth opened, but he spoke no word. It was unbelievable, and yet—so *that* was the kind of a fellow Devon was after all! Giving his landlady an imitation

diamond as payment for his and another good-for-nothing's board bills!

And Binny couldn't very well tell her because it would bring out his ridiculous mistake of the morning.

He held his tongue and went in to supper.

"See where they've got a clue to that robber who got the diamonds over at the Rawlins," said the bookkeeper across the table.

"Yes?" said Binny, interested. "What was it?"

"Oh, they found a small barrel-shaped pocket-knife set with a ruby, which the detectives claim identifies the crook and they say they'll have him and his outside man by to-morrow."

"Outside man?" mumbled Binny as his jaw dropped.

"Yes, they was two of them in it—two of the best crooks in the business, they say."

Binny bolted his food.

"Mrs. Whitney," he said after dinner, "let Mr. Johnson here who works in a jewelry store value that diamond Devon left with you—maybe it's worth more than we think."

"A good idea," said the landlady as she produced the small stone.

"Seventy-five dollars, I should say," appraised Johnson. "It has a slight flaw."

Binny retired to his room with his lips set in a grim line.

For a long time he sat on the edge of his bed and thought. Suddenly he found his gaze focused on the place on the dresser where his "Methods of Great Detectives" ordinarily reposed.

The book was not there now. Instead, there was a small package, neatly wrapped. He undid the package mechanically. It contained a small volume. Binny glanced at the title. It was "Emerson's Essays."

He had no doubts as to who had left it there.

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed the maid next morning. "Mr. Binny has thrown away enough reading matter to last me for a year; all fine deteckative stories, too!"

SONG OF THE BULLET

IN the crystal crevice deep,
When the plastic world was cold,
While the peopled cycles rolled,
Formless lay I, dulled in sleep,
Chaos born and old.

Then the battle's trumpet blare,
Echoing through the woody glen,
Woke me in my rock-clad den;
Strode I forth in upper air—
Arbiter of men.

In the fierce, tumultuous fray,
Never a recreant I, nor slow;
Eager I rush to meet the foe;
Swift along my pathless way,
Singing as I go.

Whose the fate that with me flies?
Neither know I, aye, nor care;
Haply a courtier debonair,
Haply only a drummer dies,
Sobbing a childish prayer.

Harry Leroy Hawthorne.

While Dorion by Lives

Victor Rousseau

Author of "The Eye of Balamok," "Draft of Eternity," "The Diamond Demons," etc.

WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

LANDING at the sea-coast village of Bonne Chance, Will Maitland, who had leased the Dorion timber tract from the Canadian government, found himself taken for a spy to trap the village brandy smugglers and an agent to pave the way for sealing steamships which would still further deprive the *habitants* of a livelihood. But Maitland's purpose was merely to locate a certain rare species of wood used in airplane manufacture. He won the support of Paul Cawmill, lumberman. The latter told him that he was being ruined by La Rue, bank manager and justice of peace, and Belley, storekeeper, La Rue's tool. The power in the town was Jeremiah McGraeme, owner of lumber schooners and a smuggler, and it was at Presqu' Ile, stronghold of the McGraemes, that Maitland discovered the very timber of which he was in search. On his return he found Cawmill, now in his employ, moving his goods by order of La Rue, the mortgage held by the latter having been foreclosed.

CHAPTER VII.

SINGLE-HANDED.

EVERY gang acts in the same way. Angus, at Will's side, was already spitting out insults, with the purpose of diverting his attention, and upon the other Alexandre was advancing with an insolent defiance that masked a good deal of wariness. Near him stood Eudore, his muscular torso contrasting curiously with the puffy, immature boy's face; his hat was on the side of his head, and he was chewing while waiting for the opportunity to rush in upon the interloper and deal him a succession of murderous kicks with his hob-nailed lumberman's boots.

Will sensed that all the opposition centered in the McGraemes: the lumbermen themselves were not openly hostile, though they would undoubtedly follow their leaders in any act of deviltry.

Taking the initiative with a sudden, unexpected spring, Will put all the strength of his shoulder muscles into a right-hand blow that caught Duncan squarely upon the jaw, sending him to the ground stunned, as if he had been poleaxed.

A gasp went up from the group. The deliverance of this blow before the preliminary parleying was over had taken the wind out of the sails of the lumbermen. This was not cricket, as it ought to be played.

Will gave them no time for recovery. Disregarding Angus, whose age and comparatively slow movements made him the least formidable of the McGraemes, he swung to the right and led a smashing blow with his left to Eudore's face, splitting both his lips and knocking his false teeth down his throat.

Eudore screamed, choked, and ran frantically from the scene, the blood streaming from his torn tongue. Will, whirling upon Alexandre, who had already drawn his knife, dealt him a rain of hammering blows that sent the weapon spinning out of his

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for November 27.

hand, beat down his guard, and knocked him, half stunned, across the sill of the mill-room door.

They said afterward that Will charged into the midst of the lumbermen like a mad bull. But nobody stopped to wait for him, or appeared disposed to champion the prostrate Duncan, or the cause of his employer. Will managed to head off a half-dozen men in their flight.

"I just want you to understand that I have leased this territory from the government," he said. "Get that through your heads. Those who want to work for me will receive good pay and fair treatment. I don't stand for nonsense. Do I make myself clear?"

"*Oui, monsieur!*" answered the lumbermen, with one accord.

"Then you can go. To-morrow I take charge. There will be jobs for all who want them."

They hurried away, and Will went back to where Duncan was lying. He was just beginning to come back to consciousness, he opened his eyes, and, recognizing his enemy, closed them hastily again. Will was about to attempt to revive him when he saw Paul and the two mill-hands at his side, looking at him in an awestruck way and stammering something, and pointing toward the bridge, across which the dejected lumbermen were making their way homeward to Bonne Chance.

Following the direction of their gaze, Will saw the rig with the two horses pulled up on the other side. In it sat a man leaning forward, and shouting angrily to the lumbermen as they passed.

"It is M. La Rue," said Paul. "What shall we do, M. Maitland?"

Will glanced at the three wagon-loads of furniture, to which the horses, patient in the shafts, still stood attached. "Get all that stuff unloaded and back into your houses!" he commanded.

They looked at Will a little dubiously, but hastened to obey. It was clear that they were still in doubt who was the master. La Rue lashed his horses, and the rig took the bridge and came dashing up. The driver pulled in the animals violently within a few feet of the mill door, yelled to Gingras, tossed him the reins, and leaped out.

"So you're Mr. Maitland, eh?" he bawled.

"I am," answered Will, looking at him with interest. "And you appear to be Mr. La Rue."

"You're right there! I am! Get off this land, or you'll be thrown off."

Will leaned back against the jamb of the mill door and laughed. All the remnants of his fighting rage dissolved in the peals of human mirth that came from his throat at this belated challenge.

La Rue stared at the big man in front of him, and, shifting his eyes, suddenly caught sight of Duncan, lying on the ground not far away, bleeding at the nose and ears.

His face went white. He had not learned of the fistic encounter from the lumbermen at the bridge, and had driven up, mad with rage in the belief that Duncan had shirked the task which he had given him. La Rue was no coward, but he had flung out his challenge in ignorance of the fighting qualities of Will Maitland.

For a moment he sat staring at him, nonplused. But he was accustomed to meeting situations quickly. He clambered out of the rig.

"Well, there seems to have been a little misunderstanding, Mr. Maitland," he began, in a tone that was meant to carry a compromise between suasion and jauntiness.

"There has not been the least misunderstanding, that I am aware of. This man came on my land at the head of a gang, and ordered me off. He has had what he deserved," he added, observing that Duncan was now only feigning unconsciousness. "You appear to know something of this matter, Mr. La Rue. There is no misunderstanding anywhere."

La Rue scowled. "Mr. Jeremiah McGraeme is the owner of this land," he answered. "I represent him. That is my interest in the matter. The man Duncan McGraeme is foreman. Paul Cawmill's lease has been terminated, and his property attached under a mortgage. That leaves you no standing here, unless you can prove your claims in a court of law."

"I hold the lease from the Provincial Government," Will answered. "And there is another fact which you overlook. I am at present in possession. I was in possession when your men came here. They seemed to doubt it. They are aware of it now. That is the immediate point for consideration."

"Well, you won't be in possession long," answered the other savagely. "You Ontario men will find you can't come into our province and seize private lands where you please. I'm the sheriff. What's to stop my arresting you and taking you to St. Boniface?"

Will smiled and glanced at the spot where Duncan had been lying. But Duncan had disappeared. Gathering his consciousness together, he had writhed like a snake upon his belly beneath the flume, and then run into the woods. The shattering blow had knocked all the nerve out of him. He had never been knocked out before. He did not understand it.

La Rue had offered him fifty dollars to throw Will Maitland off the limits, and he had proceeded in the sublimity of confidence. Will had not only knocked him out, but broken up his men. The whole process was bewildering. He only wanted to get out of reach of Will's terrible fists.

La Rue scowled more savagely at Will's implication. "Suppose Mr. McGraeme decides to let you stay and rot here all the winter," he shouted. "What then? He won't be losing anything. I own the flume and the mill. I don't want to operate, nor does Mr. McGraeme. And you can't, without the use of plain violence. But suppose you had everything. Do you realize you'd have to pay for every cord of lumber you took out when the court's judgment went against you?"

He ended in a milder key.

"There's no sense quarreling about a matter that can be adjusted," he said. "You're a business man. I admit I thought you were one of these cheap lumber sharks who come up here because bidding's cheap for the Romaine lands. Suppose you give up this lease—you won't be much out of pocket. You know you can't win, even if you've caught Mr. McGraeme napping. He doesn't want the trouble of this hold-up. Your ground rent's seven hundred dollars. There'll be no stumpage charges till you've cut. Five thousand for all claims."

"You're authorized to make that offer?"

"I act for Mr. McGraeme."

"I thought," said Will, "that Mme. Dorion was the owner of this property."

His words seemed to flick La Rue on the raw. "You can take it as coming from anybody you please!" he shouted. "That's my offer. Take it or leave it!"

Will glanced at Paul Cawmill's anxious face. Of course he had no intention of accepting any offer, in view of the existence of the firs. But it occurred to him for the first time that he had already committed himself in the shape of allies and enemies.

Singularly, he began thinking of Jeanne Dorion again.

"Well, what d'you say, Mr. Maitland?" La Rue demanded.

"Why, of course not!" answered Will. "This territory is going to be a gold mine to me."

"You think so, eh?" snarled the other. "Suppose I don't know about that airplane timber? That idea alone's enough to stamp you as a loser. Why, it ain't practical! And suppose it was, how are you going to operate? Where will you get the men? Mr. McGraeme's *seigneur* here, and you'll find his word goes in Bonne Chance."

Will was not greatly surprised to learn that Paul had already betrayed him. The secret would have come out anyway at an early date; little harm had been done. Yet he was surprised when, glancing at Paul, he saw him winking and nodding at him, as if conscious of having fulfilled some trust.

"I'll tackle those troubles when I get around to them," Will answered. "I have my own machinery coming up." He thought of the man's stranglehold on Paul, and his wrath blazed up. "Your offer's refused, and as much more as you like to add to it," he said. "And you're too previous with your foreclosure. It can't be done till to-morrow, and I've bought Paul Cawmill's property. Your note will be

paid to-morrow, and the rest as they fall due. That's all I have to say to you!"

La Rue swung about with a sneering laugh, and scrambled into his rig. He snatched the reins. "We'll see about that, Mr. Maitland!" he answered, from his safe point of vantage. "You'll be singing a different tune before the winter comes!"

He lashed the horses, and then pulled them in again with a jerk that set Will's pulses hammering more angrily than at his words.

"Will you take ten thousand?" he demanded. "It's the last offer!"

"No!" Will yelled back in exasperation. "And see here! If you jerk those horses' heads like that again, or use that whip on them that way, I'll use it on you!"

La Rue spluttered an oath and drove away, leaving Will almost beside himself with anger. He had won, he had overcome all opposition, and yet there seemed a curious futility about the whole affair.

He traced it back in his mind to the encounter with Jeanne Dorion, but he could not analyze the process of his impressions and reactions. Introspection of that kind was foreign to him. He only knew that he felt more humiliated than if he had been driven from the field.

Paul Cawmill came forward, breathing hard. "Ah, *monsieur,* how can we thank you!" he cried. "I stand by you, and Gingras and Poulin stand by you, too. You understand, it is not that anybody here loves Jeremiah or the McGraemes, or M. La Rue, either. For ourselves we care nothing at all: it is for our families. Now we believe that our jobs will last through the winter, or you had not refused that ten thousand dollars. *Bateche,* what a shock for Duncan! Only take care, *monsieur,* for he will never rest till he has got his revenge on you!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STRIKE.

WILL did not expect any of Paul's hands to report for work on the morning after his victory, but to his surprise every one turned up, and a dozen more, asking for jobs. The word had gone round Bonne Chance that he had really leased the Dorion tract from the government, and Bonne Chance had revised its opinion of him in the light of La Rue's discomfiture.

As a matter of fact, Gingras and Poulin had narrated the whole affair with characteristic embellishments to a vast concourse in the cellar beneath Hector Galipeault's stable, while the drinks circulated.

"*Ah, mon Dieu,* you should have seen! M. Philippe drives up in a black fury when he sees us *habitants en marche* across the bridge. He gallops his horses hard, and he looks at M. Maitland, and he sees him all covered with Duncan's blood. He gives one look—so, and his rage goes down flat, and he begs him to sell the lands back to him. 'Will you take five thousand?' 'No!' thunders M. Maitland. 'Will you not take ten thousand?' 'No!'

"And so he turns to drive home again, crestfallen, but M. Maitland seizes him by the throat. 'Rascal! You know not how to treat a horse!' With which he lashes M. Philippe three times across the face and kicks him into the bottom of the rig. A terrible man, this M. Maitland! No heart, no pity! It is an honor to work for him!"

Even Will's announcement that he would begin cutting on Presqu' Ile failed to deter his employees. The prestige of the McGraemes had received a shock from which recovery, if made at all, would prove a lengthy business. The outskirts of the smugglers' haunts were promptly invaded, without a word of protest.

Will meant to make a good cutting that winter, and have a load of fir to ship in the spring. He received a letter that morning by the mail, which was carried along the coast by horse-carriage in summer, and by dog-sleigh in winter, from a manufacturer with whom he had had an interview before leaving Quebec, asking for samples of his fir wood in good length. Will knew that what he could supply would open the manufacturer's eyes as to the possibilities of his timber.

It would create a sensation in the trade. The fir was even better than that from British Columbia. It was a primeval

growth, enormous trees with hardly a knot in the grain, tough and resilient. A load of this placed upon the market would create a sensation, would make the property of almost fabulous value. Will meant to get the samples out before winter, in good bulk; this would require a careful survey of the lands, and a selection from among the tallest and straightest trees.

His scheme required, of course, the complete construction of a camp on the neck, and the building of a new flume, though the work would not have to wait for its completion. The wood could very well be hauled to the mill, and hauled out again to the waterside by teams. That would suffice for the entire winter, during which he would be cutting along the boundaries of his camp clearing.

As soon as he had made them, Will spoke to Paul Cawmill about his plans.

"I'm going to take down your flume, Paul," he said, "and use the material to construct another one across the shallows, running from the watercourse under the cliffs to the bay. We'll dam that stream, and have the work largely finished by spring, if we have to keep a gang at work on it through the winter."

Paul had a disconcerting look upon his face that annoyed Will exceedingly.

"Well, have you anything better to propose?" he asked sharply.

Paul shrugged his shoulders. "*Ah, non, monsieur,*" he answered. "But perhaps you did not know, M. Maitland, that Hector Galipeault has built a cellar underneath his stable."

"What do you mean? What has that to do with what I've been talking about?"

"He keeps his brandy there; *monsieur.* Six gallons he brought over from the McGraemes—"

"Why the devil do you suppose I know or care anything about Hector Galipeault's brandy?" demanded Will irritably.

The light of sudden understanding flashed into Paul's eyes. He clapped his hands together. "*Bien,* M. Maitland!" he cried. "Assuredly now I understand you completely!"

"I hope you do," said Will, who loathed Paul in his mysterious moods. "And, in proof of it, suppose you confine your attention to the work in hand, and give me your practical view-point upon what I have proposed."

Paul winked at him. "Ah, *monsieur,* my discretion comes from the long experience of men," he answered. "I know now everything that is expected of me, and you can rely upon me absolutely."

Will turned from him impatiently. However, Paul ventured no mysterious allusions during the busy days that followed. The schooners had already departed for Quebec with the little foreman's lumber, the proceeds from the sale of which would suffice to put him comfortably upon his feet again. During the ensuing month the mill was taken down and conveyed by teams to the old clearing on Presqu' Ile, which had been regrubbed, and reassembled for rossing.

Will's gangmill arrived and was set up. It was not of the latest make, which would have involved a prohibitive price, but it seemed to answer its purpose well, and was capable of turning out enough board feet a day to meet requirements.

Corduroys were laid down, and the demolition of the old flume and the construction of a dam begun. Will also extended the clearing and set about the construction of a cabin for himself and camp shacks for the lumbermen.

October arrived. Another month would see winter at hand. Will pressed the work with all his might, in order to get out his sample shipment of fir before navigation closed. As soon as the gangmill was ready for operation he had his logs sawn and rossed and ready to be hauled there, and he was also constructing a road from the mill to the bay, by which the teams could haul the board lumber.

The work, proceeding with fair speed, proved a godsend to the settlement. Thus far there had been no trouble with the McGraemes; they had brought the schooners back and immediately departed upon some less legal expedition. Will had seen neither Jeremiah nor Jeanne Dorion. La Rue had gone to Quebec. If any plots were hatching, there was no sign of them.

However, Will expected trouble later, and was fully prepared for it. He knew

that neither Jeremiah nor his kinsmen would tolerate this inroad on their preserves, and the affront to their prestige in Bonne Chance, while La Rue's business was to fish in troubled waters. He hoped that the shipment could be got out before developments occurred, but he was inclined to doubt this, and his doubts proved true.

He wanted to put into execution a plan which had long been simmering in his mind. He had determined to explore Presqu' Ile systematically from the lighthouse point. The central part of the peninsula appeared to be an almost impassable tangle of ravines and cliffs. Yet there was a road into it, and across the central cleft. It was that which Jeanne Dorion had taken on the afternoon of their encounter. Will was resolved to locate it, and to determine whether or not the growth of fir existed beyond the ravine.

But there would come no opportunity for exploration for some time. Will worked from dawn to night. The camps were up by the end of October, and a few unmarried lumbermen had taken up their residence in them, though most of the men still came daily to their work from the village. Everything depended on making a good cutting for the sample shipment. The hum of the mill was music in Will's ears. The load was already cut and rossed when Paul came to his employer with a glum face.

"The men want more money," he said. "They say two dollars a day isn't enough."

"It's the standard wage in this part of the country," answered Will. "How much do they think they want?"

"Four dollars, *monsieur*," answered Paul, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"They must be crazy, then. What's at the back of it?"

"They say you told M. La Rue that the land was a gold mine," said Paul, "and that you're going to make your fortune out of it, so they mean to make theirs as well. And they think you can't get any more labor anywhere this winter, now that all the men have gone to work in the camps. And the McGraemes won't hire us their schooners for taking out this shipment."

"One thing at a time, please. So you think the McGraemes are at the back of this?"

"They have been waiting till M. La Rue came back from Quebec, M. Maitland. He has undoubtedly given his advice to Jeremiah."

Will nodded. The situation was a serious one. Of course he could break any strike; the men would have to come back to work after a brief interval, but in the mean time winter was at hand. All depended on whether or not they were aware of the importance to him of getting out the sample shipment. And undoubtedly the inspiration came from La Rue.

He had returned from Quebec a day or two before, and simultaneously the McGraemes had been seen about Bonne Chance. They had been on one of their brandy-running expeditions, and were now back for the winter, ready to resume their private quarrel with Will. He had been foolish to hope that the trouble might hold off until he got his shipment through.

"I'll telephone St. Boniface to drum up all the schooners they can lay hands on and send them here," he said. "And I'll speak to the men."

He addressed them in front of the mill at noon, but with little hope. They were as ignorant as children, and the rumor of the airplane project was just the thing that could be disseminated and magnified until the lumbermen would believe any story of Will's potential wealth.

"I understand you want more money," he said. "I'm not a rich company, and I have nobody at my back. I've put all I have into this enterprise, and I've been counting on you to help me put it through. I'm paying the standard rate. It's all I can afford. Those tales of millions are lies, spread in order to make you dissatisfied. If things go well, I'll consider a fifty-cent raise after the new year. Those who don't want to work for me on those conditions can step forward and get their pay."

Not a man came forward, though there was a little audible grumbling.

Will knew, however, that the McGraemes were busy at work. Moreover, they had brought back a supply of brandy

with them. It circulated in the village, and in the camp also. There was no way in which he could keep it out.

He had laid down a corduroy across the muskeg, connecting with the main road into Bonne Chance, and teams and men were coming and going all day long. The men came to work half-drunk in the morning, and drank all day. Worst of all was the air of brewing trouble, the sullenness of the hands, the slowing up of the work, and the general demoralization.

Added to this, Will's quest for schooners proved unsuccessful. He had, however, the promise of three, late in the season, after their last voyage was made, provided the ice held off long enough to allow them to make the journey.

The trouble came to a head on a Saturday afternoon. The men had worked sullenly all the morning, and, at the lunch hour, Will noticed that a number had come in from the foot of the range, where he had been driving a road, with the object of hauling out some timber of exceptional size, as soon as the snow had fallen deep enough. When the whistle blew, the hands, instead of returning to their work, started off in a body toward Bonne Chance.

The strike had been declared. Will took off his coat and walked down the road to intercept the men, who stopped uneasily.

"Knocking off work, eh?" he asked quietly. He saw Poulin's face among the crowd. "You, too, Poulin?"

The man came forward, shamefaced. "M. Maitland, we've got families," he answered. "We want four dollars a day. We won't listen to any argument. If you don't want to pay us four dollars, we'll quit."

"That's true!" shouted another, and others took up the cry. "You're making millions out of us, and you've got to treat us fair!"

And, seeing that Will did not contemplate physical restraint, the mob swung past him along the corduroy, leaving only two men behind. One was Paul, who had been raging futilely up and down among them; the other Gingras. The latter came up to Will. "I'll stay with you, M. Maitland," he announced.

Will clapped him on the back. "I don't need you now, Gingras," he said. "I don't want you to get into trouble in Bonne Chance. But you'll get your two dollars just the same."

He sent Gingras away, protesting, and went over the situation with Paul, a rather difficult matter, owing to the little man's mercurial disposition. Paul was not much use as an aid, in time of difficulty, for all his boasted shrewdness, but he was a good lumberman and knew his business.

"How long will they stay out?" asked Will.

"Maybe one week, two weeks," answered the foreman. "Wait till next Saturday night. The women will raise hell when there's no money coming in. That's why they struck on a Saturday; they've got to have their wages to take home. I knew it was coming, but I didn't know so soon."

"We've got them beaten then, all right," said Will. "It 'll hold us up a little, but they can't hold out long enough to keep our shipment here till spring—unless there's an unusually early winter."

"*Ah, oui, monsieur,*" answered Paul; "but, you see, Philippe La Rue has something else up his sleeve, you can depend on it."

That was sounder sense than Will had given Paul credit for possessing. Neither La Rue nor Jeremiah was paying out strike wages. It might be part of a general plan to hamper Will and his work, entered into with no very definite end in view, or there might be something more to it, as Paul had suggested.

Despite his optimism, he fretted badly over the situation, and he was unreasonably disturbed on the following day, when, making a trip into Bonne Chance to the post-office, he encountered Jeanne Dorion and La Rue riding side by side through the street, apparently engaged in intimate conversation.

Will, being on foot, had that sense of inferiority which one always feels under such circumstances. Nor was this lessened by some sneering remark about him made by the notary to his companion, accompanied by an amused glance that sent the blood to

Will's temples. Jeanne turned her face away in apparent anger.

Will persuaded himself that it was his reluctance to see the girl an accomplice of the notary that troubled him. He knew that she was sincere in her estimate of him, however mistaken. He believed that La Rue was not acting disinterestedly on behalf of Jeanne.

He hinted indirectly to Paul upon the matter, and the little man grew voluble.

"M. Philippe isn't backing Mme. Dorion and her uncle for nothing," he said. "Undoubtedly he would marry her if there were any chance for him. He has been after her ever since Dorion's death."

Will felt an absurd, guilty rush of blood to his temples.

"But Jeremiah McGraeme would never permit such a thing. You see, *monsieur*, there is a good deal of pride in Bonne Chance, and the McGraemes come of a great race, like the Dorions, though they are only *habitants*. While Philippe La Rue has never been anything but a *habitant*.

"Did you ever see a bear fishing, *monsieur?* Once only I saw that, years ago. He stands beside the water, so patient, such a long time, then—pouf! Out goes his paw, and there is the fish on the shore. So it is here, I think. M. Philippe knows how to wait. He is fishing for M. Jeremiah, who is a big fish, but stupid—very stupid, *monsieur,* for all that he got back the Dorion lands."

"And Mme. Dorion?" asked Will, loathing himself for speaking of her, and yet unable to resist.

Paul shrugged his shoulders. "A fine woman, *monsieur*. With spirit—but what can she do against her uncle and the McGraemes? For generations the McGraemes dreamed of the Dorion lands. When her uncle told her that she must marry the *seigneur,* so as to bring them into the family, she obeyed him. Never would Jeremiah permit the lands to pass to Philippe La Rue by marriage. But suppose the fish is on the bank? He cannot make his terms in the bear's paw. Sixteen she was when she married Dorion, and he drowned on the next voyage. It was sad!"

He looked up at Will with a twinkle in his eyes. "But take courage, M. Maitland. I am discreet. I know how things should be arranged. I am working for you—a word here, a hint there—"

"I hope, Paul, you don't imagine—" began Will hotly.

"*Ah, la, la!*" answered Paul, with his tongue in his cheek; and Will found nothing to say.

CHAPTER IX.

LA RUE SCHEMES.

JEANNE DORION went home flaming from her interview with Will upon the dunes. She said nothing about it to her uncle, however. From him she learned that the interloper was to be put off the Dorion limits by La Rue that afternoon.

Jeremiah, who had been advised to remain away from the scene, waited with growing impatience for the news of Will's discomfiture. It was late in the day before the story of what had happened arrived, in an exaggerated form, at the big stone house. Will had beaten up the entire gang of La Rue's men single-handed, and defied La Rue himself; he remained in possession of the field.

The news, brought by one of the men, sent the old head of the McGraemes into a white-hot fury. He clapped on his hat, took his heavy stick, and strode into Bonne Chance, to the notary's office.

La Rue's smile was anything but indicative of his inner feelings as he looked up at his flushed and indignant visitor.

"Well, Philippe La Rue, a nice hash you have made of the business!" shouted Jeremiah. "You insisted that I should keep out of it, and what happens? Duncan is knocked senseless, Eudore and Alexandre are badly beaten, from all accounts, and that scoundrel remains in possession of my niece's lands. What have you got to say about it?"

"Patience," answered the notary suavely.

"*Maudit*, is that all? I'd have thrashed the hide off the fellow. I'm not so old yet. But you told me to keep away. Now he

has made me a laughing-stock in Bonne Chance—me, the *seigneur!*" he shouted.

The word was not over-pleasing to La Rue. He masked the contortion of his face with a grin.

"Nobody could have suspected that he was the kind of man he turned out to be," he answered. "The men were staggered. They did not expect what happened, and, with Duncan knocked unconscious, they were not going to do anything. You know the *habitant's* respect for power. I'm not sure it wasn't the best thing that could have happened."

And, as Jeremiah snorted speechlessly, he went on, growing more and more bland and persuasive:

"You see, Jeremiah, we must be careful not to put ourselves in a wrong position. The government cannot take a man's lands away from him, even in Bonne Chance. When I am in Quebec next week I will look into the matter of the original title. If my investigations prove satisfactory, I will enter a suit in your name on behalf of your ward, Mme. Dorion. Even if the title cannot be found, we may still be able to retain Mme. Dorion's tenure of the lands by custom and inheritance, under the feudal régime. The courts are above the government, which has sent M. Maitland here to ruin you, because they think the loss of your schooners has put you at their mercy. Once they get a man down, they hound him."

Jeremiah thumped his stick violently. "I'll have no lawsuit!" he shouted. "What do I care for that? I'll put the scoundrel out myself. Where's the money for your lawsuit coming from?"

"Oh, as for that," answered the notary indifferently, "it won't cost you more than a few thousands. And I wouldn't press you for the interest on the mortgage until the matter is settled."

Something in the notary's tone brought a dormant thought into Jeremiah's consciousness. He turned on him with slow suspicion. "Eh, M. Philippe, you wouldna mind becoming *seigneur* of Bonne Chance yourself!" he said, with a quiver of sarcasm in his voice.

La Rue laughed. "I shouldn't mind owning the Dorion lands, I admit," he answered. "But I'd leave you the honor, Jeremiah. However, if you feel that way, I'll take no further action in the matter."

Jeremiah gulped. He knew he could not match himself against La Rue. "I didna mean to offend you, Philippe," he said slowly. "But what 'll I do now?"

"Wait till I've looked the records up in Quebec," answered the other. "Meanwhile, M. Maitland is in possession. If your kinsmen use violence, there will be unpleasant complications. If I'd known what sort of man he was, I'd never have proposed putting him off. Keep your men quiet, and make it as hard for him as possible."

Jeremiah went away with an ill grace. He fumed all the time La Rue was in Quebec. The development of the work on Presqu' Ile was a thorn in his flesh. A hundred times the fiery old man was on the point of going to Will and committing himself to some rash action. Jeanne restrained him.

"Better wait till Philippe La Rue returns, uncle," she said. "He'll know what's best to do."

"He knows too much," growled Jeremiah. "What's he to you, lass?" he added, turning upon her. "If I thocht—"

She shrugged her shoulders. "You know how much he is to me," she answered.

"How much, then?"

"As much as Emile Dorion was," she answered slowly.

Jeanne stood confronting him, a red spot burning on either cheek. Jeremiah checked an oath. His eyes dropped under his niece's searching gaze. He strode heavily away. He was no match for her, either, on the rare occasions when she opposed her resolution against his own.

Jeanne, more miserable than Jeremiah, waited, like him, for the return of the notary. She, the central figure in the play, had the least interest of any. The consciousness, increasing day by day as Will's sincerity of aim became apparent, that she had wronged him, increased her hate of him. She wanted to drive him from the lands, to conquer; but she did not want the lands. She cared nothing for them. She

only remembered his incredible insolence that day on the dunes.

The strike had been more spontaneous than Will had supposed. It coincided with the return of the McGraemes from their autumnal raid into the Prohibition counties; then La Rue was back, and he and Jeremiah sat down together in the parlor of the stone house on Presqu' Ile.

La Rue listened ironically to Jeremiah's account of what had happened. "Well, how far does that get you?" he asked. "You've stopped his working; it doesn't take him off the Dorion limits."

"He'll cut no more trees. And he'll get no more schooners. Let him stay there till he rots!"

"He won't rot," answered La Rue. "The men will be back at work within a few weeks. Now, I've done better than that. I've found the original deed to the Dorion property in the Record office. In fact, it was never lost, but it was overlooked by the land office people when the first government map was compiled, and of course each annual map was made out from that of the previous year.

"So I've entered suit, subject to your approval, and M. Maitland will be finished in Bonne Chance just as soon as the judgment's rendered, and all his cutting will be yours into the bargain. Routhier & Faguy will see the case through for you for five thousand dollars."

"Five thousand dollars!" shouted Jeremiah. "Where'd I get five thousand dollars?"

La Rue laughed. "Come, Jeremiah, don't tell me you can't lay your hands on five thousand dollars!" he said.

"I've naught but my little property here —this house and the grounds — and my two schooners."

La Rue appeared to hesitate. Jeremiah's connection with the smuggling was not a topic for frank conversation, but he knew that the old man had an immense supply of brandy ready to be conveyed to various destinations, upon the proceeds from whose sale he was dependent for his next year's living, as well as for the money to meet the interest on his mortgage of the Dorion lands.

The McGraemes's recent journey had not brought in more than enough to support the clan through the winter, and it had been made in unfrequented regions, which were safe, but unremunerative. It was the activities of the Blanche that held Jeremiah's stock hidden on Presqu' Ile.

"See, Jeremiah," said the notary presently, "when I advanced you that money on the Dorion lands, I did it out of old friendship. You thought, and I thought, that they were almost worthless. Now we know better. The title's sure, and the lumber alone should be worth a cool three hundred thousand, if that airplane story's true.

"Isn't it worth risking five thousand dollars to get the lands back in your hands again?" he went on plausibly. "And he's developing them them at his own expense —for you, Jeremiah. Don't worry about the interest on that mortgage. You've never failed in anything you undertook, until they stole your schooners—you, with your good judgment!"

"But I havena the money!" shouted Jeremiah doubtfully.

"I'll let you have five thousand more on the lands and your house here. We'll make out a new mortgage."

Still Jeremiah hesitated. La Rue interpreted his reluctance.

"Don't worry about Jeanne," he said. "By the time she comes of age next year everything will be settled, the mortgage will be paid; and, after all, you are acting in her interests as her guardian."

It was not a difficult matter to persuade the old man to commence an action in his niece's name. "But what about M. Maitland?" he demanded. "Am I to sit still and see him go on working my land?"

"That's the game, Jeremiah," answered La Rue. "You should never have tried to stop him. You ought to have encouraged him to get out all the lumber possible, and let him have every schooner in Bonne Chance to ship it in."

"Eh?" cried Jeremiah, fixing his eyes upon La Rue's face in bewilderment. "Have ye gone daft?"

"Not yet," smiled the notary. "But it's hard to stop a busy man from working. Why not make him work for you?"

Her uncle's extraordinary good humor after the conference told Jeanne that something was in the wind, but even its success would not afford her any satisfaction. She knew that, beaten, Will would depart with the same insolence, the same contempt for her and for Bonne Chance.

Will's new corduroy crossed the road between her uncle's house and the village, on its way to the sea, but the camp was a half-mile distant from it, and Jeanne could still ride into Bonne Chance without coming within sight of Will's operations until she reached the cliffs of the mainland.

Sometimes, when she felt intolerably oppressed by the web that was being spun around her by La Rue and Jeremiah, she would saddle her horse and gallop along the neck, and for miles along the coast.

Returning from one of these rides, she encountered La Rue on horseback, no common diversion of his, and she suspected the notary of having ridden out to intercept her. She neither liked nor hated him, though she was vaguely distrustful of his bold, staring eyes, and his manner, which could be both fawning and flattering, but was never frank.

Instinct had told her that this man was setting himself in pursuit of her, as Dorion had done, though La Rue's words had never given her cause to believe so. But all men were like that, she thought, and almost all girls appreciated being hunted. There would be no difficulty in diverting La Rue in another direction, if ever the occasion came.

He doffed his hat as she approached, and reined in, watching her with admiration in his eyes. "You are a great horsewoman, *madame*," he said. "I have sometimes hoped to obtain leave to accompany you."

"I ride when I am tired of my own company," she answered, letting him perforce bring his horse into step with hers.

"There's not much company worth your while in Bonne Chance, let alone Bout de l'Ile," La Rue responded. "I should think you'd find it too deadly dull to live here."

"I haven't had much experience of anything else," said Jeanne.

"A girl like you, a lady, ought to have a chance to mix with her own kind, instead of being cooped up here and seeing nothing of life. Get your uncle to take you up to Quebec, Mme. Dorion."

She winced at the appellation. La Rue had never called her that until Jeremiah mortgaged the lands to him. The notary leaned toward her confidentially as they rode down the hill toward the neck.

"You're too good to mix with those McGraemes," he said. "Jeremiah has no business to use you as his go-between. It hurts me to see that, Jeanne."

He fell back into the old friendly way of address designedly.

"If I could help you," he said, "I'd be glad to, Jeanne. But it's difficult for me. When you were a bit of a girl we used to be great friends. Now we're apart. You're miles above me, now that you're owner of the Seigniory."

She was touched by his words, and what she thought his humility, though the boldness of his gaze disconcerted her.

"Please don't say that, Philippe," she answered. "You know very well how I hate all this business, this matching of the Dorions and the McGraemes. It isn't what our families were, it's what we are."

They were turning down toward the neck when Will came into view, walking back from the post-office. La Rue looked at him, and sneered.

"We wouldn't accept what you said," he remarked. "I guess he thinks that all Bonne Chance is the dirt under his feet. At any rate, I've fixed M. Maitland for you." He laughed. "He'll be lucky if he has a penny to his name when he's made good for the robbery of your lands," he said. "I've fixed him, Jeanne."

Jeanne turned her face away. She felt an inexplicable, hot resentment—at Will, at her companion, at life, which had plunged her into this morass of antipathies and schemes and trickeries.

"I'm going to help you," said La Rue, leaning toward her over his horse's withers. "You're too fine for all this. And you could make me do anything you wanted, with those eyes of yours."

The boldness of his gaze brought the blood to her face. It reminded her of Dorion.

La Rue misunderstood. He chuckled over the memory of it afterward, when he sat in his office. Anybody could fascinate a woman: the difficulty was, not to win her, but to go slow enough to keep pace with Jeremiah's increasing entanglements.

He chuckled again as he placed the new mortgage away in the little safe in his office. The mortgage was innocent enough: he was not thinking of that, but of his plan to make Will work for Jeremiah. The old imbecile had jumped at the plot. But it was one thing to invent a plot, and another to put the cap on.

CHAPTER X.

THE HAND OF FRIENDSHIP.

WILL was not seriously disturbed when he received notice of the impending lawsuit, which he believed only an attempt to harass him. Being now perforce idle, until the strike ended, he resolved to put into execution his plan to explore Presqu' Ile from the lighthouse point, and strike inland.

Accordingly, he arranged with Jean Desmoulins, who owned a boat, to be rowed out to Bout de l'Ile on the following Sunday after early mass.

They started about ten in the morning. Beyond the smooth waters of the bay the rollers surged heavily about the submerged rocks. A line of buoys indicated the narrow ocean fairway. Beyond these was the swell of the sea, and beyond, again, the sunken fangs of Bout de l'Ile, through which the boat threaded her way toward the bottom of the wooden stairs.

Jean, having made the boat fast, followed Will up four long flights to the plateau on which were the lighthouse and the keeper's cottage. The foghorn station was immediately beneath, on a projecting shelf of the rock.

Will now perceived that the cottage alone was on the mainland, while the two other buildings were perched upon an isolated limestone rock, connected with the land by a natural bridge of the same formation, arched high above the waves, which beat upon the rocks below.

It was a singular natural construction, caused by a fault in the granite structure, through which the softer stone had oozed up, in a molten state, in some prehistoric convulsion.

Jean, ambling at Will's side, looked up and grinned. "Ai, *monsieur*, where do you go now?" he asked.

"Is there any road leading over that way?" asked Will, pointing toward the fringe of forest above the plateau.

"No, *monsieur*, there is nothing there. Besides, one may not go there. It is not permitted."

Will checked his annoyance; he was not inclined to discuss his rights with the half-wit. "You can wait for me in the boat," he answered. "I'll be back in two or three hours, probably. Don't go too far, in case I return earlier."

Jean loped away. Will looked about him. From the plateau of Bout de l'Ile he could see the entire four miles of the Presqu' Ile peninsula spread out before him, except the central portion, where the tangle of tree-clad wilderness rose into high peaks, cleft by ravines. On the one side lay the sea, upon the other the bay, calm and placid behind the barrier of the submerged reef, where the breakers crashed about the ridges and sprayed the points of the rocks.

Across the bay, in which two schooners lay at anchor, he could see the houses of Bonne Chance, looking like a row of stones strung out along the cliff, some fishing shacks below, the old camp in the meadow, and the new camp across the neck in the clearing.

A single glance confirmed Jean's statement that Presqu' Ile was not more accessible from the lighthouse end. A dense scrub scrambled across the rolling hills behind the lighthouse-keeper's cottage. Will hesitated a moment, and then struck out vigorously through this growth inland, fighting his way with difficulty among the wild raspberry briers and brambles, till he reached a fairly open tract, where scrubby spruce-trees intermingled with stunted aspen. Great rocks broke through the thin soil everywhere. A drizzling rain was falling.

He went on for half an hour, until of a

sudden he saw the ravine in front of him. He looked down the sheer face of a smooth cliff. It was impossible of descent, either there, or as far as he could see on either side of him.

It was the central fissure of the peninsula—on this side spruce and pine, upon the other the tall firs that he loved and coveted. Nature had set this boundary, as between two kingdoms, eons apart.

Beyond the ravine Will saw the high peaks of Presqu' Ile, extending upward and ranging to the summit, a great, gaunt scarp that rose like a watchtower in the very heart of all.

Then he caught his breath to see Jeanne Dorion moving among the trees upon the other side of the cleft. She wore a long raincoat and high boots, and she was passing along a trail near the edge of the ravine.

Instinctively Will shrank back, to avoid being seen by her. An intense curiosity arose in him. But she was gone in a moment more, and now the rain was coming down in torrents. The fog was sweeping in. The blast of the distant foghorn began to reverberate among the rocks. Reluctantly Will turned back. He would have to try again on a clear day—if ever there was a clear day in Bonne Chance.

He reached the plateau drenched. By this time the fog had become almost impenetrable. The foghorn blew continuously; from out at sea the blast of a steamship answered it with startling suddenness. The screaming of invisible gulls came out of the mist. The waves were splashing noisily upon the rocks below.

Will went down the stairs toward his boat. He had descended two of the flights when he began to be aware of a singular, persistent sound, like a muttered monologue, that appeared to come out of the heart of the rock beneath him.

He went down a third flight and stopped. He could just see the boat underneath, rocking upon the waves, which sent up clouds of spray about him. Running along the face of the cliff he perceived a narrow ledge. It was hardly six feet wide, and it extended for twenty feet or so before it terminated in a sort of natural rock platform, breast-high.

He began to make his way along it. Now he perceived that the arch which connected the lighthouse with the mainland was immediately over his head, and the muttering of the voice had become plainly audible. Then Will was on the platform, and looking at a stranger sight than the arch itself.

Half-way up the face of the granite cliff was a hollow rectangle of limestone. It was an old Protestant place of worship, a cave used in bygone years by the settler soldiers of Wolfe. At that time Bout de l'Ile had extended farther into the sea, the cliffs had not yet fallen under the encroachments of the waves; cottages had lined the rugged shore, and the burr of the Scot had been the speech of half the countryside.

The roofed interior might have been fashioned by some human builder, instead of by nature, it was so fairly made; and the convulsion which had created it out of the roots of the mountains had left, at the far end, a ridge like an altar stone.

But the Scot had long since yielded to the *habitant*, and only a single family remained to perpetuate the ancient worship, represented by the one person within.

Behind the altar ridge stood Jeremiah McGraeme, in his black broadcloth, a Bible in his hand, and he read to the two empty benches in front of him as if he addressed a whole congregation.

"'Wo unto Tyre!' he read. 'Wo unto Sidon, for she hath persecuted the faithful in her secret places. And unto thee, O Babylon.'"

Suddenly Jeanne Dorion stepped from a recess in the mouth of the cave and confronted Will steadily. It seemed to him incredible that she should be there, when he had last seen her on the other side of the ravine.

"Are you mad, Mr. Maitland?" she asked in a tense whisper, interposing her body between him and Jeremiah's vision. She almost dragged him beyond a projecting angle of the rock. "I don't know why you have come here," she said, "but go immediately! They will kill you if they find you here!"

"I am on my leased land," answered Will hotly.

She wrung her hands. "Go, in Heaven's name!" she whispered. "I tell you—your life is at stake. Take your boat and go, before they come! Never mind the rights of the land now! Why won't you go? I want to save you!"

"'For thou hast poured forth the measure of thine iniquity on thy high altars,'" droned Jeremiah within.

Jeanne laid her hand on Will's arm, pointing frantically with the other toward the steps. And suddenly there came a clatter of boots upon the stone, harsh voices, and three of the McGraemes appeared—Angus, Alexandre, and Eudore, with a little faded woman in an ancient black silk dress and black bonnet, Angus's wife.

For a moment the men recoiled, glaring at Will as he stood at the chapel entrance. Then they clustered savagely about him, cursing and jeering him.

Will set his back against the low parapet. It was one thing to take the initiative in an open field, and quite another to be baited here. Jeanne cried out in terror. The little, faded woman screamed, and, twirling her bonnet-strings, raced back along the ledge.

"Let's throw the dirty spy down the cliff!" shouted Eudore, his white face working with fury. His lips were still scarred and swollen from the blow that Will had given him.

Eudore and Alexandre drew their ready knives. Angus, apparently unwilling either to aid or to restrain them, looked on. Will had no leaping-space. He was calculating that he could dodge one knife and tackle one of the men, but not the other. Jeanne threw herself before him, her eyes flashing.

"Let him go!" she cried. "He didn't know!"

"Damn him, he came here to spy on us!" yelled Alexandre, working himself up to the point of attack.

Another moment, and Will would have been fighting for his life. But at that instant Jeremiah came striding down the chapel and out upon the ledge.

"What is this?" he thundered. "Have ye forgotten that this is a holy place—aye, and the Holy Day?"

"We've got him, and, by Heaven, we'll finish him now!" shouted Eudore.

Jeremiah dealt him a buffet that sent him sprawling. At his command Alexandre drew back, scowling at Will ferociously, and put his knife away. The old man went to Will's side.

"Have no fear, Mr. Maitland," he said. "This is the Lord's Day, on which we put aside all carnal strivings and endeavor to perfect ourselves in His service. 'Be ye perfect!' saith St. Paul. Mr. Maitland, I bid ye welcome here. Whether ye be of the true releegion or no, this chapel is holy ground for you and yours."

Will looked in amazement at Jeremiah, not a word of whose address seemed strange to any of the McGraemes. Angus and Alexandre stood sullenly by, Eudore had picked himself up, and slouched into the chapel. And it occurred to Will that this was not so much hypocrisy as the heritage of straitly religious parentage, the very phrasing ancestral and once common. Jeremiah used expressions naturally that had died among men two generations before.

"There is peace this day in the Lord's tabernacle," he said. "Let there be peace betwixt us henceforward. What say ye, Mr. Maitland?"

"I should like nothing better," Will responded heartily.

"I fear that we have misjudged ye, Mr. Maitland. We took ye for a member of the oppressor, the Pharaoh who rules this land from Ottawa and oppresses and persecutes us. Will ye pledge yourself that you are not come here to oppress us, to betray us and our ships to the government?"

"I am here to lumber, and for no other purpose," answered Will.

Jeremiah put out a great hand. "When the spirit enters, the carnal heart of man is softened," he said. "There shall be peace, and no more strivings, until the law has judged between me and mine and thee and thine. Then, he who is adjudged in error, and not to be the owner of these lands, let him confess the wrong he doth, and depart. How say you, Mr. Maitland?"

"That's satisfactory to me," answered Will, and he took Jeremiah's hand.

"My kinsmen, then, shall place their schooners at your disposition, as I shall mine," said Jeremiah, dropping back into the common vernacular. "And, as for the strike, I dinna think it will be a lasting one," he added, with a faint flicker of humor under the granite mask.

He turned to the others. "We have misjudged Mr. Maitland," he said. "Ye have heard he has pledged himself that he has not come for the government, but to cut timber. And there shall be no more enmity between us, but we shall work together for the credit and good name of our community, until the law has judged between us. My brethren, ye are late, but take your places, and we will begin the reading again."

CHAPTER XI.

JEANNE EXPLAINS.

WILL remembered the slim hand that Jeanne had extended to him, and the girl's face, averted, as if in shame at the remembrance of their dissensions.

He remembered it as he sat in his shack the following afternoon, and for once he could not command his thoughts, which flitted hither and thither, touching on all things but the situation which confronted him.

During the strike he had insisted on remaining at the camp, and had almost had to drive Paul away, when the latter wished to stay and cook for him. Will could not bear to be away from the scene of his work. Meanwhile, the strike had gone into its second week, and, unless Jeremiah's prediction were quickly verified, it would be impossible to get the sample shipment out before navigation closed.

This would mean not merely the loss of orders, but the failure to secure the additional capital which he would have to obtain the following spring. He had sunk everything in the enterprise, and the expenses were mounting steadily. It would be impossible to go on without backing.

He did not know how much credence to place in Jeremiah's words. The continued hostility of Bonne Chance, its stupid malignity, made him rage with impotent anger. La Rue, he knew, was the brains at the back of it all, and the notary was using him as a pawn in the game that he was playing with old Jeremiah McGraeme.

Jeremiah, the strikers, Jeanne, and the McGraeme clansmen were all pawns in the notary's game, moving with a certain spontaneity, yet nothing but La Rue's automatons. Will could not believe that the intrigues against him had abruptly ended.

It was late afternoon. After long pondering, Will had succeeded in clearing his mind and fixing it upon the problem before him. By putting all hands to work upon the shipment, he could get it out in time, provided the strike terminated with the second Saturday.

He went down to the bay, wondering, as he approached it, which way Jeanne Dorion had taken to cross the ravine. The road from Bonne Chance to Jeremiah's house ran near the water's edge. It gave no access into the interior of Presqu' Ile. The whole of the neck was no more than a mile in width, or a little more, but so diversified that exploration was impossible among the bogs and quicksands, while the growth of stunted spruce and birch prevented observation.

The trails behind the camp led always to the stark precipice of the cleft. It seemed certain that there was no direct way into the interior from that end of the peninsula.

As Will worried over the problem, suddenly he saw a figure moving among the evergreens at the turn of the road. Out of the shadows of the great firs he perceived Jeanne Dorion walking toward him.

He was about to turn away to prevent the embarrassment of a meeting, but it seemed to him, from the deliberation of her movements, that she had seen his presence, and wished to speak to him. He waited accordingly.

She came straight to him, and stopped. Her face was flushed, and she looked miserable enough, yet full of determination.

"M. Maitland, I did not expect to see you here," she said; "but I was coming to your camp to speak to you. It is hard—

but I must tell you that I know now your purpose in coming to Bonne Chance was to lumber, and nothing else."

"Well, Mme. Dorion, I am glad you do believe that," answered Will. "But I assure it was not necessary for you to tell me so. No harm has been done."

"I told you—I called you—"

"But that has all been forgotten," answered Will, lightly.

He could not turn her from her intention. "I must tell you that I am ashamed and sorry for what I said and did. But I want you to know that I did not lead those men to attack you in the hotel. I did my best to restrain them."

"I saw that, Mme. Dorion. I am grateful for it."

Thus peace was made, but she was not satisfied. "I want to tell you why Bonne Chance felt so strongly," she said. "Our people are good people. You do not know what they have had to endure. For three years now the government has hounded us of Bonne Chance. Ever since the first Frenchmen settled here our men have gone into the drift ice in spring, as soon as it began to break, and taken the seals. And those who were the bravest and the most daring among the floes brought back most skins. Bonne Chance men go where no others dare to go, neither from other ports on the North Shore, nor from Newfoundland, nor from the Magdalens.

"And now the government has said that for one month only shall the seals be killed. So men who never dared to set sail before the ice had left the shores now crowd the sealing-floes, robbing us of what we earned by our own courage and skill, because we may not sail before the middle of March.

"But the government is not content with that, for there has been talk for a long time of a great subsidized sealing company, which is to operate with steamships, and in this way rob us of the remnants of our livelihood, and make us work for it, for, when the seals are sighted, a steamship can come up with them long before our little schooners can, and it is sealing law that the men upon the ground are in possession. And they are trying to harass and crush us, dragging men away to jail for months at a time, because of a little brandy sold, which hurts nobody—all to impoverish us and rob us of our schooners.

"We cannot endure it any longer. Last spring, when some spy betrayed my uncle's schooners, which had been one day out of season in the drift ice, we swore that we would show the government that even the *habitant's* patience is not eternal. That is why our men were so bitter against you when you arrived on the Blanche."

"Of course I knew nothing about this feeling, or I should have been more careful," Will answered. "There was no other boat for days, and I was anxious to get here as soon as possible. But that is all past, Mme. Dorion. What I would rather speak about is my lease of the lands you claim as yours.

"I assure you I did not even know such a claim existed until I was on my way up here. The lands are recorded as government property upon the maps. If I had known, I should have tried to arrange matters. And, after all, can't they be arranged without a lawsuit? I am only leasing them. I would be ready to pay a royalty, perhaps—if we could talk it over—"

He rambled on, feeling that his words were more and more ill-chosen, and stopped suddenly to see that her eyes were full of tears.

"I never want to hear of the lands again!" she cried, stamping her foot. "If I only were concerned, I would say, 'take them, M. Maitland, take them, lease and leasehold!' It is not I." She broke into unrestrained sobbing. "They have embittered my uncle's life and mine," she said.

"I'm sorry. I did not know this," Will stammered.

"I want to tell you," she answered, dabbing at her eyes with a bit of a handkerchief, hardly larger than the palm which held it. "When I was a child, brought here to my Uncle Jeremiah, who is really a cousin, no more, by a kinsman from the south shore, who knew he had not long to live—my father—"

She stopped incoherently, pulled herself together, and went on:

"From that first day of my Uncle Jere-

miah's charge of me I learned about the lands. It was the eternal theme of every conversation. My uncle was mad on the subject. They were supposed to have once belonged to the McGraemes. There had been bitter rivalry with the Dorions, who were as poor as we. My uncle had given his life to getting them into his family. At last he saw his chance. Emile Dorion, the seigneur—"

Will laid his hand on her arm. "I know," he said quietly. "Never mind! Why do you want to tell me?"

They were standing on the edge of the bay: the sun was just dipping into the horizon. It lit her face and seemed to transfigure it, it touched her brown hair and transformed it to a web of gold.

Something gripped Will's heart as he looked at the slight, frail, boyish figure—pity, not love: she could almost have been his daughter: she seemed too fine a thing to be the plaything of these cruel ambitions of two rival clans and races.

"I want to tell you," she aswered in a low voice. "I don't know why. I am going to tell you. Perhaps because I have done you a wrong, or because"—she turned and smiled at him in frank confidence—"because I trust you, M. Maitland."

Will swallowed the lump that rose in his throat: he did not answer her.

"Emile Dorion, the seigneur, was a sealer, like the rest of us. He had a boat of his own. My uncle financed him in a small way. He got to trust him. He fell under his influence. He was not strong-minded—a great, simple *habitant*, frank, honest, friendly to all, and—and a drunkard, *monsieur*. Strong—there was no man who dared oppose him: and, when he had been drinking, he was capable of any act of rashness. All the girls adored him—even I was at first fascinated by his boldness, his courage, and his looks. He was handsome—like a Viking, such as we read of in books. And one day he began to take notice of me.

"That night my uncle said to me. 'Emile Dorion has been asking me about you, Jeanne. Now is the chance to win back the Dorion lands.'

"I laughed, but I was destined to hear a great deal about it in the days to come. He fell in love with me. I became more and more afraid of him, of his violence, his drunkenness. All the time my uncle was playing him, as one plays a well-hooked fish. He told me that if I married him, Emile Dorion would settle the lands upon me as a marriage gift. And I had been brought up hearing nothing but the lands that ought to be ours. My uncle, Angus, all of them were at me constantly after the seigneur began his pursuit of me.

"I was not seventeen. Imagine how this constant persecution wore down my spirit. Every influence was brought to bear on me. At last I consented to marry him. Only, I insisted that it should not be until he came back from the spring sealing.

"He swore that he would make me his bride before he sailed. All the girls of the village thought I was very fortunate. They envied me, who would so gladly have changed places with any of them. But I held fast against my uncle and all of them, and, when I yielded, it was with the stipulation that the ceremony should take place an hour before the fleet sailed.

"When the marriage was performed, and I was Emile Dorion's wife, I ran from the church, distraught. From Presqu' Ile I watched the fleet set sail, carrying Emile Dorion, my husband, and my uncle with him, and I prayed—I prayed in my despair and wickedness that I might become a widow before the fleet returned. God heard that prayer, *monsieur!*"

Her face was deathly white now. "God heard that wicked prayer! Now I've told you. Now you can understand why I never want to hear the lands spoken of again. The lawsuit is my uncle's: it is not mine, even if it is brought in my name. I have done my part toward him."

Will was holding her hand, and his face was as white as hers with fury. "If I had known that when he gave me his hand yesterday—" he began.

She turned upon him quickly. "M. Maitland, that is what I came here to speak about. You must not trust him! Do not believe one moment that he means well by you! He has some scheme—I

don't know what it is. But be on your guard. That's all I wanted to say. Be on your guard!"

"I shall be on my guard. But what you've told me has troubled me a good deal—"

"Why?"

"Because I—am sorry for you, I suppose."

Her face hardened. "Don't be sorry for me. It's all past now, and I don't care —only—only—"

"Only?"

"I hate all this," she exclaimed passionately. "This life—this sordid life! It is not what my father would have had for me. He wanted me to be educated, to live in the world. Uncle Jeremiah promised him that he would send me to school, and all I ever learned was in the parish school, from the cure's books before he went to Rome, and from newspapers. I am ignorant—I know it—" She made one of her quick movements toward him. "M. Maitland," she went on: "you are an educated man. It's not the time now, so soon after I have wronged you, but some time I—I want to ask you to help and advise me, to tell me about books, what I should read, so that I can make something of myself."

"I'm anything but an educated man," said Will. "I've knocked about the world; that's been my education. I didn't learn much at college."

"You know the world, though," she said wistfully. "And I have never even been to Quebec!"

"You ought not to have to live here, Mme. Dorion—" Will began. But she interrupted him with a quick gesture. "Don't call me that!" she said, shuddering. "So long as I am here the memory of that marriage weighs on me. This trouble about the lands is only the old trouble in another form. I feel helpless in the midst of it all. I have begged my uncle to let me go away, but he doesn't understand. He has always lived here. I suppose I should not tell you all this."

The pathos of her tone rang in Will's ears long after. He took her hand in his.

"I'm glad you have, and that we have become friends," he said. "I'm going to think what advice to give you."

The sun had set, and they had turned back toward the road. Suddenly Jeanne uttered a low exclamation. Will looked up, to see Philippe La Rue coming toward them. He was not twenty yards distant, and had evidently been to Jeremiah's house.

He raised his hat to Jeanne. There was a sneering scowl on his face as he addressed her, ignoring Will.

"If you are going home, *madame*, permit me to escort you as far as your uncle's house."

"I won't take you out of your way," she returned.

"It will be a pleasure, *madame*."

"I do not need it. Mr. Maitland is with me."

"So I perceive," returned the notary. "That is why I offered you my escort."

Will flushed and stepped forward. "Just what do you mean by that?" he demanded.

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.

TO THE READERS OF ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

BECAUSE we have discontinued the Log-Book and Heart to Heart Talks I do not wish you to feel that the personal touch between readers and editor has become non-existent. I appreciate highly the flattering words you have said regarding those two departments and your regret over their passing. And because we have no section now in which to print them, do not feel that any letters you care to write me concerning stories or other matters connected with the magazine are tossed aside. They are all read, and I am happy to seize the chance this corner affords me to thank you for them. : : : : : THE EDITOR.

The Infernal Feminine

by M. G. Roberts

THE fat girl behind the lace-counter at Markham's department store gazed regretfully into the empty candy-bag, crumpled it in one pudgy hand and returned to her former occupation of baiting Harry Green. She was angling for an invitation to Stein Brothers Annual Employees' Ball and the situation demanded tact and skill to bring it to a successful issue. Otherwise Sadie might beat her to it.

Worshipfully, she turned her cowlike eyes upon him, and the youth, acclaimed god and hero of every georgette-covered heart in the neighborhood, leaned forward and patted her plump arm. The fat girl thrilled and flushed a dull scarlet. A group by the elevator buzzed excitedly.

"You know, girly," he began, pointing significantly to the empty bag, "cut them out and you'd be the one best bet in the showrooms—you've got the lines"—eying her critically—"only you don't handle them right. I bet you'd look swell in real, classy duds!"

"Ye-ah?" Breathlessly she watched him. Was the desired invitation really coming? But he continued his speculations:

"And a snappy little stepper I bet you are—no sitting out a dance in your books."

"Not if I know it." Eagerly she interrupted him. "Me, I'm just crazy about dancing, and the fellows do say: 'Babe, I hand it to you, for your size you've got every skirt on the floor faded to a fare-thee-well. How do you do it?' they asks me."

"Uh-huh?" Harry was plainly thinking of something else. "I'll say so—" he rejoined automatically.

The girl waited, acutely conscious of the the giggling group watching. Presently he leaned toward her again.

"You see, it's thisaway, girly," he continued, studying her shrewdly, "dancing counts, but it's class that is the big show. Now me, I'm assistant buyer over to Stein's—I've got a position to live up to. The other guys look to me to set the style; the girl I take to the dance has to be a snappy dresser—she's got to kill the rest, cut them all out, you understand—else Harry Green loses his name as being a slick picker and knowing a sure style in advance—" He paused, and the girl's heart sank.

If it were style he wanted, not genuine affection, but style, then she was already beaten. One slightly soiled black satin dress represented her entire evening outfit, while Sadie—well, Sadie had at least six gowns with which to enhance her red-headed beauty. Mournfully she regarded him, not daring to blink lest her eyes betray her, full lips drooping with sudden disillusion. After all, Sadie was right; here was proof positive—even the best of them would pass up the real womanly girl for a flashy clothes-rack.

"Now the last young lady I took wore

one of our justly famous models—a regular pippin, I'll tell the world, and it just struck me"—hesitating—"that the one we're showing in the window to-day"—indicating the red-placarded building opposite—"No. 1540, might fill the card—would suit you to a T, eh? How about it?"

He leaned back, smiling, twisting a dangling cigar-cutter around one spatular finger and awaited results. Babe's self-confidence returned.

"But why can't I wear one of our own models?" she queried. "They're just as good—why, the Victory Model for our coming sale is going to be the biggest thing yet!"

"Now you've said something." His smile fairly radiated. "By golly, Babe, if you can wear that gown before it's shown, I'll guarantee to hand you the grandest time you ever dreamed of!"

"Oh, you mean—to wear the Victory Model to the dance?" Her voice was hushed.

"Sure—that's the ticket in your fall sale, ain't it?"

She nodded.

"Well," he continued, "ain't it a cinch that you'd be the whole cheese at our shindy next week if you wore it before they put it on the market? And maybe the old man wouldn't think Harry Green a sure-enough picker!"

Anticipation flushed her round cheeks.

"Aw, gee!" she murmured ecstatically; then with a sudden touch of fear: "But—but supposing I can't get hold of it? Nobody outside of the designing-rooms so much as got a sight of it yet."

He shrugged significantly. "Of course if you can't, that's another tune—I told you how it is with me. I'm strong for you, but not for no skirt on earth, not even yourself—could I take a chance. Competition's too keen. You know how it is yourself; it ain't brains that count so much as the drag a chap's got these days—"

"Oh, I wouldn't want for them to sour on you, Harry, but I'll get it sure"—her voice shook with suppressed fervor—"just give me a coupla days—just don't ask any one else yet, Harry, and I'll get it."

"All right, you know me"—the boy grinned knowingly and kneaded her arm again—"I've got to beat it now, but don't forget, I'm for you all the way."

A customer approached, and with a muttered "Call you up Tuesday" he went swaggering up the aisle. Eyes shining, she watched his black head bobbing across the street till it disappeared behind the much-lettered door of Stein Brothers.

"Gee! Just wait till the girls hear of this!" she triumphed, but was rudely interrupted.

"Please, miss, how much is this?" indicating a narrow edging.

"Seventeen cents, but we only got two yards left."

Once again her thoughts soared. Wouldn't they be mad when they learned that Harry Green had asked her, Babe Crowley, the butt of every joke in their department, to the Stein dance at Merlin Hall! A dimple appeared. Already visions of herself resplendent in the Victory Model swam before her eyes—of herself besieged for dances—of an ardent Harry taking her home and pleading to take her to the Columbus Day ball on the eleventh. To which, of course, anybody knew a feller only asked the girl he was keeping "steady company" with. The shrill voice recalled her.

"I'll take three yards of this, I guess."

Mechanically she measured off the desired amount, the while answering other queries. "Eighteen cents—what? Thirty-six—no, we don't cut it—"

The afternoon's business had began.

Yet even as she checked, measured, and served countless bargain-hunters at her odds-and-ends counter, her eyes shone and her dimples came and went. In her usual whole-hearted way Babe had abandoned herself to the joys of anticipation. Over and over she conned the recent interview. Harry had said she had swell lines—that he wanted to flash her at the dance; he had hinted many other things, the possibilities of which made her thrill all over again. Even sly-faced Mabel's ruthless comment that some people made her sick, the way they believed all the soft stuff any chap cared to hand out, failed to trouble her. Besides which, she knew Mabel was sweet on him herself, so she only smiled. Just

wait till they saw her start off with Harry all dolled up in the Victory Model and then see who was right!

But with this thought dawned her first flicker of doubt. Supposing Sadie wouldn't give her the model? What then? Of course Sadie was her friend, but since the arrival of Harry Green upon the scene their relations had been rather strained. It was Sadie who had met him first.

Closing time proved she was right about Sadie. The vivid red-head had been quite pointed in her remarks upon girls who tried to cut their best friends out, and her opinion of their methods. It took Babe two ice-cream sodas and a bag of candy to bring her round, but in the end Sadie capitulated. They parted finally at her door, quite enthusiastic about the possible risk they were running.

Babe was still uneasy, but Sadie, having nothing else to lose, saw only the glory of her own part in the performance.

"Sure I can get it—that's a cinch, you just leave it to me," she scoffed, and laughed, a tight, hard little laugh.

The fat girl didn't like that laugh, and all the way up-stairs to her cubby-hole in the boarding-house, it rang in her ears and worried her, but by the end of dinner she had forgotten all about it.

She spent the rest of the evening before a tiny mirror trying out different combinations of rouge and airing her thoughts for the benefit of an art student in the room opposite.

"Gee!" she confided to the girl lolling by her door. "But I guess it didn't rile Sadie none to be shown where she gets off, and by me, of all people!" Here she flung herself into a rickety rocker and with a deep sigh began polishing her nails.

"Take this here Harry Green," she continued. "He's a stylisher, but for all that he says it's a girl's heart that counts with him every time. And me—I feel the same. He ain't like the cheap bums in Markham's, Miss Davis, somehow he's different."

The art student grinned. She had heard this same pæan before on more than four occasions. Harry had been on the scene ever since Sunday.

"The others must be awfu y jealous," she commented, meeting the cowlike eyes squarely.

"Are they?" Babe's voice thrilled. "Just you wait till they hear he's asking me to-morrow morning! They'll be so mad they'll want to kill me—sure."

The fat girl retired in high feather that night.

Yet, next morning, contrary to expectations, her triumph fell curiously flat. Somehow or other in that mysterious way of department-stores the news had preceded her. At first the group had been jocosely incredulous.

"What! Harry Green taking Babe Crowley to the dance! Well, he's got ambition!"

"Say, Babe, is it your lines he admires, or your disposition?" demanded Mabel with dangerous sweetness.

"What, take Babe! Is he buyer or freight-handler over to Stein's, I ask you?" Estelle, black-eyed, sorting muddled ribbons, giggled at her own wit.

They all ragged her, but beneath it all lay an unconscious relief. There was a decided satisfaction in the fact that some one —any one—had stung the insatiable department vamp. Sadie was not popular; she had been too careless in fancying their various swains in the past. But it took the pert-nosed Florence at the glove-counter to voice the public sentiment.

"Gee! He's got a fierce nerve to dish Sadie like that, but I'm glad of it," she exclaimed.

"You said it," they agreed.

Later they rallied around Babe. Subconsciously they all felt that Babe was easy. Any one could get a feller away from Babe —and so they played up to her individually and collectively. Besides it was always safer to be on the side of the favorite elect.

Babe was mystified but pleased. All that week she was the recipient of special makes of candy, confidences and invitations. She always refused the latter, because they told her to bring along Harry. Babe prided herself on her acumen.

"Huh!" she grunted to the art student. "I should hand over my Harry to them! They don't have no use for womanly reserve or modesty; they'd ask him out alone

the next night sure as sure! I'm not generally poor-spirited, Miss Davis, but a girl has got to take care of herself—especially where her feelings is concerned, and me—I'm all temperament."

Yet, in spite of it, she toadied to Sadie extravagantly till the night of the big event.

The ethical aspect of the matter in appropriating the Victory Model had not once entered Babe's head. She wanted to go to the dance with Harry and the gown was an essential; therefore, the obvious course was to obtain it. The fat girl's conscience was absolutely free.

It was Harry himself who first laid the seed of doubt in her mind. Three pinch-back specimens had accosted him at the door, and Harry hastened to introduce.

"Miss Crowley—meet Freddie Clark, Max Brunnel, Stein's champion song artist, and Larry Sullivan, our greatest little punster." They all bowed elaborately, and Harry continued: "And now, fellers, a word about Miss Crowley here"—resting one hand possessively on her plump, bare shoulder—"not only is she claimed to be Markham's classiest stepper, but I wait to ask what you think of a little girl that 'll flash trade secrets at a rival dance!"

The three stiffened perceptibly and Babe's breath caught.

"Wow!" they chorused. "I'll say she's nerve!"

"You've said it," Harry nodded, "and I hand it to Miss Crowley for wearing Markham's Victory Model to our dance to-night—the model they're banking on for their coming sale! A mighty nice compliment she pays us, I tell her, considering us worth risking her job—"

Babe's eyes dilated and her full lips sagged. This was a new aspect. A distinctly frightening one, too, but his next words reassured her.

"But I said to her: 'Believe me, girly, there ain't any one in Markham's that could show it off better, and there ain't a feller in our gang what would squeal on you'—and I'm right there, ain't I?" he added, winking craftily.

"You bet."

"I'm for her."

"I'll frame an alibi any time you say," swore Larry. "Only I sure want to dance with Markham's Victory Model before it's out—"

"You've said something," they acquiesced.

This was the password which, spreading rapidly, whirled Babe into a perfect vortex of frivolity. Never in her life had she been such a center of attraction—never once during the evening did she have a chance to sit down, or brood over that disturbing speech of Harry's. Those who did not know the reason why this somewhat ordinary, very plump girl should be so singled out by their leader and his friends came to find out, only to return again and again, still mystified. And the girl herself worshiped and glowed alternately at each newcomer, trying to stifle a growing uneasiness, and the faint disappointment that Harry himself was so generous with her company.

She would have liked him to keep her to himself; all the "fellers" she knew did that when with a girl they wanted for "steady company." With feminine intuition she sensed that to-night marked the turning point in their affair—that unless he asked her to-night she would never go to the Columbus Day ball, or flaunt him before the girls. Also subconsciously she wondered why, when he was so volubly impressed, he shied away from the least suggestion of a date or understanding.

Later she tackled Harry from a new angle.

"The trouble with me, Harry," she began, "is I've too much temperament."

The wise-eyed youth studied her critically. "Believe me, girly, too much never hurt nobody. The trouble with most girls these days is they're all out for themselves. No thought of what a feller is—just how much he's worth and if he'll show them a good time."

"Not me!" dragging on his arm. "Money and position never counts with me—all I want is a little word of gratitude and appreciation for what I do and I'm content—but just let some one pass me a lemon and—good night!"

"Well, nobody passed you one to-night, I bet. You certainly showed them how."

They were just starting for home after

the closing dance, when the need for immediate and desperate action gripped her, together with the chill of the fast-lightening streets. Somehow, with the return of daylight, her job seemed to grow in proportion. She was tired and worried, but returned to the attack.

"Harry--" Even her voice seemed thin.

"Huh?" The youth himself looked pale-green in the sickly glow.

"Do you really think I will lose my job --if they find out?"

"I don't know; you should worry anyhow. Plenty of good ones going round."

The ambiguity of his reply was not comforting.

"But—but you wanted me to wear it, didn't you?" she wailed in a final effort to make him appreciate her action.

"Sure I did. And you're a little A-1 sport to do it, I'll tell the world." Mechanically he squeezed her arm. "Well, did I show you a good time, or didn't I?" he demanded.

The wide, blue eyes, heavy with fatigue, brightened suddenly. "Oh, say, Harry, I had a swell time! It was a swell party, too," she reiterated, adding after an instant's pause: "But I guess this Columbus ball on the eleventh is going to be even better than this, won't it?"

Nerves tense, she stumbled up the front steps, but Harry seemed curiously dense. He flatly refused to bite.

"Oh, I don't know," he mumbled. "You can't tell--I'm not so sure I'm going myself yet. We're awful busy over to the store these days getting ready for our fall sale and these things sure put a crimp in you."

"Sale! What sale?" The words fairly rasped.

"Well, you ain't the only ones to have a fall sale, you know, girly," the youth grinned slyly, despite himself. "Stein's planning on a walk-away on the fifteenth himself, and I'll say he's got some fancy goods for the price!"

A rival sale! Too late did Babe realize the trap into which she had fallen. Why! To go to that dance in Markman's Victory Model was tantamount to giving them the design to sell at a much lower rate. Besides, Markham's was sure to get wise now, with it draped in the very windows opposite!

Tears of remorse and fatigue welled up in the soft blue eyes as she tiptoed into her bedroom. After all, had it been worth it? It had been a wonderful night in many ways, but somehow or other, it had failed signally in its main purpose. Instead of drawing them nearer, Harry seemed to have become more inaccessible than ever. To be sure, he had wanted to kiss her in the doorway at parting, but even then, it was a disappointment to find him so acquiescent when she had refused. Curiously enough, the fat girl's principle against kissing till a fellow was steady company had survived more than one blow before, but to-night, for the first time, she caught herself wishing she had been less insistent. She would like to have been kissed by Harry; somehow it might have mitigated the hurt of the coming loss of her job.

For a long minute she continued to sit, the whole of her aching body inert, envisioning the "might-have-beens" of the recent parting. Stubbornly she refused to believe that Harry had taken her merely to get a glimpse of the Victory Model; or that he intended using the design for his coming sale; neither did she accept his not asking her to the Columbus dance that night as proof that he would not ultimately do so. How could he when he was not certain of going himself? A nice thing to date a girl up and then fall down on it the last minute!

Thus she argued, still under the spell of his personality, but inwardly she knew otherwise. Even apart from the gown, he might only have taken her to spite Sadie. He and Sadie had quarreled.

Suddenly she shivered and with a supreme effort rose to her burning feet. Only three hours more before she must be behind her counter again, answering the girls' queries—measuring interminable yards of lace—while the great night receded into the past and only ultimate disgrace faced her in the future!

Breakfast, and a flattering welcome from the girls revived her somewhat. There is nothing which strengthens one's self-esteem so much as to be made the center of an applauding group, and this morning Babe

found herself the object of much mingled approbation and envy. Somehow, some one had learned about the Victory Model, and being curiously devoid of all ethical scruples, the whole crowd were simply seething with unbounded admiration for her nerve; envy for the prestige the affair gave her; and a secret desire to have some one other than themselves tell Winters of the catalog department. Without wishing her any hard luck in the least, they wanted a climax; the affair was too rich in possibilities to pass into oblivion, or the harmless waste-basket of past offenses.

Placidly munching the lemon-drops of Harry's suggestion, the fat girl lolled behind her counter and listened to their comments on her daring. By luncheon all scruples were stilled and she had already adopted the scheme as her own—by closing time she was seeing herself as one sacrificing everything to further her loved one's success and, despite dizzying fatigue, hope was flaming.

She now no longer entertained any doubts as to Harry's ulterior motive in inviting her—womanlike, she was glad he'd found her necessary. Granted he copied the gown in time for their sale, and it proved a success, Harry would get the job permanently, and then, of course, it would be up to him to take her to the dance. After that it would be easy sailing. Thus she argued, the while fairly dragging herself home, so utterly worn out that the absence of Sadie at their usual meeting-post passed unnoticed, and she even found herself hoping that Harry would not call that evening.

But about this latter possibility the girl need not have entertained any fears, for days limped tediously by; balmy evenings came and went, and brought no further sign from the errant Harry. At first Babe was mystified, then she began to worry.

She worried for fear Sadie and Harry had made it up again; she worried lest she might have lost her last chance by being so cool to his osculatory advances—she worried about the impending loss of her job and, above all, as to what the girls would say if they found out that she had not seen him since the dance.

This dread, however, remained quiescent, for the crowd, after its first flurry of surprise, returned to their own pursuits, leaving Babe to sink once more into the oblivion of familiar and uninteresting objects.

For nearly a week the fat girl continued to eat lemon-drops and worry about her job and Harry during the day time; and rearrange her hair and dream delightfully foolish dreams of Harry in the evenings.

Then one day she met him and for a brief span the future resumed its former rosy glow.

It was on the street at luncheon hour, and he had walked with her on the sunny side, munching sandwiches and pouring a host of troubles into her sympathetic ear.

He'd been working like a dog every night that week—he'd meant to call her up before, but it was something fierce the way they drove one—he wouldn't stand it much longer. Not a minute to call your own—it was fierce. Thus he grumbled, while the girl listened, wide-eyed and worshiping, and angled for emotional tid-bits.

Naively she broached the subject of the coming sale:

"Say, listen, Harry, I'm wondering if you're rushing a job lot of that gown I wore to the dance? Honest, Harry, you can tell me."

But the other merely winked and grinned teasingly.

"Me? I ain't saying—but this sale 'll sure make old Stein take notice of Harry Green."

Babe swelled with pride at this ambiguous proof of her suspicions.

"Gee! I don't care about my job if it does you any good, Harry," she thrilled. "I always said I don't care what happens as long as my heart is satisfied and me—I'm all heart."

Whereupon the youth had replied eloquently, but generally, and they had wandered on in pregnant silence for the space of several minutes. Babe's spirits soared at this reestablishment of her idol; what matter if they ought not, as he so tactfully pointed out, see each other till after the sale, when she knew his thoughts were with her?

At parting, too, he promised to call her up as soon as the sale was over and, with

an empty leer, "talk over a few little things." Babe had returned to the stress of a bargain afternoon, dreamy-eyed and flushed with anticipation.

But even the assurance that Harry's absence was not voluntary failed to completely uphold her during the days following, and as the fatal date approached, Babe began casting about for some means by which to avoid the inevitable. None seemed forthcoming; even Sadie's ever fertile mind failed her signally for once, and she dared seek counsel nowhere else. Almost tearfully she packed away her laces the night of the fourteenth, and bade a lingering good night to the girls; it would probably be the last time she ever chatted with them in the washroom after hours.

She sighed dolefully as she wended her way in the morning, for the last time, down the closely packed street to Markham's department store. Opposite, Stein's fairly screamed at her in all the brazenness of its red placards, while in their windows, made of every possible variety of shades, flaunted her gown! Babe's usually placid face grew taut and her eyes dilated. Unconsciously she averted her gaze, only to be confronted by Markham's blue cards, fluttering in the morning breeze, advertising their Victory Model!

Almost trembling now, the girl approached, drawn relentlessly by that peculiar something which makes a criminal return to view his crime. Striving desperately for composure, she raised her eyes to the more conservative window of her own store, then halted aghast. For there it stood, the famous Victory Model, in all the glory of its cleverly cut lines and—it was not her gown! It was not the gown Sadie had given her to wear! It didn't even remotely resemble that rather commonplace affair on which Harry had banked all his hopes in the window opposite! It was a dream; a miracle of perfection, set in the midst of its commoner brothers and sisters, and one of these, hidden well in the corner and marked thirty dollars, was the one she had worn at the Stein dance!

For a moment the girl was too relieved to realize the full, awful perfidy of her bosom friend. Then the whole explanation of her actions burst upon her. No wonder Sadie had been so amenable when all the time she intended giving the wrong gown! Babe saw it now, with startling clearness—Sadie had purposely passed her a lemon; she in turn had unconsciously passed it on to Harry, and now Harry would most justifiably hand it back with interest.

Babe's cheeks flushed angrily and she fairly hurtled through the employees' entrance. The whole thing was Sadie's fault, and she was out to find Sadie and give her a piece of her mind. Sadie was jealous and had seized this opportunity to queer her with Harry!

Babe flew through the coat-room. Just let her catch that Sadie and she'd show her! Off came her hat, bang went the door, and then Babe found herself plunged into a giggling group around the corner.

"Well, speaking names—here's Babe herself—"

"Say, Babe, maybe Sadie didn't put one over on you this time!"

"Maybe it wasn't Stein's ball she was planning on wearing it to? Maybe she meant the next?" Florence's voice cut like a knife.

"Gee! I didn't think you swallowed them alive and whole, I really didn't," giggled Estelle.

For a full moment Babe stared, while the sharp-edged taunts were thrown at her, then abruptly she straightened. So that was the way they felt! Just let a girl get out of luck and the whole crowd turned on her. Well, she'd show them! Suddenly the fat girl no longer felt angry or humiliated—a sort of calm desperation came to her aid. Blue eyes flashing, she faced the group.

"Huh!" she grunted contemptuously. "I should worry—I've my reasons."

"What! Reasons for playing goat to Sadie Sullivan!" they all chorused, but Babe stuck to her guns.

"Ye-ah," she repeated stolidly. "You just wait and see—I've my reasons." And almost chanting the refrain, passed on her way.

But once out of their sight all her brave defiance departed. She no longer wanted to find Sadie and give her a piece of her mind—the unexpected attitude of the girls;

the shock of her discovery about the gown: Sadie's perfidy, and above all, the irrevocable loss of Harry, proved too much for even her sturdy spirit, and under cover of hunting pins behind the counter, the fat girl wiped her eyes.

What hurt most of all was the fact that Harry would think she had played him false—Sadie would tell him so, and Sadie could lie so much better than she. Sadie would use the knowledge as a means to make it up with Harry and then he would take her to the Columbus dance, and poor Babe, who wanted to go so badly and whose only trouble was her soft heart, would be left to suffer in solitude! Here Babe sniffed quite audibly and mechanically dived for the lemon-drops. She was wallowing in a perfect morass of seething hate and self-pity and was almost enjoying it. Subconsciously she wished that she were back in her own little room, with the day behind her, and the art student listening sympathetically and soothing her with chocolates—or perhaps, tentatively, if she could ever get Harry to believe—

And then they came—those words which shattered the last remaining hope, floating from the lips of the little runner, Ethel; "and she up and tells me that Harry Green's going to be fired, and it's all Babe Crowley's fault, and he's so mad he's taking Sadie to the dance."

Taking Sadie to the dance! An overwhelming fury dried Babe's eyes miraculously and she yanked at the lace in her hands so the whole bolt came off its blue card. They'd be getting at her about losing Harry next, she fumed. Well, let them! Then gradually her lips curled and she smiled grimly.

Somehow Harry minus a job didn't seem, despite her protestations to the contrary, quite the same as Harry Green, buyer for the famous Stein Brothers. Life began to assume a more normal aspect again. Almost she had forgotten it was to all expectations to be her last day at Markham's when the head usher sailed down the aisle and halted before her.

"Miss Crowley"—her tone was pregnant with meaning—"Mr. Winters would like to speak to you for a few minutes. You know where he is? Room 300? Yes, right away, please."

The girl's breath caught; subconsciously she'd been nerved for this all morning, but now it had come, with every girl in the department listening intently, the disgrace seemed worse than she'd anticipated. Automatically she laid down the lace bolt, fluffed her hair and followed the usher. It all came from having too much temperament; from following the dictates of her heart, regardless of cost, but this was the end. She'd been handed a lemon once too often—she was through! Henceforth any one who tampered with Babe Crowley's feelings better watch out!

Suddenly, to their utter astonishment, even as she mounted the stairs, the fat girl glanced over her shoulder and began to laugh.

Bewildered, the girls looked at one another.

Ethel, the tow-haired runner, was the first to speak.

"Say—do you really think she's got a plan? That she did it a-purpose?"

Silence. Finally broken by a confused murmur:

"I don't know—she may have—"

"Oh, Babe may seem foolish, but she wasn't born yesterday."

"Well, for my part, I never was so crazy about Sadie that I wouldn't like to see Babe hand her something," declared Mabel, hurriedly adjusting herself to the change of sentiment.

The tide had turned, and when Babe finally returned, tentative advances were quite in order.

"Say, Babe, what 'd he say?"

"Over here, Babe, and tell us all about it."

"Say, listen, was he awful mad?" This from Ethel, round-eyed and eager to spread the news.

But the fat girl merely marched stolidly to her counter and amid a strained silence, picked up her sales-book. Anxiously the girls studied her. No, there were no traces of tears; no appearance of outraged pride or justice; but, nevertheless, Babe Crowley was undeniably suppressing some great excitement. Her cheeks were flushed; her

blue eyes bright; and her full lips were not sagging with her usual placid good humor. The group stiffened, but still the fat girl remained silent. She knew they were slowly dying of curiosity, and she was determined to realize to the full her moment of triumph.

Finally Ethel could not stand it any longer.

"Aw—come on and be a sport, Babe," she pleaded. "Have you jumped the float, or are you with us still? Loosen up; I always tell you everything."

Babe recognized the justice of the remark. Slowly she raised her eyes from listing her sales.

"Well," she drawled, "I ain't quitting for some time to come, but Sadie's canned, and I'm thinking of taking her job."

"What! Say, listen, girls! Sadie's canned and Babe's got her job!" With a wild squeal of joy Estelle bounded from her counter. "Go on, Babe, tell us the whole thing. I'm just dying to hear it. I was just telling the girls I knew you'd been up to some game this week, you seemed so low in your mind. Aw—come on."

"Well, it was this way." Babe drew a long breath of happiness and faced the listening group. Subconsciously she was glad it was noon-time and the store so empty. She wanted her moment to last as long as possible.

"You know when Harry asked me to that dance and was so keen on my wearing our Victory Model, I sort of smelled a rat, but I thinks to myself: 'Babe, if that low-life is up to his monkey tricks again, you better hold tight and see it through. Otherwise he might get some sucker who'd fall for the whole show.' So when I goes to Sadie and find she's so keen to give it to me, I knew my suspicions was right; that them two was playing a con game and using me as the goat. So I decides to fool them."

"And did Sadie really give you the model then?"

Ethel was impatient to be gone on her news-spreading way.

Babe glanced at her reproachfully. "Sure, she did," she answered, "and then I sneaks back and changes it myself." Repetition made the words flow easily. "But I don't let on to Harry, and so he goes and puts Stein's a whole job lot to the bad and queers hisself—all through trying to put one over on Babe Crowley!"

"But what did Winters want with you then?"

"I'm coming to that." Babe was getting peeved. "When he asks me why Stein's was showing our Model No. 30, which was never out before to-day neither, I just goes and tells him the whole thing—all about Sadie and Harry being partners, and her giving me the gown—and then I tells him straight I didn't think she was to be trusted in that department." Here Babe paused and began automatically to fluff her hair. Tactfully the group remained silent, watching.

"Well, he agrees with me," she finally concluded, "and asks me if I thought I'd be better at it myself, but when I tells him I'd consider it—not wanting to appear too anxious, you understand—he just looks at me for a long minute with them gray eyes of his and says: 'No, Miss Crowley,' he says, 'I don't think I'll even offer it to you; your imagination would be wasted in that department.' That's what he says to me, with the nicest smile, and then he tells me to come to him to-morrow and he'll know where I'd be most helpful. He says I'd sure got a fine spirit of store loyalty, but to come straight to him next time, as it was too valuable to be lying round loose."

Babe was in her element. Once more her errant fancies had found a harbor and she was thrilled to her temperamental roots at being again in the limelight. Mechanically, she fished under the counter and extracted a discarded bag of large, luscious chocolates. Placidly she began to munch, and as she did so, her cowlike eyes grew worshipful again and she smiled almost dreamily upon the temporarily silenced Estelle.

"Gee!" she murmured wistfully. "I sure hope he can put me in the catalog department—I don't know that I want Sadie's job—I think gray eyes are so soulful, don't you?"

The House of Simitars

by George C. Shedd

CHAPTER I.

TROUBLE BREWING.

HOFUF is favored above all cities in Arabia. It rests in a paradise of its own. Water is the most precious article in that country, and this stretch of the province of El Hasa, overlooking the Persian Gulf, has it in abundance.

Like a town carved out of alabaster and set in an emerald bed, Hofuf appears from a height of one of the western hills. Always it has been wealthy, always it has carried on a rich commerce with Oman and Persia and India, and always it has suffered from the avaricious raids from hordes in the interior and from the crushing taxes of its Turkish masters.

Never in sympathy with the puritanical fanaticism of the Shiah sect of Mohammedanism, and having suffered much at its hands, it was to be suspected that the people of Hofuf would exhibit no fervor directed, as its apostles preached, to "purify Islam and prevent Arabia from becoming a vassal of Great Britain." And so Jim Woodberry found them.

He and Hassar, his steadfast companion, having departed in the night hastily from Bahrein to escape their enemies, and particularly the Arab, Ebin 'Abd-Allah, and landing at El Katif, had secured by great good luck three Oman dromedaries, slender-limbed and milk-white in color and patently of racing breed, incomparably the finest of all camels anywhere. With the girl from Hail, whom Hassar had rescued from De Baca's house in Menameh, they had traveled at once south to Hofuf, covering the intervening seventy-five miles in a single night.

After they had bestowed themselves in an inn, Woodberry went to call upon a Persian merchant, a dealer in hides, who bought extensively for English and American firms, while Hassar and Sulma slept.

After the Persian had read the letter of introduction which Woodberry presented to him, he bowed deeply and remarked, "My humble abode is lifted to a place of honor by receiving the person of 'Lord of Lords' Jim Woodberry, friend of the Shah and a hundred other rulers, whose name in Persia is as a book of great deeds, and whose face is as the sun at noon." With which oriental acknowledgment he conducted his visitor to an inner chamber behind the shop, clapped his hands in command, and had servants bring coffee and *narghiles* with Persian tobacco.

At the end of an hour, when they had fulfilled the requirements of courtesy by general conversation, Woodberry began to make inquiries regarding the temper of the people of Hofuf.

"The Arabs of El Hasa want peace and liberty from oppression," the merchant stated. "They hoped to have it in the new Caliphat of Mecca organized by Shereef Hussein, and in a new Arabia under a British mandate as proposed by the peace assembly at Paris. But El Hasa is a small province and weak politically."

"While Nedjed is strong," Jim remarked.

"Curses be on the men of Nedjed, that lion's den, that country of robbers, that stronghold of the Wahhabees!" the other exclaimed with feeling. "Even the Turks never ruled them, or cared to march against them in their mountain kingdom in Central Arabia. It is Nedjed, with the malcontents of India and Egypt and Turkey who have set Islam seething. I tell you, my Lord of Lords, there is great trouble in store for the British. Everywhere, everywhere! And three-fourths of the tribes of this land have taken an oath to support Ebin Sa'oud in his war against them."

"And does this spirit run in Persia also?" Jim inquired, considering his companion keenly.

For a time the man did not reply, only his eyes dwelt upon Woodberry as if speculating how far he might trust him.

"You are an *Americani*, though acting for the British. May I speak as to a son whose lips will be sealed?"

"Yes."

"Then there is trouble there also for the Lion from the north. For the Lion of Persia, though old, feeble, starving, may yet join with Britain's enemies and strike a blow. And is not Persia mostly Mahommedan? Yea, my friend. Iran has suffered much and endured much, and perhaps her time has come to die, as appears in the treaty forced from her by English statesmen even while a League of Nations was being formed—a treaty that makes of her a protectorate, that makes Persia a vassal, that swallows her up in the British maw."

"To all Persians, Parsees, and Mahommedans alike, this is an indignity and a crushing affront, and their souls are angry. They had hoped for much from the peacemakers at Paris, and dreamed of a Persia renewed, democratic, rid of Russian and British leeches of commerce that kept its veins sucked dry, a happy Persia, no longer weak and no longer corrupt; and for that she sent delegates to Paris. But the British blocked them, and the French leader and the American President closed their ears to them at Britain's behest; and so Persia is swallowed, in spite of all Britain's polite professions of friendship."

"When did you hear of such a treaty?" Jim asked.

"Recently. News of it came to me in a letter from a friend in Bagdad, who had it from secret sources in Teheran. The treaty has not yet been made known, but it is consummated. Presently when the British consider it wise, it will be known. And she will have made a new enemy, a feeble enemy, perhaps, but another enemy nevertheless—and Islamic."

"I'm sorry to learn this," Woodberry said, whose knowledge of Persia was profound. "It's a mistake."

The merchant puffed smoke from his amber mouthpiece.

"Great Britain will suffer from her greed," said he, solemnly. "Her paw is not great enough to cover and hold India, Afghanistan, Tibet, Mesopotamia, Arabia and Egypt and Persia. All Islam is now under it, and it seems—though I cannot speak with surety—that a *djehad* will come."

Woodberry's face became grave at that word, the term for a general religious uprising on the part of the Mahommedan world.

"But here in Hofuf you are quiet?" he requestioned.

"Here in Hofuf, yes."

Both relapsed into thought. In the subject discussed, with all of its connate possibilities, there was plenty of food for reflection. At length Woodberry inquired:

"Do you know of an Arab of the name Ebin 'Abd-Allah?"

"I know of him, and he has been pointed out to me here in Hofuf. But he comes from Nedjed—a Wahhabee."

"A tall black-bearded Arab, of fierce aspect and restless eyes?"

"The same, my Lord of Lords Jim Woodberry. When here he strove to stir up the few Wahhabees in the city, and all other Arabs, in behalf of Ebin Sa'oud's campaign against Shereef Hussein and the British. I liked not his looks."

"Nor I. For he was in Bahrein while I was there; and it's my conclusion now, after hearing your words, that he was in

the islands to gain adherents to his cause. We met—and I foiled him in a certain enterprise."

"Then he is your enemy, my lord. If I may utter the word to one of your wisdom, I say, 'Beware!' His men will seek you out and slay you."

"I shall take care of that," said Jim. "Will you be so good as to convey for me along with your own letters one of mine to Bagdad. For I go into the desert."

"To Nedjed!"

"Even there."

"Nay, my lord, though you have courage beyond others, be advised. The saying is an old one but true, 'Few go into Nedjed, and fewer return.'"

"I shall be one of the few who both go in and return," said Jim, smiling. "And the letter?"

"It shall reach Bagdad safely. If there be aught else—"

"Nothing, except to keep secret my presence here in the city, where I shall remain until the next caravan starts for Ri'ad. Doubtless I shall visit you again before departing from Hofuf."

Woodberry went from the shop through the long barrel-vaulted arcade, known as the "Keysareeyah," forming the marketplace, and upon which the shops open. As he moved forward leisurely, wearing the native robe and head-dress, in appearance Arab from his bare sun-blackened feet to his lean, brown, hawklike face, mingling with the men who congregated in the covered street, he on a sudden came to pause.

Before him among the shifting figures his eyes had lighted on a short, fleshy form, clothed in white linen of European cut, which possessed a singular familiarity. The man was advancing toward one end of the street in the direction in which Woodberry moved, so that it was not until both had reached the open gate of the long tunnel that Jim had a view of his face. De Baca!

How in the name of all that was amazing had the little obese pearl merchant, whom Woodberry had supposed left behind in Menameh, discomfited and baffled, come here? And yet here he was in the marketplace of Hofuf. No mistake. He was giving a thoughtful twirl to the ends of his curling mustache; and his air was that of important satisfaction, which likely was habitual.

It was this last that filled Jim with forebodings. De Baca would not be manifesting such complacency if fortune had not turned in his favor. Something had gone wrong somewhere; and Woodberry experienced a quick and profound anxiety, not for himself, not in a concern for his plans, but for the safety of the girl, Jacinth Alexander.

Dropping farther back, Jim began to follow the little pearl dealer, exercising a fine inconspicuousness in the business. The mystery of the man's presence had an explanation, of course. A fast motor-boat could have taken him to the same port where the American and his companions had landed, and as soon, but he must have come to Hofuf in a motor-car, leaving town before Woodberry's party.

That must be the way of it. It had taken Jim and Hassar a day to secure their dromedaries, supplies and equipment, which gave the half-caste merchant plenty of time to travel the road. Undoubtedly he had friends, rich merchants in El Katif, who owned cars; and had secured the service of one. But why had he come?

The perplexing question continued to beat at Jim's mind all the while he was trailing the man to the door of a dwelling in the Rifey'eeyah quarter of the city, the section where lived the wealthy, where the white-plastered houses possessed a certain elegance owing to their ornamented doorways and windows with pointed arches.

For a while the American waited to learn if De Baca would appear, but at length convinced he had entered his lodging-place, where presumably he was the guest of some acquaintance, Jim returned to the inn at which he and his friends rested. Hassar still slept, so Woodberry gave himself up to slumber, weary from his long ride.

It was night when he awoke. Possibly it was the smell of the coffee Hassar made which roused him. At any rate he sat up, inhaled the aroma coming from the coffee-urn and addressed Sulma, who was placing bread, dates, and a stew of mutton on the table.

"Does this suit thee better than the sweetmeats and ease of the pearl dealer, thou with eyes like desert stars and lips red as a sultan's roses?"

"I wearied of De Baca's sweetmeats," was the answer, as she turned to gaze at him. She had removed her veil. On her lovely face, with its large shining eyes, shapely nose and voluptuous scarlet mouth, was the unconscious insolence of a proud, passionate, unrestrained nature. "But what know you of my eyes? You have not once looked into them since leaving the islands. Or of my lips, *Americani?* For your own have not pressed them."

"You already have a master."

"I am no common woman, but the daughter of a sheik of Jebel Shomar. I would have a lord for my master—a lord of lords, like you."

"Your ambition outruns all but your tongue," Hassar interjected calmly, squatting by the brass coffee-pot. "I must tame thee, my little hill-tiger."

"I shall endure thee for a time only," said the girl.

Jim laughed at her haughty tone and posture. Truly she had the ideas and spirit and vivid beauty to make, given favorable circumstances, another Semiramis.

"You had better hold fast to Hassar; I have seen De Baca this day," said he.

The girl seemed all on an instant turned to stone. Then in a single gliding movement she was by Hassar's side, had bent and plucked the knife with the green stone in its hilt from his belt.

"In this house?" she hissed between set teeth.

"Nay, in the market-place."

She gripped the knife, glaring at the closed door. Afterward she breathed tremulously a deep breath and dropped on her knees beside Hassar and flung an arm over his neck.

"Thou lovest me, beloved?"

"I shall endure thee for a time yet," was the ironic response. "But until we've eaten and drank, I shall not go forth and seek the pearl merchant to slay him, which is thy immediate wish."

The arm encircled his neck closer.

"When we are in the desert, I shall make of thee a great chief," she murmured, resting against his shoulder.

Hassar turned a countenance all agrin to Jim.

"Hear you, O Lord of Lords?" he questioned. "She, this girl with a mouth like a rose-petal, will give me greatness. She will raise a jinn to build me a palace and fill me a treasure-chest and give me an army and make me a prince. O-ho, observe the black slaves run before Hassar to clear away the people and beggars!"

The girl from Hail turned her head to regard him half in anger and half in amusement, for unlike most native women who were stupid she had a natural shrewdness.

"But nevertheless you will do away with De Baca for me," said she, "for already I am dear to you."

"That much I shall do for you. Yet how comes it the pearl merchant is here?" And Hassar looked his question, as well as spoke it, from under his knit brows, gazing at Woodberry.

Jim gave the probable explanation for the man's swift arrival.

"And the reason?"

"He cannot know we're come, so that's not it," the American replied reflectively. "It may be on business for himself or for Ebin 'Abd-Allah." He was silent for a time. "Or it may be that that Ophir-seeking little archeologist has escaped to El Katif, bringing Jacinth Alexander with him by force or deception, through De Baca's aid. Which means they will come here. Then, once they're arrived, De Baca thinks to seize the girl with impunity."

"The pearl dealer has forgotten Sulma," quoth Hassar, "who wills otherwise."

"Thou readst my soul, my tall warrior."

"According to the Koran, women have no souls, but you have desires, which is the same thing. Just now it pleases me to satisfy your desires, so let De Baca die at the proper moment. Meanwhile my desire is for food. Serve us, therefore, woman with a face fairer than the full moon."

And Sulma served the food to Lord of Lords Jim and Hassar with indolent condescension, for she thought she knew her own value.

"This girl has been a little spoiled by De Baca," said Hassar to Jim in English. "Presently I shall take her in hand."

"Well, it will be amusing to watch," was the reply. "I think she will prove your match."

"By all the big and little gods, if that be true, I shall marry her and rear a tribe! For never yet have I found a woman worthy to bear me sons." And he let his eyes dwell speculatively upon the face with scarlet lips and smoldering eyes.

"The pair of you will be well mated," Jim declared, "both being modest, gentle, amiable, soft-hearted, feeling no evil passions, without guile, without self-conceit, open of countenance, respectful, full of virtue—"

"And devout. Don't overlook that, O Jim," Hassar asserted, chewing on a piece of mutton.

"What say my lords in this strange tongue?" Sulma exclaimed in Arabic, breaking into the talk. "You mock me, I think, for your eyes move upon me as you utter this devil's speech. Perhaps it *is* devil's speech, words of black magic. How know I?" She regarded them suspiciously.

Hassar nodded.

"How know you, indeed?" said he. "But though we are learned in the ways of magic, yet we use it only against our enemies." Sulma looked relieved. "As for our talk, it was talk of you, as you divined."

"What said you of me?" she questioned eagerly.

"That your head was filled with curiosity and naught else, like all women," Hassar returned calmly.

Sulma, fairly caught, kept sulky silence, until Jim laughed and said Hassar deceived her and that their talk was in praise of her beauty and faithfulness.

CHAPTER II.

TRAP FOR TRAP.

DE BACA did not die that night, nor the next day, nor the day thereafter; for he had vanished. Alternate watch by Jim and Hassar failed to disclose a glimpse of the Bahrein pearl merchant, and they had concluded that in the house where Woodberry had seen him enter De Baca had been only a casual visitor. Indeed, it might be doubted if he were now in Hofuf. Then about the third hour of the forenoon of the fourth day Hassar, who had gone to the camel market outside the city gate in the north wall and in the lee of the Kôt, that vast grim citadel of thick ramparts and high towers which constitutes the northeastern quarter of Hofuf, he beheld the man. And at his side, lo! the archeologist plucking absently at his reddish beard, and the little man's stepdaughter.

They were not examining dromedaries, but surveying the fortress, originally of Carmathian construction, now mostly in ruins with battlements impaired and winding stairs broken, an aged testimony to the fierce religious conflicts in Islam. So calm, so natural appeared the manner of the trio at the moment that Hassar pursed his lips as if to give a whistle of surprise.

Evidently the English consul had been unable to prevent the departure from the islands of Bascom, the scientist, and his niece Jacinth Alexander. In truth, how would that be possible if De Baca and Bascom schemed together? The former, with his immense wealth, his command of boats, his knowledge of native life, his secret influence, and his private purpose to possess the lovely American girl; the archeologist unsophisticated, confident of the half-caste's friendship, incredulous of danger, narrow-minded, dominated by the single passion of his research—a pair impossible to control through the limited powers of the consulate.

Hassar marveled not at all at the girl's being here. She was victim of her stepfather's pertinacious will, of his blind delusion about Ophir. Who but a man half-mad, thought Hassar, would drag a girl with him into the deadly desert on such a quest? And she was helpless.

When the trio finally gave over their cursory inspection of the old fortress and walked away along the highway north from the city, he followed them. When they at length entered a gate in a wall, he set himself to investigate; through the wall he

could not see, of course, but by a spring upward he caught its top, drew himself up for a look, and beheld his quarry moving through a garden, a bit of green, flowery paradise with fountains, toward a house whose light-columned porticoes, Moresco arches, and gleaming white walls possessed unusual beauty.

By judicious inquiry in the neighborhood he learned that the garden and house were those of a rich pearl merchant of Bahrein, who came here frequently for relief from the great heat of the low islands. A vendor of cucumbers and melons, leading his laden ass along the road, gave him this information in a half-hour's gossip—the one seed of grain in a bushel of chaff.

"Two things I have learned this day," Hassar stated to Woodberry, on his return. "Both in the market-place outside the city wall. By exchanging news with camel-drivers I discovered something of importance is about to occur, for travel into the desert is unprecedented. The journey to Ri'ad is, as all know, beset by perils of sand and storm, so that whole caravans are swallowed up. Hence the journey is rarely made. But in a fortnight three caravans have departed from Hofuf to cross the Nefud, one in hire of three men from India, one of a mixed company of leaders from Bagdad and Oman, who had joined together, and another in charge of two Persians. Ostensibly they were merchants going to trade, but there is gossip of them in the market-place which gives a religious color to these visits."

"From India, Persia, Bagdad, and Oman, eh?" Jim reflected. "I wonder if emissaries are coming from the west and north also—from Egypt and Morocco and Anatolia. This smacks of big politics in the Moslem world, Hassar."

"Yea," assented Hassar.

"All going into the stronghold of the Wahhabees."

"Yea," Hassar repeated, "but can the dogs and sheep and jackals and wolves and tigers lie down together in peace to compose their quarrels?"

"Yes, if the right occasion, a common motive and a leader with genius appeared. Don't forget what Mohammed did."

Hassar smiled.

"The time is ripe, no doubt of that, my friend," said he. "And the greedy and blundering politicians of Europe are pouring oil on fuel. But is there a man strong enough to pile the fuel in a heap, strike a match and fan the flames?"

"The meeting of these emissaries at Ri'ad or wherever they shall foregather will decide that, I imagine," Jim answered, "and we'll learn the result in due season. This information that you bring me concerning the gathering of Moslem representatives is, however, of first importance. It gives us something definite—and big. Now for your second piece of news."

"They are here: the pearl merchant, the seeker among ruins, and his girl. All three. I beheld them gazing at the Kôt, then followed and traced them to a garden and house three-quarters of a mile north of the city among other gardens."

"Whose house?"

"De Baca's." Hassar grinned. "When he suffers in Menameh from heat or perhaps the tongues of his women, he comes hither for rest and peace and coolness. He is very rich."

"I remember that he was speaking of a house he owned in Hofuf when we entered the chamber of his dwelling in Menameh to get my letters. The house you saw is doubtless the one." After a pause he continued: "I recall, too, that Bascom, the archeologist, had given up his rooms at the hotel. They came to El Katif that very night. Dawson, the British consul, never saw them, never had a chance to prevent their coming, and that crazy little scientist paid no heed to my warning."

"As I said then, I say now," Hassar remarked, "perhaps the American girl seeks marriage with the rich pearl merchant, and therefore came willingly also."

"She came because her stepfather brought her, not because she desired to," Jim stated. "She learned that night what sort of creature De Baca is; she would never marry him, I give you my word for that."

"Then she has so much more to fear, O Jim. For I beheld De Baca's eyes resting on her both there in Menameh and here to-

day in Hofuf, and they were the eyes of one who lusted greatly. If her stepfather vanished, who would know or care? And she is in De Baca's house—and who would know or care?"

"I care," said Jim. "She's an American girl in a bad scrape. That's sufficient to arouse my interest."

"Yea; but heretofore she was not well pleased on beholding you," was the practical answer. "It runs in my mind that she was even angry with you. However, if it be your desire to take her away from De Baca, who, by the way, I've agreed to slay on Sulma's account, I shall assist you. But, then, O Jim, will you take her with us into Arabia?"

"I don't know what to do," Woodberry confessed, greatly perplexed. "If I were her friend, or even an acquaintance! But I'm only a stranger to her, and one whom she has viewed with disfavor. Rather a pity I had to speak sharp to her in Menameh. She may hate De Baca like the devil himself, and yet resent any move of mine to direct her actions, for she has spirit."

Toward sunset the innkeeper appeared to announce that a visitor carried a message for the two travelers. The men exchanged a look, felt to make sure of their weapons, and became alert; for who in Hofuf would seek communication with them? On Woodberry's command the person was admitted.

He proved to be a young negro with thick lips, a flat nose and a broad, good-humored face. Clearly neither intelligence nor courage were his strong points; he was not the stuff of which assassins are made.

"For him who is an *Americani* I bear a letter," said he, salaaming low.

"And who sent you?" Jim inquired.

"The *Americani* princess in the house of my master, the pearl merchant of Menameh. But it is not known by my master that I am here, for I came secretly."

"I'm the man you seek," Woodberry stated. And he received the sealed envelope which the black slave drew from his girdle, and, salaaming once more, presented.

"How knew she where to send you?" Hassar asked, with eyes full of suspicion.

"I know not. But she gave me the name of this inn, and bade me come hither and inquire for you, saying to inform the innkeeper that you were three, one a woman."

"Here is a strange thing," said Hassar thoughtfully.

"I would return now, O lord," spoke the negro.

Hassar stepped between him and the door.

"When we have learned what the letter contains, but not before," said he.

Woodberry tore open the envelope and drew out the folded sheet it contained, reading:

SIR:

Because men who are your enemies know you are in Hofuf, having learned through spies, I am taking the liberty of addressing you to give you warning. I am the young lady who dined with Señor De Baca the night you recovered your letters, and my stepfather and I are guests in his house here. I overheard the Portuguese merchant and an Arab, one Ebin 'Abd-Allah, discussing you and a secret attack upon you and your friend at the inn where you stay. The time set for the attack is one hour after sunset. Perhaps this may mitigate in part my offense against you in Menameh. And I would not have harm come to you.

Respectfully,

JACINTH ALEXANDER.

P. S.—Jim Woodberry, I'm not here because I want to be, but because I couldn't avoid it.

At the postscript, so suddenly impulsive after the careful restraint of the letter itself, the reader gave way to a smile. It was a characteristic feminine touch that proved the genuineness of the message; and proved, moreover, her repugnance for De Baca.

The news conveyed by the letter itself was grave. Jim joined Hassar, and handed him the sheet that he might read it.

"Perhaps it's a forgery," said he in English.

"No; she wrote it. De Baca is too vain to add that postscript, even if it had occurred to him."

"Yet the pearl merchant and the Arab are not men carelessly to discuss their plans where a girl may hear them," Hassar remarked. "It runs not with the character of either."

"Since they were in De Baca's house, they may have relaxed their natural caution."

Woodberry directed his gaze upon the negro youth, who stood curiously listening to the dialogue carried on in an unknown tongue. The slave had the open countenance and artless air of his race; and it was not so much in expectation of gaining definite knowledge of the Portuguese's plot as a hope of learning something of Jacinth Alexander's plight that Jim began asking questions.

"Have you carried other messages for the *Americani* princess?" he asked.

"Nay, lord; this is the first," was the reply.

"When do Señor De Baca's guests depart?"

"Of that I know not, O lord."

"What said she when she bade you bring the letter?"

"To hide it in my bosom and lose it not, and say nothing of it to any one except to you to whom it was sent."

"And De Baca knows not that you are absent?"

"Nay, lord; he is here in the city. If he knew, I should be beaten on the soles of my feet with a rod." A grin accompanied the words.

"What if he has already returned to his house?"

"He is in the city, so I fear not." The slave's assurance was complete, showing not the least trace of trepidation. "I have not seen him since dawn when he departed, and he will not return until evening, for such is his custom. He sells pearls in the street of the bazaars."

Hassar touched Jim on the arm for permission to speak.

Woodberry nodded, stepping back.

"Then your master has not been at home to-day since early morning?" Hassar softly addressed the messenger.

"Nay, lord."

"And likewise the *Americani* princess has remained within the house, only writing and giving you this letter to bear to us?"

"Yea, that is true, lord."

"But this morning about the third hour I beheld your master and the girl and her father near the camel market, and following, perceived them enter thy master's gate, whence afterward until noon they came not out. How then could your master have been absent? O thou liar, thy tongue has spilt too many words!"

Hassar's left hand shot forth and caught the slave by the throat, while the right produced his knife. His face grew diabolical.

"Would you die?" he queried.

"Nay, nay, O lord," the other gasped, suddenly smitten with terror. "Slay me not."

"Perhaps I may spare you—if you speak the truth. He is not in the city?"

"Oh, no, my lord."

"You fear not a rod on your feet, so you come with his connivance or even at his command?"

"Yea, yea."

The knife-point before his eyes sent the slave to his knees, trembling violently.

"He read the letter?"

"At his command, yea, I carried it from the princess to him, and he opened it and read it, and sealed it, and directed me to carry it here, telling me what to speak. Kill me not, for I am but a black slave, one as dust under your feet."

"What more did he say?"

"O lord, he commanded that if you spoke of visiting his house to-night and offered me a bribe, then I should agree to admit you at the gate an hour after sunset."

Hassar looked over his shoulder at Jim, a tight smile on his lips.

"A trap," said he in English.

"Clearly. De Baca counts on our believing the attack will be made and that therefore we will try to steal into his house during his supposed absence to seek more information from Jacinth Alexander."

Hassar loosed his hold on the negro's throat. He put away his knife and patted the slave on the shoulder.

"Arise. You shall go unharmed. Here is a coin of silver as a reward. Tell your master that you did his bidding, but reveal naught further, or he will certainly take your life for betraying him. Say also that we agreed to come to the gate. We may

or may not come, but in any case it will clear you of evil designs in his mind." Again he patted the youth's shoulder reassuringly. "Do this, and to-morrow morning if you look in the dust by the gate you may find another coin, and a gold one."

"Yea, lord, I will tell him not I betrayed him."

"If you do, he will kill you and afterward I shall kill you also," Hassar exclaimed in a last threat.

The slave, with a final fear-inspired roll of his eyes, went hastily out of the chamber.

"It is in my mind," Jim remarked, "to spread a net over that of De Baca, and snare him, and with him Ebin 'Abd-Allah, who seeks our lives and who at once should be removed. What think you, Hassar—shall we go to De Baca's house one hour after sunset, as is expected of us?"

"The thing pleases me."

"We would go not to see the girl, but to settle scores."

"De Baca is to die, anyway," said Hassar. "In his own house is as good a place as another."

"And Ebin must not follow us farther," Jim stated grimly.

Sulma clasped her hands in admiration.

"To catch them in their own trap will be a wonderful thing," she cried. "Thou, O Jim, and Hassar have not only daring beyond other men, but cunning beyond other men. Yea, very greatly. Thou livest, thou two! Ye play with life and death for dice. Though I come to walk in rags and without sandals, I shall follow ye always for love of ye and your ways. I tread your road."

"Well, it leads to another dwelling just at present," Jim said. "Let us make ready to go from here."

CHAPTER III.

A COUPLE OF SCOUNDRELS.

THE house Woodberry had in mind was that of the Persian merchant with whom he had conferred upon his arrival in Hofuf. Thither they went, after paying the innkeeper and departing by way of a kitchen door leading out into an open court, which in turn gave into a narrow, dirty passage having its issue in a side street—a retreat chosen to evade Ebin's men in case they maintained watch hard by the inn entrance.

Meshahda, the Persian, received them without surprise or question.

"There is perhaps something of danger for you in sheltering us, but the compensation shall be worthy," Woodberry explained.

The dignified merchant made a gesture that dismissed both considerations as trivial. And he conducted the visitors to a chamber over his shop, where he announced that the roof and all beneath it had become theirs, and inquired concerning their comfort and wishes.

"I am not without influence in Persia and elsewhere," Jim said. "This shall be remembered to your credit. But I must put myself deeper in your debt; can you secure two men for me, of good height, dressed as we are dressed, without great scruples but of some courage and wit, preferably not Arabs, who for, say, ten medjidies gold, or ten sovereigns in English money, will—"

"Yea, there are any number," the merchant interrupted, with a thin smile, "who will take life for that sum."

"It is their own lives that will be in danger, for they put their heads into a lion's den. Hence it is that I prescribe as a requisite that they possess both courage and wit."

The Persian stroked his long beard and remained in thought.

"How soon do you wish to use them?"

"At once—that is, as soon as it is dark."

"Which will be in half an hour, my lord of lords. I cannot give you promise of them before an hour, or possibly a little later, as the men I have in mind must be searched for. A friend of mine has employed them before—not I, who, being a Parsee, practise no violence. If in an hour's time you will go into a carpet shop five doors along the street from here eastward and on your left hand, and say to the owner of the shop, 'We come from Meshahda,

who tied our bundle of skins,' you will be put in speech with the men you desire. That will be the message I shall leave with the carpet merchant so that he may recognize you. And now I shall go to him to arrange the matter."

In accordance with this plan, Woodberry and Hassar later entered the shop of the seller of carpets, where upon repeating the Persian's agreed words they were taken to a room at the rear of the house, apparently a storeroom, as piles of rugs lay on the floor and unopened bales of carpets lined the walls—a veritable treasure chamber of products of the loom. Here they waited.

Some twenty minutes had passed when two men glided one after the other into the room, garbed in Arab robes and head-dress, tall, light of foot, darting quick looks at the pair seated on bales before them.

In the middle of the floor they halted and salaamed.

"We are they who have been sent to you," said one.

No reply was immediately forthcoming. Woodberry and Hassar both knew the power of silence on occasion, and the value of creating a proper respect in the visitors.

The one who had spoken had a long, hanging nose, almond-shaped eyes, and wore a faint smile on his lips; the other was of heavier features, less confident, more suspicious by temperament, and the stronger man physically. Both men had a suppressed air of eagerness.

"Your name?" Hassar finally demanded of the first.

"Silva."

"Whence?"

"From Maskat."

"Your tongue is full of lies," Hassar declared harshly. "You speak not the Arabic of Oman, but of Egypt; your nose is the nose of a Mediterranean man, and your eyes you have from a Copt. Your name and birthplace?"

The man laughed without embarrassment at being detected in a false story.

"I perceive that we deal with worthy men," said he. "My name is Stephanus. My father was a Cyprian Greek and my mother a Coptic woman, and I was born not far from Alexandria."

Hassar turned to the second visitor.

"And you?"

"Ababa. From Massua on the Red Sea, originally."

This statement Hassar did not dispute, for it was apparent after the first man's failure this one had decided to speak the truth. That he was from somewhere along the Red Sea, probably the west side, Hassar, marking the points of his physiognomy, had already guessed.

"I would look at your ankles," the inquisitor announced. "Come hither."

The men exchanged a quick, uneasy glance, but came forward. The ankles of both disclosed marks of the nature of scars that spoke plainly of fetters some time in the past.

"Where?" Hassar asked of Stephanus.

"Jidda—for three years."

"And you?"

"At Herak," the man called Ababa answered.

"Arabs are not merciful to prisoners," said Hassar, rising from his inspection. "And your religion?"

A slight hesitation followed, while Stephanus gazed keenly at the questioner and Ababa veiled his eyes.

"We are not overparticular about which prophet is the true one—Mohammed of the Moslems, or Jesus of the Christians; for we are infidels," said the former. "But we observe the forms of worship when we are with those who observe them, for we are polite."

"And prudent," Hassar added dryly. "Well, that is wise. He is a fool who would anger others to no profit. I see that you two are men of experience, and courage also, else you would not have marks upon your legs. Listen while my master gives his commands." And by gesture he indicated Woodberry.

Jim during the colloquy had sat silent and unmoving. He now suddenly extended his arm, opened his closed hand, and disclosed ten sovereigns, the gold coins shining in the light from the suspended brass lamp which illuminated the chamber.

The men's eyes glittered, and Stephanus' smile widened. But Jim stacked the coins in a pile at his side on the bale.

"I shall leave the money in charge of the carpet merchant, who will pay you when your work is finished. If in this night's affair," he stated, "you act faithfully and with skill, it is possible that I shall employ you yet again in other matters."

At his first words a shade of disappointment had darkened the visitors' faces, for they had thought the man before them fool enough to pay beforehand, but as he continued their countenances cleared. There might be even more gold than that which lay before them.

"What would you have us do?" Ababa asked.

"Go with us to a certain gate, where I shall further instruct you."

"Will there be danger? I inquire simply that we may not be surprised."

"A little risk, perhaps," Woodberry remarked negligently. "You of course are armed."

"With knives, yes."

"And with cunning, that also, I trust. It is necessary. But you appear men of wit and ones not easily confused or intimidated when gold is at the end of your service. Go you out into the street and wait until we come forth, then follow us at some paces, but as if you did not see us and moved on business of your own."

Five minutes later the men in pairs were pursuing their way through the ill-lighted streets among other pedestrians. Night was over the earth, the velvety night of the hot countries, when life that has pulsed but languidly during the day hours gains fresh force and activity. One looking up at the heavens beheld over the roofs of Hofuf a multitude of stars of a brilliance unknown in cooler latitudes. One harkening to the city heard a murmur in the darkness that added to the mystery breathed from sealed walls and silent, gliding figures.

Woodberry and Hassar passed through the Kôt and the narrow north gate, and after them the two men, Stephanus and Ababa. They struck along the road between walled gardens for De Baca's place. This was the well-traveled highway down to El Katif by the sea, and it glimmered white in the starlight, having been beaten hard and bare through centuries, and here in the air, too, was a faint salty coolness as if along this road the sea sent at night its refreshing airs.

A few men they passed, who went toward the city. From the gardens on either side, invisible behind the walls and with only the masses of acacia-trees or of lofty date palms showing against the sky, no sound reached their ears, except the musical gurgle of water.

When they came to a low-arched bridge under which flowed a brook, Hassar halted Woodberry.

"De Baca's garden lies a little way beyond this spot, on the right hand," said he.

"Then we shall speak with our men here," was the reply.

Stephanus and Ababa advanced, whereupon the four crossed the bridge together and drew apart at the roadside. For a time they listened to mark whether there were passers-by near at hand, but Jim, having assured himself of none, began to speak in a low voice.

"We shall undoubtedly find the gate in the wall open, for we are expected," said he. "Perhaps it may even befall that a young negro may await us there, since it serves the purpose of our enemies to make the way easy."

"If he be there?" Stephanus inquired.

"You will ask if the master has gone into the city and if the lady who sent the message awaits."

"Do you rob this man's harem? That is a serious matter, and we should know."

"Nay, we touch not his harem. This lady is an *Americani* girl, who with her father has been lured hither under pretense of friendship. The master of the house desires to add her to his harem when the father is got rid of. I work to prevent that. For I also am an *Americani*."

"Yet of the east also; you are not like the ignorant tourists from America I have seen in Cairo and along the Nile."

"I have dwelt in the east for a little time."

"Longer than a day or a year," Stephanus laughed, sagely. "But if the gate be locked?"

"Then we go over the wall."

Further details and instructions Woodberry gave the men minutely, until at length they were apprised of his plan so far as it concerned them. By their acuteness in asking questions and ready grasp of points both Stephanus and Ababa pleased Jim. They were scoundrels, but scoundrels of brains and courage, and not lacking in humor.

"If this man, whom you declare to be partly Portuguese, has wine in his house," Ababa stated, grimly, "the knowledge would greatly strengthen us."

Presently they went forward again along the road, but now the pair who had followed were in the lead. Hassar had informed them that the gate was one hundred and eighty paces beyond the bridge, according to his measurement of the afternoon; and at that distance the men turned aside to search along the wall, quickly touching it with their fingers.

The gate was a little ajar. Stephanus pressed it open until a hand within held it at a stop.

"Who would enter?" a voice asked—a voice Woodberry and Hassar recognized as that of the bearer of their message.

"We of the inn," Stephanus replied, cautiously. "And you who ask?"

"I am he whom the lady sent to you with the letter."

"Does she await?"

"Yea, my lords."

"And you are alone? The only servant?"

"Yea, my lords. You may enter safely. When I have fastened the door in the wall, I shall lead you to the lady who by the favor of Allah is very beautiful and very impatient to behold you."

Stephanus and Ababa entered, but as the gate swung close, Jim and Hassar heard the latter uttering a threat:

"If you have deceived us about the lady or about your master, we shall slay you."

What reply the young negro made was not heard. Probably it was reassuring, yet doubtless it was uttered with a tremble. For the garden was dark and the youth with a black skin was simple and not overly brave.

When a minute had passed, Hassar set his foot in Jim's locked hands and was lifted upward so that he gained the top of the wall. Thereupon he in turn assisted Woodberry to mount. The garden was silent; not even the voices of the men who had gone forward trailed back to them; a heavy scent of grass and flowers and dampness came to their nostrils; and some distance off through trees they perceived gleams of light.

"There is the house," Hassar said.

"De Baca lives well," was Jim's dry response.

Next instant they were sliding down the inner face of the garden wall, after which they went creeping forward like creatures of the night.

CHAPTER IV.

RINGED IN BY STEEL

ARRIVING at the entrance of the house, Stephanus halted the guide by a word. The door stood open, revealing an antechamber of small size, where lamps burned brightly and where no one was in sight.

"In what part of your master's dwelling does the lady abide?" he questioned the young negro, while he and Ababa held the folds of their head-dresses clutched before their mouths that the youth might not discover the imposture. With their free hands they gripped the knives inside their robes.

"In a room at the south side, lords."

"How much of the house do we pass through to encompass that room?"

"Through the chamber before you, and another larger one. That of the lady opens off the latter."

"Let us stand for a moment to harken, lest your master and his men be even now returning."

"I pray you enter," said the youth.

Ababa's hand closed upon the speaker's shoulder. Then the three remained motionless for a time, while the visitors' keen eyes darted about the house, over the walls and at lighted, latticed windows and toward corners.

"The dwelling seems quiet," Stephanus remarked, in a tone of satisfaction. His

real purpose in delaying was to permit his employers to draw near. "You have served well, wherefore I pay you richly." So saying he placed in the negro's hand, not the small coin given him by Woodberry for that purpose, but a disk of lead such as was fraudulently passed by low tricksters when possible.

"Thy opulence shall be remembered by Allah," said the black youth, salaaming.

"It is the measure of your trustworthiness, boy," was the patronizing answer. "Lead us to the lady."

Into the house the men went after the servant, still covering their mouths. The habitation was quiet. A heavy reek of sandalwood incense assailed their nostrils.

Stephanus and Ababa moved forward slowly. Their eyes never ceased to play about in their sockets, restless as disturbed quicksilver, and in the heavy-scented atmosphere of the place their nostrils expanded and retracted like those of animals.

"Your master is a great lord," Ababa remarked, as their guide was about to lead them through a curtained doorway.

"Yea. A rich merchant and a great lord."

Ababa touched him on the arm.

"But you? Fear you not a rod on the soles of your feet when he returns and discovers the lady absent?"

The Oman negro wrinkled his flat snub nose as if this were a new thought. Stephanus and Ababa exchanged a quick look of understanding. The fellow had no invention; he could tell only what he had been told to tell, and for this he had been given no answer.

Indeed, he attempted no reply.

"Enter, lords," he said, drawing aside the curtain before the doorway.

Here now was a chamber of very much larger size, no doubt the main apartment of the house. The visitors took two steps in, very careful not to have their backs to the speaker even though they valued him cheaply. A first glance had shown the room empty, and with that assurance they permitted admiration to appear upon their faces—admiration for the rich silken wall draperies, and heavy velvet portières, for the tables and tabarets of ebony inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and for the stuffed chairs and divans, and the little marble fountain playing a sparkling jet, and for the choice collection of arms on the walls, and the priceless rugs in profusion on the floor. What plunder!

Again they looked at each other. But the look though avaricious was also uneasy. Here was wealth—how many slaves and how many knives guarded it?

"Follow," said the Oman youth.

He was moving toward another curtained doorway.

Stephanus rapidly overtook him and seized his wrist in a firm grasp.

"It is not courteous that we should go to this lady's chamber," said he softly. "Bring her hither."

"The command was for you to follow."

"Nay, we shall wait here. Make haste, boy, for we have quick tempers."

The speaker was no longer pursuing instructions from Woodberry, for at this stage of the adventure the men must needs act on their own initiative.

And something — an instinct — warned Stephanus to avoid that particular curtained doorway!

"The command was to follow," insisted the negro.

Ababa's heavy face bent over him.

"Go thou," he hissed at the youth, who retreated step by step and then in terror turned and ran toward the curtain.

Ababa glided back by Stephanus' side. At the doorway the negro put his face over his shoulder to gaze at them, wrinkling his nose in perplexity. They had frightened him, and they did not follow. Stupidly he knew not what to do. It was not according to the command.

"Draw the curtain!" Ababa hissed at him in low tones.

"The order was to follow," came again.

But nevertheless the youth's hand went out to the curtain, and his black fingers closed on it, and he put it aside.

Out and downward through the doorway flashed two simitars, like streaks of light, and the Oman slave without so much as a single cry toppled forward on his face. The two men in the middle of the room dropped the hands that held the cloth be-

fore their mouths, turning their faces this way and that. Four doorways there were leading from the room, besides that where stood two Arabs over the negro's body; an armed man was at each, including that at which they had entered. They were ringed in by steel.

Past one of the guards two men now pressed forward, each holding a pistol. The first was a black-bearded, narrow-faced Arab of haughty bearing, the other a short obese half-caste, with curling jet mustache, a fat, shiny face and European clothes of white linen.

"Thou infidel dogs, who comest to catch and are caught! As that black died by mistake, you die by our will!" cried the Arab exultantly. "Allah hast given thee into our hands!"

But the second man had stopped, staring in amazement. Next he darted forward and clutched the speaker's robe.

"A thousand devils, these are not the men, Ebin!" he cried.

"Not the men?"

"No, no, no. Look at them! You saw Woodberry at my house in Menameh—and do you see him in either of these?"

The fierce eyes of the Arab were bent upon the motionless pair as if his gaze would consume them. And on his countenance dawned doubt, then surprise, and finally a black rage. His hand holding the revolver rose. But before he could fire his companion pressed it down once more.

"Don't be a fool, Ebin 'Abd-Allah," he said—between his teeth. "What profits it to silence their tongues when we know nothing? This is a matter to be inquired into. Haste will leave us no wiser than we are, and it is not these but the others—may they be accursed — whom we want. Let us put questions to these fellows."

Ebin's taut figure relaxed; he nodded. The two men before him, gathered for a spring forward, assumed easier postures and let their breath escape. It had been an unpleasant instant, for the situation had an appearance of being final. One—two—perhaps three they might kill before they themselves were hacked to death by simitars, but that were no great consolation if they, Stephanus and Ababa, were dead.

"How happens it you are here?" De Baca demanded.

"By Allah, it is a mystery!" Stephanus answered, with a fervor that was an almost perfect imitation of truth. "The negro who lies dead yonder might answer if he were alive, for he brought us. As for ourselves, we are steeped in wonder at his message and at all that has happened."

"Yet you had your hands on knives in your girdles, where they still rest."

"Is that strange, my lord, when we suddenly behold our guide slain and armed men as if about to slay us too in a strange house where we have been invited strangely?"

"Invited? Who invited you here?"

Stephanus pointed at the form by the doorway.

"I will tell you this strange happening, and no stranger matter ever befell travelers even in the Thousand and One Nights' Tales," he proceeded, with a manner that bespoke him as still marveling. "We, who are just come to the city from Mokhabber, in a caravan, being dealers in skins and hides, were sitting in an inn about sunset, drinking coffee. To us came the inn-keeper and said: 'You are newly come to Hofuf? You are strangers?' And we answered, 'Yea.'"

Ababa gave a grave nod, echoing the word.

"When we had made that reply," Stephanus continued, "the inn-keeper said, 'There is a young negro who would see you.' And he went and fetched him, whereupon the boy presented us with a letter which we could not read. 'This is not for us,' I said. But he replied that it was for us, two strangers newly arrived at the inn.

"At that we were filled with wonder and questioned him concerning the paper. But all he would say was that a lady awaited us at the house which bore the name De Baca, and to come after darkness to the gate, where he would meet us. And we questioned him further to learn why we, strangers, were awaited, and he said she, being rich and wise, would learn of other places than Hofuf, inviting strangers for that purpose as did many in this city.

Therefore, when it was dark, we sought for one to guide us to the gate of this garden, and were brought here, where the same negro who found us in the inn met and conducted us hither. We are yet overwhelmed by amazement."

"You are liars!" De Baca declared angrily. "The thing is impossible."

"Nay, nay, we utter truth, noble lord. In proof of it here is the very letter delivered to us, and which we are unable to read." With which Stephanus, making a courteous salaam, handed the message to the pearl merchant.

The latter opened and read the document, his fat, dusky face working under access of mixed feelings.

"That stupid black boy—" he began. But breaking off, he hastened to where the body lay and vented his spite in a kick. "I would that he were yet alive!" he added.

"I pray thee, master," Stephanus continued, "if in any way we have offended, that you will remember we are but ignorant travelers brought hither by error, and let not your wrath fall upon our heads. We have discreet tongues. We forget what it is not desired we should see or know. We have not trespassed wittingly. You are a great lord, while we are but poor dealers in skins and hides of goats, sheep, kids, camels, and dogs, praying faithfully five times each day, observing the fasts and avoiding both the great and the little sins."

"What are the great sins?" Ebin 'Abd-Allah asked harshly.

"The first is giving divine honors to a creature and the second 'drinking the shameful.'"

With glibness Stephanus named the great sins according to the Wahhabees, having been instructed by Woodberry against this very contingency—the one a tenet directed at the divine character given Mohammed and 'Alee by their respective sects, and the other a proscription against tobacco. "Drinking the shameful" in simple English means "smoking."

"And the little sins?" Ebin demanded.

"False witness, and adultery, and murder, and dice, and gluttony, and wounding a camel, and excessive wearing of ornaments, and a hundred or possibly two hundred more, O sheik!"

The dark face of the fanatic lost something of its suspicion. Here were men of his own hard and bitter faith, which was greatly in their favor.

"Saw you anything of two others in the public room of the inn who might have been strangers also, one an *Americani* and both infidels?" he questioned.

Stephanus puckered his brow. Then he faced Ababa.

"Were there not two drinking coffee as we entered to sit down?" he inquired doubtfully. Then: "Yea, I recall them—one in particular. He may have been the *Americani*. Yea, they spoke together in a strange tongue, and smoked, and were blasphemous. Clearly they were infidels and evil men."

"Yea, infidels plainly," Ababa affirmed confidently.

Ebin turned to De Baca.

"You hear? The men were at the inn."

"I hear."

The pearl merchant's expression expressed anger and spite.

"That cursed negro—" he began.

"He is dead, and his blood runs on the floor," the Arab cut him off. "Save your curses. If your choice of a messenger had been wiser, the other men instead of these would be standing here. What of these strangers?"

De Baca scowled.

"They will return to the inn and talk," said he.

"Nay," said Stephanus, shaking his head.

Ebin folded his arms and became thoughtful. While his mind was thus engaged, his eyes nevertheless continued to flash. Fire was in their depths.

"I shall take two swords and go to the inn," he announced at length.

"Two? If you are wise you will take twenty," De Baca retorted.

"Other blades I shall gather in the city. There will be sufficient to seal the doors and slay them where they hide, though some of my own men fall."

"Bring back the wench they stole from

me," said the pearl dealer in a venomous tone, "so that I can lay a lash on her back and see if her spirit can be broken."

"Aye," Ebin assented.

"I shall teach her, both here and in Menameh."

"Will you do the teaching before this *Americani* girl?" the Arab inquired slyly.

"Not at first; later, perhaps."

"Ebin's way is not your way," was the other's enigmatical response. But a look strangely like jealousy showed on his face for an instant. Next he addressed the two men before him: "As you are good followers of the true religion, you will remain silent hereafter of what has passed here and of what you have heard. These are matters that do not concern you. Yet if you should be forgetful, my arm is long and my fingers many. Even in Mokhabber they can close about your throats."

"To us your command shall be as a law," Stephanus murmured, with eyes cast upon the floor in humility.

The Arab directed his look at De Baca.

"Four servants of mine, men with swords, I leave you, and two servants of your own are here," said he. "Keep the girl safe."

In his voice was a faintly threatening intonation which De Baca missed.

"Of course I shall keep her. And these?" He indicated the unwelcome visitors.

"Keep them also until I send you word or myself return. Perchance out of your bounty you could give them food if they are hungry."

"Yea, we are an hungered," Stephanus declared.

"And they will be an added force to your hand."

"That is true," De Baca admitted. "A servant shall conduct them to where they may eat. But you — you will surely find and kill the scoundrels we seek?"

"By Allah's favor. May it be so written to-night. I shall take all precautions, and unless they are served by jinns who are powerful, as I sometimes suspect, I shall destroy them."

"Are they served by jinns?" Ababa inquired, interested.

"Who knows? There are jinns, good and bad, as taught in the Koran. But I wear an amulet against bad jinns."

"I also wear one," said Ababa.

"Yea, I also," Stephanus added. "May Allah bring thee safe from the enterprise on which you go."

He glanced at De Baca. On the pearl merchant's dusky, fat face was only contempt. Clearly he was no Mohammedan, and as clearly he did not believe in any scheme that included jinns.

"Allah is Allah," said Ebin 'Abd-Allah.

He made a signal, and the two men who had slain the negro joined him. He made another and the other armed Arabs at the doors disappeared. Next minute he himself, followed by his guards, left the chamber.

CHAPTER V.

ON DANGEROUS GROUND.

MEANWHILE with the point of his knife Hassar broke the fastening of the light lattice in a window at one side of the house, swung the frame inward and drew himself over the sill into the dark room beyond. Both he and Woodberry had cause to thank their stars a servant had not yet made a round of the dwelling to close and lock the heavy shutter-frames with which such abodes were protected at night against thieves. The heat still in the air, or perhaps absorption in De Baca's more pressing business, accounted for that.

The two men had thought to steal inside through the main doorway where Stephanus and Ababa had entered. This had appeared practicable. But with the disappearance of the pair under guidance of the negro, and the falling of the curtain at the inner door through which they had passed, an Arab armed with a simitar glided into view and took his station at the curtain, facing toward the chamber beyond.

Hassar considered the man's back.

"Shall I creep upon him?" he inquired of his comrade.

"Too risky," Jim replied. "A sound would betray you; a struggle might reveal our presence to others; and, besides, we

know not whether the fellow has companions at hand. We must get into the house undiscovered. Those rogues in yonder are in the trap firmly now, so that attention will be centered on them for the time, as we planned. I hope Ebin and De Baca don't allow their tempers to overcome them when they discover the meat they have."

"That is on the lap of fate," said Hassar, indifferently. "You offered a large reward; they took the risk. We are not concerned whether they live or die."

Jim had lived too long in countries where life is cheap and a belief in fate strong not to have become tinged in mind by the same philosophy, though fate, as he perceived it, was primarily the effects flowing from man's own decisions. Stephanus and Ababa had said "yea" and entered. He had given them all the precautionary instructions possible to meet contingencies. Now fate was due to take a hand.

An examination of the exterior of the house brought them to the window, whose darkness and retired position promised the secret admittance they desired. So Hassar made use of his knife and they entered. The beam of the electric torch Jim drew from under his robe showed the chamber in which they stood to be one of small dimensions, with two curtained doorways.

These gave exit in two directions, into other rooms. Into one of the latter they put their heads and found only darkness; stepping into the other, they saw a lighted doorway at their left some paces off and posted in it a robed swordsman. Past this man they beheld a large, lighted chamber, where stood Stephanus and Ababa confronted by De Baca and Ebin.

The trap had been sprung.

Fragments of the talk reached their ears, clearly when the voices rose, indistinctly as the crisis passed with the telling of Stephanus's false tale and passion died out of the Arab chief and the pearl merchant. Hassar's sharp elbow nudged Woodberry to express his satisfaction and amusement. Those two in yonder were clever rascals, men after his own heart — so spoke the elbow.

But as the talk approached an end the two observers retired into the darkness of the room behind them, lest the man with the sword by a chance glance behind make out the glimmer of their robes.

"Have they locked the mad scientist and the girl in their rooms, think you?" Hassar asked in a whisper.

"They have been somehow kept off the scene. We must find the stair, wherever it is."

"Presently there will be but four swords here of Ebin's, for Ebin has said it. He takes with him two of them; that much I heard perfectly, which is the meat in the nut. And, O Jim, we have bad jinns working for us!" Whereupon Hassar indulged in a fit of soundless laughter, clapping Woodberry softly on the shoulder.

"We have two allies present in the house, which is worth all the *afreets* in Arabia."

"Yea, and they know we are somewhere about. We are two and they are two, which makes four against Ebin's four—though our automatics make us master in any case. As for that little fat De Baca and his servants—*ssst!*" Then he added as an afterthought: "This is a good night to redeem my pledge to Sulma in the matter of the pearl dealer."

Jim made no reply. That Hassar planned to kill De Baca aroused no compassionate feeling in his breast. He rather thought the man's death would be best all around: De Baca was an unmitigated scoundrel, a foul little creature, a would-be stealer of Jacinth Alexander, a conspirator to some degree with the Arabs, probably a secret "blackbirder," engaged in slave traffic of negroes from Africa into Southern Arabia, and specifically a foe seeking Woodberry's life. Yes, richly he had earned death, so let him die.

Woodberry had vastly more respect for Ebin 'Abd-Allah, enemy though he was. There was no comparison between the two men. The Arab but followed the traditions of his race and the ways of his fanatical sect, while De Baca was a degenerate mongrel without virtue and with all the vices. In his soul the Arab leader doubtless had only a profound disdain for the pearl merchant, and in the end, when his plans matured, schemed to wring him dry

of his wealth and sweep him off the earth with all other infidels.

The swordsman at the doorway in the other room now turned about and walked toward them, in obedience to Ebin's signal. Jim and Hassar shrank back. Unsuspecting, the man stalked past them, still carrying his simitar naked in his hand.

The chance seemed to Hassar too good to miss.

"One gone," said he, as he withdrew his knife, lowered the body to the floor and ended his clutch upon the fellow's throat. "But three will remain."

"Was there need?"

"Why ask when in a house of swords like this? If De Baca will now have the kindness to stroll this way! Wait until I have wiped my knife on his cloak—there—now lift at his feet. Into a corner and under a rug. May I not choke on a fish-bone like the tailor of the tale if I did not finish him most skilfully!"

"Like a professional assassin."

"Thine enemies have called me thy hired assassin—but I am more than that."

Jim caught the veiled reproach.

"Then my enemies lie, for you are not that at all. You are my brother, closer than a blood-brother, and I know the nobility of your heart. You are the keeper of my honor."

"In a small way—and if you have any honor," was Hassar's reply, uttered in an ironic tone that disclosed his spirit to be once more serene.

"Let us now search for the stair," suggested Jim. "If a servant should happen in here and stumble on this body, it would put De Baca on guard."

"Had we not better finish him off?"

"I think not. If we can remove Jacinth Alexander first, her escape will then be certain, whatever breaks loose afterward."

Their advance was necessarily slow and cautious. The general plan of the dwelling, judging from the arrangement of the chambers they had seen, was one wherein smaller rooms surrounded the main chamber where Stephanus and Ababa had been questioned. There appeared to be no passageways, at least not in the lower part of the house.

It thus happened that they must go from room to room with great stealth, ready every instant to fight. But circumstances favored them: Ebin's men had retired somewhere, possibly to the kitchen to share the food with Woodberry's pair of rogues, where also no doubt were De Baca's servants. De Baca himself probably had remained in the main room, or gone above.

The latter was the case, as it turned out. Jim and Hassar having come into a place where a stair went up. Having ascended this, they heard a murmur of voices. Here now they saw by the burning lamps that they were in a room even larger than the central chamber below, though not similarly located. This ran the full length of the house, with innumerable windows on that side.

Distinctively oriental it was in furnishings and character. The ceiling, because of a row of slender columns running through the middle of the room, and of half-columns against the walls, supporting Moresco arches that gave it a semblance of being vaulted, was high. Rugs in profusion, divans heaped with silken cushions, tabarets bearing *narghiles* and boxes of cigarettes, incense pots on standards, giving off thin wreaths of scented smoke, small carven tables of ebony or teak-wood holding fruit, sweetmeats, candied cinnamon, jars of sirup-water and decanters of wine, stands bearing European books and illumined parchment volumes of tales in Arabic—these were everywhere.

Here when the heat of Bahrein tortured him, or when the season of pearl-fishing had ceased, the owner could come with his concubines to luxuriate in blissful ease. Woodberry was impressed, for the place further indicated De Baca's great wealth; and Hassar was full of admiration, for it accorded exactly with the Oriental notion of happiness.

And it gave him likewise an idea—of which more later. Meanwhile if any one appeared at one of the dozen doors opening at regular intervals along the inner wall of the room they would be discovered. From one of them indeed, there came the sound of voices. What was being said could not be distinguished, but from the tones they

recognized the speakers for De Baca and the little American scientist, Bascom, Jacinth Alexander's stepfather.

Apparently they were engaged in some debate, or dispute. The listeners could easily separate the voices: that of the archeologist, high-pitched, nervous, irritable, quick, while that of the Menameh merchant was suave, unhurried, but nevertheless insistent. De Baca seemed to be pressing some decision of agreement upon his guest which the latter refused to make.

"They love talk like Arabs—and Arabs will argue a thing forever, as you know," Hassar whispered. "It is well. Let us draw near."

First making sure their knives were loose, they stole forward toward the door. The discussion became louder now. But they had come into the middle of it and found it difficult to pick up its thread.

"In Menameh you spoke otherwise," Bascom was saying.

"Ah, the circumstances were different, my friend, the situation difficult and filled with perplexities for us both. One had to do what one could, and it was my profound desire to serve you. You are here now. You can proceed unmolested, which gives a different aspect to the case."

"Ebin warned me—" the scientist began.

"Ebin is a fanatical ruffian and thief, who would stop at nothing. Besides, he is a great liar, like all Arabs."

"Yet you work with him."

"One frequently associates with men in matters of business not from choice but from necessity, my dear sir. Our relations are on a business footing purely. I in turn warn you against him in the particular of which we speak. It is easy to imagine what he would do in the desert where his will and passions can run free. The thought of it causes my body to shudder and my blood to run cold."

"Ah, is it possible?" And in the scientist's exclamation was a maliciousness that revealed him not altogether taken in by the other's expression of horror. Evidently he had been gaining an insight into the pearl dealer's true character, and was both distrustful and uneasy.

No more than that did the pair by the lintel learn. For at that instant they heard on their left another door open, immediately facing which they beheld Jacinth Alexander slowly appear with an air of furtiveness and apprehension. At first she did not see them. She advanced a step into the long room, once more to halt and listen. Then she glanced about, having heard the voices.

Woodberry touched his lips with a finger as her eyes fell on him and Hassar. She obeyed the signal. No sound of surprise or utterance of recognition escaped her, but her face disclosed a sudden light of gladness and her bosom rose and fell in a quick movement which bespoke joy.

Next she seemed to consider, then beckoned them towards her.

"Go in, go into my rooms," she whispered anxiously. "There we can talk in safety." And with a fearful hand she pressed Woodberry forward, darting looks in the direction of the voices and at the stair. "Oh, sirs, I've been in constant terror for you the last two hours!"

No question of that, for both her radiant eyes and her relieved tones affirmed the fact. When they all had crossed the threshold, she closed and locked the door.

For a moment she leaned with shoulder and head against it, still grasping the handle, with eyes half-closed and an infinite lassitude. The reaction from the strain she had borne was sharp, resulting in a momentary weakness. Jim was quick to lay a gentle and reassuring hand upon her arm.

"Don't mind me; I'll be all right soon," she said. "Ever since we've been here, indeed, ever since I learned we were to come here, I've been fighting for courage. That man, that little wretch, with his oily compliments and wicked hints and beastly intentions!" She shut her lips tight for a little, then went on, "My father is blind—and I was in despair, until I learned from their talk you were here in Hofuf."

Woodberry recognized that speech more than anything else would relieve her tension and calm her spirit.

"How did it happen you came after the warning I gave you of the man in Menameh?" he inquired.

She fixed her eyes full upon him at the question.

"Please think that I did not come voluntarily," said she. "I wouldn't have you believe that I held your advice lightly. No, no. They deceived me. My stepfather and Señor De Baca met shortly after I last saw you at his house in Menameh, and that same night we departed secretly in a fast motor-boat. I did not know we were going, nor know we were traveling to El Katif. For they said we were on our way north to the mouth of the Tigris, whence we could reach Bagdad.

"I was tired out," she continued, "and slept all night, waking only at dawn as we came into port. Then I learned the truth of our journey, for they told me and excused their deception on the ground of necessity, the necessity of leaving Bahrein at once, the necessity of haste in my stepfather's exploration, necessity in all. But they lied to me—because it was the simplest way to get around my opposition."

"Your stepfather is in some respects a singular man even if an admirable archeologist," Jim remarked.

"It is this mad journey in search of Ophir, this obsession of his, that is breaking down his character. Mr. Woodberry, and making him dishonest in little things."

"I call it no little thing to lie to you and drag you here into De Baca's power," said Woodberry.

"No, it's not a little matter for me," she admitted. "But come, let us go into the inner room, even though it is my bedchamber. We must not stand on ceremony at a time like this. Here our voices might be heard by some one listening at the door."

They accompanied her into the next chamber, a room furnished richly with a bed set from Paris, if one guessed from its design, and rugs and silken draperies.

"I hoped you would go from Hofuf at once," Jacinth proceeded.

"We were not ready," was Jim's reply.

"I said I hoped, but I didn't really expect that you would," she answered, smiling. "For though I may not know you very well, I saw enough of you on the islands to understand that you are two very brave, gallant, but reckless gentlemen."

"Hark to that, Hassar," Jim exclaimed. "We are classed as reckless, when never were men more squeamish about losing their lives."

"That is most true, O lady. We worship caution."

"Well, perhaps reckless isn't the word. You may be cautious, as you say, and yet you are bold, or you would not now be in this room. No, I thought it rather useless, that expectation of your going, but I was sincere. Then later, when De Baca disclosed that he and the Arab knew all about the note, and had talked intentionally so that I should hear them, and expedited the sending of the message so that it should be bait to draw you into their trap, I was horrified. And I prayed in earnest then that you should divine the trap. The man gloated over your prospective deaths—and my soul was sick. And my stepfather, when I begged him to intercede, shrugged his shoulders and declared the matter was none of our business. Yet he was terrified, too, as I could see, for he is not a murderer. It's his insatiable desire to carry out his project that makes him thus passively connive at crime."

"And you?" Woodberry inquired.

Her eyes again lifted to his, were troubled, wavered and at last sank.

"What can I do?" And her tone was filled with bitterness.

"You know me now as one who would be your friend, I trust," Jim said.

"Yes."

"Then allow me to render you a friendly service, Miss Alexander, without one particle of obligation on your side. Let me loan you the money to escape from this country and return to America. I have wealth; I should like to invest a little in your happiness. And with letters I can also give to men at home whom I know, you can quickly establish yourself in a position where you will be independent, even of your stepfather if you so desire. Accept this offer of mine and I shall consider you've done me a great kindness. You will get away from De Baca, from Ebin, from Bascom, from this wretched country."

Jacinth's lips trembled and her lashes

were wet. She strove to speak, but could not. Such unlooked-for magnanimity from any one would have been wonderful, but from a man who had suffered at her hands, who had been shamefully and contemptuously considered, and who had nearly been cast into the hands of enemies through her stubbornness and errors—ah, that was overwhelming!

"I can't accept," she succeeded in saying, finally.

"One American should have the right to help another when in distress," Woodberry told her. "On that ground—"

She shook her head.

"No, no. I thank you for your generosity—but, no. Accepting is out of question. I—I should never again be able to raise my eyes."

Woodberry gave a faint sigh.

"Like too many of us, you're cursed by pride," said he.

All at once her eyes came up from the floor where they dwelt to gaze into his, and in them was a kind of starry light.

"Oh, my Lord of Lords Jim, for all your wisdom you little understand women," she said, low and tremulously. "I would go into the desert and walk there barefoot before I would take this money of yours after all that has passed. But not because of pride."

Jim stood silent for some time. He quite agreed with her judgment that he did not understand women; at any rate, he did not understand her mood and her obstinacy.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TABLEAU ON THE DIVAN.

HASSAR clearing his throat ostentatiously brought Jim back to a realization of practical things. How long he had stood thus, gazing at Jacinth Alexander, he could not have said. He let go her hand and looked about at his friend, to discover Hassar smiling sardonically, eyes elevated toward the ceiling, one forefinger tapping with nail against his teeth—the very image of a man greatly diverted and mockingly pretending a lack of observation.

The rogue was inwardly laughing at him.

"Should we not go to the garden for this love-making?" he remarked, in Persian. "Beside a fountain under an acacia tree where nightingales sing?"

"Thou hast thy Sulma, and you have eyes like a calf when harkening to her," Jim returned in the same tongue, vexed at his friend's interpretation of his disinterested action.

Hassar laughed. He glanced at Jacinth, appeared about to utter a further speech along the same line, but in the end shrugged his shoulders and asked what they were to do.

"We have to get out of this house of simitars as well as get into it—and there is a slight matter to be settled first," he said, significantly, this time in English.

"Here is the window of this chamber for an exit," Jim announced.

Hassar nodded.

"Will you wait until I return?" he asked.

"Yes, but be not long. When Ebin 'Abd-Allah finds us not at the inn and questions the inn-keeper, he will learn the truth of Stephanus' story, which will bring him back in haste. Doubtless he will divine he was the one who was tricked and suspect out intention."

"Stephanus and Ababa in that case should not tarry over their food," was the grim reply.

He went out of the rooms; and Woodberry listening by the door heard no sound of voices from the place where De Baca and Bascom had been engaged in argument. In truth, the whole house was still. Apparently both men had gone below, having either agreed or given over discussion for the time.

Swiftly Hassar passed along the other doors corresponding to that of the girl's room, harkening at each, then satisfied that discovery did not threaten from this quarter he went to the stair, listened again, signaled to Jim that all was well and went down out of sight. An act of folly it would have seemed to any one but Woodberry, or else one of bravado.

But Jim knew his companion and did not attempt to dissuade him. He knew his cunning and resourcefulness. He knew the

cold purpose animating the man, a purpose divided between desire to make Sulma's liberty sure, for De Baca would unquestionably set agencies at work to recover her, and a natural hatred of the little scoundrel. What Jim did not know was that a third motive had developed in the last hour, a covetousness for this house and garden. That, for a surety, would have surprised the American.

Hassar went down the stair and through the chambers until he reached the main *salon*. It was empty and he coolly made a circuit of the chamber to examine its furnishings. From the arms on the wall he chose a fine simitar of Oman steel—steel the equal of that of Damascus—with a hilt that was richly embellished with silver chasing.

Still no one appeared. A badly managed house. Or, was it that the servants were occupied with burying the dead negro somewhere in the garden? Possibly that was it, for De Baca would be one to rid himself of carrion without loss of time.

Just then he heard a curtain whisk. Hassar was in the middle of the floor where he could not dart out to the protecting darkness of another chamber. But it was not too late to transform his features and this he did by a facial contortion that gave him a twisted, unfamiliar aspect. Possibly De Baca would not have recognized him in any case, for the pearl merchant had had but a single encounter with him, on that brief, sharp occasion in Menameh; but on the other hand he might.

As he turned about with the slow ease and dignity of an Arab, De Baca stepped into the room, followed by Stephanus and Ababa.

Hassar bent in a salaam. If he safely passed the pearl merchant's first suspicious scrutiny, he trusted to be able to carry off the rest.

"May thou and thine remain under the protection of the Prophet and be blessed by the favor of Allah," he murmured, still bowing obsequiously. "I am sent to thee from the city by my master, Ebin 'Abd-Allah."

"What is your message?" De Baca questioned eagerly.

Hassar salaamed even lower.

"His command was to say, 'The men were taken and—'"

"'Were'? What mean you? Did they escape again?"

"I pray thy permission to finish. He bade me say, 'The men were taken and now lie dead in their chamber.'"

"Ah!" said De Baca, with a great satisfied breath.

Hassar, with head still bent, glanced up at the little man's face from under his brows.

The Portuguese was not looking at him but in the direction of the door. On his fat, shiny brown face a smile had broken forth like sunshine from behind a cloud and his whole expression was exultant. Even as the other watched, his mustache curled higher and his teeth were revealed by that widening smile, white and gleaming like the very pearls which he bought and sold over his counter.

Hassar perceived that his news had swallowed in the little man's mind all thought of the messenger.

"And the girl who was with the men? Is Ebin bringing her here to this house?" De Baca asked, still gazing away.

"She is in my master's charge."

The merchant gave his mustache a flourish.

"You are a messenger who pleases me," said he. "Ebin is returning here?"

"He is on the road now, since he was ready to set out when he sent me to run hither with the tidings. Three of his own men were slain, besides the ones he sought, and he stayed for a little time to arrange with the inn-keeper for a secret disposition of the bodies before the affair became known in the city."

De Baca asked no more questions, but remained reflecting. Hassar glanced at Stephanus and Ababa and he perceived that they had recognized him, for the former closed one eye at him while his companion grinned. They, like the pearl merchant, had been deceived—but only in the beginning. At Hassar's replies to his questioner they had gazed at him more sharply, since they knew the messenger lied, and saw that the speaker was in reality one of

the men who had brought them to this house.

Hassar made a covert sign to the two, which they acknowledged by slight nods. Stephanus bent back and with clawing fingers gathered a gold-embroidered red cloth lying loosely over a divan, then gazed at the man before De Baca inquiringly. Now it was Hassar's turn to nod, with an almost imperceptible nod of approval. These men were men of understanding and wit, this Stephanus and this Ababa.

But it was not Hassar's intention that the rich half-caste should die ignorant of how he had been tricked.

"When returnest thou to Menameh, O dealer in pearls?" he asked, resuming his natural aspect and voice.

De Baca came out of his absorption in thought to look up at the other, beheld a face he knew and started back a step.

"You! Woodberry's man!"

"Yea, I." And Hassar's black shining eyes with devils lurking in them and his thin smile in which was to be found no hope sent a shiver over the little man's fat body.

De Baca's look shifted and stole this way and that. Then he turned to flee.

"Cast!" Hassar commanded. And Stephanus cast the red cloth over De Baca's head, while Ababa's hand clapped over his nose and mouth, checking his struggles.

The pearl merchant continued to kick frantically as they placed him on a divan.

"Stand by the door you just entered," Hassar ordered, when he had his victim quite helpless, "and let no servant enter."

Five minutes passed, while a profound silence except for the low tinkle of the fountain filled the great chamber. By the curtained doorway stood immovable the two men stationed there, a knife in the hand of each, their bodies taut, their heads turned a little aside so that they might watch the tragic tableau enacted on the divan.

Presently Hassar made some dispositions that suited his desire.

"What would you have?" he asked, joining the men.

Their eyes traveled appraisingly about the chamber.

"Lamps," Stephanus answered. "They are of silver."

"Take one each, and one only. Too great a greed will bring you to grief. Two lamps may be overlooked, but more would lead to discovery and the suspicion that you were thieves." The men were already extinguishing the lights and hiding the lamps under their robes. "Return into the kitchen now, acting naturally," Hassar continued. "Talk for a little with the servants and Arabs, and— Why brought you he here?"

"To employ us on a private errand."

"Good. Tell those who fed you he has paid you to perform the commission, and that as you retired he lay down on the divan as if weary or ill. Then at the right time—you might search about for a moment for something you have not lost, inquiring if they had found it—go out of the house and into the city, and await us at the Persian's. For perhaps we can use you further in our service, since you are proven men."

"What of the Arab who by now has learned at the inn that we carried hither a lie?" Ababa asked thoughtfully.

"He will be your enemy, and hunger for your lives. For this"—Hassar waved his hand towards the couch—"he will be surprised, but not greatly grieved, I think, since the man was no true believer. But for your heads he will have a great desire, as you made him ridiculous."

"And you and the *Americani?*"

"This business being finished, we can depart from Hofuf. We shall travel to-night."

Stephanus smiled ingratiatingly.

"We would go with you," said he.

"Ours is a difficult journey," Hassar stated, studying the men's faces.

"We would go with you," the other repeated. "We would serve you faithfully—and you have proven us."

Hassar waved them toward the kitchen entrance.

"At the Persian's I shall answer you," said he.

When they were gone, and he was quite sure, he drew a small bag of red cloth from his bosom, such as *tawawis* always carry

about their persons, and opened its neck. The bag was almost full of large, lustrous pearls.

CHAPTER VII.

JIM AND BASCOM CLASH.

BY the door that stood slightly ajar Woodberry and Jacinth Alexander sat watching for Hassar's return. Jim had placed two chairs there, extinguishing the light of the room and from time to time they exchanged a few words as they waited.

"Why did you come to this house?" Jacinth asked, after a silence.

"One reason was to persuade you to go home," Jim answered. "Another, to meet Ebin. And it appears now I shall fail in both respects; you won't be persuaded, and now when the Arab returns he will have too many men for me to take the risk of settling matters with him."

"He's your enemy."

"Yes; and I'm his."

"Why must you risk your life—"

"It's my business to risk my life. In a sense, it's a service for the white races I [illegible] dangerous perhaps but necessary. There are men, and, yes, women, from Europe and America engaged in work in these lands, commercial, medical, or religious, holding lonely outposts, so to speak, in the midst of ignorant, superstitious, fanatical hordes. And if these Mohammedan peoples here should become inflamed, those men and women would be the first to be slain. It's necessary that the passions of the Moslems be watched, and if they bubble too high, then those outposts must be warned and removed in time. The devilish brew is being stirred and heated now by crafty and brutal leaders. That's why this projected expedition of your stepfather's into Arabia at this time is so mad, so fatal."

His earnestness caused a shudder of apprehension to pass over Jacinth. Pictures, vague but threatening arose in her mind. It seemed to her that she was caught in one of those cruel coils of fate from which there was no escape: the obsession of her stepfather leading him forward as by a steel chain into the pitiless desert and dragging her behind at his heels.

And yet she could not take this man, Jim Woodberry's money, in order to free herself.

"When does your stepfather plan to go?" Jim asked presently.

"I don't know. He hasn't taken me into his confidence, Mr. Woodberry. He has had conferences with Señor De Baca and with Ebin, and I guess that their talks concern his caravan and our departure, but beyond that I can't speak."

"I wish you would reconsider my offer."

"My mind's made up; I shall go on with father. But I shall never forget your wonderful kindness."

After a time they saw through the crack of the door Hassar mount into sight. He came with a leisurely manner and pleased face.

The waiting pair stepped outside to join him.

"Here is a strange thing now," Hassar began, as if narrating a tale. "I, an enemy of the master of the house, walk everywhere in the dwelling and find none to ask me what I do in the place. In the kitchen [illegible] Arab servants have their gossip, and in the *salon* the lord sleeps—or so at first I thought."

"What do you mean?" Jacinth asked eagerly.

"Let me explain it to you. As I stood behind a curtain harkening, the pearl dealer and two men entered the chamber and conversed of a commission in the city on which he was sending them. One of the men was still wiping his mouth of the food he had eaten, and both were men I had seen at a merchant's shop. When De Baca had given them his command, he said, 'Leave me now, while I lie down and rest for a time. For I ate heartily at supper, and afterwards a great dish of sweetmeats, and I feel ill.' Then one of the men questioned, 'Where art thou sick, lord?' And De Baca replied, 'There is a great oppression in the region of my heart. I feel as if I should die. When you go into the city, send me a physician whose name I now give you.' And the men retired."

Hassar stopped. "What happened next?" the girl breathed, lips parted.

"As the man remained quiet, I stole close to him to learn if he were really ill, as he said," Hassar's tale went on. "And I perceived his face waxen. So I put my ear to his breast, and there was no sound. Allah had him." The words were spoken gravely, almost solemnly.

"Dead!"

"He lies dead, yes."

"And not an hour ago I was talking with him!"

"One with a bad heart cannot be certain how long he will live," Hassar remarked, enigmatically.

"De Baca undoubtedly had a bad heart," was Jim's reserved comment.

"And now I need fear him no longer!" Jacinth's tones expressed relief rather than awe.

"You need fear him no longer, lady."

"I oughtn't to be glad at any man's death, but I'm as near it at his as I shall ever be," she exclaimed, with a deep breath. "He was a beast and a monster."

It was at this juncture Bascom, the archeologist, appeared from one of the chambers opening upon the long room where the three talked. In some surprise at beholding Jacinth in conversation with two apparent Arabs he advanced to the spot, fingering the tip of his beard and nervously pursing his lips. But when he recognized who the visitors were he halted in astonishment.

"You here!" he exclaimed.

"We're not yet slain," Woodberry replied, with a slight ironical bow, "if that's what you mean. You're probably aware that your friend Ebin 'Abd-Allah has a keen desire to rid the earth of us, as had your excellent host Señor De Baca, but so far we've succeeded in evading the Arabs' simitars."

The scientist moved uneasily.

"I know nothing of Ebin's desires in regard to yourself, though I suspect that they may not be entirely friendly," Bascom replied, choosing his words. "However I think he hardly meditates murder, my dear sir. You appear to have annoyed him about something or other, but as to the difference between you that's none of my business. If your life is actually in danger, I'll say that I'm glad to see you still safe, though I must confess to a personal dislike for your company. I think you're a meddler and I'm inclined to believe, as my friend De Baca maintains, that you're an impostor."

Jacinth took a step towards him, speaking solemnly:

"Señor De Baca is dead."

"Dead! My Heavens, Jacinth, what are you saying!"

"This gentleman"—she nodded toward Hassar—"states that he died but a few minutes ago on a couch in a room below, probably of an apoplectic stroke. Tell him what you told me."

Briefly Jim's companion related the tale he had already given the girl.

Bascom listened attentively, then stood for a time with his gaze resting on the floor. If the expression of his countenance was an index of his feelings, he experienced surprise at the news but no great sorrow. Indeed, Woodberry suspected that the little archeologist in his heart felt considerable relief.

The dispute which Jim and Hassar had overheard when they first mounted the stair to this chamber was a straw that indicated how matters went between Bascom and De Baca. Undoubtedly the pearl merchant had had a fixed purpose to keep Jacinth in his clutches, either by persuading Bascom to leave the girl behind in his care or by treachery; and undoubtedly, too, the scientist had begun to discover the man's true character and to have a growing fear. To him, then, De Baca's death possessed something of the fortuitous. Selfish himself, he had gained all that was to be gained from the merchant and therefore felt that his expedition would be promoted rather than retarded by the Portuguese's demise.

"De Baca was always a great eater," he remarked. "I, who know the benefits and wisdom of eating sparingly, had frequently warned him of the danger of stuffing himself. Very unfortunate, however, very unfortunate."

"Well, we may have different views on

that point," Woodberry stated dryly. "But let us discuss another matter more pertinent to your affairs. Miss Alexander has told me of your plan for going into Arabia and I've tried to dissuade her from accompanying you. That is no journey for a girl, Mr. Bascom, as you certainly know, for there are both physical hardships and threatening dangers to which your step-daughter should not be exposed."

"Pish! She is accustomed to camel travel."

"But this route is one of the worst—"

"Don't try to play upon my fears, sir. While I'll not deny she may suffer some inconvenience, there's really no cause for anxiety. Ebin 'Abd-Allah has told me all about it. He states that my step-daughter will experience no particular discomfort—and I require her assistance in my researches."

"Leaving aside the sand and thirst and—"

"Then you've left out everything, my dear man. And it appears to me that her going doesn't concern you in the least, though I've learned to expect this sort of impertinence from you. I've already named you for a meddler; this is only another instance that justifies the term."

Jim's face gave no sign that the speaker's sharp words stung him to the quick, though such was the case. When he spoke, it was in an even propitiatory tone.

"There is danger in Arabia at this moment," he said, "and very serious danger, for any one who goes into the interior. The place has never been safe to enter for any one not a Mohammedan, but in the present uneasy state of the Moslem mind it's infinitely more perilous. If you had paid less attention to archeological matters and more to native gossip, you would know that. And now to take your step-daughter into the Nedjed is inviting death for yourself and an infamous life for her."

Woodberry's warning slid off the other like raindrops off a duck's feathers.

"You're an alarmist, I fear," he said, with a supercilious smile. "Your imagination is too vivid. On my part I have exact information—facts, for I test everything only by cold facts, my good man—and this information discloses that there's no danger whatever."

"But why run any risk? Why not send Miss Alexander back home and then you yourself proceed on your investigation?"

"I've already informed you that I require her," was the unyielding answer. "Her services as amanuensis are essential."

Jim's face hardened.

"This Ebin 'Abd-Allah is the source of your information, isn't he?" he demanded.

"Well, in part," Bascom rejoined.

"And you trust that man, a savage, a fanatic!"

"He's a gentleman and no savage even if an Arab; and I should dislike to be called upon to say as much for you, sir. As for his religious belief, that's a matter for his conscience; the Mohammedan sect has some admirable, very admirable features."

"Such as slaying 'infidels,'" was the reply. "I imagine you will change your notions in regard to those 'admirable features' when once you've come into more intimate contact with some of them, especially as conceived by the Wahhabees of the interior. But, Mr. Bascom, I make you one more appeal. Don't take your step-daughter on this mad—"

The archeologist's whole manner changed from one of coldly contemptuous scorn to one of hot, bitter hostility.

"You ruffian!" he broke out. "You call my explorations mad? My researches that are among the noblest of humanity? I've heard enough of your defamatory and scurrilous speech. I'll have De Baca—"

"De Baca is no more," Hassar reminded him sadly.

"Then Ebin," the other corrected spitefully. "He will call you to account for so insolently intruding here into this house where you have no right, in order to trouble me and annoy my step-daughter."

"Ebin or no Ebin, your journey is a mad, fantastic project," Jim insisted, "and taking Miss Alexander along is the maddest part of it. I'm beginning to think you're really cracked."

Bascom's face went pale with rage. With flashing eyes, with hands uplifted and curved like talons, he seemed about to spring upon Woodberry to tear him to

pieces; and, in truth, at the instant he appeared a man obsessed by an insane passion.

Jacinth rushed between the two.

"Father, father, calm yourself," she cried.

The raised hands trembled, then sank to his sides. But his eyes continued to dart ireful glances at the American, as if he would wither and consume him by their fires.

"Mr. Bascom, I apologize. I should not have said that, but on the other hand I can't, as one fellow-countryman addressing another, speak anything but plainly when I see you bent on thrusting your head into the lion's den. You may risk your own life if you will, but you have no right to risk that of your step-daughter."

"Risk, risk, there is no risk," Bascom snapped.

"And I tell you there is."

The scientist's rage flamed forth anew.

"You lie, you damned vagabond! Get out of my sight, get out of this house, get out of Hofuf! By Heavens, I shall tell Ebin of this! And if he wants to kill you, I sha'n't lift a finger to stop him."

"Father, father!" Jacinth cried, seizing the lapels of his coat and seeking to halt his furious words.

"You can't stop me; let go my coat. I'll not have you interfering. The fellow is a sneaking, insufferable, ruffianly rascal, always meddling. Go to your room, Jacinth, and remain there until I give you permission to come out."

"Father!"

"Go, I say!"

Jim took a quick step forward and caught the man's forearm in a grip of steel.

"For two cents I'd break your miserable little body in pieces," he declared. "You can't treat any lady, even your own step-daughter, in my presence like a five-year-old child. You're the one who ought to be shut up in a room—with bars."

"Mr. Woodberry, don't," came Jacinth's pleading voice. "I'll do what he wishes; I'll go."

"Your stepfather may know all about ancient ruins, but he knows nothing about manners and the decent treatment due you," he exclaimed, tightening his hold on the arm until Bascom winced. "I ought to take you away from him by force and send you home where you would be safe from his mad ideas."

"No, you can't do that," she said, with a shake of her head. "Please release him."

Jim's hand fell from Bascom's arm. Though for the moment cowed, it was plain that the little man retained all his spite and hatred.

"Jacinth, obey me! Go to your room!" he ordered.

A flush of shame rose in the girl's cheeks. With a quick look, followed by a lowering of her lashes before Woodberry's gaze, she turned and went. Bascom also vanished.

Jacinth moved noiselessly across the rugs to her door, where she turned for a last look at them, and then went in. With a strained gaze, Jim watched until he saw the last of her. In his heart, hitherto a stranger to fear, there had come a dread that promised to reside there permanently.

But presently as cries below broke forth, and a muffled confusion of voices arose, he directed his eyes toward the stair.

"Well, how did you kill him?" he inquired of Hassar, in his usual voice.

"With a pillow. There he lies on a divan like a fat little image," the other answered. "Everything in order, the mouthpiece of a *narghile* tube in the fingers of one hand, his mustache curling. Everything natural. And I gave Stephanus and Ababa a tale to tell in the kitchen of his having a pain in his heart. The thing was well done. If they think not that he died of some spasm, then may I be cooked with saffron and served Ebin 'Abd-Allah for a meal."

CHAPTER VIII.

BIDING THEIR OPPORTUNITY.

WOODBERRY and Hassar went down the stair quietly, made their way to the room where they had come into the house, and passed out through the open window.

A full moon had risen, flooding the

grounds with a bright light. In places trees made a shade and shrubbery gave shelter, but in crossing the patches of exposed lawn there was a risk that they should be seen if any one chanced to be looking. Yet there seemed no danger; the garden was quiet; no person was in sight.

"Well, we must waste no time moving," Jim remarked. "We stand full in the moonlight here."

The words were scarcely uttered when a loud yell from directly before them caused them to realize their worst fears. Ebin had returned. The voices of alarm in the chamber where De Baca lay dead had been the startled exclamations of his men; and now here they were scouring the grounds.

"By Zoroaster, my pretty little scheme didn't convince that suspicious Ebin!" Hassar growled, drawing his revolver. "He knew De Baca was healthy and kicking when he set out for the inn, where he failed to find us. Follow."

He set out for a clump of trees at his left hand, with Woodberry close behind. Unfortunately the direction was not that which they would have taken by free choice, since the gate was towards the right, but hunted men must go where the way lies open. The white figures of Arabs in fluttering robes were springing up all about. Their cries were the shrill yells of men who believe they have caught their game. The gleam and flash of their swords showed what the fugitives fate would be if they fell within reach of the foe.

"If Ebin himself would but show his face!" Hassar muttered, as they darted ahead.

A man leaped from a bush before them, raising his simitar for a blow. Another joined him. Woodberry's automatic pistol spat fire at point-blank range, two quick vicious reports that dropped the assailants in their tracks without so much as a gasp, and the fleeing men sped on, darting from black shadow to black shadow, from cover to cover, until they came to the wall.

"Up," Jim exclaimed, and Hassar, who had put away his pistol at sight of the stone barrier, leaped with outstretched hands for its top.

Woodberry faced about and sent a bullet whining among the nearest pursuers. That the rest of the Arabs had been startled by the swift fate of two of their fellows, was evident in the halt they made and their rush for hiding-places. One or two who had old-fashioned pistols such as most desert men possess loosed their shots, which passed harmlessly by.

Hassar by now had gained his perch and gave Jim a hand up.

"There's Ebin himself, back yonder in the moonlight, if I mistake not," he whispered, as he lay on his belly on the coping and coolly watched the garden below while he regained his breath. "Behold him! He waves his arms like a mad dervish and howls for the others to seize us. But he is a wise chief; he issues his commands from afar off. He guesses that we are well-armed and can shoot."

"Our reputation is reaching into Arabia," Jim replied grimly.

"What now? He is calling his men back. Will he send them before us to the city gate?"

"Come," said Jim.

They dropped to the ground and ran through a garden, crossed it, climbed another wall and raced across other grounds. But when at length they thought it safe to go upon the road, they perceived Arabs already running thither and yon there in scattered twos and threes.

"Well, we must get into Hofuf," Woodberry anounced. "There goes the last of them. Let us be a pair of Ebin's men also."

"By Allah, we will," Hassar cried joyfully.

Once on the road they set out after the others, gradually overtaking the last runners as they neared the frowning Kôt, trusting to the men's haste and ignorance of their features not to be recognized by them. Unless Ebin himself was of the straggling party, there was an even chance, if not better than even, that their ruse would work.

The narrow north gate, in the old fortress, the same portal by which Jim and Hassar, with their two hirelings, had gone forth earlier in the evening to De Baca's house, was the goal.

"Has aught been seen of the infidels?"

Hassar asked, panting, as he and his comrade came up with the slowest runners.

"Nay, they escaped as you know, and have not been seen since. But when they come hither, unsuspecting, we shall fall on them and cut them to pieces."

The speaker's robe flapped about his legs as he ran, while sweat glistened on his face.

"Ha, there is the gate!" cried Hassar.

"Yea. May they come soon, by favor of Allah! All the evening we have been running hither and thither in chase of these scoundrels."

"I—I also am tired," said Hassar. "At the inn we found nothing, and in the garden missed them. I am one of a tribe that rides steeds when at home, so that this racing on my own feet is difficult. I think jinns must protect the infidels."

"Ebin has spoken of jinns also. But we shall see if jinns will carry them over the wall in the air, for only thus shall they enter. We are fifteen simitars, and shall surprise them."

"Nevertheless I have a great fear of jinns and *afreets*."

"Where is thy amulet?"

"It is on my breast, under my shirt."

"If it is a good amulet, then you are safe," said the other.

They came now by the wall into the shadow cast by the moon, which gave added security against recognition, and thence to the gate. Here were all the Arabs, panting loudly, wiping their faces, consulting, debating, cursing the pair of infidels whom presumably they awaited.

Through the passage of the gate came a subdued murmur from the city within. A company of three persons passed out, for whom the Arabs drew apart. From some garden near by sounded the low cry of a restless water-fowl, like the expression of a troubled soul. Jim and Hassar let the others talk, wishing to make themselves inconspicuous, answering briefly when addressed and speaking in disguised voices.

Nor would it do to attempt to slip away immediately along the dark wall of the passage.

The Arabs had sharp ears, curious natures, suspicious minds.

"Would that I had a draft of water," said one.

"Yea, and I," Hassar echoed.

"None must leave the gate. What is a little thirst to men of the desert?" came in answer from another Arab.

Minutes passed until half an hour had been consumed in the wait. The men, rested from their run, were now more amiable, though a strain of impatience now and again manifested itself in curses.

"Would that they were here now, so that we might kill them and go where there is coffee and dancing girls," said one.

"Could it be that jinns have indeed flown over the wall with them?" Jim inquired thoughtfully.

And the talk thereupon began to run on *afreets* and jinns and marvelous happenings of which the men had heard.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SIMPLICITY OF ESCAPE.

IT was as Jim and Hassar, standing together and exchanging an occasional low whisper, consulted on what diversion would get them away from the Arabs, that word passed of a party approaching on the road. The men drew their swords and waited. Several, at the command of one appearing to be their leader, stationed themselves in the arched tunnel of the gate, to cut down any who passed unscathed the first line of attackers—a disquieting precaution for Woodberry and his comrade.

"They are not the two murderers, unless they have stolen horses," one exclaimed. "For these people are mounted."

This was true; and the party included more than two. It came forward in the moonlight along the white road between garden walls, until it emerged into the open space of the market ground about the gate. There were two who rode and three who walked, and their pace seemed to be urgent.

"They are not the *giaours* we await," said one Arab.

"They are travelers coming to Hofuf," said another.

"Nay, if my eyes see straight," the

leader stated, "it is Ebin himself and friends in the house of that dead pearl merchant."

Woodberry gave a start. For he now recognized the riders as Bascom, the archeologist, and Jacinth. Both their helmets and Western clothes distinguished them clearly.

What did this hurried arrival mean?

As the party drew near, Ebin 'Abd-Allah uttered a call to his men, who answered and put their simitars into their girdles. Bascom's nervous voice addressing the Arab chief came to the ears of the listeners, with that of Ebin in reply.

"They have not come," the chief said harshly, merely stating what was an apparent fact, as evidenced by the watch still kept. "May Allah make them sightless!"

"Nay, we watched strictly, but they have not come," the leader of the Arabs answered. "Only by being carried over the walls by jinns could they have got into Hofuf, since at night all other gates but this are closed, and they have not appeared here."

"They will lie in some garden until morning, thinking to enter on the morrow when people come and go," was Ebin's opinion. "Two of you will go to the pearl dealer's house to guard it until the Cadi appears and places his seals upon its doors. See that nothing is missing, for it must not be said that Ebin 'Abd-Allah or his men stole anything from a house where they had eaten bread and salt with its master.

"One will go to the Cadi immediately to inform him that De Baca has been murdered by the *Americani* and his man, that a search must be made for them throughout city and country."

"Yea," said his lieutenant. And he thereupon chose two Arabs to return to the house and one to go to the city magistrate.

By now the men had crowded around the chief and his party with the freedom which is an Arabian characteristic. Jim and Hassar, taking pains not to come near Ebin, cautiously moved about until the horses as well as the heavy shadow protected them from the sheik's sharp eyes.

Woodberry touched Jacinth Alexander's hand, at which she glanced down at him.

"Hush, make no sound," he warned, in a light whisper. "We're safe so far and will presently slip away into the city."

"I'm glad," she returned softly.

"What caused this sudden departure?"

"Father and Ebin agreed upon it; I think both fear being detained on account of De Baca's death."

"Ebin goes with you?"

"No; north he says, to El Katif. But we're in charge of his men."

It was now necessary to break off their hurried talk, since others crowded close to Woodberry. He stood motionless, impotent to prevent her going and chafing inwardly at that impotence. The thought occurred to him to strike Ebin 'Abd-Allah down, now that he was so close, and then run for it into the city; perhaps the Arab's death might halt the archeologist from setting out on his journey. But this was only a thought; for were Ebin to die here under his attack, his followers would turn and rend scientist and girl in their fanatical fury.

"Four will remain at this gate until dawn," the chief was ordering. "The rest will accompany us to the inn where we go, in order to assist in loading the camels. Also they will depart with the caravan. For this friend of mine and his daughter, who are under my protection, this night journey to Nedjed, and its city, Riad. All has been prepared against this hour—camel-drivers and food and water—so that they might depart when convenient."

"And thou?" asked his lieutenant.

"I remain, going on the morrow to El Katif and thence northward," Ebin responded.

"The journey across the Nefud is a hard one for men, let alone for a maiden, O sheik!"

"Maidens bend but do not break—and the affair is not for your consideration, moreover."

"That is true," the man answered. "I shall pick the four to remain here."

Jim was now busy unbuckling from under his robe the belt containing cartridges and revolver. To persuade the girl against going had been impossible, and to carry her forcibly out of Ebin's hands was now like-

wise out of the question; the little he could do to add to her safety was indeed so slight that he sighed while pushing the belt and weapon into her hand.

"Hide it. Let no one know you have it, but wear it inside your waist," he whispered, leaning towards her. "Use it if it should become necessary. You can handle a pistol?"

"Yes," came her guarded reply.

"Beware Ebin."

"Yes."

An Arab near by said to him:

"Of what do you mutter, brother? Are you angry that you must go upon this journey across the sands of the Nefud?"

"Yea, for the coffee in Hofuf inns pleases me well," Woodberry made tart rejoinder. "But let not Ebin hear."

The man laughed.

"Rather is it the dancing girls in the low quarter, I think, than coffee in respectable inns."

Presently the party began to move forward, stringing out in line to pass through the gate.

They came forth into the narrow dark streets of the fortress quarter—the Kôt. In the moonlight one could see the broken walls and gaping chambers of the old castle, rearing above the rows of shops through which they passed. The street itself was dark, for into it the moon had not yet penetrated.

"Take care of yourself," Jacinth whispered. "You heard what Ebin said of the Cadi making a search for you and Hassar as De Baca's murderers."

"We shall be gone before the search grows warm. We shall be following your caravan. But, I think Ebin lies when he speaks of going to El Katif. Something tells me the man deceives you—and I fear on your account. Always wear that pistol; promise me that."

"I promise."

"You will see me again, perhaps."

"Yes?" she breathed. "Good-by."

"Get thee back behind the horse, which I shall lead," broke in a harsh voice.

"Yea, O shiek," Jim answered, in a nasal whine.

A last pressure of Jacinth's hand he had, a last meeting with her eyes in the dusk enveloping them. Then Woodberry fell into the rear, where he followed for a time, until Hassar found him, and joined him, and placed a finger on his arm to indicate that he was gradually to drop back to the end of the company.

Jim's impulse was to go on to the inn and even into its courtyard where Ebin's camels awaited. But wisdom asserted itself. That would have been to act like a foolish boy instead of a grown, experienced man.

Among the last stragglers they finally found themselves, and in the end they brought up the rear, walking as if weary and in need of sleep. When the company passed out of sight at a bend in a street, they halted altogether. They were safe.

Hassar faced about.

"It was very simple, after all," said he. "But let not your feet lag, O Lord of Lords, in returning to the last cross-street passed, for the fellow who just vanished may look over his shoulder and seeing us not, become curious to know what thing detains us. Were not Arabs so tough, they would die of their curiosity."

With rapid steps they made their way to the street designated, where plunging into it they speedily lost themselves in the shadows. Ten minutes later they were in the quarter where Meshahda, the Persian merchant lived, and in another five minutes in his house.

There they discovered Stephanus and Ababa, who greeted them with well chosen words.

"I am pleased with you," said Jim. "I shall tell Meshahda to pay you your money, and you may go."

"But we would not go, unless we go with thee to serve thee further. It is the wish of us both," Stephanus declared.

"They seem good men," Hassar put in.

"Can you get camels for them to ride, in addition to those we have?"

"Undoubtedly. In the stable of the inn where our beasts are kept, there are camels which may be bought, the owner lying sick. I will examine them on the morrow."

"Then let the men hide themselves until to-morrow night, for they may be searched for, and they shall travel with us."

Stephanus and Ababa received their money and went out of the shop. When they had disappeared, Hassar addresesd the merchant:

"I have a commission for thee, most worthy Meshahda. Outside the city is a house and garden owned by one De Baca."

"Yea, it is known to me."

"I have money in banks, as Lord of Lords Jim will confirm. The pearl dealer, De Baca, died this night of a constriction of the heart, and on the morrow the Cadi will place seals on his house, and later it will be for sale. This house and garden please me as no other that I have seen, either here or in other lands. Go then for me and buy it and the grounds. I shall give you an order for fifty thousand dollars on an *Americani* bank in New York, which my Lord of Lords Jim will endorse for your security and satisfaction, and if more money is needed, as is likely, you will supply it from funds from the sale of certain pearls I give to you to dispose of. You will bargain as shrewdly as possible with the Cadi—some of the money must privately go to him, of course, it being the custom. And you I shall pay five per cent for your service. When the house is bought, you will keep it secure, and all it contains, against the day I return. Do you agree to this for the commission I pay?"

"I agree—if my Lord of Lords Jim Woodberry says that the business is good."

"Do you as he requests," Jim stated.

The merchant bowed.

"It will be done," said he.

"Buy as cheaply as possible—but buy," Hassar reasserted. "For my heart is set on that garden and that house. You will strictly account to me for all money received and spent. On the sale of the pearls you also shall receive an equal commission. They should be disposed of in Bahrein, where foreign buyers come."

The merchant went across the shop and closed and locked the door.

"Have you the pearls with you? I shall give you a receipt."

Hassar smiled.

"Nay, I trust thee—and we shall count the pearls between us. That is sufficient."

Drawing the red sack from his bosom he opened it and disclosed to his companions the treasure it contained.

"There is wealth to buy all the gardens about Hofuf," the merchant exclaimed in amazement.

"Half of it is my lord of lords."

"Nay, I have enough and more than enough. Keep it all, my friend, to make a princess of your Sulma."

Hassar argued for a time, and showed his dissatisfaction, and then conceived a sudden thought.

"The best and largest of them you will save, Meshahda, and have made into a rope of pearls," he stated, "and keep them. They shall be for an *Americani* lady, whom my lord shall some day find and wed."

His eyes glowed with fervor and his teeth shone in the smile he turned on Jim.

"There is but one Hassar in all the world!" Woodberry laughingly cried, clapping him on the shoulder. "Count your pearls and we shall go up into our chamber."

Hassar placed the red sack in Meshahda's hands.

"Have I not said I trust thee?" he addressed the merchant. "I have looked into your eyes and you are an honest man."

Thereupon he and Jim went out of the room and up the stair to the floor overhead. Sulma ran to meet them.

"You are safe, my lords. Allah be praised!"

"And thy wish is fulfilled, little tigress," Hassar replied. "Fear De Baca no more."

From the look on his face when the girl flung herself on his breast and held his neck tight in her arms and pressed her lips to his lips, Hassar seemed to experience a certain satisfaction. Well mated, those two—so thought Woodberry.

(The end.)

The third novelette of this "Blazing Road" series will be called "THE GREAT DIVAN," and will appear in due course. The first, "The Pearl Merchant," appeared in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for November 20.

Think Quick

by George M. Johnson

TED GRAYSON didn't think a great deal of his boss, Mr. Thomas K. Welburton, manager of the Wilmar Corporation, and he had a shrewd hunch that his boss was not exactly in love with him. Naturally this went far to make the young man dissatisfied with the niche he filled in the big concern.

A happy-go-lucky sort of chap was Ted, however; not at all the person to let his life be miserable because he seemed to be a misfit in the position he was supposed to fill. He had started to work for the Wilmar people with high ambition for the future and a firm belief that he was going to get ahead rapidly. But something was wrong, and after a year, so far from getting ahead, he had about decided to flip a coin on the proposition of whether he should resign at once or wait until he was kicked out.

As Ted looked back on his brief business career he was in no way able to see that the failure was due to his own fault, and as a matter of fact he was partly right; it was not wholly his own fault. Rather the whole fiasco could be traced to a surprising series of hard luck incidents, following one after the other with monotonous regularity. In the language of the sporting world the breaks were all against him, and every one knows that of two evenly matched baseball or football teams, victory will perch on the side which is blessed by the breaks of the game. Bad breaks have more than once brought defeat to the better team.

One morning early in the week a messenger came to Ted's desk.

"Mr. Welburton wants you in his office," said he.

"Ho, hum!" and Ted yawned nonchalantly. "At last I land the hook. Ah, well-a-day! Here to-day and gone to-morrow."

He made his way toward the boss's sanctum, to which he was admitted after a brief delay. Mr. Thomas K. Welburton bent a severe glance upon his visitor.

"Grayson," he said sternly, "do you know why I sent for you?"

"Oh, yes, sir," replied Ted brightly. "I've won a blue ribbon and you're going to pin it on."

Feeling intuitively that the hair from which the sword dangled had at last broken, the young fellow perceived no reason why he should take the blow meekly, and with tears in his eyes. He would face disaster with a jest on his lips. The manager of the Wilmar Corporation frowned; he did not approve of levity, particularly on the part of an employee about to be discharged.

"I'm sorry to say I've been disappointed in you, Grayson," he said heavily. "Personally, I like you—"

"Oh, what a whopper!" murmured Ted to himself.

"But I cannot let my own feelings in-

fluence me in a matter that concerns the welfare of the COMPANY."

(Note: we have to spell that last word with capitals, since that is the way Mr. Welburton pronounced it.)

"The trouble with you, Grayson, is that first of all you lack responsibility. That is shown by the flippant attitude you have exhibited since entering this office. Also, you're not a quick thinker; you are far too slow in making up your mind how to act when faced by an important matter which requires instant decision."

"The old buck's right in that, I reckon," thought Ted. "There've been times when my brains jumped back and forth like a hen in the road with a motor-cycle steaming at her."

"The COMPANY will have to get along without your services after the end of this week," Welburton went on. "Saturday noon you will receive an order on the cashier for an extra week's pay. May I suggest that in any future business connection you make you select the words 'Think quick!' as your motto? Success in business of course requires that one think correctly as well as quickly. You may be wrong sometimes when you make a quick decision, but weak hesitation is even more fatal. And in time the man who forms the habit of thinking quickly will find it more and more easy for his quick decisions to be right decisions.

"I regret that fate has decreed that you should not be successful with us, but I trust that things will come your way in the future. Good luck to you."

"Thank you, Mr. Welburton," replied Ted, and now there was no trace of levity in his voice. "I realize that your criticisms are justified, but believe me I'm going to follow your motto in the future and make good on it."

"I sincerely trust so," and then the manager turned back to his desk as a sign that the interview was over.

"Say, I believe I had the old codger wrong all along," mused Ted, as he went back to his work. "He let me down decently, better than I expected a whole lot. Gave me some good dope, too. 'Think quick!' Slick motto, that. My middle name from now on. Ted Think-quick Grayson. Sounds good, what?"

During the remainder of the week Ted gave no thought to looking for another job. He was due for a vacation anyway, and had money enough on hand for a good one. After he had enjoyed that would be time enough to begin looking for other employment.

Ted was a confirmed motor-cycle fan, and his idea of a good vacation centered about a two thousand mile tour into a new part of the country. Ten joyous, carefree days on the road, a-straddle of his faithful two-wheeler! Who could worry with such alluring prospects ahead?

The Wilmar Company closed at noon Saturday, and Ted was conscious of an unexpected pang of regret as he left the building, after saying good-by to the friends he had made there; it was a sort of tardy realization that his failure to make good had left a deeper sting than he had thought. But Ted thrust such reflections from his mind with a careless shrug of his shoulders.

"All the same a hundred years from now," he muttered, and turned into his favorite eating joint for lunch.

As he left the chop-house, pausing a second to light a cigarette, he was almost run down by an athletic youth bearing a suit case and a collection of fishing paraphernalia. Ted was on the point of grunting out a savage, "Can't you see where you're going!" but checked himself as he recognized the chap to be Jim Haverford, a trusted employe of the Wilmar Company.

"Say, Grayson," exclaimed the other, "you're a regular life saver, by Jove. Take this report up and stick it on the file by the assistant cashier's desk, will you? Just starting on my vacation, and like thirteen kinds of a darned fool I plumb forgot to hand this to Judd. He left early to-day, anyhow, but said he expected to be back and put in a couple of hours to-night. Told me to leave the report on his desk. It's dashed important. Can't imagine how I was such a confirmed chump as to forget the beastly thing. If I stop to take it up myself, I'll lose my train,

and I don't dare trust the paper to a messenger boy; might get lost."

"I'm not altogether crazy about going into that blamed building again," retorted Ted in answer to this rather rambling request, but—"

"I know, old chap," Haverford interrupted sympathetically, "and I don't blame you a dashed bit. But you see how it is. You'll help me tremendously if you do this. How about it?"

"Why of course I'll do it, Jim," Grayson agreed readily. "I didn't mean to imply that I had any thought of refusing."

"Thanks, old man," and Haverford wrung Ted's hand appreciatively. "I'm no end obliged to you. Excuse me if I beat it, will you? Have to hustle to make connections on that train even now. By-by, and good luck! Don't fail to look me up after a couple of weeks."

"So long, old man," replied Ted. "Catch a few black bass in my name while you're about it."

Ted retraced his steps toward the huge building that sheltered the Wilmar Company, hoping that he would find it deserted when he sought his destination high on the tenth floor. Somehow he didn't like the thought of meeting again the employees he knew, so soon after being himself discharged for incompetence.

The building *was* deserted, so much so that the elevators had ceased to run, but that detail bothered Ted not at all. He had scraped up an acquaintance with one of the elevator boys, through this means becoming quite familiar with the operation of the lift.

"Why walk up-stairs when you can ride?" he muttered; whereupon he coolly entered the elevator and started up toward the office rooms, ten flights above.

Somewhat to his surprise the various office doors—several, at least—appeared to be unlocked. This gave him a chance to take a short cut to the cashier's office, where he speedily jabbed the report Haverford had given him on the file beside Judd's desk. Before leaving the room Ted paused a moment to look at the big steel safe. In connection with his duties of the week just passed he had learned that there was something over fifty thousand dollars cash in that safe at this particular time.

"Funny everything's open like this," he mused. "Grand little chance for a cracksman, I'll say. He'd have threescore and ten different cinches making a clean-up. Reckon not many people know the coin's here, though. The W. C.'s not usually in the habit of shouting such things from the chimney tops."

Ted walked over to the safe, spinning the dial in idle curiosity. He heard a slight noise behind him, a suspicious sort of noise, and turned to find himself looking into a nice little round black hole—the business portion of a perfectly healthy automatic pistol. Behind the pistol was an unpleasant appearing individual, rather short and thick-set as to stature, but his identity was effectively concealed by a black mask and a folded handkerchief.

A wisp of red beard was, however, visible under the handkerchief, where the disguise seemed to have slipped a trifle from its moorings.

For the space of an eyelid's flicker Ted looked steadily into the single eye of the pistol, which in turn stared back at him.

"Hands up!" growled the intruder, making a threatening move with his weapon.

Now Ted had no desire for a more intimate acquaintance with the contents of the automatic, so his hands flew ceilingward promptly. The other glanced shrewdly around; somehow his attitude suggested to Ted that he was familiar with the arrangement of rooms, though the late employee of the Wilmar Corporation had not the least idea as to whether the fellow was a stranger or not.

"In here with you, and be quick about it!" snapped the man behind the automatic, and he motioned with a small black handbag he carried toward a room off the cashier's office. This room, which had only the one entrance, was used occasionally for important conferences.

Under the ceaseless threat of the gun-muzzle, Ted was shunted into the conference-chamber, whereat the door clicked shut after him. His first thought was one of indifference. No longer an employee of the

company, why should he worry about a loss to the concern of fifty thousand dollars, or twice that amount?

"They can stand it easy enough," he told himself.

But then another and less pleasing idea occurred to him. He had no business to be in the building at the time, nor at any time, for that matter, as he had been officially canned at noon. Now if he should be discovered in the conference-room, the safe in the office just outside rifled, would it not be easily possible for the company officials to assume that he had had something to do with the crime? They could assert that he had a grievance because of his discharge, and that he had planned the robbery in collusion with an accomplice, the latter having apparently double-crossed him at the last moment.

Nothing but Ted's own unsupported word could be offered in refutation of such a charge, if it were made. Of course, Jim Haverford would bear out Ted's story as to why the latter had come up to the office after being discharged, but the mere fact that another unimportant clerk had asked him to leave a paper on the desk of the assistant cashier would not prove that he had not already planned to rob the company.

There was only one sure solution of the difficulty, only one certain means of clearing his good name beyond all question. He must, in some way, foil the criminal who was already busy on the safe in the next room.

Ted picked up a heavy chair and began battering at the door, with a reckless idea that the noise might attract help, should it happen that the building was not, after all, entirely deserted, or that he might break through the barrier.

"Cut that out, you!" came a harsh order from behind the partition.

The prisoner redoubled his attack, but then ceased abruptly, for even as the panel splintered under his vicious blows the automatic barked and a bullet bit its way through the door. Ted dropped to the floor without a sound, for the slug had grazed his temple, leaving an ugly red track across his brow. It seemed that the cracksman was desperate enough to let nothing, murder even, stand in the way of accomplishing his nefarious purpose.

After the lapse of some time Ted sat dazedly up and rubbed his head, vaguely surprised to find his hair wet with blood. For a moment he could not recall what had happened or why it was that he chanced to be alone in the conference-room off the cashier's office. Gradually, however, the place stopped spinning around, the chairs settled down to their accustomed places, and then the memory of the treacherous bullet through the partly demolished door came back to him. With some difficulty he managed to rise, still weak and stunned, though the bullet had fortunately done him no real or permanent injury.

The furniture of the room included a drinking-water stand, and Ted steered an uncertain course for this, the heavy rug on the floor deadening the sound of his footsteps. He drank several glasses of water, and then swabbed off his head, as a result of which treatment the cobwebs in his brain disappeared as if by magic; the wound which, after all, was very shallow, throbbed a trifle and continued to bleed, but Ted checked that by binding a moistened handkerchief around his aching head.

His watch showed that he had lain unconscious for more than an hour. He crept up to the door and cautiously peeped through the small hole smashed by the chair-leg. The safe was in plain sight, with the thief still working away at it.

"Probably getting ready to blow the door off with a dose of soup," he mused. "Now what the Sam Hill can I do to stop him?"

Ted spent no more time in looking through the crack, for it quickly occurred to him that the thief might believe him killed by that chance bullet, and if this were the case it would be just as well to allow him to continue in that belief.

He glared doubtfully about the room, with the half-formed idea of locating a weapon.

"Now, Mr. Ted Think-Quick Grayson," he addressed himself, "let's see what you're made of. Any pep in the old bean, or is

it flatter than a busted tire? Think quick, old top, for the luva Mike, think quick!"

The windows of the room fronted an important street. Ted hastily raised a window and looked out. The building opposite was only six stories high—no chance of signaling any one there. Nor could he escape from the place by any cool-headed climbing stunt, since there was no possible pathway—not even a two-inch ledge—between the conference-room and those on either side.

"I'm no Doug Fairbanks," Ted muttered, dubiously shaking his head. "If I was, I could hang on to the wall with my finger-nails or eyebrows or something, and get out of here in less than two jerks. But, gosh, this ain't a movie fillum!"

In the street, far below, a number of people were passing. Ted leaned out and cupped his hands. His idea was to shout for help; but he instantly abandoned the thought, for that could only result in disaster to himself. Any evidence of activity would surely mean another bullet.

"Got to do something," Ted thought desperately. "Can't let that fellow get away with the contents of the safe—

"Let's see now—

"B'jing, I've got him! Write a message. Like this: 'Gentle sir: Am forcibly detained in this room, while a chap armed with an automatic pistol is busily engaged in cracking the safe in the next. Help! P. S.—The guy with the automatic appears to be a good shot.'

"Heave message out of window, wrapped around paper-weight. Passer-by picks it up. (Here's hoping it doesn't nail him on the bean.) Reads it. Police! Good dope that, I'll say. Let's go!"

Ted felt for a pencil in the pocket where a pencil was usually to be found. Alas! Too late he remembered that he had loaned that useful little article to a chance acquaintance in the lunch-room. Whoever dreamed of returning a borrowed pencil, unless the owner was mean-spirited enough to ask for it back? And Ted had left his fountain pen to be repaired only two short days before.

He opened the drawer of the big center table, around which, like Arthur's famous table round of old, so many important affairs had been settled. Paper there was in plenty—heavy, richly embossed Wilmar stationery, but no pencil—no pen—no ink. And thereupon Ted faced the humiliating fact that he had no means whatever of sending a message to the people ten stories below informing them that a desperate crook was cracking the big steel safe in the next room.

"Now what the merry, merry blazes!" muttered Ted in perplexity. "This think-quick stiff—no, not *stiff; stuff*, I mean. I'm not a stiff yet, though that guy in the office will stiffen me if I give him any excuse. This think-quick stuff isn't getting us any place, and it's getting us not any place fast. What to do?"

Again Ted glanced around the room, seeking a way out of the dilemma, hoping for an inspiration to come to him. Suddenly he snorted to himself—noiselessly.

"Gosh, but I'm a copper-riveted fool!" he muttered. "Here I've been hunting for a miracle, and plumb overlooked the commonplace. That door panel's cracked so bad that a little shove will push it out. Key's still in the keyhole. Just as soon as that crook leaves the office, I can unlock the door and be on his trail. And if he doesn't know how to run the elevator I came up in, I'll be down-stairs pretty near as soon as he will.

"I didn't think quick enough on this. Good lesson here: don't miss the little bets."

About this time a muffled boom from the cashier's office showed that the cracksman had blown open the safe.

"Didn't make much noise," thought Ted. "He must have piled rugs on it to deaden the explosion. Now he'll presently be packing the loot away in that black hand-bag he carries. A minute or two more and I ought to be out of here, if all goes well."

Ted dared not look through the opening in the door, for fear that the crook might catch a glimpse of him. But then he heard footsteps approaching the conference-room. Evidently the robber was going to take a look to satisfy himself that he had no cause to worry over what his prisoner might do.

Moved by a sudden inspiration Ted ripped off the handkerchief bandage, throw-

ing it far to one side out of sight. In another second he was lying on the floor as if unconscious, his blood-stained face turned toward the door so that the mark of the bullet stood out conspicuously.

He heard a grunt of satisfaction.

"Guess I cooked his goose good and proper," the thief muttered, and at once the sound of steps showed that now he was hastily leaving the office.

Ted waited hardly a second before leaping up. The panel resisted more than he had expected. In fact, he had to smash it out with several blows of his improvised battering-ram to make the hole sufficiently large for him to thrust his arm through and reach the key.

The elevator he had run up some time before was still waiting. Obviously the crook had not been sufficiently familiar with its operation to trust himself to that means of descent. Ted dived for the door with a yelp of joy.

The elevator dropped like a plummet under Ted's reckless control, giving him the impression that all his insides had been left in the upper part of the building. Luckily he managed to make a successful stop at the street level without being carried on to the basement.

He rushed from the building in time to see a burly man with a red beard—the thief had apparently shed his disguise to lessen suspicion—and carrying a black hand-bag, in the very act of climbing into a racy looking roadster.

"Stop thief!" shouted Ted at the top of his voice. "That guy just cracked the Wilmar safe!"

A policeman was standing on the corner and as he heard Ted's wild yell the officer made a plucky spring for the car, which was already in motion. He made one frantic grab for the side of the roadster, only to be bowled helplessly over as the machine leaped ahead with a roar from its powerful motor.

"Think quick!" muttered Ted, glaring around in desperation.

Two or three cars were parked along the curb across the street, but Ted was not especially adept at driving an automobile, besides which the machines were in all probability locked. By the time any one of them could be got in motion the thief would be hopelessly out of reach.

Then Ted's eyes fell on a motor-cycle on its stand a short distance away. He knew not who owned the machine, nor did he care. There was no time to be lost in useless explanation. In less than half a minute his foot was thrusting viciously down on the starting-pedal; the day was warm, so that fortunately there was no trouble about the motor refusing to fire. Off it went at the first kick, and then Ted whizzed away like an arrow, vaguely conscious that a young man in a motorcycle suit had made a vain dash at him as he left the curb.

The speeding car had a gain of at least three long blocks when Ted started in pursuit, but no more than a minute after he leaped into the saddle of the commandeered motorcycle the speedometer of the latter indicated fifty miles an hour, which presently increased to fifty-five, and then to sixty. There is probably no type of vehicle on earth which has more pick-up power than a modern motorcycle. Actually one can go away from a standstill like a veritable shot out of a gun.

"She's a good old bus," muttered the rider grimly, in tribute to the qualities of the machine beneath him; "chock full of pep and then some. I only hope no fat-headed boob comes blundering into us from a side street. Zowie! There would sure be one grand little old smash, and I'll tell that to the world. Guess I'd better keep my fingers crossed."

The machine ahead, its lead now cut down to less than a block, turned to the left, and Ted followed, though he lost a trifle owing to the fact that he could not take the corner at as high a speed as the four-wheeled vehicle. A skid with a motorcycle invariably results in a spill, and a spill could not fail to mean a fatal loss of time before he would be able to resume the chase, even granting that the motorcycle was not damaged by the fall.

A few blocks ahead was an important street crossing, where an officer was stationed to direct the flow of vehicles. If the traffic was east and west, instead of

north and south, the thief would be held up at the intersection. But luck was against Ted.

The roadster, slowed down to a suitable pace, was waved ahead by the officer, and then, to make matters worse, the semaphore swung to Stop, and the east-west traffic began to pour across, cutting Ted off when he was almost on the heels of the escaping crook. It was now a choice between abandoning all hope of catching the runaway car or taking a chance of diving through the cross traffic, with possibilities good for a serious accident. Ted's decision was instantaneous. With a warning crash from his horn and a machine gun roar from the open muffler, he shot forward.

Officer Connelly was scandalized as a motorcycle, driven by a wild-eyed young lunatic with a blood-stained head, zipped by his coat-tails, shaved a big limousine in its path, barely avoided running down an old lady carrying a market-basket, and then thundered on up the street.

"Hey, there, you!" shouted the traffic policeman. "Whad'ye trying to do anyway?" But Ted was half a block away.

"I got his number, officer," choked an excited gentleman who had only saved himself by a frantic leap out of the pathway of the two-wheeled juggernaut. "It was 2548. He ought to be sent up, tearing through a crowded street like that!"

"He will be, all right!" grunted the policeman, jotting the number down in his note-book.

Meanwhile Ted was hot on the trail of that elusive roadster. Up to this time it seemed that the thief was unaware that he was being pursued, but presently Ted roared close up behind and then swung to the left with a shout at the driver. Fortunate it was for the young man that he was an expert motorcyclist.

As the red-bearded man in the roadster recognized his pursuer as the one who knew what had happened back in the Wilmar Building, without a second's hesitation he abruptly veered the car to the left. His plan was to trap Ted between the auto and the curbstone, and had it succeeded—the machines were traveling at a bit over forty miles an hour—Ted would have lost all interest in the chase—and probably in all other worldly affairs as well. He avoided disaster only by a miracle; and after that was content to stay behind.

As they gained the outskirts of the city Ted realized that the car ahead had slowed down noticeably, instead of speeding up even more. He wondered if the driver were having engine trouble. The distance between the machines lessened, the autoist turned in his seat, steering the roadster with one hand, and deliberately plugged his automatic at Ted; the slowing down in speed was merely a trick to get the motorcyclist within easy shooting distance. The bullet kicked up dust, striking altogether too close to be wholly comfortable. Ted closed his throttle with a jerk.

"Gosh!" he muttered. "That guy makes me nervous. If he doesn't look out he'll be hurting somebody with that gat. He's too darn promiscuous to suit me."

Thereafter the chase continued in a slightly different manner. Ted had to keep near enough to the roadster so that there was no danger of losing it, yet not so near as to be in too good range of the pistol. It was a game that required a measure of finesse.

The autoist tried various stunts to shake off his pursuer. He would start a terrific burst of speed, as if in hope of running away from the motorcycle, a rather hopeless task considering that the two-wheeler had at least ten miles an hour the advantage. Then he would slow up suddenly, with the obvious intention of shooting his persistent follower if the latter were careless enough to come close up to him. Ted had to keep his brains on the jump all the time to frustrate these schemes. The thing began to look like a stalemate. The thief couldn't get away, and Ted dared not catch him; nor could he risk stopping long enough to tell any one of the circumstances.

"Can't say I'm stuck on this 'Tag, you're it!' proposition," muttered Ted in some anxiety. "'Fraid that party 'll give me the slip yet."

At this point a railroad-track paralleled the scene of the race, and they presently neared a suburban station, where a train was on the point of pulling out. The safe-

breaker seemed to have reached a sudden determination, for he drove his car straight up to the platform, in spite of the people assembled there.

The train had started, but he leaped from the automobile and sprinted after it, caught the hand-rail of the last car, and swung up on the steps. Ted whizzed up on his motorcycle about two seconds too late.

The next station on the line was Lakeview, ten miles away. By this time Ted no longer needed to prod himself into quick thinking. He darted for the telegraph office.

"Wire Lakeview, arrest stocky man, red beard, dark suit," he gasped. "Black hand-bag with fifty thousand dollars. Just cracked Wilmar safe."

He rushed back to the motorcycle without further loss of time, unconscious of the sensation caused among the people about the station. A new cement road led to Lakeview, and for part of the distance the railroad was in plain sight from the highway. Ted had conceived the daring idea of racing the train to the next stop in hope of being on hand when it arrived. His presence might be highly important in case there was some misunderstanding about the message.

The speedometer-needle hovered between sixty and sixty-five miles as Ted whizzed on, thanking his stars for the smooth, floor-like pavement under his tires. At that terrific speed he rapidly cut down the lead of the train. He caught an occasional fleeting glimpse of it, and even thought he could make out the figure of the cracksman still on the back platform of the last car. Of this he was not sure, however, as it was very necessary to keep his eyes glued on the road which unwound beneath him like a broad white ribbon. During the last three or four miles the track was farther from the highway.

With his motor smoking hot, Ted pulled up at the Lakeview station in a flat ten minutes, the train not yet due.

"Get that wire from Brookdale Junction?" he hastily demanded of the operator, who opened his eyes in unbelieving astonishment.

"Don't mean to say you left the Junction after that train?" he asked. "How the devil did you do it?"

"Motorcycle," retorted Ted briefly, assured that the message had arrived. "Got an officer on the job?"

"Constable's there on the platform. Better go out and be ready to help spot your party. Train's already whistled."

The constable and two deputies watched the various cars as passengers descended. Ted also kept his eyes busy, but no burly individual with a red beard got off.

"May be still aboard," suggested the officer. "We'll go through the whole train."

Still the criminal was not to be found.

"Sure he didn't drop off before she pulled out of the Junction?" asked the constable.

"Not a chance," replied Ted, "but, say, did she stop anywhere along the line, I wonder?"

This query was put to the conductor, who approached them at that instant.

"We didn't stop," was his response, "but we had to slow down just the other side of Swamp River because of a cow promenading on the track."

"Slow enough for a man to drop off?" asked the constable.

"Yes, I reckon so, if he wanted to pretty bad. I'll swear no one answering the description was in any car this side of Brookdale Junction. Yes, I reckon your party stuck to the back platform until we slowed down, and then dropped off."

"First thing he'd think of would be that you'd wire to Lakeview," the constable told Ted. "He'd know his only chance of a getaway would be to leave the train before she pulled in. Is there a general alarm out for this man?"

"Search me," was Ted's response. "There's probably a general alarm out that the safe's cracked, but I doubt if they have a good description of the crook. So far as I know, I'm the only one that got a decent look at him."

"I guess there's nothing very definite I can do for you right now, except to keep a lookout for your party," said the constable. "What you aiming to do now?"

"I'll chase back to the Swamp River crossing and see if I can get on his trail,"

rejoined Ted. "Bound to get that guy if it's possible. Lend me a gun, will you?"

The officer readily passed over to Ted a husky blue six-shooter, and a few seconds later the young chap was scooting back down the cement highway. The other side of Swamp River he turned off on a none-too-good country road that presently brought him to the railroad-track near the place where the fugitive must have leaped from the train.

Ted dismounted for a keen look around. At first he discovered nothing, but then, a short distance from the track, found the footprints of a man. It had sprinkled the night before, and since the rain there had been no vehicles along the road—in fact, there were no fresh tracks at all except the footsteps.

"Looks as if those tracks might belong to the fellow I want," mused Ted. "This road goes off into a pretty wild bit of country, just the sort of place a crook would be likely to head for. I may be on the wrong trail, but there's nothing else to do but take a chance."

Accordingly he mounted the motorcycle and set out to follow the footprints, which stood out plainly enough in the dust of the little-traveled road.

"He's got something over half an hour's start, and if he sticks to the road I ought to overhaul him in twenty minutes or so."

That sandy road was not designed for fast time on a motorcycle, but Ted covered ground quite rapidly none the less. After traveling about three miles he began to ride more slowly, especially when rounding a curve. He had closed the muffler, and with its exhaust thus deadened, the machine was extremely quiet, making little more noise than a smoothly running automobile. Ted kept the borrowed gun handy in the side pocket of his coat, for he had every reason to suspect that it would be needed, once the fugitive caught sight of his pursuer.

Presently, as a stretch of straight road opened up before him, Ted spotted a pedestrian tramping along at a brisk pace. Furthermore, this person carried a small black hand-bag. The road here descended a fairly long grade, and a sudden inspiration came to the rider. He shut off his engine, throwing out the clutch, so that the heavy machine started to coast swiftly down the hill under its own momentum, constantly increasing in speed.

The big tires made absolutely no noise in the dust, and with the motor silent the traveler ahead received not the slightest warning of Ted's abrupt approach. As he neared his prey the motorcyclist very gingerly applied the brake—for he feared its harsh squeak might betray him—and just at the crucial instant leaped from the saddle upon his surprised victim, letting the machine topple over to one side.

The burly individual with the black hand-bag emitted a grunt of consternation as Ted's muscular fingers closed about his throat. He resisted desperately, but despite his superior weight was no match for his athletic opponent, and in about three and one-half minutes after his preliminary tackle, Ted was master of the field.

The prisoner was a rather portly person, his hair shot with gray; he was smooth-shaved. So that, after all, the red beard was merely a part of the disguise.

Not a word was said by either during the struggle, but after Ted's prisoner had caught his breath he broke out in angry denunciation.

"What in the devil do you mean by this outrageous attack?" he finished angrily.

"Guess you're wise as to its meaning all right," rejoined Ted, breathing hard, and keeping a watchful eye upon his captive, whom he held covered by the constable's husky revolver. Ted had already suffered from the cracksman's readiness to use his automatic and was not inclined to experiment further in that direction. "You pretty near got away with it, but the game's up now," he added.

"Game? What do you mean?"

"Trying the innocent dodge, eh?" retorted Ted. "Well, I reckon that's about the only play that isn't coppered. But I'll copper that to the queen's taste."

"Innocent — coppered!" sputtered the other. "What in the world are you raving about?"

"You're raving, not me!" stated Ted cheerfully. "Now for a look into that bag

of yours. Ought to be about fifty odd thousand dollars there. Pass over your keys."

"This is an unmitigated outrage!" choked the prisoner. "You—"

"I know it is," agreed Ted cheerfully. "Keys, if you please!" and the muzzle of his six-shooter prodded the other's plump stomach."

"I haven't the least idea what you're getting at," declared the captive with an air of injured dignity. "You seem to accuse me of some crime, but I am in utter ignorance as to its nature. My name is Philemon R. Endicott. I—"

"Come, come!" exclaimed Ted impatiently. "I'm not at all interested in your autobiography. What I am concerned in is the contents of that bag. Fork over the key! And be very careful when you put your hand in your pocket that you go for the place where you keep the keys, not the gat."

"I tell you I'm a peaceable, law-abiding citizen. If you know what's good for you, you'll stop this comedy before it goes any further."

"That's what they all say," chuckled Ted. "I'm glad you think it's a comedy. And now for the last time I ask you to shell out the key to yon sachel, grip, suitcase, hand-bag, or whatever title you give it. And let me slip you this tip, friend: if you keep me waiting much longer I'm liable to get real peevish."

Endicott—to use the name he gave himself—scowled savagely at the mocking undercurrent of his captor's words, but the open end of Ted's ready pistol was insistent, carrying a threat that one might not prudently ignore.

"I can do no less than yield under the circumstances," he said grudgingly, "though I warn you this high-handed outrage will cost you dear. Here is the key. You will find that the bag contains nothing but clothing and some food."

Without a word Ted eagerly jerked open the valise, though he did not relax his watchfulness for a single second. He knew that his opponent still had the automatic, and the knowledge that he faced a dangerous criminal whose fangs were not yet drawn added to the zest of the occasion. The bag, as its owner had said, held only wearing apparel and a neatly packed lunch.

"Where did you hide that money?" demanded Ted sharply.

"I tell you this whole affair is a profound mystery to me," Endicott stormed.

"You do it pretty well, but it won't go," remarked Ted judicially. "I suppose you have a first-class explanation of why you're hiking it down this lonely road late Saturday afternoon."

"I was spending my week-end in a cross-country tramp, as I often do," was the angry reply. "My presence here requires far less explanation, so far as that goes, than your inexcusable attack upon me."

Ted laughed in mocking appreciation.

"I'm surprised you didn't dig up a better one than that," said he. "But maybe you're only an amateur crook after all. By the way, before we proceed further allow me to relieve you of that gat; its possession seems to make you nervous, and to tell the truth, I think my own nerves will be somewhat quieter when it passes from your hands.

Endicott's hip pocket contained a .38 automatic, which, as an examination showed Ted, had been recently fired.

"In a minute I reckon you'll be saying that this isn't the gun you snapped at me three or four times down the line," Ted stated grimly. "Not your fault you didn't get me either," and involuntarily his hand touched the wound on his brow.

"I fired it at a woodchuck sitting up in a little meadow a mile or so back," Endicott declared angrily. "I most certainly never shot it at you. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time I ever laid eyes on you."

"Quite so," assented Ted coolly as he removed the clip from the automatic and put the now useless gun in the handbag, which he locked, the key of the same going into his own pocket. "If you'd had foresight enough to get rid of the gun along with the boodle, it would have helped you play the innocent game," he told his discomfited victim.

"I always carry the pistol on my country tramps for purposes of self-defense," said Endicott bitterly. "Had I received

any warning of your cowardly attack, I should surely have used the weapon, and to good advantage."

"I don't doubt it at all," Ted assured him lightly.

"Will you cease this outrageous nonsense at once and permit me to go on my way?" the other shouted, utterly beside himself and fairly grinding his teeth in rage. "Man, are you clean crazy?"

"The answer is no to all three inquiries," was Ted's retort. "Let us now change the subject. You may notice that the motorcycle is fortunately equipped for two. Presently you will be seated upon that tandem saddle and will journey with me back to the city, where I shall turn you over to the more or less tender mercies of the police. The charge will be safe-breaking. But I do wish you'd reconsider and tell me where you cached the cash. That would help heaps!"

Endicott's face turned to a delicate shade of purple.

"You mean you're going to make me ride behind you on that devilish contraption?" he gulped.

"Motorcycles aren't devilish contraptions," answered Ted reprovingly. "It was owing to this good old boat here that I succeeded in keeping on your trail, though I'll tell the world that you led me one grand little old chase. And, giving credit where credit is due, some has to go to the advice my boss—that is to say, my ex-boss—gave me this week. 'Think quick!' says he. I told him I was going to take it for my motto, and I did. That's why I'm here now, not forgetting the motorcycle of course. But that's no reason for camping here the rest of the day. Let's go!"

Thereupon, paying no attention to the scandalized protestations of his victim, Ted introduced him firmly to the tandem seat; the black hand-bag he strapped to the top of the gasoline-tank.

"You won't get hurt," he promised, "unless you try to jump off. I can't guarantee results if you pull any fool stunt like that."

The trip back to the city was accomplished without incident worthy of note. Endicott, apparently realizing the uselessness of further argument, relapsed into silence, nor was he imprudent enough to risk an attempt to leap from the swiftly moving machine. Ted drove straight to police headquarters, and upon arrival there at once conducted his prisoner to the desk.

"This party," he informed the lieutenant of police, "cracked the safe of the Wilmar Corporation to the tune of some fifty odd thousand bucks. I chased him pretty near to kingdom come on a motorcycle that was handy, but I finally got him. Believe me, uncles and aunts, but it was some chase. I'll say it was."

"Not a word of it is true, lieutenant," cried Endicott. "Not a grain of truth in the whole statement. This chap must be daft. That is the only explanation I can think of, though when he first attacked me, I took him for nothing but an ordinary highwayman. I wish to enter a charge of assault against him.

"Endicott is my name; Philemon R. Endicott, of the Atlas Company. Don't you remember me, Lieutenant Burke? We met at the time of the Harding robbery. You were a sergeant then, and were assigned to that case. You came out to our plant in connection with your inquiries about Harding's activities prior to the robbery."

"Yes, I remember you very well, Mr. Endicott," said the officer. He looked speculatively at Ted; then back at Endicott. "Hum!" he mused, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "I don't suppose you had heard that the Wilmar safe actually *was* cracked this afternoon, Mr. Endicott?" he asked.

"You don't mean it?" cried Endicott in surprise. "Then this young fellow is partly sane after all."

"It's all news to him, lieutenant," put in Ted with cutting sarcasm. "He doesn't know a blooming thing about it, not a thing. Doubt if he ever even knew that there *was* a safe up at the Wilmar Building. All he knows is where he salted down that fifty thou before I landed on him like a ton of mud. What makes me sore is the rotten luck I had in not getting to him a little sooner. Then I'd had him with the goods in his claws."

Endicott shook an angry fist under Ted's nose.

"You'll pay for this, you young scoundrel!" he snorted. "And mark my word, you'll pay dearly. I'm not the man to speedily forget what I've suffered at your hands to-day."

"Easy, easy, Mr. Endicott!" the officer soothed him. "There may be some mistake here."

"Not much chance for a mistake, I reckon," said Ted easily. "But, say, lieutenant, could you get in touch with the policeman that saw me start out chasing this man? He might help in the identification."

"That's Officer Radson," rejoined Burke. "He's the man who reported the robbery. He'll be going off duty—hum—may be in the locker-room now."

He touched a button on his desk, and in answer to the signal a clerk appeared from an inner room.

"Find out if Radson is still in the building," Burke directed. "Send him here as soon as you locate him."

Fortunately the messenger caught Radson just as the latter was leaving. He reported to Lieutenant Burke without loss of time.

"Ever see either of these two men before?" the lieutenant asked him.

"This one," the policeman replied, indicating Ted, "is the fellow that came tearing out of the Wilmar Building shouting that the safe had been cracked. I tried to stop the car in which the thief was making his getaway, but got knocked over. By the time I was on my feet this chap was tearing off on a motorcycle that he helped himself to."

"The other?"

"I can't be sure of him. He's about the build of the guy in the automobile, but that party had a red beard."

"The beard might have been a disguise," remarked the lieutenant. "Except for that, how would they line up?"

"They'd look pretty much alike, I should say."

"Would you swear to their identity?" persisted the officer.

"No, lieutenant," answered the policeman positively. "I certainly couldn't *swear* that they were the same. All I can say is that they would look about the same except for the beard."

"All right," said Burke, "we won't need you any more now." Then he turned to Ted. "What makes you feel so sure that Mr. Endicott is the man who looted the safe? You know that's a pretty serious charge to bring against any one."

Before Ted could answer, the desk phone jingled; Burke put the receiver to his ear.

"Police headquarters," said he. "What's wanted?"

"Why, a young chap named—what's your name?" he broke off, addressing Ted.

"Grayson."

"A young chap named Grayson has just come in with a man whom he accuses of looting the safe. I haven't heard the story yet, but I guess he's made a mistake."

"What's that? You'll be right down. Fine! We'll expect you."

"It was Welburton, the Wilmar manager," Lieutenant Burke explained. "He came in from his home as soon as he learned that the safe had been cracked. He's at the office now, and called up to see if we'd got on the trail of anything yet."

Welburton's car was in front of the Wilmar Building, and its owner must have broken all the speed laws in the city to judge from the time it took him to get down to police headquarters. He nodded to Ted as he strode in; then his glance fell upon Ted's prisoner.

"Why, hello, Philemon!" he exclaimed. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"It seems I cracked that damned old safe of yours," the other rejoined dryly.

"Ridiculous!" snapped Welburton to the lieutenant. "Why, I've known Endicott all my life. They might as well accuse me of doing the job."

He faced Ted sternly.

"Do I understand, Grayson," he thundered, "that you brought in this gentleman as the man who broke open our office safe?"

"You've got the dope straight," rejoined Ted grimly.

"But this is an outrage!" declared Welburton. He now seemed more put out over the matter than was Endicott himself.

"That's just what the other man said," replied Ted stubbornly, "but calling it an outrage doesn't alter the facts in the case."

"But you haven't yet told us on what facts you base the accusation," put in Lieutenant Burke. "Let's have your story."

"Just a minute, gentlemen!" And his raised hand checked the other two as each was about to speak. "Suppose we hear what Grayson has to say."

Again the phone interrupted before Ted could begin his tale, and again the officer put the receiver to his ear.

"Police headquarters," he remarked into the instrument in a bored tone, but after listening for a moment or two he exhibited a suddenly increased interest.

"That's fine work," he presently said. "Congratulations!"

Then he turned from the phone with a smile.

"It was Farnham, constable out at Lakeview," was his explanation. "He's got your man, and all the boodle—fifty-six thousand dollars in gold and bank-notes."

"Good night, nurse!" gulped Ted feebly, staggering under the blow.

"It seems that this party—who incidentally does sport a red beard—jumped from the train near Swamp River," the lieutenant continued, "but luckily fell hard and was rather badly hurt. He told Farnham that he lay hidden in the bushes a while, until a fellow that had been chasing him on a motorcycle came by and stopped a few minutes close to where he was concealed. When he saw that the motorcycle rider was still on his trail, he concluded that he'd better clear out, even though he was feeling pretty well shaken up. He managed to steal a Ford belonging to a farmer, and a little while after that Farnham nabbed him."

At one side of the room was a wooden bench, and Ted flopped weakly toward it; the bottom seemed to have dropped out of everything. Now all he could see looming up ahead was trouble—lots of it, in piles and heaps.

"Things seem to be badly mixed," said Lieutenant Burke, addressing his audience of three. "If the amateur sleuth gives us that much delayed account of his adventure this afternoon, perhaps we'll see light."

Thereupon Ted told the whole story, omitting nothing. Gone was all his bravado and cocksureness. He spoke humbly, oh, so humbly. Toward the end the sternness on the faces of both Welburton and Endicott began to relax.

"Well, well!" exclaimed the latter as Ted finally finished. "Quite a thrilling narrative indeed!"

He paused for a moment, clearing his throat impressively.

"In view of facts which have just come to my knowledge," he presently went on, speaking to the officer, "I desire to withdraw that charge of assault which a short time ago I preferred against this young man. I find him not wholly blameworthy."

He paused again, and now it was Welburton who took up the conversation.

"Grayson," he said, "I want you to report for duty again on Monday. You seem to have acquired the ability of quick thinking in a surprisingly short time, and though you were wrong in—er—one important particular, still no one can deny that it was entirely due to you that the criminal was apprehended and the stolen money recovered. The qualities you exhibited this afternoon are just the sort which the COMPANY"—caps, please; thanks!—"appreciates and values. It is not at all impossible—in fact, I may venture to state it as quite certain—that you will receive a substantial salary increase in recognition of your services to-day."

Ted rose to his feet dazedly.

"And neither of you gentlemen holds it up against me because of the rotten blunder I made!" he stammered, glancing uncertainly from Endicott to Welburton, and then back again.

"Tut, tut, young fellow!" And Endicott waved aside the suggestion. "You must remember that my friend Welburton told you that a quick thinker sometimes makes mistakes. And"—there was a twinkle in his eye as he spoke—"I may as well admit that I—er—after a fashion rather—er—enjoyed the motorcycle spin. Really, now, those efficient little machines are not half so bad as they're painted."

Prairie Flowers

by James B. Hendryx

Author of "The Gold Girl," "The Gun Brand," "The One Big Thing," etc.

(A Sequel to "The Texan")

CHAPTER XX.

AT CINNABAR JOE'S.

ALONG toward the middle of the afternoon Cinnabar Joe laid down his hammer and smilingly accepted the sandwich his wife held out to him.

"You sure don't figure on starvin' me none, Jennie," he grinned as he bit generously into the thick morsel.

"Ranchin's some different from bartendin'—an' you're workin' awful hard, Joe." She surveyed the half-completed stable with critical eye. "Couple more weeks an' it 'll be done!" she exclaimed in admiration. "I didn't know you was so handy. Look over to the house."

Cinnabar looked. "Gee! Curtains in the window! Looks like a regular outfit, now."

"Do you like 'em—honest? I didn't think you'd even notice they was hung." With the pride of new proprietorship, her eyes traveled over the tiny log cabin, the horse corral with its new peeled posts, and the stable which still lacked the roof. "We ain't been here quite two months, an' the best part is, we done it all ourselves. Why, Joe, I can't hardly believe we've really got an outfit of our own—with horses an' two-hundred an' fifty head of cattle! It don't seem real. Seems like I'm bound to wake up an' hear Hank roarin' to git up an' git breakfast. That's the way it ended so many times—my dream. I'm so sick of hotels I hope I never see another one all my life!"

"You an' me both! It's the same with bartendin'. But you ain't a-goin' to wake up. This here's *real!*"

"Oh, I hope we can make a go of it!" cried the girl, a momentary shadow upon her face. "I hope nothin' happens—"

Her husband laid his hand affectionately upon her shoulder.

"They ain't nothin' goin' to happen," he reassured her. "We've got to make a go of it! What with all both of us has been able to save, an' with the bank stakin' us fer agin as much—they ain't no two ways about it—we've got to make good."

"Who's that?" asked the girl, shading her eyes with her hand, and peering toward the mouth of the coulée that gave into Red Sand Creek from the direction of the bad lands. Cinnabar followed her gaze and both watched a horseman who, from the shelter of a cutbank, seemed to be submitting the larger valley to a most careful scrutiny.

"One of them horse thieves, I guess," ventured the girl, in a tone of disgust. "I wisht, Joe, you wouldn't have no truck with 'em."

"I don't have no dealin's with 'em, except to keep my mouth shut an' haul their

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stuff out from town—same as all the other ranchers down in here does. A man wouldn't last long down here that didn't—they'd put him out of business. You don't need to fear I'll throw in with 'em. I guess if a man can tend bar for six years an' stay straight—straight enough so the bank ain't afraid to match his pile an' shove the money out through the window to him—there ain't much chance he won't stay straight ranchin'."

"It ain't that, Joe!" the girl hastened to assure him. "I never would married you if I hadn't know'd you was square. I don't want nothin' to do with them crooks—I've got a feelin' that, somehow, they'll throw it into you."

"About the only ones there is around here is Cass Grimshaw's gang an' outside of runnin' off horses, Cass Grimshaw's on the level—everyone knows that."

"Well," replied the girl, doubtfully, "maybe they might be one horse-thief like that—but a whole gang—if they was that square they wouldn't be horse-thieves."

"What Cass says goes—"

"Look at comin', yonder!" interrupted Jennie, pointing to the lone rider. "If it ain't that low-down Jack Purdy, I'll jump in the crick!" At the mention of the name of Purdy, Cinnabar Joe started perceptibly. His wife noticed the movement, slight as it was—noted also, in one swift sidewise glance, that his face paled slightly under its new-found tan, and that a furtive—almost a hunted look crept into his eyes. Did her husband fear this man, and if so—why?

A sudden nameless fear gripped her heart. She stepped close to Cinnabar Joe's side as though in some unaccountable way he needed her protection, and together they waited for the approaching rider. The man's horse splashed noisily into the creek, lowered his head to drink, but the rider jerked viciously on the reins so that the cruel spade-bit pinked the foam at the animal's lips.

Spurring his horse up the bank, he stopped before them, grinning.

"'Lo, Cinnabar! 'Lo, Jennie! Heard you'd located on Red Sand, an' thought I'd look you up—bein' as we're neighbors."

"Neighbors!" cried the girl in undisguised disgust. "Lord! I know'd the bad lands was bad enough—but I didn't think they was that bad. I thought you was plumb out of the country or dead, long before this!"

The man leered insolently. "Oh, you did, eh? Well, I ain't out of the country—an' I ain't dead—by a hell of a ways! I guess Cinnabar wouldn't sob none if I was dead. You don't seem tickled to death to see an' old pal."

"Sure, you're welcome here, Jack. Anyone is. Anything I can do for you?"

The man seemed to pay no attention to the words, and swinging from the saddle, threw an arm over the horn, and surveyed the outfit with a sneering grin. "Saved up enough to start you an outfit of yer own, eh? You ought to done pretty good tendin' bar for six years, with what you got paid, and what you could knock down. Go to it! I'm for you. The better you do, the better I'll like it."

"What I've saved I've earnt," replied Cinnabar evenly.

"Oh, sure—a man earns all he gits—no matter how he gits it. Even if it's shootin' up his old pals an' grabbin off the reward."

Cinnabar's face went a shade paler, but he made no reply and the other turned to Jennie. "You go to the house—me an' Cinnabar wants to make medicine."

"You go the devil!" flashed the girl. "Who do you think you are, anyhow? Tryin' to order me around on my own ranch! If you've got anything to say, just you go ahead and say it out—don't mind me."

"Kind of sassy, ain't you? If you was mine, I'd of took that out of you before this—or I'd of broke you in two."

"If I was yourn!" cried the girl contemptuously. "If you was the last man in the world, I'd of et wolf poison before I'd been seen on the street with you. I've got your number. I didn't work in the hotel at Wolf River as long as I did, not to be onto your curves. You're a nasty, dirty, low-down skunk—an' that's the best can be said about you! Now, I guess you know how you stand around here. Shoot off what you got to say, an' then take your

dirty hide off this ranch—an' don't come back!"

"I guess Cinnabar won't say that," sneered the man, white with rage. "You don't hear him orderin' me off the place, do you—an' you won't, neither. What I've got on him 'll hold you for a while. You're holdin' yer nose high—now. But, you wait—you'll pay fer them words you said when the times comes—*an' you 'll pay my way!*"

Jennie's face went suddenly white and Cinnabar Joe stepped forward, his eyes narrowed to slits.

"Shut up!" he said, evenly, "or I'll kill you."

Purdy glanced into the narrowed eyes of the ex-bartender, and his own glance fell. Cinnabar Joe was a man to be reckoned with. Purdy had seen that peculiar squint leap into the man's eyes once or twice before—and each time a man had died—swiftly and neatly.

The horse-thief laughed, uneasily. "I was only jokin'. What do I care what the women say? Come on over here a piece, an' I'll tell you what I want. You asked me if there was anything you could do."

"Say it here," answered Cinnabar without taking his eyes from the man's face.

Purdy shrugged. "All right. But first let me tell you somethin' fer yer own good. Don't kill me! I've got three pals not so far from here that's in on—well, you know what. I told 'em the whole story—an' if anything happens to me—up you go—see? An' if you try to double-cross me—up you go, too. You git that, do you? Well, here's what you got to do. It ain't much. I've got a boarder fer you. It's a woman. Keep her here fer a week, an' don't let anyone know she's here. Then I'll come an' git her. That's all."

"Who is she, an' what you goin' to do with her?"

"That ain't none of yer damn business!" snapped Purdy. "An', mind you, don't try to bushwhack me, an' don't let no one know she's here, or you'll spend the rest of your life in Deer Lodge—an' me an' Jennie 'll run the outfit—"

With a cry Jennie threw herself upon her husband who, unarmed, had launched himself at Purdy. "Joe! Joe! He'll kill you! He's got his guns!" she shrieked, and held on the tighter as Cinnabar struggled blindly to free himself. Purdy vaulted into his saddle and dashed across the creek.

Upon the opposite side he jerked his horse to a stand, and with a wave of his hand, indicated the coulée down which he had come: "She's up there a piece on a cayuse tied to a tree. Go get her—she's had a hard ride.

Cinnabar succeeded in freeing himself from his wife's grasp and dashed for the house. Purdy stopped speaking abruptly and spurring his horse madly, whirled and dashed for the shelter of a cottonwood grove. As he plunged into the thicket a gun cracked behind him, and a piece of bark flew from the side of a tree not a foot away from his head.

"The damn fool! I wonder if he knew I was lyin' about tellin' the others. He sure as hell was shootin' to kill—an' he damn near called my bluff!"

Working out of the thicket into the mouth of a deep coulée, Purdy rode rapidly into the bad lands.

Three or four miles from the hang-out of the Grimshaw gang, was a rocky gorge that had become the clandestine meeting place of the four who sought to break the yoke of Grimshaw's domination. Unlike the cave, the place was not suited to withstand a siege, but a water hole supplied moisture for a considerable area of grass, and made a convenient place to turn the horses loose while the conspirators lay among the rocks and plotted the downfall of their chief. Purdy made straight for this gorge, and found the other three waiting.

"Where in hell you been?" asked one; "we been here sence noon."

Purdy eyed the speaker with contempt.

"Who wants to know?" he asked and receiving no answer, continued, "Where I been is my business. Why don't you ask Cass where he's been, sometime? If you fellers are goin' to follow my lead, I'll be boss—an' where I've been is my own business."

"That's right," assented one of the others, in a conciliating tone. "Don't git

to scrappin' amongst ourselves. What we wanted to tell you: the Flyin' A horse raid is off."

"Off!" cried Purdy. "What do you mean, off?"

"Cass told me this noon. The IX rodeo has worked down this side of the mountains, an' it 'll be a week before the slope 's clear of riders."

Purdy broke into a torrent of curses. The Flying A horse raid, planned for that very night, was to have been the end of Cass Grimshaw. He was to have been potted by his own men—both Cass and his loyal henchman, Bill.

After a few moments Purdy quieted down. He rolled a cigarette and as he smoked his brows knitted into a frown. Finally he slapped his leg.

"All right, then—he'll take it where he gits it!"

The others waited.

"It's this way," he explained. "We ain't got time to dope it all to-day—but be here to-morrow noon. To-night everything goes as usual—to-morrow night, Cass Grimshaw goes to hell—an' it 'll be the Purdy gang then, an' we won't stop at horse-runnin' neither."

The men looked from one to the other, uneasily.

"It's better this way, anyhow," announced Purdy. "We 'll bump him off, an' collect the reward. I know a feller that 'll collect it—I've got somethin' on him—he's got to."

"We're all in the gang," muttered the man who had asked Purdy where he had been. "Looks like if you had somethin' on some one you'd let us all in."

"Not by a damn sight! If I did, what would keep you from double-crossin' me, an' goin' after him yerselves. All you got to do is be here to-morrow noon—then we'll cut the cards to see who does the trick."

Grumbling dubiously, the men caught up their horses, and scattering, approached the hang-out from different directions. As Purdy rode he scowled blackly, cursing venomously the heavens overhead, the earth beneath, and all the inhabitants thereof.

"I overplayed my hand when I made Cinnabar sore," he muttered. "But he'll come around in a week. Trouble is, I've took too much on. Cass an' Bill 'll git theirn to-morrow night, that 'll give me time to git organized, an' horn the pilgrim out of his five thousan', an' git it over with by the twentieth when old McWhorter's due fer his lonesome jag, an' then fer three days I'll have my own way with the girl—an' when I've had her fer three days—she'll never go back!"

A sudden thought struck him, and he pulled up and gazed toward Red Sand while a devilish gleam played in his narrowed eyes.

"Gawd," he muttered. "Drunk as he gits, the shack could burn to the ground—it's every man fer hisself—might 's well play safe. An' after that comes Cinnabar's turn—an' another woman's goin' to pay fer bein' free with her tongue. Then the Wolf River bank. Damn 'em!" he cried, suddenly, "I'll clean 'em all! I'm smarter'n the whole mess of 'em. I'm a killer! I'm the last of the loboes! Cass depended on friends, but me—the name of Purdy 'll chill their guts!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PASSING OF LONG BILL KEARNEY.

IT was yet dark when the Texan rolled from the blankets at the edge of McWhorter's haystack, and dumped a liberal measure of oats into the blue roan's feed box. While the animal ate, the man carefully examined his outfit by the light of the waning moon.

Gun, cinch, bridle, saddle, rope, each came in for its bit of careful scrutiny, and when he had finished he saddled and bridled the horse in the stall and led him out just as the first faint hint of dawn greyed the east. As he swung into the saddle, the horse tried to sink his head, but the Texan held him up.

"Not this mornin', old hand," he said, soothingly. "It wastes strength, an' I've got a hunch that maybe I'm goin' to need every pound you've got in you."

As if recognizing the voice of a master,

the horse gave one or two half-hearted jumps, and stretched into an easy lope. As the coulée began to slant to the bench the man pulled him down to a walk which became a steady trot when the higher level was gained.

The Texan rode with a much lighter heart than he had carried on the previous day. The words of Janet McWhorter had kindled a ray of hope—a hope that had grown brighter with the dawning of the day. He even smiled as he thought of the girl back there in the cabin.

"I didn't think there was her like in the world. She's—she's the kind of woman a man dreams about, an' knows all the time they ain't real—they couldn't be. Hair as black an' shiny as the wing of a crow. An' eyes! Sometimes you can see way down into 'em—like deep, clear water. An' when they laugh, the surface seems to ripple an' throw back flashes of sunshine. An' there's other times, too. They can look at you hard an' gray—like a man's eyes An' they can get black an' stormy—with lightnin' flashes instead of sunshine. There's a woman for some man—an believe me, he better be *some man!* He'd have to be to get her."

The man dreamed a jumbled, rosy dream for a mile or more.

"An' she can ride, an' shoot, leastwise she packs a gun—an' I bet she can use it. I've seen these ridin', shootin' kind—lots of 'em—an' mostly, they don't sort of stack up to what a man would want to marry—makes you kind of wonder if they wouldn't expect the man to rock the cradle—but not her—she's different—she's all girl. After Win's wife—I never expected to see another one—but, shucks—she said there was more—an' she was right—partly—there's one more. I'm goin' to hunt a job over on this side—" His train of thought halted abruptly, and involuntarily, his gaze fastened upon the blue-black peaks of the Judith range to the southward across.

His gloved hand smote his leather chap with a crack that made the blue roan jump sidewise.

"I'll be damned if I do!" he exclaimed aloud. "I'll go straight back to Dad Colston! I'll tell him the whole thing—he'll know—he'll understand an' if he'll give me my job back I'll—I'll buy me a mile of cable an' rig up Long Bill's ferry right plumb across to the mouth of Red Sand! I don't want her till I've earnt her—but there ain't no one else goin' to come snoopin' around—not onless he's a better man than I am—an' if he is, he ought to win."

At the edge of the bad lands the Texan pulled up in the shadow of a twisted bull pine that grew from the top of a narrow ridge, and banishing all thought of the girl from his mind, concentrated upon the work at hand. He knew Purdy for just what he was. Knew his base brutishness of soul—knew his insatiable greed—and it was upon this latter trait that he based his hope.

Carefully he weighed the chances. He knew how Purdy must hate the pilgrim for the shooting back at Wolf River. He knew that the man's unreasoning hate would extend to the girl herself. He knew that Purdy hated him, and that if he found out through Long Bill that he had been with her, the man's hate would be redoubled. And he knew that even in the absence of any hatred on the part of Purdy, no woman would be safe in his hands. To offset unreasoning hate and bestial desire was only the man's greed. And greed would be a factor only if Purdy knew of the reward.

The fact that Long Bill had ridden one of Purdy's horses added strength to the assumption that they had been in touch.

"A thousan' dollars is too much money for Purdy to pass up," muttered the Texan as his eyes swept the dead plain. "He knows he'd have to deliver her safe an' unharmed, an' the chances are he'd figure he could make Win shell out a good bit more'n the thousan'. Anyhow, if Long Bill ain't got back across the river yet, I've got two chances of locatin' her instead of one."

The Texan's attention riveted upon a spot less than a quarter of a mile away. Above the edge of a low cutbank, that formed the wall of a shallow coulée a thin curl of smoke rose and was immediately dispersed. So fleeting was the glimpse that he was not sure his eyes had not played

him false. Long and intently he stared at the spot—yes, there it was again, a gossamer wraith, so illusive as to be scarcely distinguishable from the blue haze of early dawn.

Easing his horse from the ridge, he worked him toward the spot, being careful to keep within the shelter of a coulée that slanted diagonally into the one from which the smoke rose. A hundred yards from his objective he dismounted, removed his spurs, and crawled stealthily toward the rim of the cutbank. When within arm's reach of the edge he drew his gun, and removing his hat, wriggled forward until he could thrust his face into a tuft of bunch grass that projected over the edge.

Not ten feet below him Long Bill Kearney squatted beside a tiny fire and toasted a strip of bacon upon the point of a long knife. Long Bill was alone. A short distance away a cayuse stood saddled and bridled. Noiselessly the Texan got to his feet and stood looking down at the man by the fire. The man did not move. Grease dripped from the bacon and little tongues of red flame curled upward, licking at the strip on the knife. The strip curled and shriveled, and slipping from the point, dropped into the fire. Cursing and grumbling, the man fished it out with the knife, and removing the clinging ashes upon his sleeve, conveyed it to his mouth with his fingers.

From a greasy paper beside him he drew another strip and affixed it on the point of the knife. As he thrust it toward the fire he paused, and glanced uneasily toward the cayuse which dozed with drooping head and one rear foot resting upon the toe. Apparently satisfied, he resumed his toasting, but a moment later restlessly raised his head, and scrutinized the lower reach of the coulée. Looking over his shoulder he submitted the upper reach to like scrutiny. Then he scanned the opposite rim while the bacon shriveled and the little red flames licked at the knife blade.

Finally, as if drawn by some unseen force, he deliberately raised his face upward—and found himself staring straight into the eyes of the Texan who had thrust the gun back into its holster. Seconds passed—long tense seconds during which the man's hands went limp, and the knife dropped unheeded into the fire, and the bacon burned to a charcoal in the little red flame. His lower jaw had sagged, exposing long yellow fangs, but his eyes held with terrible fascination upon the cold stare of the Texan.

"My Gawd!" he muttered thickly, when he could endure the silence no longer. "I—we—thought you was drownded in the river."

"Oh, we did, did we? But we was afraid I wasn't so we went ahead an' spread those bills. Well, I'm here—do you want that reward?"

The question seemed to inspire Long Bill with a gleam of hope. He struggled to his feet. "Lord, no! Not me, Tex. I just tuck them papers 'long 'cause—"

"Where's the girl?"

"What girl—you mean the pilgrim's woman? I donno—s'elp me—I donno nawthin' 'bout it."

"Where's Purdy?"

"Who? Purdy? Him? I donno. I ain't seen him. I ain't seen him fer—it's goin' on a hell of a while. Last time I seen him—"

The sentence was never finished. Lightly as a cat the body of the Texan shot downward and hardly had his feet touched the ground than a gloved fist drove straight into Long Bill's face. The man crashed heavily backward and lay moaning and whimpering like a hurt puppy. Stepping to his side the Texan kicked him in the ribs. "Get up!" he commanded.

With a grunt of pain, the man struggled to a sitting posture. A thin trickle of blood oozed from the corner of his mouth. He raised a shaky hand to his face, and inserted a long black-nailed forefinger between his puffed lips, ran it along the inner edge of his gums and drew forth a yellow tooth. Leaning forward he spat out a mouthful of blood, and another tooth clicked audibly upon the rocks. With the other hand he felt gingerly of his side. "You've knocked out my teeth," he sniveled, "an' broke my rib."

"An' I ain't only just started. I'm goin' to knock out the rest of 'em an' break the

rest of your ribs—one at a time. You've got your guns on, why don't you shoot?"

"You'd kill me 'fore I c'd draw," whined the man.

"You've got me—exact. Stand on your feet—it's too far to reach when I want to hit you again." The man got to his feet and stood cowering before the Texan.

"Now you answer me—an' answer me straight. Every time you lie I'm goin' to knock you down—an every time you drop, I'm goin' to kick you up again. Where's that girl?"

"Purdy's got her."

"Where?"

"Over—over to the hang-out."

"What hang-out?"

"Cass Grimshaw's—" Again the Texan's fist shot out, again Long Bill crumpled upon the floor of the coulée, and again the Texan kicked him to his feet, where he stood shrinking against the cutbank with his hands pressed to his face. He was blubbering openly, the sound issuing from between the crushed lips in a low-pitched, moaning tremulo—a disgusting sound, coming from a full-grown man—like the pule of a brainless thing.

The Texan shook him, roughly. "Shut up! Where's Purdy?" I know Cass Grimshaw. Don't try to tell me he's into any such dirty work as this."

"Purdy is in Grimshaw's gang," stammered the man. "Grimshaw ain't in on it—only Purdy. If she ain't in the hang-out, I don't know where she's at. Purdy wouldn't tell me. He'd be afraid I'd double-cross him."

"What's he goin' to do with her?"

"Git the reward."

"An', you're in on it? You're the go-between?"

The man shrank still further back against the wall. "Yes."

"When are you goin' to collect it?"

"Yeste'day a week—"

Once more the Texan's fist drew back, but the man groveled against the dirt wall, holding his hands weakly before his battered face. "Not agin! Not agin! Fer Gawd's sakes! I kin prove it! Here's the paper! Kill me when you read it—but fer Gawd's sakes don't hit me no more!" Fumbling in his shirt pocket, he drew out the note Purdy had written and signed with the Texan's name. Carefully Tex read it and thrust it into his pocket.

"Where's Grimshaw's hang-out?" he asked, in a voice of deadly quiet.

"It's in a coulée—ten miles from here. A coulée with rock sides, an' a rock floor. A deep coulée. Ride straight fer Pinnacle Butte an' you 'll come to it. It's up the coulée, in a cave."

The Texan nodded. "All right. You can go now. But, remember, if you've lied to me, I'll hunt you down. I ought to kill you anyway—for this. He tapped the pocket where he had placed the note.

"Purdy writ it—I can't write. I ain't lyin'. It's there—the cave—west side—crack in the rock wall." The man was so evidently sincere that the Texan grinned at him.

"An you think when you go bustin' in on 'em they'll just naturally fill me so full of holes my hide won't hold rainwater—is that it? You wait till I tell Cass Grimshaw you're sneakin' around tippin' folks off to his hang-out. Looks to me like Long Bill Kearney 's got to kiss the bad lands good-by, no matter which way the cat jumps."

A look of horror crept into the man's face at the words. He advanced a step, trembling visibly. "For Gawd's sakes, Tex, you wouldn't do that! I'm a friend of yourn. You wouldn't double-cross a friend. Cass, he'd kill me jest as sure as he'd kill a rattlesnake if it bit him!"

"An' that's jest about what's happened." Both men started at the sound of the voice, and glancing upward, saw a man standing at almost the exact spot where the Texan had stood upon the edge of the cutbank. He was a squat, bow-legged man, and a tuft of hair stuck grotesquely from a hole in the crown of his hat. With a shrill yaup of terror Long Bill jerked a gun from its holster and fired upward. The report was followed instantly by another, and the tall form in the coulée whirled half around, sagged slowly at the knees, and crashed heavily forward upon its face.

"Glad he draw'd first," remarked Cass Grimshaw, as he shoved a fresh cartridge

into his gun. "It give him a 'chanct to die like a man, even if he ain't never lived like one."

CHAPTER XXII.

CASS GRIMSHAW—HORSE-THIEF.

LOWERING himself over the edge, Cass Grimshaw dropped to the floor of the coulée, where he squatted with his back to the cutbank, and rolled a cigarette.

"Seen the smoke an' come over to see who was campin' here," he imparted. "Then I run onto McWhorter's roan, an' I knowed it was you—seen you ridin' him yesterday. So I slipped over an' tuk a front row seat—you sure worked him over thorough, Tex—an' if any one needed it, he did. Set down an' tell me what's on yer mind. I heard you'd pulled yer freight after that there fake lynchin' last year."

The Texan squatted beside the horse-thief.

"Been over on the other side—Y Bar," he imparted briefly. "Cass, I need your help."

The other nodded. "I mistrusted you would. Name it."

"In the first place, is Purdy one of your gang? Long Bill said so—but I don't believe him."

"Why?"

"Well—he ain't the stripe I thought you'd pick."

The outlaw grinned. "Make a mistake sometimes, same as other folks—yup, I picked him."

The Texan frowned. "I'm sorry, Cass. You an' I've been friends for a long while. But—Cass, I'm goin' to get Purdy. If I've got to go to your hang-out an' fight your whole gang—*I'm goin' to get him!*"

"Help yerself," Grimshaw grinned, "an just to show you there's no hard feelin's, I'll let the tail go with the hide—there's three others you c'n have along with him."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if you don't get him before supper, I'll have to. The four of 'em's got tired of the horse game. Banks an' railroad trains looks better to them. I'm too slow fer 'em. They're tired of me, an' to-night they aim to kill me an' Bill Harlow—which they're welcome to if they can git away with it."

An answering grin twisted the lips of the Texan. "Keep pretty well posted—don't you, Cass?"

"Where'd I be now, if I didn't? But about this woman business—I told Purdy to let the women alone—but you can't tell that bird nothin'. He knows it all—an' then some. Is she your woman, an' how come Purdy to have her?"

"No, she ain't mine—she's the wife of the pilgrim—the one we didn't lynch, that night—"

Grimshaw shook his head. "Bad business, Tex—mixin' up with other men's wives. Leads to trouble every time—There's enough single ones—an' even then—"

Tex interrupted him. "It ain't that kind of a mixup. This is on the level. She an' I was on Long Bill's ferry, an' the drift piled up against us so bad I had to cut the cable. We drifted ashore this side of Red Sand, an' while I was gone to get some horses, Purdy come along an' made off with her. I followed an' lost Purdy's trail here in the bad lands—I was half crazy yesterday, thinkin' of her bein' in Purdy's clutches—but, to-day, it ain't so bad. If I find her quick there's a chance she's safe." He paused and drew from his pocket the folded hand bill. "The pilgrim offered a reward, an' Purdy aims to get it."

The other glanced at the bill. "I seen one," he said, gruffly. For a moment he puffed rapidly upon his cigarette, threw away the butt, and looked the Texan squarely in the eye. "There's a couple of things about that bill I've wanted to know. You've told me about the woman part. But the rest of it? What in hell you been doin' to have a reward up fer you? You spoke a mouthful when you said we'd been friends—we're friends yet. It's a friend that's talkin' to you now—an' one that knows what he's talkin' about. You're a damn fool! A young buck like you, which if you'd stay straight could be foreman of any outfit on the range—an' mebbe git one of his own started after while—goin'

an' gittin' hisself outlawed! Fer God's sake, man—you don't know what you've gone up against—but—me—I know! How bad be you in?"

The Texan started to speak, but the other interrupted. "If it ain't bad—if a matter of a thousan' or so will square it—you go an' fix it up. I've got the money—an' it ain't doin' me no good—nor no one else, cached out in an old iron kettle. You take it an' git straight—an', then you stay straight!"

The Texan laughed. "There ain't nothin' against me—that is, nothin' that amounts to anything. I got a few drinks in me, an' cleaned out the Red Front saloon over in Timber City, an' because I wouldn't let Hod Blake arrest me an' stick me in his damned little jail, he stuck up the reward. I'll just ride over when I get time, an' claim the reward myself—an' use the money to pay my fine with—that part's a joke."

As Grimshaw joined in the laugh, the Texan leaned over and laid his hand on the man's shoulder. "But I won't forget—Cass."

The man brushed away the hand. "Aw, hell! That's all right. You'd of made a hell-winder of an outlaw, but the best of 'em an' the worst of 'em—there's nothin' ahead of us—but that." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the body of Long Bill that lay sprawled where it had fallen, and changed the subject abruptly. The woman's safe, all right—she's over to Cinnabar Joe's."

"Cinnabar Joe's!"

"Yes, Cinnabar an' that there Jennie that used to work in the Wolf River Hotel, they married up an' started 'em a little outfit over on Red Sand—couple hundred head of dogies. Purdy's got somethin' on Cinnabar, an'—"

"Somethin' on him!" exclaimed Tex, "Cinnabar's white clean through! What could Purdy have on him?"

Grimshaw rolled another cigarette. "Cinnabar's been in this country around six years. Him bein' more'n six years old, it stands to reason he done quite a bit of livin' 'fore he come here. Where'd he come from? Where'd you come from? Where'd I come from. Where'd anyone you know come from? You might of been ornery as hell in Texas, or New Mexico, or Colorado—an' I might of been a preacher in California, or Nevada. All we know is that long as we've know'd him Cinnabar's been on the level—an' that's all we're entitled to know—an' all we want to know. Whatever Cinnabar was somewhere's else, ain't nobody's business. Nobody's, that is, but Purdy's. He made his brag in the hang-out one night that when the time come, he'd tap Cinnabar fer his pile—"

"The damned dirty hound!"

"That's sayin' it ladylike," grinned the outlaw. "I told him Cinnabar was a friend of mine an' he was to keep off him, but Purdy he's plumb disregardful of advice. Anyways, the woman's safe. Purdy's figurin' on leavin' her there while he dickers fer the reward."

The Texan rose to his feet. "Where did you say I'd find Purdy?" he asked.

The other consulted his watch. "It's nine thirty. At noon he'll be at the waterhole, four mile north of the hang-out. Up till then they ain't no hurry. We'll plant *him* first, an' then I'll go alone—me an' Bill Harlow—"

The Texan shook his head. "No, Cass; this is my job. It's a long score I've got to settle with Purdy—startin' back a year. It leads off with a cut cinch. Then, there was the booze that Cinnabar Joe doped—"

"Cinnabar?"

"Yeh, when he was tendin' bar. I can see through it now—since you told me about Purdy havin' somethin' on him. Purdy got him to do it—"

"I don't believe Cinnabar 'd of done that, no matter what Purdy had on him."

"But he did, though. Then he switched the glasses, an' drunk it himself—"

"Some man!"

"I'll tell a hand! An' that same night Purdy took the pilgrim's girl out on the bench, an' dragged her off her horse—"

"I heard about it."

"And then, yesterday, he found her unconscious there by the river." The Texan paused, and when he continued his voice was low. "An' you know, an' I know what would have happened, if Long Bill hadn't

showed up with those bills. An' then signin' my name to that letter to the pilgrim demandin' five thousan' dollars; an' last of all I owe him one for ridin' Cinnabar the way he's doin'—I ain't forgot those switched drinks."

Cass Grimshaw nodded. "Quite a score to settle, take it first an' last." He paused, and the Texan noticed a peculiar twinkle in his eye.

"What's the joke?" he asked.

"There ain't no joke about it—only I was thinkin' mebbe you'd left out somethin'."

"Left out somethin'?"

"Yeh. What you think would of happened, an' what would of happened out here in the bad lands, if Long Bill hadn't come along is two different things. I was trailin' Purdy from the time he hit the bad lands with the girl. I wanted to find out what his game was, an' when he run onto Long Bill I snuck up an' listened to their powwow. When I found out he aimed to take her to Cinnabar's, I figured, like you did, that she'd be safe; so I kind of loafed around to see if you wouldn't be along."

"You keep awful close cases on Purdy."

"Yeh—couple of pretty good reasons. I knew he was plottin' to bump me off, an' I kind of had some curiosity to find out when they figured on pullin' the job. But, mostly, it was on account of McWhorter's gal—"

"McWhorter's girl!" cried Tex. "What has McWhorter's girl got to do with it?"

"Nothin'—except that Purdy's been buzzin' around tryin' to get her—an' I don't mean marry her, neither—an' when he found out they wasn't nothin' doin'—that he didn't stand snake-high with her—he figured on gittin' her, anyway—"

"God!" The single word spoken ground between the Texan's tight-drawn lips, and as Grimshaw looked he noted that the gloved fists were clenched hard.

The outlaw nodded. "That's what I meant about leavin' out an item—main item, too—I hope. You see, I seen you two ridin' together yesterday—when you sent her back home at the edge of the bad lands. An' that's what made me so damn mad when I thought you'd gone an' got outlawed an' was mixin' it up with this here other woman. The man that gits McWhorter's gal don't want his trail tangled up with other men's wives. Marry her, Tex—an' take her out of this damn neck of the woods! Take her across to the other side."

The Texan met the man's eyes squarely. "I'm goin' to," he answered—"if she'll have me."

"Have you, man! Make her have you!"

"I aim to," smiled the Texan, and Grimshaw noted that behind the smile was a ring of determination. "So you've been kind of—of lookin' out fer her, Cass?"

"Who the hell was they to do it but me?" answered the man roughly. "McWhorter's busy up to the lambin' camp, miles away—an' she's there alone." The man paused, his face working strangely. "By God! If Purdy 'd laid a finger on her I'd of—of *tore him to pieces!*" The Texan stared—surprised at the terrible savagery of the tone.

The man continued, his voice dropped low: "It was that that outlawed me, years ago—killin' the damn reptile that ruined my little girl. I stood by the law, them days. He was arrested an' had his trial—an' they give him a year! *One year for that!* She died before he was out—her, an' the baby both. An' he died *the day he got out*—an' I was outlawed—an' I am damn proud of it!"

The Texan reached out and gripped the man's hand.

"I'm goin' after Purdy now," he said quietly. "But first, I'll help you with him."

It was but the work of a few moments to raise the body of Long Bill to the bench by means of a rope, carry it to a near-by mud crack, drop it in and cave a ton of mud onto it. As they raised him from the coulée, Grimshaw removed his guns. "Better take one of these along," he cautioned. "Purdy packs two—one inside his shirt—an' the dirty hound carries a squeezer in his pocket. Don't play him fer dead till he's damn good an' dead, or he'll git you. Better let me an' Bill go along—there's four of 'em—we'll leave Purdy fer you—

he's the only one that kin shoot right good —but the others might edge in on you, at that."

The Texan shook his head as he examined the guns, carefully testing them as to action and balance. He selected one, and handed the other to Grimshaw.

"No, Cass, this is my job, an' I'm goin' through with it."

The outlaw gave minute directions concerning the lay of the land, and a few words of excellent advice. "I've got a little scoutin' around to do first," he concluded. "But some time along in the afternoon me an' Bill will drift around that way to see how you're gittin' along. If they should happen to git you, don't worry—me an' Bill, we'll take care of what's left of 'em."

The Texan swung into the saddle. "So-long, Cass."

"So-long, boy. Good luck to you—an' remember to watch Purdy's other hand."

CHAPTER XXIII.

CINNABAR JOE TELLS A STORY.

BEFORE Cinnabar Joe could fire again at the fleeing Purdy, his wife reached the door of the cabin and knocked his gun barrel up so that the bullet sped harmlessly into the air.

"Don't! Don't, Joe!" she screamed. "He said—there was others, an' they'd—"

"I don't care a damn what he said! If the others don't spill it, he will. It ain't no use, an' I'd ruther git it over with."

Jennie noticed the dull hopelessness of the tone, and her very soul seemed to die within her.

"Oh, what is it, Joe?" she faltered. "What's Purdy got on you? What you gone an' done? Tell me, Joe!"

The man laid the six-gun on the table and faced her with set lips.

"Wait!" she cried before he could speak. "He said they was a woman—in the coulée. They'll be plenty of time to tell me, after you've got her here. Hurry! He said she'd rode a long ways. Chances is she ain't had nothin' to eat all day. An' while you're gone I'll git things fixed for her."

Even as she talked, Jennie was busy at the stove, and without a word Cinnabar left the room, crossed the creek, and walked rapidly toward the mouth of the coulée.

"It ain't no use," he repeated bitterly, "but I'll git Purdy first—or he'll git me!"

Back in the cabin Jennie completed her arrangements, and, stepping to the door, stood with an arm against the jamb, and allowed her eyes to travel slowly over the new horse corral and the unfinished stable. Joe's tools lay as he had left them when she had interrupted his work to give him the sandwich. Her fists clenched and she bit her lip to keep back the tears. The wind rustled the curtain in the window and she caught her breath in a great dry sob.

"It *is* all a dream. It was too good to be true—oh—well"

A horse splashed through the creek, and she saw Cinnabar coming toward her leading a blaze-faced buckskin. A woman was lashed in the saddle, her feet secured by means of a rope that passed beneath the horse's belly, her hands lashed to the horn, and her body held in place by means of other strands of rope that passed from horn to cantle. Her hat was gone and she sagged limply forward, her disarranged hair falling over her face to mingle with the mane of the horse. She looked like a dead woman. Hastening to meet them, Jennie pushed aside the hair and peered up into the white face.

"My Lord!" she cried. "It's—it's her!"

Cinnabar stared. "Do you know her?" he asked in surprise.

"Know her! Of course I know her! It's the pilgrim's girl—that he shot Purdy over. An' a pity he didn't kill him! That Tex Benton, he got 'em acrost the bad lands—an' I heard they got married over in Timber City."

"Who—Tex?"

"No—the pilgrim, of course! Get to work now an' cut them ropes an' don't stand round askin' fool questions. Carry her in an' lay her on the bed, an' get the whisky, an' see if that water's boilin', an' pull off her boots, an' stick some more wood in the stove, an' then you clear out till I get her ondressed an' in bed!"

And be it to the everlasting credit of Cinnabar Joe that he carried out these commands, each and several, in the order of their naming, and then he walked slowly toward the stable and sat down upon the newly hewn sill and rolled a cigarette. His tools lay ready to his hand, but he stared at them without enthusiasm. When the cigarette was finished he rolled another.

In the cabin Alice Endicott slowly opened her eyes. They swept the room wildly and fixed upon Jennie's face with a look of horror.

"There, deary, you're all right now." Jennie patted her cheek reassuringly. "You're all right," she repeated. "Don't you remember me—Jennie Dodds, that was? At the Wolf River Hotel?"

Alice's lips moved feebly. "It must have been a horrible dream—I thought I was tied up—and I broke loose and saw Long Bill, and when I tried to get away there stood that horrible Purdy—and he said—" She closed her eyes and shuddered.

"I guess it wasn't no dream, at that. Purdy brung you here. But you're safe an' sound now, deary. Jest you wait till I feed you some of this soup. I'll guarantee you ain't et this noon—an' prob'ly all day."

Jennie moved to the stove and returned a moment later with a cup of steaming soup. Supporting her in a sitting posture, she doled out the hot liquid by spoonfuls. Several times during the process Alice endeavored to speak, but each time Jennie soothed her to silence, and when the cup was finally emptied her eyes closed wearily and she sank back onto the pillow.

Presently her eyes opened.

"Where—where is Tex?" she asked in a scarcely audible tone. "Was he here, too?"

"Tex! You mean Tex Benton? Law! I don't know! He ain't been seen sence that night back in Wolf River."

"He didn't drown—and he's—somewhere—after Purdy—" The voice trailed off into silence, and at the bedside Jennie waited until the regular breathing told her that the girl had sunk into the deep sleep of utter exhaustion. Then, with a heavy heart, she turned and stepped from the cabin, closing the door softly behind her.

Out of the tail of his eye Cinnabar Joe saw his wife step from the doorway. Rising hastily from the sill, he seized his hammer and began to pound industriously upon a nail that had been driven home two days before. And as he pounded he whistled. He turned at the sound of his wife's voice. She stood close beside him.

"Now, Joe Banks, don't you stand there an' whistle like a fool! They ain't no more a whistle in your heart than they is in mine!"

There was a catch in her voice and she sank down upon the sill. The whistling ceased, and with rough tenderness Cinnabar laid a hand on her shoulder.

"It's tough on you, girl—after gittin' such a good start. When I told you a while back that there couldn't nothin' happen, I overlooked one bet—Purdy."

"Oh, what is it, Joe? What's he got on you? Come, Joe, tell me all about it. I married you fer better or fer worse—I've took the better, an' I'd be a poor sport if I couldn't take the worse. Even if I didn't love you, Joe, I'd stick. But I do love you—no matter what you've got into. Tell me all about it, an' we'll work it out—you an' me. You ain't been rustlin' horses, have you? An' the bank stakin' us 'cause they trusted us to make good! Oh, Joe—you ain't! Have you, Joe?"

The fingers tightened reassuringly upon the woman's shoulder, and reassuring were the words with which he answered the appeal of the eyes that looked imploringly into his own.

"No, no, girl—not that. Not nothin' I've done sence I growed up. I've played the game square sence then." The man seated himself beside her upon the sill.

"It's a long story, an' starts back, let's see, I was seventeen then, an' now I'm twenty-six—nine years ago, it was, I was workin' over near Goldfield in a mine. Everything was wide open them days, an' I was jest a fool kid, spendin' my wages fast as I got 'em, same as all the rest of the miners.

"Out of the riffraff that worked there in the mines was four men I throwed in with. They'd drifted in from God knows where, an' they'd all been cow-punchers, an' their talk run mostly to the open range.

They was counted hard in a camp that was made up of hard men, an' they kep' pretty much to theirselves.

" Somehow or other they kind of took a shine to me, an' it wasn't long till the five of us was thick as thieves. When we'd be lickered up, makin' the rounds of the saloons, men would edge along an' give us room at the bar. They didn't want none of our meat, although we never made no gun-play, they always figgered we would.

" Bein' a kid, that way, it made me feel mighty big an' important to be jammin' around with 'em. Lookin' back at it now, from my experience on the other side of the bar, I know that if that bunch had drifted into a place I was runnin' I'd spot how my guns laid under the bar so's I could reach 'em without lookin, you bet!

" There was Old Pete Bradley, one-eyed, he was, an' he didn't have no teeth but false ones that clicked when he talked an' rattled when he et. An' Mike Hinch, with a foretop of thick black hair that hung down over his eyes so it looked like he had to squint down to see in under it. An' Scar Lamento, which he was a Dago or Spanish, an' had met up with an accident that tore his mouth down one corner so's he always looked like he was grinnin'. An' Wild Hoss Duffy. An' me. They wasn't none of 'em miners, an' they was always cussin' the mines an' wishin' they was back in the cow country; so, come spring, we decided to beat it.

" Duffy, he knowed where there was a wild-horse range up toward Idaho, an' he wanted we should go up there an' hunt wild horses. Scar Lamento, he claimed there was more in it to go to Mexico an' start a revolution, an' Old Pete an' Mike Hinch, they had each of 'em some other idee. But Duffy's horse range bein' nearest, we decided to tackle it first. We started out with a pack outfit—too little grub, an' too much whisky—an' hit up into the damnedest country of blazin' white flats an' dead mountains that you ever heard tell of.

" To cut it short, we didn't get no wild horses. We was lucky to git out of there alive. We et the packhorses one by one, an' almost two months later we come out over in Idaho. We killed a beef an' spent a week eatin' an' restin' up an' drinkin' real water, an' then we hit north. We was busted, an' one evenin' we come to the railroad. A passenger train went by all lit up an' folks settin' inside takin' it easy. We pulled into a patch of timber, an' the four of 'em framed it up to hold up the next train.

" I was scairt out of a year's growth, but I stuck, an' they left me in the timber to hold the horses. After a while a train come along an' they flagged her down, an' there was a lot of shootin'—nobody hurt, the boys was just shootin' to scare the folks.

" I didn't know that, though, an' believe me, I was scairt. I was jest gettin' ready to beat it, figgerin' that they'd all been killed, when here they come, an' they made a good haul, too. We rode all night, an' skirted through the mountains. Next mornin' we holed up. Old Pete, he said we'd divide the stuff up after we'd slep', so we all turned in but Scar which we posted him fer a lookout.

" It was plumb dark when I woke up—dark an' still. I laid there a while thinkin' the others hadn't woke up yet. By an' by I got up an' hunted around. They'd gone—pulled out on me! They hadn't even left me a horse. There I was, afoot, an' no tellin' how far from anywheres, or what direction it laid. I learned then what it was to hate men. Fer a week I tromped through them mountains, follerin' cricks an' crossin' divides. I et berries an' what little stuff I could kill with rocks and clubs. I killed a deer with my six-shooter an' laid around three days eatin' on it. At last I come to a ranch an' worked there a month an' then worked around different places an' wound up in Cinnabar.

" I got a job drivin' dude wagons out of there an' Gardner, an' one evenin' I was comin' down the trail with my dudes, nine of 'em—out steps two men an' shoves six-guns in under my nose. I pulled up an' then I got a good look at 'em.

" It was Old Pete Bradley an' Wild Hoss Duffy! Old Pete had me covered an' Wild Hoss was goin' through my dudes. Old Pete he recognized me about the same time

I did him—an' he grinned. He never grinned again! It was a fool thing to do, but I was jest a kid—an' the dirt they'd done me was still fresh.

"I jerked out my gun an' begun shootin'. An' when I put it up Old Pete an' Wild Hoss was deader 'n nits—an' I was so crazy mad, that I'd jumped offen the seat an' was trompin' 'em into the trail. The dudes pulled me off an' tuck up a collection an' give it to me, an' the company give me a reward, too. The railroad an' the express company had rewards out, but I didn't dast try an' collect 'em, 'cause how was I supposed to know they was the ones pulled the hold-up?

"Well, I got kind of notorious fer savin' the dudes, an' I had a good thing there until one day I seen a man hangin' around the depot. It was Mike Hinch—an' that night I blew. I worked around after that—cow-punchin', bartendin', minin', an' lots of other jobs. But I never would stay long in a place—till I hit Wolf River an' seen you.

"I figgered if I had to make a stand it might's well be there as anywheres, so I stayed. I knowed Mike Hinch was on my trail. It wasn't that I was afraid of him—afraid he'd shoot me—'cause I took care to get so good with a six-gun, either handed, that he wouldn't stand no show. But I'd learnt my lesson—that crooked work don't pay. I wanted to be on the level, an' I was afraid that Mike would somehow tip me off fer that hold-up, to git even fer me killin' Old Pete Bradley an' Wild Hoss Duffy.

Cinnabar paused, and his wife, who had been drinking in every word, leaned toward him eagerly:

"But Purdy! How did Purdy git in on it?"

"I was comin' to that. A year ago Purdy had a little job of dirty work he wanted done, an' he come to me to do it. I told him where to head in at, an' then he sprung—what I've jest told you. I pulled my gun an' covered him, but—somehow I couldn't shoot him down in cold blood—not even fer that. He'd left his guns off for a purpose. Then he lit in an' told how he was ridin' along Big Dry an' found a man layin' there with his back broke, which his horse had thrown him off. Purdy seen he was all in, an' while he stood lookin' at him the fellow got to mutterin' about a hold-up.

"Purdy fetched him some water, an' the man—he was Mike Hinch—begged him to give him his gun which had fell out of his reach, so he could put hisself out of misery. Purdy thought if he was a hold-up, he'd have a cache somewheres, so he dickered with him, agreein' to pass him the gun if he'd tell where his cache was. Mike said he didn't have no cache. He was headin' to Wolf River to horn some money out of me to keep him from tippin' off the sheriff that I was in on that hold-up of the train.

"So Purdy give him his gun—an' he shot hisself, but before he died he told Purdy that he was the only one left of the gang—I'd bumped off two, an' Scar Lamento had got killed down in Mexico." Cinnabar removed his hat and breathed deeply. "So now you've got it—straight. I'd ought to told you before—but somehow—I kep' puttin' it off." He rose to his feet. "I'm goin' out an' git Purdy now—I'd ought to done it long ago."

Jennie rose and laid a hand on his arm. "Just one thing more, Joe? That little job of dirty work that Purdy wanted you to do—did you do it?"

Cinnabar grinned. "I did—an' I didn't. Ask Tex Benton—he knows."

"Tex Benton! That reminds me!" Jennie paused and pointed toward the cabin. "In there, she told me that Tex is huntin' Purdy. How it comes she's keepin' cases on Tex—an' her married—is more'n I know. But that's what she said."

Cinnabar stared at her: "Tex huntin' Purdy!" he cried. "Well, if he is, it's good night Purdy! An' I'm right now on my way to help him. It means I'll do time, but I'll back up Tex's play, an' between the two of us we'll git him."

Jennie shook her head. "No, Joe—not that way."

"What do you mean, 'not that way'?"

"It's like—murder—"

"Murder!" exclaimed Cinnabar. "It ain't no murder to kill a skunk like him!

He's got us right where he wants us. This is only the beginnin' of what he'll do to us. If I don't come acrost with whatever he says—up I go. An' if I do come acrost, up I go, anyhow—he'll double-cross me jest to git me out of the way. An' where'll you be?"

"Listen, Joe"—the woman had risen and stood facing him—"it ain't right to go huntin' him that way. I don't know if I c'n make you see it—like I do. You ain't a coward, Joe—you've always come through like a man. Every one knows that. But if you go huntin' Purdy it would be because you was afraid of him—"

"Afraid of him! I'll show you how much I'm—"

"I don't mean that way, Joe! I know you ain't afraid to shoot it out with him. What I mean is, you're afraid to have him runnin' around loose—afraid that if he squeals you'll do time. Now it would be pretty close to murder if you killed a man, no matter how ornery he is, jest to save your own hide—"

"But it ain't my own hide—it's you!"

"Now you're gittin' down to it. An' it ain't so much me right now, as it is that poor girl in there. There's two of us here that it's up to you to protect, an' the way to do it is to stay right here on the ranch till he comes back for her."

"But that 'll be a week! In the mean time Purdy might tip me off."

"No chance fer that. With Tex on his trail he ain't goin' to have no time for no tippin' off, an' he wouldn't any way—not till he'd squeezed you dry. It's like you said, this is only the beginnin'! When he's got everything he thinks he can git out of you, then he'll tip you off. An' not before. An' he's liable to show up here any minute—after her. When Tex begins to crowd him, he's goin' to try to make a gitaway with her. An' when he comes you make him wade through lead to git to the house! There's two guns in there, an' we'll keep one loaded while you're keepin' the other one hot!"

"What if he gits away? If Tex don't git him—an' he don't come back to our place here?"

"He won't git away, but if he does, you're goin' to throw the saddle on your cayuse an' ride to Wolf River, an' you're goin' to the bank an' git your friends together an' tell 'em jest what you told me. Every man there is your friend, an' they'll see you through.

"They've knowed you fer six years—an' they'll know the same as I know that there ain't no sense in throwin' you in jail fer what happened there on the edge of the desert. You done your time fer that when you was wanderin' through them mountains. You learnt your lesson then. An' it changed you from a fool kid that was headed straight to the devil into a square man. That's what the prisons are for—if they're any good—an' if the mountains done the job first, why, there ain't nothin' left fer the prison to do, is there?"

"Tex Benton's a friend of mine. I'd ought to be out there backin' up his play."

"You're backin' up his play better by stayin' here an' protectin' that woman. He's trailin' Purdy to save her."

"But, even if we do git Purdy, there's the others—his pals."

Jennie sniffed contemptuously.

"I thought so, too, at first. But come to think it over, you can't tell me he ever let any one else in on this! That was a raw bluff to save his own hide. Why, his kind wouldn't trust one another nowheres with nothin'!"

Cinnabar removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Women ain't got no more education than men has," he said thoughtfully, "but sure as hell they can outthink 'em. I hope you're right all down the line—an' I guess you are. Anyhow, you better be, 'cause I'm goin' to do it like you say." His eyes rested for a moment on the new cabin. "But if you're wrong, an' back there in Wolf River they think the slate ain't wiped clean, an' send me up, an' the little outfit goes to the devil—"

His wife interrupted him: "Why, I'll get my old job back, an' wait for you to git out, an' we'll start all over again."

Cinnabar reached out and gathered the girl into his arms.

"Yes," he answered, with his lips close to her ear; "an' either way, we'll know

we done the best we knowed how—an' that's all any one can do."

CHAPTER XXIV.

"ALL FRIENDS TOGETHER."

OLD BAT, with Endicott following closely, led the way through the darkness back along Timber City's main street. At the corner of the livery stable he paused: "W'ere you' hoss?"

"Why, I—wait, I'll step across to the hotel and borrow one of Colston's." The half-breed nodded, and, hurrying across the street, Endicott entered the office of the hostelry. His appearance was the signal for a sudden awkward silence among the half-dozen men that sprawled in the chairs or leaned against the cigar-case. Endicott's glance swept the faces of the men. "Where is Mr. Colston?" he asked.

The man with the long mustache, the one who had informed him that the ferry-boat still floated, opened a door that gave into the rambling interior. "Hey!" he called loudly. "'S Y Bar went up?"

From the region beyond came an answer, and the mustached one turned to Endicott. "Yup, he's went up. Don't know what room's his'n, but jest holler when you git to the top of the stairs; he ain't got to sleep yet."

At the head of the stairs Endicott paused, a light showed through the crack at the bottom of a door, and he knocked. The door opened, and Colston, in undershirt and trousers, bade him enter.

Endicott shook his head. "No, I want to borrow a horse."

"Goin' after 'em?" asked Colston. "Well, help yourself. The Y Bar horses are yours now. But if I was you I'd wait right here in Timber City. A man that ain't used to the range will get lost at night before he's gone three miles. The chances are you'll never reach the river—and what are you going to do when you get there?"

"I'm going to cross—somehow. I'm going to find my wife. As for getting lost, Old Bat is going with me—or rather, I'm going with him."

"Bat! What's he doing here?"

"Found out that the Texan had pulled out, and came to get him. He knows Tex better than any one knows him. He had guessed pretty accurately what was coming off here to-day, and he rode over to take the Texan back home."

Colston nodded. "Go ahead. If Old Bat starts on the trail, you'll find your wife." He laid a hand on Endicott's shoulder. "And just bear in mind that when you do find her, you'll find her all right! I, too, knew the Texan. He's been more like—like a son to me than an employee. The boy's got his faults—but he's a man! Barring the possibility of an accident on the river, you'll find 'em safe an' sound—an', when you do find 'em, mind you bring 'em both back. You're goin' to need Tex."

Endicott nodded.

"I'll remember," he said. "And when we return you have the papers ready, and we'll close the deal."

While the barn dogs saddled Endicott's horse Old Bat led the way to the alley between the livery barn and the saloon, and, throwing himself upon his belly, lighted matches and studied certain marks on the ground. Satisfied at length, he regained his feet.

"What are you hunting for?" Endicott asked.

"Hoss tracks. Tex, she ain't got hee's own hoss. Me, Am wan' know w'at kin' track Am foller w'en we git 'cross de riv'."

"How are we goin' to cross?" asked Endicott, as they swung along the trail at a brisk trot.

"We ain' 'cross yet. Firs', we swing down de riv'. We comin' to de ranch. Plent' ranch on dis side along de riv'. We git de boat."

"But, the horses? We can't take the horses in the boat."

"We com' w'ere we need de hoss we hont de ranch an' git mor' hoss."

At the river they halted for a few moments before heading down-stream, and Endicott shuddered as he gazed out over the drift-choked surface of the flood. Old Bat divined what was passing in his mind.

"De riv', she look lak hell w'en you stan' an' see her go pas'. But she ain' so

bad she look. W'en de boat git een de wataire she ron so fas' lake de res', an' she 'bout de sam' lak she stan' still."

"Yes—but the boat—the heavy ferry—they couldn't handle her in the water."

"Dey ain't got for han'l'. De riv' she han'l'. W'en de boat com' on de plac', w'at you call, de ben'—w'ere de riv she mak' de turn, de boat she gon git shov' on de bank. Mebbe-so dey don' gon' on de bank, w'en de daylight com' som' wan see um an' com' in de boat an' tak' um off."

Bat struck off down the river, with Endicott following. After an hour's ride through the darkness they came to a ranch. Bat opened and closed the wire gate and led the way along the winding wagon-road to the house, a log affair nestled in a deep coulée. A dog rushed from the darkness and set up a furious barking, dodging in and out among the legs of the horses in a frenzy of excitement.

A light appeared in the window, and as the two riders drew up before the door, it opened, a man thrust his head out and swore at the dog. When the animal subsided he peered at the horsemen.

"Whut's up?" he growled surlily.

"Have you a boat?" Endicott asked.

"A boat! What the hell am I runnin', a cow outfit or a summer resort? A boat! Er mebbe you think I fish fer a livin'? Mebbe I'm runnin' a ferry? Mebbe I want the hull damn country raisin' hell around here all night! No, I hain't got no boat! An' I never had none, an' don't want none!" The man's senseless anger seemed to increase as though the imputation that he might have owned a boat were in some way an insult. "What the hell would I want of a boat?" His voice rose almost to a scream, and he shook his fist almost in Bat's face.

The old half-breed leaned slightly forward in the saddle. "W'at de hell! W'at de hell! W'at de hell you wan' wit de ponch on de nose—but you git wan jes' de sam'!" As he spoke, his fist shot out and landed squarely in the man's face, and as he staggered back into the cabin the half-breed put spurs to his horse, and the two rode swiftly into the dark. "Dat do um good—mebbe-so nex' tam som' wan com' 'long he ain' stan' an' holler 'W'at de hell! W'at de hell!' so mooch."

A boat was procured at the fourth ranch, and, turning the horses into the corral, the two pushed out into the river. Daylight was beginning to break, and, keeping close in, they scanned the shore eagerly for sign of Long Bill's ferry. Hour after hour they drifted, Endicott overruling Bat's suggestion that they stop for food. It was some time after noon that the half-breed stood up and pointed toward the other side.

"Am t'ink mebbe-so de boat gon' on de odder side. 'Long tam Am watch de drift. De heavy stuff—de tree an' de beeg log, dey mos' all on odder side. Am t'ink dat better we cross. Am t'ink dat boat lan' befor' dis—we com' pas' it."

"But how are we ever going to buck this current. If we've passed it, we'll have to go up-stream to find it."

"We hont de ranch an' git de hoss an' ride 'long de edge."

"But, suppose they haven't landed? Suppose they've drifted on down?"

The half-breed shrugged. "S'pose dey gon' on down—we can't ketch um. Dey got de beeg start. De riv' she car' de ferry joost so fas' lak she car' de leetle boat. S'pose dey gon' too far for ride back, dey com' back on train. But me—Am t'ink dey lan' befor' dis. We com' 'bout feefty mile. You fol' Ol' Bat—we fin' um."

The half-breed, who more than once that day had proved himself more willing than proficient with the oars, surrendered them to Endicott, and for more than an hour the Easterner battled with the yellow, turgid flood before he finally succeeded in driving the boat ashore in the mouth of a coulée. Abandoning the boat, they struck out on foot up river where, a mile or more above, they had passed fences. When they finally located the ranch-house Endicott was near to exhaustion.

It was mid afternoon, and he had eaten nothing since the night before, every muscle in his body ached from his labor at the oars, and the skin of his feet was rubbed raw by the grind of the high-heeled boots. The people at the ranch knew nothing of the wrecked ferry, the men holding, with Bat, that the chances were it had grounded far

above. Declining their invitation to remain over till morning, Endicott procured horses and an ample supply of food, and, with the hearty approval of Old Bat, the two struck out up the river.

" He said it was nearly seventy miles to Long Bill Kearney's ferry crossing and only three ranches between," said Endicott, as the horses labored out of a deep coulée. " And if anything's happened to their horses and they haven't struck one of those ranches, they're going to be in a bad way."

" Dem all right. Dat Tex, she got de gun, she shoot de jack-rabbit, de leetle owl, mebbe-so de deer—dey ain' gon' hungry w'ile he got de gun."

It was slow work exploring the margin of the flood. The late darkness overtook them with scarcely twenty miles of the distance covered, and they camped on the top of a high bluff where they built up a huge fire visible for many miles up and down the river. Daylight found them once more in the saddle, exploring the mouths of coulées and scouring every foot of the scrub-bordered bank. It was nearly noon when, from the edge of a high cliff that overlooked the river, they caught sight of the abandoned ferry-boat.

The crest of the rise of water had passed in the night, and the boat lay with one corner fast aground. Putting spurs to the horses, they raced back from the river until they reached a point that gave access to the coulée. The keen eyes of the half-breed picked up the tracks at the bottom of the ravine even before the horses had completed the descent, and it was with difficulty that he restrained the impatient Endicott from plunging down the ravine at the imminent risk of destroying the sign.

Picketing the horses beside the trail, the two proceeded on foot, Old Bat in the lead, bent slightly forward with his eyes darting this way and that, studying each minutest detail of the disturbed ground. Following closely, Endicott hung on each word and grunt and fragmentary observation of the old Indian. In vain he plied Bat with eager questions, but he might as well have sought information from the sphinx. The old man paid him not the slightest attention, but proceeded on down the coulée, pausing and staring at the sign for a full minute at a time, again almost running with his eyes fixed on the ground until brought up again, frowning and muttering, by some new baffling combination of tracks. After what seemed an interminable length of time they reached the mouth of the coulée, where Endicott sank wearily onto the end of the water-logged boat and watched the half-breed work back and forth, back and forth, over the little strip of beach.

Endicott had long ceased to ask questions and when at last Bat straightened up, removed his hat, and wiped the sweat from his forehead upon the sleeve of his faded shirt, the information he conveyed was voluntary:

" I ain' quite mak' it out. Firs' t'ing dey lan' here Tex, she ain' got on de boots. De 'oman she sleep—mebbe-so w'at you call, knock out. Tex car' her an' lay her on de grass, w'ere she leetle bit flat,." He paused and pointed to a spot that looked no whit different from any other spot of grass to Endicott's untrained eyes.

" Only wan hoss lan—dat Powder Face, an' he ron lak hell up de coulée. Tex, she gon' up de coulée an' bime-by he put on de boots an' climb oop on de bench. After w'ile comes a man on a hoss off de bench. He ketch op Powder Face an' com' down here an' git de 'oman an' ride off—he lif' her oop an' tie her on de saddle an' ride off, leadin' Powder Face. Bime-by Tex com' 'long on beeg hoss an' nodder man on leetle hoss. Tex git off an' look round an' fin' de 'oman gon'—he joomp on de hoss an' ride lak hell after de man an' de 'oman."

Endicott was staring, white-lipped, into the half-breed's face. He leaped up and seized the man's arm roughly. " Did he catch them?"

Bat shook his head. " *Non*—not yet. We fol' 'long on de trail—we fin' dat out. Com' we git de hoss."

" But, maybe it was Tex who got here first and rode away with her," cried Endicott as they hastened toward the picketed horses. " Surely you can't tell from those tracks—"

The other interrupted him. " *Oui!* De track don' lie. Ol' Bat, she know 'bout dat.

Me—Am know Tex track, an' w'en she tromp 'roun' she shov de mud on de odder man track—eef de odder track ain't dere firs', how in hell kin Tex shov' de mud on it?"

"And this happened yesterday! Oh, Alice! Alice!" The man's voice broke on the name, and, glancing into his face Bat saw that it glistened wet with the sweat of torture.

As they mounted, he offered a word of advice and encouragement: "Dat better you ain' los' de, w'at you call, de guts. Mebbe-so you' 'oman all right. We fin' um safe on som' ranch-house."

The trail of the four horses was so plain that even Endicott found no difficulty in following it across the bench. Bat struck into a steady trot which was maintained till he pulled up sharply at a point where the trail dimmed to nothing upon the hard lava rock of the bad lands. The half-breed studied the ground.

"De leetle hoss turn back," he announced. "Tex, she gon' on in. He los' de trail now—he ain' kin pick it oop in here—he ain' Injun. He, w'at you call, goin' it blin'."

Unhesitatingly the old half-breed followed along a ridge and dropped off into a coulée. He rode slowly now, with his eyes on the hard rocky ground. Several times he dismounted, and Endicott's heart sank as he watched him search, sometimes upon hands and knees. But always the old man straightened up with a grunt of satisfaction and, mounting, proceeded confidently upon his course; although, try as he would, Endicott could discern no slightest mark or scratch that would indicate that any one had passed that way.

"Are you really following a trail?" he asked at length, as the Indian headed up a coulée whose wind-swept floor was almost solid rock.

The old man smiled. "*Oui!* Am fol' de trail, all right. Two hoss, shod, mak' good trail for Injun. Eef dey swim een de wataire lak de feesh, eef dey fly een de air lak de bird, Ol' Bat he no kin pick oop de trail—but, by Goss! eef dey walk or ron or stan' still, dey got to mak' de sign on de groun', an' me—Am fin' dat out—"

The words died in his throat as he jerked his horse to a stand. From behind a projecting shoulder of rock a man stepped directly into their path.

"Stick 'em up!" The command rang with a metallic hardness in the rock-walled coulée, and Bat's hands flew upward. From the rear Endicott saw that the man who barred the way was squat, bowlegged, and bearded, and that he held a gun in either hand. For one sickening instant he thought of Alice in the power of this man, and reckless of consequences, he forced his horse to the fore.

"Damn you!" he cried, leaning forward in the saddle. "Where's my wife?"

Old Bat cried out a warning, and then stared in surprise at the man on the ground who was returning his guns to their holsters and grinning as he did it.

"Dama me, where's your wife?" repeated the man. "Ain't that a kind of a rough way, pardner, to ask a question of a stranger? Or mebbe you're jest na'chelly rough, an' can't help it." The metallic hardness was gone from the voice.

Endicott noticed that a tuft of hair stuck through a hole in the crown of the man's hat, and that upon close inspection the dark-bearded face had lost its look of villainy.

"But—my wife!" he persisted. "You brought her here! She—"

"Not me," interrupted the man. "I didn't bring her nowheres. An' besides she ain't here."

"Where is she? And who did bring her? Speak up, man!"

"She's safe enough. You don't need to worry about her. She's over to Cinnabar Joe's ranch on Red Sand. Purdy took her there yesterday."

"Purdy!" shouted Endicott. "Do you mean the Purdy that—"

"Yup," interrupted the other; "the Purdy that you took a shot at an' creased. Why in hell couldn't you of shot a half an inch lower that night?"

"How do you know she's safe?" cried Endicott. "How do you know he ever took her there? I wouldn't trust Purdy out of my sight!"

"You an' me both," grinned the man.

"An' I didn't. I trailed along from the time they hit the bad lands till he delivered her at the ranch. He's after the reward, an' he had to keep her safe."

"But the people at the ranch—this Cinnabar Joe?"

"Ace high all around—the breed, there, he knows em."

"How did Purdy know about the reward?

"Long Bill Kearney, he brung the bills along."

Long Bill! He's another fine specimen! She's not safe as long as those two scoundrels are at large. Where are they now? And where's Tex?"

"Well, Long Bill, he's quite a piece away from the bad lands by now. I 'spect he wishes he was back—but he won't come back. An' Purdy, he's prob'ly wishin', by now, that he'd listened to me. God knows, I tried to make a horse-thief out of him, but it wasn't no use—he's crooked. An' Tex, he's busy an' don't want to be disturbed."

"Busy?"

"Yup. Busy killin' some folks—Purdy an' some others. I wanted he should let me an' Bill Harlow go 'long an' help—but he wouldn't. Said he wanted to settle with Purdy hisself."

"Who are you?"

"Me? I'm Cass Grimshaw."

"Ha!" cried Bat, climbing from the saddle. "Am lak Am shake you' hand. Am know 'bout you. You de bes' hoss-tief in Montana, *sacré!* Me—Am Batiste Xavier Jean Jacques de Beaumont Lajune—"

"Is that one word—or several?" grinned Grimshaw. "An' as long as we started in passin' poseys back an' forth, I've heard tell of both you birds. You're Tex's side kick, an' your regular name's Bat, ain't it? An' this here's the pilgrim that nicked Purdy, over in Wolf River, an' then cussed out the lynchin' party to their face, thereby displayin' a set of red guts that was entirely onlooked for in a pilgrim. So, bein' as we're all friends together, let's hit it out an' see how Tex is makin' it." He turned to Endicott. "Onless you'd ruther hit fer Cinnabar Joe's?"

Endicott shook his head. "No! If my wife is safe, my place is right here beside Tex. This is my fight as much as it is his—more so, for it's on her account he's after Purdy."

"That's what I call a man," said Grimshaw, extending a hand, which Endicott shook heartily. "Here's a gun—but let me slip you the word to lay off Purdy. Nick away at the others— there's three more of 'em—or was—but Tex he wants Purdy. Of course if anything should happen to Tex—that lets us in. We'll pick up Bill Harlow on the way. Come on, let's ride!"

And as they rode, Endicott smiled grimly to himself. A horse-thief, a half-breed, and he, Winthrop Adams Endicott, "All friends together." And in this friendship he suddenly realized he felt nothing but pride. The feel of his galloping horse was good. He raised his eyes to the purpled peaks of the distant "Bear Paws," and as he filled his lungs to their depths with the keen, clear air, his knees tightened upon his saddle, his fingers involuntarily closed about the butt of the gun that protruded from the waistband of his corduroy trousers.

"All friends together," he muttered, and again he smiled—grimly.

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.

TRIFLES

IT is such little things as these—
A broken fan, a withered flower—
That hold in elfin tapestries
A lifetime in one hour!

Dorothy Louise Smith.

Snow

by

Paul L. Anderson

LOCKPORT VALLEY is a charming cleft in the Taconic Hills of New England. Martinville is at the eastern end; and fifteen miles to the west is Lockport, situated on two lines of railroad, one a trunk line from New York, the other a single-track road which follows the windings of the Taconic River from end to end of the valley.

Eight miles west of Lockport is West Lockport, a friendly little town of some two thousand people, where every one knows—and mostly likes—every one else. One of the most popular of the folk of West Lockport is Charlie Cromwell, who owns the garage and does a sales and livery business as well. He is a short, chunky, humorous, rather taciturn, highly uninquisitive individual, and, odd as it may seem to one acquainted with the general run of garage owners, is strictly and scrupulously honest. Stranger yet, he is a thoroughly competent motor mechanic, as are also the men whom he employs.

Charlie lives with his wife and son Danny—a sprightly youth of ten—in a little house on Railroad Avenue, a couple of hundred yards from Main Street, and it is worth noting that he fairly idolizes Danny.

One February, Cromwell had been over to Springfield on business, spending two or three days there, and started for home in his light six just as it began to snow. The going was not especially heavy till he reached Martinville, but from Martinville on it was very bad, and by the time he reached Lockport he knew he was held up: from there on the road is hilly, there are a good many cuts where the snow drifts deep, and even with chains it would be impossible to make it through.

So about five o'clock Cromwell turned in at the Carlingford in Lockport, stowed his car in the hotel garage, and prepared to spend the night, intending to have a try at getting home next morning by daylight. He attempted to telephone his wife, but was unable to get her, so called up a neighbor, whom he asked to let Mrs. Cromwell know what had happened. This done, he washed up, chatted a few minutes with the clerk and went in to supper.

Supper over, Charlie returned to the hotel office and settled himself with his pipe and a copy of the local paper, resigned to spend a dull evening; there is little to do at night in Lockport except on Tuesday and Friday, when there are movies in the town hall, and this was a Thursday.

However, this was not to be so dull an evening after all, for Charlie had not sat there more than ten or fifteen minutes when a man came in, spoke at some length with the clerk, and in response to a nod from the latter marched over and took a chair at Charlie's side.

The newcomer was a tall, athletic-looking person, muffled in a huge fur coat, liberally sprinkled with snow, and distinguished by a brown Vandyke beard slightly shot with gray, and a pair of twinkling blue eyes. He wore a sealskin cap and big fur gloves, which he drew off, extending his hand to Charlie with the words:

"Mr. Cromwell?"

Charlie nodded, and the stranger went on:

"I'm Dr. T. H. Dawson, from New York," The two shook hands, and the doctor continued: "I've been spending a few days in Ridgefield, up north, and this afternoon I got a phone call from Dr. Cronk, of West Lockport, saying that one of his patients had appendicitis, and he wants me to come over and operate. Cronk's an old friend of mine—known him for years—and he must want me pretty badly; so I came down on the afternoon train that got here half an hour or so ago, and now I find this little jerkwater road is snowed up, and I can't get over there."

"Why doesn't Dr. Cronk operate?" asked Cromwell.

"Well, I fancy, from the way he spoke, it's rather a serious case—a bit beyond him, you know. And I've specialized in surgery, while he hasn't. Of course, if I can't make it, he'll do the job himself, but he said that if I could get there by midnight he thought the patient could be saved, but after that he had his doubts. And now I can't find any one to take me over; as I say, the railroad's snowed up, nobody 'll take a horse out for love or money, and I can't get any one with a car. But the clerk tells me you live over there, you know the road, and if anybody can make it, you can. How about it?"

Charlie shook his head.

"Nothing doing, doctor! I'm holed up here for the night myself. Why, shucks, there's places along the road that 'll be drifted four or five feet deep—'specially along Undercliff; this wind 'll have carried the snow in there to beat the band! No, I reckon Dr. Cronk 'll have to do his own operating to-night!"

Dr. Dawson pulled out a cigar-case, offered it to Charlie, and lit a cigar himself before he spoke again. Then he said, slowly and thoughtfully:

"Now, look here, Cromwell! you're a pretty husky chap, and I can make out to keep from stepping on my feet myself. And you look like a fellow with plenty of nerve. What's the matter with us two having a go at it? They tell me you've a good, powerful car; and I think we ought to be able to get through, some way or other. You see, it isn't as if I were asking you to take me to a bridge-party, or some such foolishness; this is a case of life or death. How about it?"

Charlie walked over to the window and looked out. Presently he came back and sat down.

"No," he said decidedly. "No. It's all very well for you; you go over and operate, and get a good fee, but I can't charge more than just about so much, and I can't afford to tear my car all to pieces. I'd get the front axle and the steering knuckles bent, likely the radiator stove in, maybe strip some of the gears and bust up the differential, maybe tear the whole rear end clean off. And the whole bus 'd be racked beyond guessing at the damage. It isn't as though Dr. Cronk couldn't operate, you know!"

"As I said, I fancy he thinks it a bit beyond him, or he wouldn't have sent for me in the first place. Well, if you won't, you won't, and that's all there is to it; the youngster 'll just have to take its chances!"

"Hell!" exploded Cromwell. "Why didn't you tell me at the start it was a kid? Sure I'll go; I got a kid o' my own! That is," he amended, "I'll try to go; I ain't nowise sure we'll make it, but we'll try."

He thought for a moment, then went on: "Look here, you go talk to Jimmie—that's the clerk over there—and get him to have 'em fix up half a dozen sandwiches—roast beef and sliced ham—maybe four of each—and a quart o' hot coffee. While they're doin' that you boil over to the drug-store an' get a thermos bottle for the coffee. You see, it's nowise unlikely we may have to spend the night in the snow half-way between here an' West Lockport; it's goin' to be plain hell along by Undercliff, you take my word for it. An' while that's goin' on I'll go out an' get some stuff; be back in ten or fifteen minutes."

At Puccini's garage around the corner, he found Puccini himself, just getting ready to go home.

"Hey, Puck," said Charlie, "I want two sets o' chains, thirty-four by four, half a gallon o' medium oil, and five gallons o' gas."

"Right!" said Puccini. "Where you goin' to-night, Charlie?"

" West Lockport.

" You're crazy as a bedbug! You'll never get half-way!"

" Maybe so; maybe not. Any way, I'm goin' to have a try at it. An' bedbugs ain't crazy, either; they're a mighty crafty form o' bird, so don't you lose any sleep over me!"

" Well, I reckon you think you know your own business. Here's your stuff; where do you want it?"

" Round at the Carlingford. Be a sport an' help me tote it, will you? An' I'm goin' to pinch your snow-shovel, too; you can get another to-morrow."

" Help yourself! I don't feel like refusin' a dyin' man's last request. What kind o' flowers do you want me to send?"

" You go to hell!" laughed Charlie; and together the two carried the things to the hotel.

Dr. Dawson was ready, and after filling the gas-tank, pouring in a couple of quarts of oil, filling the radiator, and putting in the food and the snow-shovel—armed with a second shovel which he found in the garage—and with one set of chains on the front wheels and two on the rear—Cromwell soon declared himself ready to start.

Off they went into the dark, the falling snow piling thick on the hood, and driving into the car. Occasionally they passed a lighted house; but for the most part, so dark and silent was the street, they might have been journeying over a desert. The going was not bad at first; the length of Main Street had been blown fairly clear of snow by the wind, so it was not until they turned the corner by the Methodist Church and swung out of town that there was any trouble.

To be sure, Charlie had to run in second; any attempt to shift into high resulted in laboring of the engine and threatened stalling, but otherwise it was all right till they struck a drift in front of the church. Here, after plowing ahead a few feet, the car stopped dead, the rear wheels spinning, and Charlie backed out, then sent the machine slamming on again in low, the engine racing furiously.

They gained a few feet in this fashion, then repeated the maneuver, gaining a bit each time before the weight of the snow exhausted their momentum. Eventually they got through the drift in a series of bucking plunges, and went on, Charlie remarking:

" That's hell on a machine, if you want to know; racks it all to pieces."

" I know," was the answer. " It hurts to do it, but there's no other way."

From the Methodist Church to Bull Bridge, a distance of about two miles, they had no further trouble; simply ran straight ahead in second, though it was more or less of a job to hold the car in the road. But at Bull Bridge they stuck. This is a new concrete bridge, with side walls about four feet high, and it was drifted level full—impossible to buck through. So out the two piled, each taking a shovel, and set to work to dig a track.

" Don't try to dig clear through to the ground," directed Charlie. " Just scoop enough off the top to let us buck through. Save time that way."

" All right," was the reply, and the two men bent their backs to the killing labor. The headlights bored into the night, and the snowflakes drifted down aslant the beams like white moths dancing about a flame.

For nearly an hour Cromwell and his passenger worked, throwing the snow to right and left, and, for all the cold, they were dripping with sweat when the job was done.

Clear of the bridge, they went on till they came, a mile beyond, to the foot of Johnson's Hill, where Charlie shifted to low and they began the climb.

Johnson's Hill is a stiff ascent in the best of circumstances; even in summer few cars make it in high, and wise drivers, coming down, brake on compression. Now, in the dark, with driving snow obscuring the vision—though Dr. Dawson kept the windshield-cleaner going constantly—with snow lying deep on the road, and occasional patches of ice where the wheels spun madly, it was desperately hard. From time to time they stalled utterly, and Charlie was forced to drop back and take it with a rush, gaining a few feet each time, and often he could go ahead only by racing his engine and

dropping the clutch in suddenly, fairly throwing the car forward. It hurt him to do it; a good mechanic loves an engine and hates to ruin it, but there was no other way.

In one of these rushes a rear chain snapped, flung loose, whipped furiously against the fender for a few seconds, then wound tight around the axle. Charlie and his passenger climbed out, and, taking the spotlight from its place on the windshield, they went to investigate. It cost them twenty minutes of hard labor to block the car against sliding down-hill, jack it up, and free the chain from the axle.

The chain freed, another quarter of an hour was spent in mending and replacing it, and they finally went on, the laboring engine complaining loudly, the water in the radiator boiling and gurgling, till at length they topped the crest of the hill. Here Charlie stopped.

"We'll let her cool off a bit," he said. "Let's get that cover off an' give her a drink."

The two piled snow into the radiator till it was full, then opened the thermos for a round of coffee for themselves.

"You get a magnificent view from here on a clear day," remarked Charlie.

"I'll take your word for it!"

"Reckon you'll have to. Let's go!"

The western slope of Johnson's Hill is a series of steep pitches alternating with level or nearly level benches, and is very winding. It was hard driving, though not desperate, for the downward slant aided the engine, and the snow did not lie so deep. The road here is heavily bordered with trees, oak and maple, larch and pine, and these kept the drift from blowing in, but the turns made it hard, especially since the track is narrow; also, the frozen ground was cut into deep ruts, for this side of the hill is almost always wet from springs in the woods.

Down the hill they slipped and swung, round curve after curve, till at length they ran out on the long stretch that leads to Undercliff, and plowed ahead to that dangerous spot.

Undercliff is well named. Here the road runs along the very side of the mountain, a mere track cut in a spur of the great Taconic range. Barely wide enough for one car, the road is no more than a shelf clinging to the hillside.

On the right the hill drops away not quite sheer for two hundred feet to the floor of the valley; the tops of the tallest trees are below the level of the road. Fairly straight the track lies, with but a slight turn at either end as one enters, and in summer it is a beautiful spot, one of the loveliest half-mile stretches in all the Taconic Hills; in winter it is, as Charlie said, "plain hell."

The fierce winds from the north, unchecked for twenty miles of sweep over open country, hurl the snow against the cliff, making the road at times impassable save on snow-shoes. As they swung around the curve at the upper end the headlights bored through the smothering dark, and Charlie groaned, then swore.

"I told you!" he said. "Here's where we dig!" For the snow was packed to half the height of the car.

Stepping on the foot-throttle, he slammed the car ahead as fast as ever he might, and the sturdy machine plunged far into the snow, throwing it in clouds over the top. But as the car checked it skidded, swerved sharply to the right, there came a splintering crash, and they jarred to a grinding stop with one front wheel hanging over the abyss.

Instantly Charlie reversed, the drivers spun, and they clawed back to safety, the headlights sweeping out into vacancy over the wide valley. Dr. Dawson caught one fleeting glimpse of snow-laden tree-tops far below, and Charlie mopped his forehead with his arm and gasped:

"Hell, that was sure one close call! Little bit more an' Puck's joke about sendin' flowers would 'a' come true, all right. Only they'd never 'a' found us till spring!"

"What happened?" asked the doctor.

"The old girl skidded on a piece o' ice and shot through the fence. This is a patch o' State Road, you know, an' there's guard rails to keep cars from goin' over. She sure saved us to-night, all right!" And taking the shovels, the two climbed out.

By now the snow had stopped falling and

the wind had died down, so that what they gained in digging they kept. But for all that, it was a heavy and wearisome job.

The snow had not drifted in uniformly. There were stretches where Charlie could send the machine bucking ahead for a hundred yards or more, and so save much shovel work. An hour went by thus, and another, Dr. Dawson urging haste, for the precious minutes were slipping past.

From time to time they stopped to breathe or to drink from the thermos bottle, then at it again, tossing the feathery snow over the rim of the road. Their backs ached, their hands were cramped, and their clothes were drenched.

Foot by foot and yard by yard they forged ahead, holding as near as might be to the fence, where the snow lay less deep. It seemed as though they had dug thus forever and would so dig to all eternity; they had lost the sense of time, of distance, and it came as a shock when, looking up, Charlie saw that he could break through.

And so at last they won free, climbed in, and slid down the slope that ends the Undercliff. Topping a little rise, they saw below them the lights of West Lockport, and shot downward to the town.

Main Street was fairly clear; the selectmen had had the snow-plow out during the evening. And as they swung into town Charlie laughed and pointed to the clock.

Four hours and a quarter to do eight miles! That comes pretty near being a record for the distance, doc. But it's just eleven thirty now, and I reckon you can operate by midnight, like you said. What part o' town do you want to go to?"

"No. 74 Railroad Avenue," was Dr. Dawson's answer.

"*What?*" gasped Charlie, turning sick and faint. "*What!*"

"I think that's right. Yes," and Dr. Dawson leaned forward to look at his memorandum book by the light of the dash-lamp. "Yes, No. 74 Railroad Avenue."

"Good God!" cried Charlie. "Danny!"

The Picture on the Wall

by J. Breckenridge Ellis

CHAPTER XXX.

THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE.

"STOP, stop, John, we are having too many courses for our dinner! Say something in English and I'll answer."

"Tell me about the homefolks. It may seem strange, but you do seem just homefolks to me, the only homefolks I ever had, after my mother. You were that to me from the minute you took me in, that golden afternoon when the wind was blowing and the sun was shining and to you it was just March. Why aren't you and your mother living at the old home-place on the fat of the land? I don't think keeping lodgers agrees with either of you."

"Yes it does. There's some money in it, and with my job as a typewriter down town, we're perfectly independent."

John thought this over briefly, then said, "I was right; Mr. Warring is dead."

"Yes."

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for October 30.

"When—" he caught his breath, and she saw him brush his eyes secretly. Finding himself detected, he smiled tremulously. "Do you know, Virgie, I didn't dream that I should have cared so much. Well, I do. When—did it happen?"

"Less than a week after you left us."

"I like your expressing it that way. 'Left us' sounds so respectable. Did he get better and then worse?"

"No, never any better. He never knew about you—that you were not—you know what I mean."

"I certainly do, Virgie."

"He was too low even to miss you. He thought you were still with us. Lucia held his hand at the last; but I don't think he knew. He passed away in his sleep."

He leaned over the table to ask, guardedly, "Did you ever hear—Did Lucia tell you about what I told her just before I went away? I mean—that little bottle—"

Virgie whispered, "Yes," and looked at him intently.

His voice grew stronger in sudden protest: "But didn't anybody do anything about it?"

"She told the doctor, but he refused to take it seriously. She told Eugene Ware because you had referred her to him."

"Well—he seemed a man of sense, whatever else—"

"Eugene was very nice about it."

"Nice!" he echoed scornfully. "Nice, in a matter of life-or-death!"

"I mean—he treated Lucia all right; but the trouble was he—he—"

"Didn't believe it. Well, that was natural enough. But poor Mr. Warring! I could have saved him—if only they had believed in me."

"But Lucia believed in you, and when she found that Eugene would do nothing she determined to watch at the door and save him. But Eugene had spoken to Mr. Glaxton about it and never once could Lucia catch him off his guard. He pretended not to know why she was in the hall at midnight. And then—Mr. Warring died."

"Didn't that make people ask questions?"

"No—it had been expected for days. And besides, other things came up to stir the whole town. Changes come so quickly; and after they come, it is hard to take back one's mind to old conditions."

"Changes? What changes? Oh—you mean Lucia and Eugene?"

"No, I mean the home was broken up. Do you remember my telling you once that Mr. Glaxton had discovered a secret that gave him a hold on me?"

"I remember that everybody had a secret. Yes, I remember about yours."

"It was on account of what he had found out that he could force me to tell about—about your having been in Alice's house on Troost."

"I remember. I wish I could think myself as polite in private life as the papers represented me as a burglar!"

"My secret was this—" Virgie pushed back her plate in the stress of the moment, then began eating again because the savory food he had ordered was irresistible. "Listen, John: When Mr. Warring, that good, good man, out of a sentiment for old times and from gratitude for being taken care of in his orphanhood, hunted up my mother—his foster-sister—I was too little to know what my mother found at once. It was this: Lucia wasn't Mr. Warring's daughter."

John shook his head. "I don't seem to get it, Virgie; try again."

"After his son was kidnaped, he and his wife adopted a baby-girl, meaning to raise it as their very own."

She paused for breath, but John, staring at her with pale face, offered no comment.

"It was only later that I found out the truth. That was the secret Mr. Glaxton forced from me, how, I hardly know. I was afraid to let mother find out I'd told him; afraid and ashamed. And he promised to keep the secret, except at such times as he threatened me with it. Oh, it was a horrible situation. Whenever I thought of it, I was in a nightmare. I had that to dread day and night: that the one Lucia revered as her father was really not related to her—" She broke off confusedly.

"So!" John muttered at last. "Neither Lucia nor I—Poor Mr. Warring!"

"Mr. Glaxton could make me tell any-

thing by holding that over my head. That's how he learned about you. It was for Lucia's sake that I broke the promise. Do you remember I said if you knew why I told, you'd think I did right?"

"And you were quite right, Virgie. I'm sure you wouldn't have told from any other reason, dear Virgie. And anyway, it doesn't matter about me any more. That came before the war and belongs to another age. Poor Mr. Warring, lying there at the mercy of a devil with no child of his own! I'm thankful he believed in me to the last. Instead of doing him harm, after all I must have given him a little comfort.

"But poor Lucia! I see everything. Glaxton, as nearest of kin, has come into the property. I suppose there had never been a legal adoption?"

"Nothing of the sort. And he always put off making a will. He meant to; but you see he was afraid the moment he did, the secret of her parentage would get out."

"So Glaxton turned all of you out of the house." His teeth clenched ominously.

She nodded. "Now you understand why mother and I are glad to be as well situated as we are."

"Virgie, it's great! Nothing like living on your own, after all. As soon as possible I mean to settle down to good steady work and maybe some day, when I'm forgotten by the rest of the world, we may all live in the same block. That would be fine, wouldn't it! All living in the same block —Well, I suppose Eugene Ware is still an intimate friend of Glaxton's?"

"I suppose so."

"Don't see how Lucia can expect happiness in an arrangement of that sort."

"But it's nothing to her," Virgie said with a sudden grin that left him blank with amazement.

He protested, "It can't help being something to her, the kind of person Glaxton is, and the way he's treated all of you, for him to be an intimate friend of her—" he swallowed to make the word come easier —"her husband."

Virgie's grin became so broad that she would have seemed remarkably ugly if he had not suddenly found her beautiful. "Her husband!" she mocked.

John started up from the table, making the dishes rattle. "Isn't he?" he called loudly, heedless of deprecatory glances from neighboring tables.

"Don't go over the top, John; stay with me in the trenches." He subsided simply. "Nobody is her husband."

"Look here, Virgie, when we met, I'm afraid I didn't let you see how glad I was —let's shake hands all over again."

"No, I'm hungry still; and people are watching us. And besides, I'm not the one you want to shake hands with."

"Where is that girl I want to shake hands with?—at your mother's? If we've finished dinner—"

"But we haven't. I haven't been fed in as many branches of the service as you, and my appetite is still young and inquisitive. And Lucia is not in Kansas City. She lives in a small town in Kansas not far from Ottawa."

"Kansas! And to think that I was in a cantonment there! What is she doing in Kansas? Can it be that Glaxton has turned her out of her house without a competency?"

"Like mother and myself she is working for a living. After they dismissed Brother Tredmill from his church—"

"Dismissed! And he worked for those people like a slave."

"Maybe that's why they thought no more of him. After he was dismissed he went to the little town in Kansas; soon after he and Alice Klade were married; and Lucia is boarding with them. They'd be glad to have her as a guest, but you know how proud Lucia is."

"I guess I do!"

"So Lucia teaches school and during her holidays spends half her time with us."

John stared at the opposite wall, hearing nothing of the sounds and seeing nothing of the changing sights of the restaurant-scene in which his part seemed oddly unreal. At last he turned bruskly toward the other:

"What did you think of me when you learned I'd been playing the imposter? What did Aunt Hildegarde—Mrs. Abbottsfield say? How did Lucia feel? I can imagine Glaxton trumpeting the news at the breakfast table; and the search for me

with the police—finding the letters and photographs in a corner of my room, and Mr. Warring too weak to be questioned about his old trunk."

"I can tell you exactly how I felt," Virgie said, "as if the ground had melted away and I was falling with no idea of the distance I'd have to drop. As to mother she just kept repeating hysterically that she never had believed you looked like the picture on the wall. Alice regarded it as a dreadful practical joke of her Polite Burglar. But Lucia had nothing to say. She kept to her room and bed to avoid us all."

John asked anxiously, "Was she really ill?"

"What does it matter? She's well now. All that, as you say, was before the war. It was Brother Tredmill who made me see things in their true light. He said you'd pretended to be John Lyle Warring, not for gain or adventure, but to save yourself. Of course it was at our expense, but I forgave you. I just couldn't blame you, John. You merited a great deal of blame, but there wasn't anybody to administer it. The more Mr. Glaxton raved, the gladder we were you'd escaped. The trouble was, we just thought too much of you! And I can't blame you even now. When you give one of your smiles, the world lights up and everything's all right. Ah, that smile of yours is an awful responsibility! If you don't live up to it, it ought to be canned."

"Virgie I was born with it and can't help myself, but I'm going to try to use it fairly. Do you think Lucia has really forgiven me? Do you think she'd receive me if I went to that little town in Kansas not far from Ottawa?"

"You see how glad I am to meet you once more. Well, Lucia also is human."

"Virgie, you're an angel!"

She smiled grimly. "Oh, is that what you mean? And Lucia is a woman! I appreciate the difference. All right, John, I trust I know my place. What do you mean to do—after my appetite is appeased?"

"Go straight to Kansas. Well, no, not exactly straight." He took up his knife and fork only to lay them aside. "Is Glaxton living in that house in Lagville?"

"He and Simmons have it to themselves."

"And poor Lucia working herself to death!" he groaned. "Teaching school. How dreadful!"

"John, how can you say that? There's nothing so good as being independent, and 'living on your own'."

His face was grim. "I'd think the townpeople would rise up. The very stones should cry out!" Then shortly: "Has he altered the house—or garden?"

She shook her head.

Then he told her his plan. On leaving Lagville he had written to the Rev. Harry Tredmill, inclosing a sealed note to Mr. Warring with instructions that it should either be delivered into Mr. Warring's hand by the minister, or destroyed. It could not have been delivered. In that sealed envelope had been explicit directions for finding the new hiding-place of the money-box. The secret was still John's alone. He meant to go to Lagville, dig up the treasure and take it to Lucia. At least that much of the Warring property should be hers. By no moral right could it be diverted to Glaxton's uses. Of course John would be obliged to disguise himself and work in secret. If he were discovered digging in the garden, or carrying away the box of banknotes—

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE HIDDEN MONEY-BOX.

IT was a cloudy moonless night when John pulled up the river from the town where he had procured the skiff—a small collection of scattered houses about two miles below Lagville. He had chosen this means of returning to the scene of his happiest days in order to avoid attracting attention and have the advantage of the current should his departure become a flight for liberty.

When the dark masses of trees thinned away and the lights of the village peeped at him beyond the bottomlands, memories grew more vivid than the living world. They threatened to get between his eyes and what he had to do, for, gazing upstream,

he saw the bluff towering above the level dark, and seemed to find on its jutting rock the shining figure of Lucia.

The hour was too critical, however, not to call for his keenest perceptions and the swiftest play of his wits and he resolutely banished from mind all but the one thing in prospect: the recovery of the box of banknotes.

Out of the rush of the current he found a little cove where weeping willows dipped their myriad fingers in the water and here he tied up. After scrambling up the steep bank he waited under the trees till it was nearly twelve o'clock, hearing nothing but the murmur of the river and the occasional barking of dogs with now and then some indistinguishable sound from the sleeping village.

When he reached Lagville—which for only a few weeks had known the passing of his feet, but for three years had been the setting of his fondest dreams—how dear to him was every brick of the humblest walls, every plank of the rattling sidewalks! The trees that lined the streets on either hand sighed in the warm wind for the summers that were spent, and John sighed with them, thinking that days could never come like the days that were gone.

As he passed under a street arc light, echoes rang along the shop-fronts, clapping sounds, startling as pistol-shots produced merely by the approach of a single figure. John hastened toward the pedestrian in order to get the light at his back. Nearer, he recognized Eugene Ware.

Ware, knowing street-passers in Lagville at so late an hour were extremely rare, stared curiously at John, seeing only a fellow dressed as a day laborer with a spade over his shoulder. He uttered a perfunctory greeting which was returned with gruff indistinctness.

John's first thrill of suspense was gone, but he turned off at the first corner to make his way toward the residential district, leaving Ware well on his way to his hotel lodgings.

When the Warring residence came in sight he would not permit himself to dwell on the day of his first arrival, a fugitive adventurer; after he had climbed the side fence into the garden he resisted the desire to linger for a time in the summer-house, where Lucia and he had talked for the last time at just such an hour of the night.

Moving with infinite caution—for a light was burning its warning from the sitting-room—he crept to the shrubbery in which he had left the box of bank-notes safely buried. Naturally he was tormented by doubts and fears. Of course Glaxton had secured the secret key hidden behind the landscape painting, and Mr. Warring had explained its purpose. The lawyer was sure that John had dug up the box from under the summer-house floor and disposed of it. Glaxton had argued that the reason for Simmons's dismissal on the night of Mr. Warring's journey had been for the purpose of giving John a free field. Had he suspected that the box remained on the premises? In that case, he and Simmons must have dug in the garden from one end to the other.

Although it was quite dark, John did not hesitate, except to avoid making a noise as he pushed his way through the thorny brambles to the center of the clump of bushes. He began to dig very gently, while the rushing murmur of the wind in trees and undergrowth filled his ears. The steady light from the down-stairs window watched like a relentless eye. It seemed to him a long time, though it was not long, before the blade of his spade smote against a metallic surface. At the contact there came a wrenching of his nerves as if the iron had struck into his flesh. The box was there. Had it rested undisturbed for three years in its place, or had Glaxton found and emptied it, and left it in mockery?

He drew it from the hole, brushed away the dirt, and tried to test it in his anxious hand. It seemed as heavy as it had been. No—yes. Certainly it was not empty. And not certainly, either, for the metal was heavy. And paper of no value might have been substituted for the fifty thousand dollars. The desire was almost irresistible to force open the box with the edge of the spade and make sure of his success or failure. But he checked the impulse. How could he know that somebody was not in the garden at this moment—possibly sit-

ting in the summer-house? And that warning light told him that the household was not asleep. If any one should surprise him in the shrubbery kneeling over the box with the banknotes lying in counted piles upon the ground. How cold and hard seemed to him the light glaring from across the lawn!

He weighed the box first in one hand then in the other and decided it was lighter than when he drew it from Mr. Warring's trunk. After all, there was only one thing to do, and to delay in carrying away the box might involve him in irreparable trouble. While drifting down the river in his boat he could examine its contents.

He thrust the spade well under the shrubbery, thinking he could have no further use of it, and was feeling his way to the open ground, still, however, with undiminished caution, when the front door of the house was thrown open and two men stepped out upon the porch. For a moment the hall light was full upon them; they were men each in his way so individual that John even at that distance had no difficulty in recognizing Glaxton with his dark smile, immensely at his ease, and Blearstead, his features writhing and twisting in the stress of passion.

They turned for a moment before coming out upon the lawn and their faces were brightly illuminated. To John, the man of refinement was the more contemptible. In his criminal nature was a loathsome calculation unknown to the brutal highwayman. Blearstead could not have disguised his enmity long enough to overcome an enemy by guile. He could take a life to save his own or to gratify a blind spasm of rage, but he could not commit murder with the bloodless deliberation John believed Glaxton had exercised toward his benefactor. He recalled Glaxton's dark malignancy while dropping the secret drug—surely it was poison—into the invalid's night-glass. Thinking of that night, Glaxton's smiling countenance now oppressed him with the sickness of strong revulsion. The very handsomeness of his face and delicate grace of his movements caused him instinctively to press back among the bushes as from something unclean.

Glaxton, followed sullenly by Blearstead, led the way across the lawn to the garden. John heard his contemptuous bidding—

"Finish what you have to say out here. You are so noisy the servants will think the house full of bandits."

John reached stealthily for the spade that he might, in case of need, have a silent weapon of defense.

Though of the two men the lawyer was the more despicable, Blearstead was by far the more dangerously violent, and John wondered at the lawyer's temerity in wantonly provoking him, attributing it to a singular lack of perception in one who had always appeared astute.

"I don't care who hears me," Blearstead ejaculated with the loud blustering John knew so well. "This thing has got to come to a point, Glaxton. I've been to your house as often as I want to come."

"A good deal oftener than my wishes," remarked the other.

"And it ain't safe for me, either. I tell you, this has got to end."

"I agree most heartily."

"And after I get here you put me off and put me off—I hardly know how. But when I get back home and think it over, I see all your dope isn't nothing but wind. Bring it to a point, Glaxton."

"I'll do it, my man; I'll end it for you right now."

"But for me," Blearstead rumbled on, too cumbrous and self-centered to notice the other's words or manner, "you'd be out of all this—I mean, your house, your lands, your money. What would you 'a' got if it hadn't been me told you John was not a Warring? This property would 'a' gone to him, and him and me would have shared it together."

"He refused to share with you," Glaxton said lightly. "That's why you took me in as your partner; because he wouldn't play your game."

"You'd never once 'a' guessed that he wasn't Warring's flesh-and-blood heir. It was me made you wise to them facts. Of course you was stealing all you could up to then, but you couldn't have gobbled up the whole million without me. And I'm going to have my share!"

"I've given you more than you deserved. After all, what did you do but tell the truth? And, if it comes to that, what was the truth?—that you patched up a rascally plan with your nephew and gave him the baby-clothes that belonged to a dead child. As for your claim that the nursemaid drowned the infant, and that you got the suit-case from your brother, I've no doubt that you yourself were the kidnaper, and that you, not the nursery maid, killed the helpless innocent. No, you've been paid all you're going to get. The fact is, I ought to put you behind the bars where you belong. Just go ahead and tell the authorities how you and Cleek cooked up that conspiracy, and see what happens to you! Yes, I'll bring things to a point. This ends it, my friend."

Blearstead uttered a furious oath. "You think I can't do anything to you. That's where you're wrong, Edgar Glaxton. I can do something to you, all right, and I'm going to do it right now."

John, familiar with all of Blearstead's moods, was thrilled by the conviction that Glaxton's last hour had struck. But he remained perfectly motionless, not so much for concealment as to let justice take its course.

"Get off my grounds," Glaxton said scornfully. "What have I to fear from a coward like you? Miserable creature, you wouldn't dare lift your coarse hand against one so much better than you. Dust of my feet, leave the place at once before I drag you to the ditch." He laughed maddeningly. "You poor braggart! There is so much of you that you look like a man; but in body and spirit you're nothing but a beast!"

Blearstead gave a mad bellow as if to corroborate this description and bent his head to rush furiously forward. But at the same moment a club from behind descended upon his head with a sickening thud.

John had been too much engrossed in waiting for Glaxton's downfall to observe a tall, thin form slip from the greater darkness of the summer-house.

"Beat him up, Simmons," said Glaxton with a cruel laugh, "but be sure not to kill him."

John now understood that Glaxton had goaded the man to fury in order to make him insensible to Simmons's approach.

"Drag him to the summer-house," Glaxton went on coolly, "and tie him so he can't move. But there's no use to gag him—no danger of the fellow's calling for help. I'd sit in there with him to make sure of his entertainment, but I find his nearness distasteful to me. When he's secured, go for the sheriff as we planned yesterday, but I wouldn't be in too great a hurry. He might as well have a quiet half-hour to meditate on the nice home the State is going to give him for a good many years. I'll go to the house and smoke a cigar—is he hearing me?"

"Yes, sir, he's at himself."

"I'll smoke a good cigar and look over my papers—the deeds to my property, the title to this estate, the mortgages on nearby farms. I wish I could have satisfied the fellow, but the more he has, the more he wants. Simmons, I was so delighted when the creature told me John Walters was an impostor that out of my impulsiveness—and I'm not naturally impulsive, am I, Simmons?"

"I don't know exactly what that is, sir, but I don't expect you are, sir."

"I should have had him thrown in jail then and there," Glaxton mused regretfully, "but I was so grateful for the news that I weakened. Let this be a lesson to you, Simmons; never let your gratitude get the better of your judgment."

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir."

Blearstead made a movement to rise and the club descended mercilessly. He fell back with a heavy groan.

"Now," Simmons snarled, "will you lie quiet?"

In spite of the injury done him, John's indignation was stirred hotly. "After all," he thought, "he is my uncle—and Glaxton is a murderer."

"Don't kill him, Simmons," Glaxton said, strolling toward the house. "A corpse is one of the most awkward mementoes to dispose of you ever saw."

In the dense gloom, Simmons muttered: "I'll beat you within an inch of your life if you give me any more trouble." He

began dragging the huge form toward the summer-house.

Apparently Blearstead was passive in his hands, for no sounds of blows came to John, and presently he saw Simmons slinking away in the direction of town. He had gone for the sheriff. Glaxton was already in the house and a shade had been dropped over the light at the window; he was overlooking his papers. The garden was silent.

After the briefest interval of caution, John, with the tin box safe in his bosom, slipped to the summer-house and explored in the darkness for the body of his uncle. Blearstead was secured by arms and legs to an upright in the wall of the structure. He did not move or utter a sound, thinking, no doubt, that Simmons had returned to gloat over his helplessness.

"Know my voice?" John whispered. Blearstead quivered from head to foot, fearfully shaken by recognition of his deliverer. "Don't be afraid," John added, mean time severing the bandages; "there was a time when I thought that if I could get you tied up as you are now, it would start my millennium. But somehow, now that the thing has happened to you, it makes my blood boil. You have done everything in your power to destroy me, but the power simply wasn't yours to finish the job. Then you tried to sell me into bondage, but Joseph wouldn't stay in the pit. After all, you are not the meanest man on earth; you'll have to give the blue ribbon to Glaxton and just wear the red. And, besides, you are mother's brother. And there you are, free. And not much time to lose! Can you walk? I'm afraid you're pretty badly beaten up. Lean on me."

Blearstead grunted hoarsely. "Do you mean it, kid?"

"Just like that."

To Blearstead, the thing was incomprehensible, but he recognized sincerity in the other's voice and made no delay in taking advantage of the opportunity.

He leaned on the proffered arm, and limped out into the garden, choking back a groan. "Where are you going, boy?"

"Where you are not. I'm getting you off free, but I'm under no delusions about you, uncle. You'll have to travel alone."

"Guess I can make it," the big fellow muttered with a plaintive quality in his voice which struck John as grotesquely pathetic as if, for all his bulk and long career of evil-doing, he was after all but an overgrown boy. "Kid, you'll never be sorry for this."

John said cheerfully: "I know you'd sell me out to-morrow if you had the chance, but I'm counting on the same old Mrs. Luck that rocked my cradle to keep me from putting your gratitude to the test. Careful over this fence—better throw more weight on me, I've been soldiering and know how to bear up. Give my regards to Bettie. And tell her father and Cleek that if famine gets in the land and they have to come down into Egypt for corn, ask for Pharaoh's right-hand man and see what he has for 'em. Do you get that biblical line, uncle?"

Blearstead gave a hoarse sound not to be definitely classified. After they had reached the end of the street he said: "I'm afraid I'm pretty badly in, John. But if anything could have braced me up, you'd 'a' done it!"

"Look here," John suddenly determined, "I'm going to give you a sure way of getting away. I came in a boat, and I'll skip out the best way I can. I'm tough and young—and the boat is yours. I'll get you to the river before Glaxton has half finished his cigar."

CHAPTER XXXII.

LUCIA ON THE WAGON-BRIDGE.

HAVING learned from Tredmill exactly when Lucia was accustomed, on her return from teaching school, to cross the wagon-bridge in the maple grove, John posted himself there about four o'clock in the afternoon and at last had the joy of seeing her dear form swinging along the country road.

Though the grove touched the border of the little Kansas town, it wore an air of singular remoteness where somehow the singing of birds sounded louder than the hammering on an anvil and the sawing of wood that came from not distant streets.

Through the branches could be seen a red blur which, on closer inspection, proved a brick church, while high up among the bird-nests a pool of water shining in the light and seemingly caught in the crotch of a tree—that was some distant window in the east, answering back the taunting sun. But despite these glimpses and the calling of children at play, John felt that Lucia was entering into an island solitude to share with him its May loveliness.

She looked tired, yet he knew it was less than a mile from her country school to lodgings at the minister's. Doubtless there were troublesome pupils under her care—was there ever a district school that had not among its number at least one child to embitter the flavor of the day's work? And of course the close of school never finds a teacher with the springiness of nerves that react to the first months of mental labor.

His heart yearned over the tired girl. Of course there was comfort in the thought that vacation days were at hand, but it was now that her limbs moved languidly, now that her face showed pallor beneath the bright tresses and now that he had loved her as he had never loved before, and realized as never before how she had been beaten to earth by his betrayal of her trust.

Lucia was startled at sight of a soldier on the bridge. She had seen khaki everywhere else without once looking for John in the uniform, but now, oddly enough, the waiting figure caused her to think of Lagville. She no longer looked for John. At first she had been terribly afraid lest Glaxton should find him, later had despaired of any one finding him. He might be dead. If living, how could he dare Glaxton's remorseless enmity by showing himself? And certainly he could not be standing there on the bridge watching her as if she were a broken fragment of his heart that needed only to be put in place to make his being complete.

Then all at once like the rushing of a warm wind across the earth that late frosts have chilled, came the certitude that once at least in life the brightest dream is not too bright to come true; and her face showed gladness, like the glow of a perfect rose after the dash of summer rain has passed.

He hardly knew how he had expected to be received; apologetic phrases, sentences of eager deprecation and excuse had floated vaguely in his mind. Whatever might be said in his defense, the truth remained that he had not scrupled to deceive her in the intimacy of the home. Yet she looked glad.

"Lucia—the impostor has come."

"I was an impostor, too," she flashed, her hand in his.

"Yes—but you believed yourself to be his daughter; and I knew!"

"You were as much kin to him as I," she insisted. All his forebodings had been needless. She was just glad. It was worth much—it was worth everything to have a friend like Lucia! He had withheld confidences, he had been obliged to let the years slip by, but the Lucia of his farewell and the Lucia of his greeting was the same.

"Virgie told me," he stammered, hardly conscious of his words, so amazing was the wonder of her unchangeableness. "That's what brings me back. You've lost everything. Oh, Lucia, you are so thin! She told me about that school. It gave me the courage to come to you. How could I stay away? May I stay now?"

She leaned against the bridge's huge inverted "V" and looked at him fixedly, whispering: "But you wouldn't dare."

"Why not—now that Glaxton has everything? He'd commit any crime for property, but I'm not in his way. He's a miser. He wouldn't spend his money to run down a man not in his way. I don't believe he knows what genuine hatred is; he's just a mountain of self-interest. We're exactly where he wants us—out of the house that is yours by right. As long as he is left in peace to enjoy the fruits of his murder—it comes to that—I have nothing to fear. If you had your rights, there in Lagville, or if we hadn't learned the facts about your parentage, oh, Lucia, you'd never have seen me again!"

She looked over the railing with her gaze on the slender stream trickling over its shelving bed. "Why?" she murmured protestingly.

"But I was the impostor. You, the heiress, could have had nothing to do with a homeless wanderer, a false claimant." There was silence between them while the stream laughed over the ledges. Then he exclaimed: "Now that you have been robbed of everything that makes life easy I have come; and I can tell you what couldn't be told in your home—I mean, about my love—"

There was a breathless pause, then Lucia raised her head to look at him while blushes dyed her cheeks. And he saw the answer to the question still struggling in his heart. The stream laughed musically over the tiny waterfalls and bubbled away to green meadows. The occupants of the desert island were in each other's arms.

"Oh, John," she murmured, "you are so noble!"

"Noble?" He was bewildered.

"Yes!" She looked up at him, then dropped her eyes, then again let him see the glory of her love shining in her sky of blue. "You never took advantage of my ignorance, not once. I thought sisters felt as I felt; and I am so proud of you—it makes me know how fully you are to be trusted that not once—no, not once—"

Then he did. Many times.

They walked up and down the bridge exactly as if there were no road across it to somewhere. Sometimes they paused to lean over the railing; it was like magic to see their two faces in the water dissolve into composite picture. Nobody came. How kind fate can sometimes be! Is it to disarm us that we may forget how keen may fall her thrust? The wagon-bridge seemed built for two pairs of feet that had nowhere to go.

How much there was to be said—how many reminiscences, how many plans! And how many times must be repeated the wonder of their happiness, the pledges of their future! Of course they had their dreams to exchange.

"I can't help hoping," he said, "that your father—no, I'll call him our father, since he belongs equally to us both—that our father made a will after all, and some day it will be unearthed, and you'll have everything."

"Mr. Glaxton would destroy it."

"It might be hidden away in a strong box at the bank," John protested.

"Father — our father — wouldn't have dared hide it in the bank, because Mr. Glaxton knew all his business there. If there was a will it might be"—she smiled at the conceit—"buried in the garden, let us say, at dead of night, in some secret spot."

"Lucia," he exclaimed, "you're half a witch! You've almost surprised my great secret. I reached town to-day at an early hour and kept out of sight till you had left for school. Then I descended upon Brother Tredmill and Alice with a certain box that your father and I hid as you described. There wasn't a will in it; we may find a will later. I hope so. But the box wasn't empty. At Brother Tredmill's advice, I deposited its contents in an Ottawa bank, getting back about an hour ago."

He handed her a deposit slip.

"But what does it mean?" she gasped. "John, what *does* it mean?"

"It means, darling Lucia, that we are not going to teach school a great deal. And I don't think Virgie will wear out her fingers at a typewriter. It means we are to be absolutely happy. It isn't every love story that ends with fifty thousand dollars!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BY WAY OF POSTSCRIPT.

THE world had forgotten John and Lucia—happy John and Lucia! Interest in individuals no matter how picturesque had been engulfed in deeper absorption in international affairs.

Even in Lagville, people accustomed to seeing Glaxton moving about the Warring yard and garden and looking from the Warring doors and windows, allowed the story of the bold impostor to fade from mind. If there had been whispers of tamperings with mortgages, of the stretching of power of attorney, of designs upon a defenseless old man, they were heard no more.

Pity for the adopted daughter whose adoption had not been legalized persisted, but only among those who disliked the

usurper. And this pity, warm and sincere as in some cases it was, led to no act looking toward Lucia's relief. One did not know what had become of her except, vaguely, that she " was living with Alice," and was obliged to work for a living.

She had been such a sweet girl, unspoiled by wealth or position, full of cheerful sprightliness, kindly, compassionate. Having everything, she had not reminded you by so much as an air that you were a poor scrubby wretch dodging and racing along on borrowed capital. And now, stripped of all that had made up her life, it really seemed that something should be done to give her a footing in the world of work and disillusionment.

But of course one did nothing; one had one's own troubles, one's own self to take care of. Besides, there was the preacher who had been dismissed because nothing could keep him from stirring to the light town evils instead of leaving the sediment at the bottom of casual affairs—he and his bride, if what one heard was true, had opened their doors to the dispossessed.

Some sympathy Lucia had forfeited by her treatment of Eugene Ware. He was related to almost every family in Lagville that mattered. Poor Eugene! He was married now, married to a girl of very little money, but with what everybody agreed to be a good complexion. She would never have anything like what Lucia should have inherited—or even was born with; for when in speaking of her looks complexion was said, all was said. And it was not as if Eugene had refused to give Lucia a last chance. Even after it appeared that Glaxton would get everything, he had renewed his offer of marriage. That she should refuse him then had seemed preposterous. What did she expect?

Eugene Ware had been treated badly, and naturally his relatives never thought of Lucia without thinking of that. It would not be fair to any of these to say that in Lagville there was rejoicing over the downfall of the heiress; but since destiny had seen to her punishment without asking assistance, it did a good deal to reconcile one to the meager bank account that came with that complexion.

In the mean time, John and Lucia were married. They had not waited one day after the closing of the district school. Why should they with fifty thousand dollars in the bank and their hearts full of love? Few lovers have waited so long!

The ceremony was as quiet as possible. Though convinced that Glaxton would not again try to run him down, there is nothing to be gained in tempting the devil to do his worst. Tredmill performed the ceremony with zest sufficient to indicate that a similar occasion had left him undismayed, though then he enacted one of the leading rôles. Immediately after the ceremony the bridal pair left for Mexico without rice.

John hoped beyond the border to take up some of the threads torn from his hands by the war and, after all, it was possible that his wife, in spite of the obscurity of the little Kansas town, might have attracted dangerous attention from which the mountains would offer safe retreat.

Several months after the wedding, the Rev. Mr. Tredmill received the following letter from the Lagville sheriff:

DEAR BROTHER TREDMILL:

It is very important as the enclosure will show you, to find out as soon as possible what has become of John Walters. We have sent out tracers in every direction and are hoping that you know something of his whereabouts for I remember he was one of your friends during the church trouble. I hope you got a good job where you are and everything pleasant. I voted against you as you know, but it was to keep peace. We haven't any preacher now, but we are united. And, please tell me what you can about John Walters. Wire his address. Of course you read in the papers about Glaxton getting shot through the heart and dying on the spot, and how Simmons winged his attacker. The fellow that killed Glaxton and got shot by Simmons to death's door is named Blearstead. The enclosure is Blearstead's dying statement, I mean, a copy of the same. Wire me if you can shed any light on John Walters's hiding-out place.

As Tredmill had not heard of the Lagville tragedy he was intensely excited and called Alice to read with him the typewritten document claiming to be a copy of the original manuscript in the office of the prosecuting attorney:

Jim Blearstead, now at point of death from a bullet fired by Simmons to avenge the death of Glaxton at Blearstead's hands, asks me, Bob Plackett, sheriff of Lagville County of the State of Missouri, in the presence of the witnesses signed below, to take down his dying statement, made in due form by his own free will at his request, under oath, as follows, to wit:

"John Walters thinks I'm his uncle, which right there he has another guess coming. He thinks the woman who raised him from a baby was his mother and a sister of me, wrong again. That woman was the nurse-maid at Warring's when his baby was abducted, and her and me is who done it, us no kin, but working together for the dough we never got. I never meant no real harm. We was going to squeeze the old man for what juice there was in him, then hand back the kid as safe as a safety-pin. But the cops butted in and it was a scream whether the kid or us was going to be up in the air. It got so hot for us that I decided to throw the kid in the river, for I das't be found with him about, so there simply wasn't nothing else to be done as you can see for yourself, though hating it like the devil, for if there's anybody got a heart it's Blearstead. Nothing vicious or low about me. But Lizzie White—that's the maid—disappeared with the kid; sloped in order to save his life, for give him back she couldn't without putting her neck in the pen. Or the noose. She'd 'a' restored him if she'd dared. She was that weak. As weak a woman to tackle an iron-hard job like that I never met or hope to. But listen to me talking about hoping to meet anybody! I know my checks are all in with my balance in red. It's just a habit a fellow has of saying things. If I could have another chance I'd show you a different man before I died. But what's the use? I never found a trace to Lizzie White till three years ago when she was living in Kansas City calling herself Ann Walters. I claimed her as my sister Ann and she couldn't kick out of the traces, for I had the goods on her. But she didn't live an awful long time after that. What I wanted wasn't to harm her, which I didn't, but to work the boy for the heir scheme; which I done. I found her taking in all kinds of hand-work, bound and determined to make a gentleman out of the boy for to ease her conscience. She couldn't give him back to his dad, though she 'lowed to leave him a letter telling all, on her death. I ain't saying she changed her mind, but maybe I done away with the letter. Anyway, she killed herself making John a gentleman, which he was by nature; as I may say, if you can get me, it was blowed in the bottle. I saw she was wasting away to fatten her conscience and I tried to show her how she was wrong, and that life is give us for living. It wasn't no use, she died, and the boy wouldn't take to my line of business. I got a strangle-holt on him by putting him in a bad light and then, to get shed of the cops he consented to pretend to be what he was all along, you know: Warring's son. But he wouldn't divvy up with me on the old man's spuds, so I tried to wring it out of Glaxton. He couldn't be wrung and that's why I done for *him*, and glad of it, he deserved no less. I got to tell you that there was one time when Glaxton would of doused my glim if it hadn't been for John. He cut the ropes, and right on top of my giving him away, so I told him he'd never be sorry for it, and I bet you he never ain't. This here statement will show him what I meant by them words, though if he hadn't shown me that good streak when I needed it, I'd have caved in with all this unsaid and it would have been good night for him. But this will put him on Easy Street and whenever he thinks of me he can't help but know that there was some good in me after all and if I'd had half a chance I'd 'a' made good yet. But the doctor says it's no use. And I feel it coming on, like a cold river rolling up about my neck. If I could have had another chance—there's a good deal in me you can't see, but I know it's there. And John 'll know it. And let him be told that every word I speak now is cutting me like a knife. There was a lot of good in Blearstead, but I wouldn't let it come out; I seemed ashamed of it, somehow; I'm awful proud of every good bit of me now, captain! If I could live I'd let the good come out and if there's a God let Him take due notice and act according. If proofs of what I'm a-telling are wanted, well, a man about to die ain't liable to hand out a cooked-up story, is he? However that may be, there's a family living in a house-boat named Hode. Mrs. Hode got the whole story from the nurse-maid, but her man, Tacky Hode, won't let her tell it, because he's laying to make something out of the secret. But they got a girl, and a good, straight one, named Bettie. She got the story from her ma. John will know how to find them. Of course, nobody would 'a' paid any attention to them spouting out this history on their own hook, but put my dying words alongside and we have what we call testimony, what? Also a pugilist named Cleek living in Smiling Lane; I've done told him the whole story. Ask him. Now, that's all. I'm Jim Blearstead, and I'm glad I killed him. I wish I had done more good acts in my life, but I hope this will count pretty high. As to that scum Simmons, as I wasn't making any attack on him, and had but the kindest feelings for him apart from the way he served me one night, what he done was cold-blooded murder, and I hope he gets all that's a-coming to him.

"(Signed) JIM BLEARSTEAD."

"We the undersigned being present while Jim Blearstead dictated the above, and being duly sworn, testify that the foregoing is a full and exact and literal reproduction of the dying statement of the said Jim Blearstead.

"HIRAM DUDLEY,
"WHITSETT DOBBS,
"EUGENE WARE."

In a storm of tempestuous joy Alice and the Rev. Harry Tredmill caught each other about the neck. You would have thought that through the discovery of a Warring will, the Warring fortune was coming to them!

"I must wire the sheriff at once." Tredmill took several steps which, from any one but a minister, must have suggested the idea of dancing. "And I must wire him—John Walters—no, John Lyle Warring, not an impostor after all, bless his heart! But the original article; the Warring heir, owner of the Lagville home—and all those farms and properties."

He gave Alice a parting kiss, then rushed to find his hat; not the one he wore about the premises, but the carefully preserved hat with only one spot which, by virtue of its prestige derived from journeyings beyond the front gate, was known—only, however, to its owner—as "the new hat."

Alice kept close upon his footsteps, talking all the time; and when he was in the yard and she knew he must soon be beyond hearing she called her last words with passionate conviction:

"I knew from the first that he looked exactly like the picture on the wall!"

(The end.)

In the Open Spaces

by Lina E Gano

THE sun had at last disappeared after a day of blistering heat. The western sky was aflame with a scheme of color indescribable. The wind was still southwest and to-morrow promised to be a repetition of to-day. Old Mother Earth, parched and dry, was baking and cracking from the August drought. A strong, rank odor of dust and scorched vegetation came in across the bottom lands and low hills.

But William Judson, proprietor of the Pottawatamie Ranch was scarcely conscious of these conditions. August was always hot and dry and he accepted it as part of the eternal scheme of things. He was thinking cattle, the short, nourishing grass of the North Bend pastures and the future money in beef.

Lean and lank, collarless, bootless, coatless, Judson sat, tilted back against a post of the screened-in kitchen porch. His expression, usually sullen or stern, relaxed a little as he sniffed the warm breeze and enjoyed an ill-smelling pipe; but there were no lines in his face that indicated a smile.

When the government threw open the great unfenced, leased cattle lands to small proprietors and real owners, Judson by

hard work, sharp dealings and much profanity had succeeded in getting title to several hundred acres in the best grazing region of The Panhandle. Accumulating property and hanging on to it had become both a business and a passion. This program left no time and made no opportunities for smiles.

Not that Judson had always been hard, "double-fisted" and profane. But to conquer a wilderness, to build an empire and to hold one's own in the cattle country had entailed conditions that called for a race of men with tenacious grasps, iron wills and strong language. For many years, Judson had been doing one man's part in the wilderness-empire-building business and unconsciously developing true to type.

From the kitchen came sound of rattling dishes, the splash of water, the slamming of cupboard and oven doors, the whisk of a broom, but no conversation. The mother and daughter had learned to exchange their confidences before the father appeared.

After a little, Mrs. Judson, tall, slender and still rather handsome, came out with a sewing basket. The wind, creeping across the kitchen porch, made it the coolest spot about the house. She threaded a needle without the aid of glasses, brushed back a mass of wavy, brown hair, picked out a stocking and began to look for holes. Her well-set jaw and thin lips helped to emphasize the impression that she intended to accomplish something while there was still light enough to see.

Ruth, the twelve-year old daughter, betook herself to a hammock that was suspended from the two trees farthest from the house.

There was silence between husband and wife until it was time to refill and relight the pipe.

"The Vail Ranch is advertising a sale of scrub cows for to-morrow," Judson remarked gruffly. "I'm going over and shall want an early breakfast. Go over to the tenant's house and tell Thommie to have breakfast for the boys at five, as I shall take a part of the outfit with me. And I shall want that precious son of yours," he added with a sneer.

This was a long speech for Judson to make to his wife. He usually gave orders more briefly. When at home, orders had become almost his only use for speech.

"Strange that you don't go over and tell Mrs. Thomson yourself," Martha Judson replied, and the tense lines about the mouth became a little more tense. She again threaded the needle and looked after holes in the stockings.

Judson smoked on, the long, deep seams streaking down either bronzed cheek relaxed a trifle in spite of his wife's taunting remark. Occasionally he gave her a furtive glance that did not fail to note the wave in the hair, the fire in the eye and the poise of the figure.

"Hard as nuts, but she's holding her looks! She's a heap handsomer than Thommie, but Thommie has the cunning ways," he mused as he lighted another match.

Holding her looks in the cow country was an accomplishment of which few women could boast. The cold winds of winter and the hot winds of summer always did their best to hasten any delay in the passing of youth. But Martha Judson, who had come out a school teacher and remained a wife, had brought to the Southwest not only good looks but a constitution that defied the winds both of summer and winter as well as the storms of an increasing domestic infelicity.

The very fact that she had challenged the elements as well as the wear and tear of life and had refused to grow prematurely old may have aggravated the family situation.

"If you have money for more cattle, you must have enough for the education of the children. Richard is ready for college. He has passed his entrance exams," she said as she snipped a thread with the sharp scissors.

"The children? Your children! Let 'em sweat! That's what I have to do; but a damn lot you care about that," her husband responded.

When Judson wished to be especially nasty, he referred to the children as "your children."

The air was at once charged with ill-

will and misunderstanding. The man and the woman seemed to have forgotten a certain fine love story that had once been a big thing in their lives.

There were no more attempts to break the silence until the last lingering light in the west foretold the end of the passing day. Then Mrs. Judson's expression suddenly changed; she folded her work, picked up the basket and called in a voice that had all the suggestion of a caress: "Ruth, dear, don't you want to go over to the tenant's house with me to tell Mrs. Thomson she must have breakfast for the boys at five, to-morrow?"

The change of voice and the expression brought out clearly the different attitude of Mrs. Judson toward husband and child. She seemed to be two characters sharply contrasted—one for the daughter and one for the father.

At the Vail Ranch, the next day, the bronzed, weather-beaten cattlemen of the two counties stood perched on the roofs of low sheds that helped to enclose one side of the cow pen. The bidding for the last group of scrub cows became a test of wits.

"A bunch of three-year-olds!" the auctioneer yelled from a platform that had been erected near the sheds. "A bunch of fifty young cows without the calves! All in fine condition! No particular breed, but the calves show what the cows can do. Look at the calves, gentlemen! Look at the calves, I say! Been running with the cows all summer. The calves are one part shorthorn and are already half the size of the mothers. What am I offered for these three-year-olds? What am I offered? Fifty dollars each and the price of beef soaring in Chicago! Gentlemen, you are joking!"

"Sixty dollars each," came from Judson.

"Sixty dollars each, I am offered by Mr. William Judson of the Pottawatamie Ranch. Sixty dollars each for beef selling at fifty cents a pound in the shops. Sixty dollars—six—ty—dollars—"

"Seventy-five," two ranchmen called at the same time.

"Seventy-five—seventy-five a piece for this bunch—"

"Eighty dollars," from the proprietor of the Pottawatamie Ranch.

"Ninety," some one called from the rear of the crowd.

"Ninety dollars each I am offered—ninety dollars! Two months on corn and they will be fit for market. Prime roast ribs are quoted at seventy cents in New York. There's plenty of corn in Kansas. Take it from me, gentlemen, run these cows up into Kansas; feed 'em corn and they will be ready for the dudes of New York inside of sixty days."

"One hundred dollars," growled Judson.

"One hundred dollars, I am offered. One hundred! One hundred—one hundred dollars I am offered."

"Hundred-ten," came from a new bidder.

"Hundred-twenty," Judson called.

"One-twenty-five!"

"One-thirty," came before the auctioneer could see the bidder.

"Judson wants them cows pretty bad. Let's make him pay for 'em," said the proprietor of Ranch Number Four to his neighbor, as he yelled, "One hundred thirty-five!"

"One hundred thirty-five I am offered. One hundred thirty-five from — Ranch Number Four. One—one—one hundred—thirty-five — thirty-five — " drawled the auctioneer. "One hundred thirteee-e-e-five—"

"One forty!" Judson's neck registered a violent throbbing and his eyes became big and black as he said it.

"One hundred fifty!" from Ranch Four.

"One hundred sixty!"

"One hundred sixty—one hundred sixty—one—one—one hundred, one hundred six—six—six—tee-e-e! Do I hear one hundred seventy? Did some one say one hundred seventy? One hundred seventy? No one bids one hundred seventy? Then going at one hundred sixty to Mr. William Judson? Going for one hundred six—te-e-e?

"Sold for one hundred-sixty to Mr. William Judson!"

The auctioneer caught his breath, tore off a wilted collar and extended his hand to the buyer. "I congratulate you, Bill," he said. "You have a bargain with rib roasts three dollars a service at the Biltless

Hotel in New York. Soak it to 'em! Make 'em pay, is my advice. Feed 'em corn and git 'em fat and make the swells pay! That's what I say."

Judson grinned as he replied: "I want this bunch for stock. I got more short grass in the North Bend than I know what to do with. But I'll remember the fellows that run 'em up on me. Some o' them ranchers ain't got eight thousand dollars this side a hell." Then he made out a check for the amount and turned it over to the clerk of the sale.

"What about the calves?" asked Dick, the fair haired, rosy cheeked boy who stood by his father as the deal was closed.

"Cut 'em out and be damn quick about it if you expect to get home to-night," Judson snarled. "You'll drive 'em to North Bend to-morrow."

Separating cows from calves that have run together all summer has its difficulties. The boys and their ponies were steaming hot before the job was half done. Some of the calves crawled between the wires of the cow pens and followed the mothers. Some slipped through the gates hugging the sides of the mothers. Some of the cows refused to leave the pens without the calves. Nature had been strengthening a bond of union between mother and offspring since March or April. The call of the calves that were left behind so distracted the mothers that they became wild with excitement and fear.

Some of them took to the first cross-road, broke wires, tore up fence posts and overran the enclosed pastures in order to return to the home ranch. In spite of barbed wire entanglements and the shouts of the ranchmen, the cows jumped back into the pens and each found the object of her particular affection. Again the cattlemen and the ponies did their best to make the separation and leave the calves behind. Many of the cows returned to the pens the third time.

Judson watched the struggle with growing rage and profanity. As he whirled the Colonel to flank the movements of a long-legged, brindle cow, he saw one of his ponies step into an old post hole, stumble and fall. The luckless rider happened to be Dick, the "precious son." As a result of this accident, the brindle cow crawled between two wires and succeeded in evading her pursuer; with her calf following, she was soon lost in the underbrush and scrub bordering the dry bed of the Red Vermilion. Another animal, chased until exhausted, was overcome with the heat and fell into a drainage ditch; frothing at the mouth, she soon died.

"Hundred and sixty dollars gone to pot!" Judson explained.

"Why don't you buy the calves?" Dick asked excitedly.

"Calves? Hell! I don't want the calves; that's why. Pity a lot of young fellows can't separate a few calves and cows. When I was your age I could have done the trick alone. A little more education and you would fall off a saw-horse!" The boy bit his lips, the pupils of his eyes became big and black but he made no reply.

"Git up! Git up!" Judson emphasized his command with an oath and a sharp cut from his riding whip. The little mare that had stumbled into the post hole attempted to rise on her forefeet but again fell helpless and lay very quiet, a pitiful look in her frightened eyes. "A broken leg! Hm! May as well shoot her. Here," he said to Dick, "take the Colonel and go to the house for a gun and then git that brindle heifer and be damn quick about it."

Then he yelled to Morgan, "Git a move on you, there! Do you think you're in a trolley car waiting for the conductor to turn on the power?" He berated Simpson for permitting his pony to drink when it was too warm. "There'll be another dead horse before you git to the county line. If I was a little younger, I'd do the whole damn thing alone." Like many another man, Judson was prone to exaggerate the accomplishments of his youth.

Presently several cows with their heads down began to paw the loose earth, throw the dirt into the air and to bellow and roar in a way that frightened some of the ponies. As a protest against too much noise, a yellow mustang pulled his four feet together, stiffened his legs, humped his back, lifted himself several feet from the earth and came down with a springless bump.

Not being prepared for this performance, Alf Connor, the rider, found himself rolling in the dust. Judson yelled louder, swore harder and gave more orders. The big veins began to swell in his neck and his eyes to burn dangerously hard and bright.

"Tell your old man to go to hell and shut up," bawled Simpson to Dick.

"Tell him yourself," was Dick's response as he started the Colonel for the scrub.

It was two o'clock when Dick returned with the brindle cow and calf. As it seemed impossible to separate the two, Connor suggested that they try to throw the cow, but it was some time before any one could get near enough to manipulate the rope. Finally, however, the animal was mastered, the leading rope fastened to Connor's saddle and a real start made for the Pottawatamie Ranch. Up to that point, the separation of the mothers from their offspring had cost the life of one pony and one cow and no one could say how much profanity and bad temper.

When the brindle "heifer" failed to escape from the rope she began to make quick dives for the leading pony. Her horns were much too sharp to please Connor; consequently the rope was cut, but by this time the cows could no longer hear the call of the calves and the boys managed to keep the cattle to the road for several miles.

Just before reaching a stretch of unfenced lands, Dick offered to take care of the herd for a few minutes as the cows seemed almost exhausted and ready for a little rest. He suggested that the other drivers should "slow down" and try to eat the sandwiches that had been pounding up and down in the saddle bags since morning.

"Funny what a grip a young thing has on the mother," remarked Connor as he threw a leg over the saddle horn, mopped his face with a wet, red handkerchief and tried to relax a little. "I suppose us men can never know how much our mothers cared," he added, rather reflectively for a cowpuncher.

"That's what's the matter with Judson, they say. He resents the kids and the way the missus cares for them. He resents the kids and she resents his eternal grouch."

"Is that the reason he goes away and leaves the handsomest woman on the range to manage the whole darn place for days or weeks at a time?" asked Morgan, who had not been long on the Judson pay-roll.

"That's what they say. She's more mother than wife, is the way Mrs. Thomson puts it," Simpson replied.

"I don't reckon any one ever said that about Thommie," remarked Connor with a knowing wink.

"Funny that Judson and Mrs. Thomson, or Thommie as you call her, are always away at the same time."

"Funny? You galoot! Where have you been living all your life?" was Connor's way of satisfying the inquiring mind of Morgan.

"Well, the whole thing is hard on the kids. I know, because I grew up in that kind of a mess."

"Hard on Dick, sure! He's got the college bug, but the old man refuses to put up the dough and treats the boy like a dog just to spite the mother."

Dick galloped up and asked for his share of the lunch and a drink from the water bottle.

It was almost dark when the cows were driven into the yards of the Pottawatamie Ranch. Some of the animals were too tired to make more trouble, but the brindle "heifer" refused to eat or drink and kept up a pitiful moo and call all night

After supper, Judson again sat smoking, tilted back against a post of the screened-in kitchen porch. When the supper dishes were washed, Mrs. Judson came out of the house and remarked rather curtly, "Richard says you gave a check for eight thousand dollars for those cattle."

"Well, what of it? It's my money."

"I suppose it does not occur to you that some of it might be my money?"

"Your money? Not a damn cent of it. And what do you want with money? Don't I pay all the bills?" For a man who still noticed the wave in his wife's hair and the poise of her figure, this was

not a happy reply, but Judson had had a hard day and he must share his bad temper with some one. Besides, Martha was held by the holy bonds of matrimony, two children and no cash account. She was not apt to leave the job whatever the provocation.

"Can't you see that I might want to do something for the children?" she asked. "I might want to help Richard to go to the University and it is time for Ruth to have a piano and music lessons."

"To hell with universities and pianos! Your son can't ride a horse without falling off. His stupidity cost me the little bay mare to-day."

"I thought the pony stepped into a hole, broke her leg and had to be shot."

"If he'd had the sense of a jack-rabbit he could have kept her out of the hole. Fancy a pony falling into a hole with me! I don't intend to spoil the boy's chances of being a man by wasting any more money on education."

"Well, when he is a man I hope he'll be a real man and not a bully."

"And when your daughter, Ruth, is a woman I hope she'll be a real woman."

Judson felt well satisfied with the retort. He was certain that his wife understood the subtlety, although he knew little and cared less for subtleties, as such. In the big, open spaces there is not much call for cunningly contrived, nicely discriminating delicacies of language.

"Disgusting!" was Mrs. Judson's only comment as she went up the stairs to her room and locked the door.

Judson refilled his pipe several times while he tried to calculate the possible profits and losses from the days bargaining. Each time he had attempted to do a little mental arithmetic he was baffled by a cross current that had nothing to do with cattle. In a vague way he felt that in spite of much land and other worldly possessions he had missed out on something. But, of course, it was not his fault. He had paid all the bills. What more could a man be expected to do?

"Damn it! What more can a man do?" he muttered as he slammed the door and went to bed.

The next morning was Sunday, but at Judson's command, the men and the ponies were ready at six o'clock to start for the short grass pastures of the North Bend Ranch. There was more trouble getting the cows headed in the right direction. Five or six of them seemed determined to go in the direction from which they had come the night before. As stupid as cows are supposed to be, instinct was pulling them toward the South.

The drivers tried again and again to get the cattle going north but each time the brindle mother led them over fences, hayricks, watering troughs, abandoned farm implements and brush piles and headed them south. The ponies were longer winded than the cows and each time succeeded in getting around them and turning them back, but no progress was made. The effort to get them started north failed as often as it was tried.

Enraged with the boys and the ponies, Judson seized a cattle-whip and took a stand down the road where he was sure he could stop the on-rush of the brindle cow. She no sooner saw him than she made a quick lunge. The impact knocked him down and rolled him in the dust. Instantly he was on his feet again. The animal turned quickly and with head down, nostrils distended, eyes red and protruding, she made a second wild rush for the man with the big whip. Judson dodged this time but took the precaution to make a dash for the barbed wire fence. As he landed on the other side of the four tightly-stretched, spiked wires, he saw a long, snakey rope quickly but gracefully uncoil itself in the air and a sinuous noose tighten itself around the swollen gullet of the maddened beast.

Dick, riding the Colonel, had been but a short distance away. Although the horse was on the run, the boy seemed to have thought that he had one chance to save his father. He threw the rope just in time to catch the cow as she prepared to vault the fence. The animal's struggles as the lasso tightened about her neck forced the lad to jump from the horse, and he in turn went rolling into the dust.

With a strength far beyond his years,

Dick held to the rope while something very elemental surged through his brain. Before the dust was out of his eyes he began yelling: "Dad! Damn you, Dad! Where in hell are you? Did you get away? Kill the she-thing! Shoot her! Kill her, I say!"

Then tears began streaming down his grimy face and a volume of profanity issued from his blubbering lips.

"Did I get away?" Judson shouted. "You didn't expect a three-year-old heifer to get me, did you?" and then the man stood quite still, stunned by the emotion of the boy. He looked at Dick and for an instant wondered where he had learned to swear so shockingly. He had never heard his son indulge in profanity before and he was sure that the mother had always counseled against it.

Finally he managed to say: "Quit swearing, lad, and what are you crying about anyway? Are you hurt?"

"Hurt? No, but you, Dad? Are you all right. I'm not crying and I'm not swearing. I'm cussing. Just cussing. Do you understand?"

"If you are not hurt what's the matter with your leg? It's bleeding. The rope, as it spun out, must have burned a hole clean through to your skin."

"It did? Well, I didn't feel it anyway and I'm not crying, I tell you!"

Dick looked down, and sure enough, a big hole had been seared across the right leg of his thin, summer trousers and the blood was slowly oozing through.

With the rope about her neck, the cow's strength had left her and a short distance away she lay panting, her tongue hanging out.

"Bring a halter," Judson called to Simpson. When the cow was haltered and again on her feet, Dick began to beat her wickedly. Just then something happened to Judson. He never knew what it was, and as he was not much given to self-analysis, he never tried to find out. But he felt himself more conscious than ever before of the power and strength of the elemental blood tie.

He saw vaguely that it had taken an accident to reveal his son and himself to each other. He also slowly realized that the boy might become the reflection, or the second edition of the man, who had stormed and bullied and accumulated much land and many cattle but was possessed of little understanding of the mysteries of life. He wondered what he could do to prevent the second catastrophe.

Presently the cow-men heard the proprietor of the Pottawatamie Ranch saying: "Don't beat her, Dick. She's crazy. She don't know what she's doing. She's lost her head about the calf. Guess I ought to bought the calf. She's mad because of the heat and the running. Don't beat her, I say! Stop it, *now!*"

Judson stamped his feet, attempted to brush the dirt from his hair and shirt as he ordered the boys to hitch the animal to the end of the wagon. "That's the only way to get her to North Bend. She won't enjoy bucking a lumber wagon," he explained.

After the rope was tied to the wagon, Judson suddenly turned to Dick. "How did you get there so soon, son? How did you stop the Colonel?"

"I didn't stop the Colonel. Guess he's going yet. I jumped over his head. Gosh, Dad! I thought you were a goner! She's got the sharpest horns of any cow in the bunch."

"But your profanity, Dick! It's awful. Where did you learn it? You know perfectly well that your mother hates it and you won't need so much of it in college. Cut it out, is my advice. Cut it out!"

Two horses were soon harnessed and ready to start with the lumber wagon. The brindle "heifer" was at last mastered and forced to trail behind and the boys succeeded in getting the rest of the herd pointed in the right direction for North Bend Ranch.

Judson stood watching the outfit as it disappeared over the ridge. For several minutes after the last rider and the last animal were silhouetted above the long, even sky-line he remained standing while a new expression came slowly creeping into his stern, hard face.

When he returned to the house everything was strangely quiet. Mrs. Judson

was not in sight. From the floor of the kitchen porch he picked up a letter addressed to his wife and evidently received and opened the day before. Having no scruples about reading her correspondence, he removed the letter from the envelope. At the top of the page was pinned a newspaper clipping telling of the scarcity of teachers in the schools of a great city and that the legislature had just voted to increase the salaries of all the teachers in the state by several hundreds of dollars.

Judson read the clipping without much interest, then glanced at the script below and wondered what was the connection. He took in a shortened breath when half way down the page he read:

> If, as you say, you can't stand Judson and his ways any longer, bring the youngsters and come to me. Richard can board at the house and attend the university and I am in a position to help you get a place in one of the new high schools. The increased salary schedules, quoted above, will make it possible for you to educate the children as you wish and to maintain your independence, as well. It is very lonely here since poor Mary passed away and I can assure you and the children a welcome. Let me hear your decision by return mail if possible. I will forward the money for traveling expenses.
>
> With much affection, your brother,
>
> JOE.

Judson again stood very still. For many seconds he felt a little dizzy and thought he saw black spots floating before his eyes. His thin face became more drawn and his long, bony hands were cold in spite of the August heat. He listened for a footstep or for the sound of a familiar voice. The kitchen clock ticked away, a big blue fly buzzed against a window pane, a mouse ran across the floor, a rooster crowed outside and the dog barked.

"It's that damn Thomson woman!" he exclaimed aloud. "Thomson's got to get her away. Why hasn't he done it long ago? Afraid of losing his job perhaps, and I've been a hell of a fool! Why, the Thomson huzzy can't read or write—just a little greaser married to a white man by mistake!"

Then he called in a voice that was neither surly nor harsh, "Mattie! Mattie, girl! Where are you?"

Mrs. Judson appeared at the top of the stairs with a freshly addressed and stamped envelope in her hand.

Judson looked up to her with a new-old expression on his face. "Say, Mattie, come down," he said. "I've something to tell you. Something I want you to hear."

She came down the stairs rather reluctantly and looked more than puzzled. Judson reached her the letter.

"I guess you dropped it on the kitchen floor. I read it and I want to say right now that I've been a hell of a fool about the little greaser and a lot of other things, but for the sake of the children won't you try me again? The whole damn Thomson outfit has got to go. And say, Mattie, your boy—our boy—does know how to ride a horse and how to throw a rope, too. You should have seen him! He's just tried to save the life of an old bully from the sharp horns of the long-legged brindle heifer that I bought yesterday. God! But I did have a close shave!"

Judson had gotten it all out of his system in one big effort and seemed relieved as he waited for a response.

Martha Judson looked at her disheveled, dust-besmeared husband and perhaps understood something of what had occurred. Calling her "Mattie" may have brought back the man that she had known before the children came. It may have brought back the time when she had not been too much occupied to listen for the return and to humor the whims of a big, domineering, empire-building husband.

Her look of concern and fright helped to soften the tense lines about the mouth, and he was almost prepared to hear her say: "It was my fault, too, Bill. We have each almost forgotten a wonderful, old love story. But tell me what's happened! Tell me!"

As Judson attempted to "wash up" by the kitchen pump he called to his wife, "What brand of piano do you want for Ruthie? And don't you think I'd better order a bath tub at the same time that I'm ordering the piano?"

"Lord, but that boy is like his dad!" the father mused as he called for more soap and another towel.