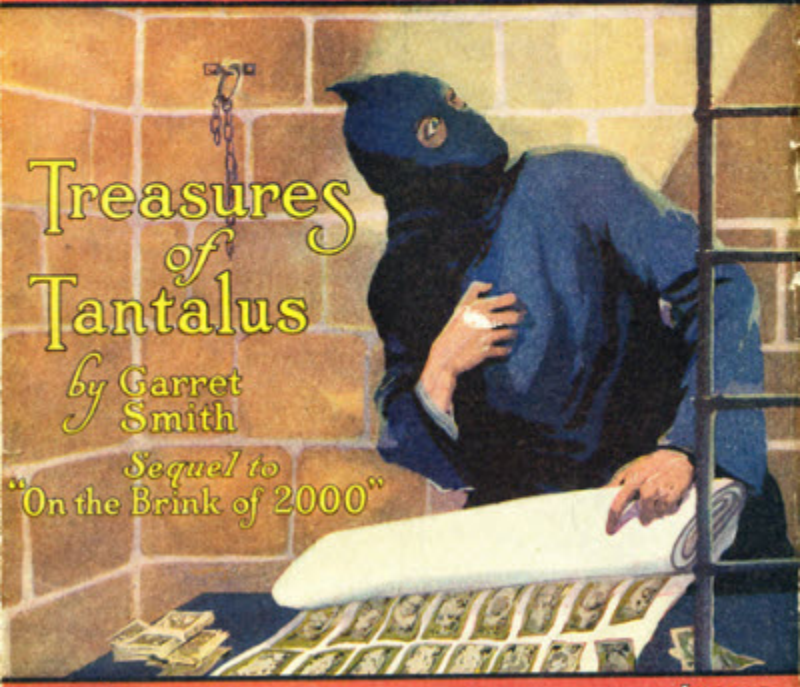
ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY



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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

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FOUR CONTINUED STORIES

ONE NOVELETTE

FIVE SHORT STORIES

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CXXVIII SATURDAY, DECEMBER 11, 1920 NUMBER 3

Treasures of Tantalus

by Garret Smith

Author of "After a Million Years," "Between Worlds," "On the Brink of 2000," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A CORNER IN PRIVACY.

PROFESSOR Fleckner's famous coup in which he secured a corner on the privacy of the world is still a nightmare memory to most men past middle-age. It was in the opening year of the twenty-first century and proved to be a veritable reign of terror, a world-wide fear inspired by the evil genius of one man.

The world has never before known by what means the terror passed. One day the inventor capitulated without apparent reason and without explanation. To-day the younger generation, using his great invention as a matter-of-fact necessity of ordinary life, have almost forgotten that the great Fleckner ever played a rôle other than that of one of the benefactors of his race.

I was a young newspaper man then. It was my rare privilege to peer behind the scenes and witness a secret drama that ultimately swept from the stage that sordid spectacle which was for a brief time enacted with an unwilling world as audience.

I was admitted to the wings at the very opening of this dual drama. Then it was that I first met Thomas Priestley, the helpless partner in Fleckner's plot, who so unjustly shared for a time the opprobrium heaped upon the inventor. The intimate friendship between myself and Tom Priestley which began at that memorable watch night party of December 31, 1999, was life-long. From his lips I learned such part of this secret history as I did not personally witness. To him I pledged secrecy during his lifetime and that of his colleague.

But Fleckner has been dead this thirty years. Now within the present month Tom Priestley has followed him. It is permitted me then, in my old age, to give this tale to the public in vindication of the memory of my dead friend.

Early that New Year's Eve an exclusive tip had come in to the city room of the New York *Planet*, where I was employed at the time, that the $20,000,000 fortune of young Tom Priestley, left him by his grandfather's will a few months before was in jeopardy.

The new Federal Inheritance Law went

into effect that night at midnight. By its provisions all inheritances reverted to the State unless previous to that hour every descendant of the testator in each case should sign an agreement to the terms of the will.

The law, whose purpose was to curb the concentration of huge fortunes, was working many fantastic and dramatic results. Newspaper offices had been busy ever since the President attached his signature to the measure, combing over the titles to all conspicuous fortunes, and our columns had teemed for weeks with sensational yarns.

But up to six o'clock that evening the Priestley fortune, one of the biggest individual estates left in the country after nearly a century of heavy inheritance taxation, had been considered immune. The lawyers of the estate had exhibited to the inquisitive news-hounds a document of assent bearing the signatures of every known descendant of old Priestley.

Then came rumor declaring the Priestley lawyers had just learned that a cousin of young Tom Priestley, Maurice Fairweather, who had disappeared years before and had been reported dead, had as a matter of fact lived to marry and leave three children who were now adults and scattered over the face of the globe. As it was manifestly too late to get the signatures of these descendants of his grandfather, Tom Priestley, if the rumor proved true, would enter the twenty-first century a pauper.

I was assigned to hunt up young Priestley. He was not at home and I was sent from pillar to post on his trail, shooting up and down town in the moving subway sidewalks of Broadway and the Drive for over an hour before I located him in Professor Fleckner's laboratory beyond Getty Square.

At first I was refused admission. A vigilant young woman, the old inventor's secretary, peered at me sidewise from under a green eyeshade and declared positively that the professor was conducting an experiment before a group of his friends and must not be disturbed. I was a dashing youngster then and prided myself on having a way with the ladies. But that eyeshade baffled me. I couldn't tell whether the wearer was young or only fairly so, pretty or otherwise, impressionable or not. I made no headway until I hinted that Mr. Priestley was in danger. Then she showed sudden anxiety and an agitation that struck me at the time as not entirely impersonal. Thus encouraged I grew more determined.

The professor had a night-watch party on, and any gathering at the famous Fleckner laboratory was in itself a story of sorts. For this inventor of the deadly violet ray destroyer, which was then fatuously considered a guarantee of universal peace, had in the last year achieved renewed public notice by perfecting the first economical means of taking power direct from the atmosphere, an invention that has since eliminated the use of coal and water power. I didn't propose therefore to be thwarted by a female Cerberus behind a ridiculous shield of celluloid. Later I was to view that green eye-shade with much more respect, but for the moment it merely annoyed me greatly. She yielded at length and sent in my card.

The fact that Priestley responded to the importunities of a mere reporter and left even for a moment the epoch-making demonstration that was taking place in the laboratory made Tom Priestley solid with me from then on. Further than that he greeted me with smiling good nature when he entered the anteroom.

But this, as I learned later, was typical of Tom Priestley, always generous and courteous to a fault. I was strongly attracted to him the moment I saw him. He was about thirty years old at the time, and his tall, well-knit body was in perfect condition from constant athletic exercise at college.

Now his face, under his faint smile of greeting, showed distinct worried lines that convinced me of the truth of the rumor I had come to verify.

"Mr. Blair," he said, after studying me closely when I had handed him my card and stated my errand. "I think I can trust you. I'm going to ask your word that you will report nothing of this to your editor until I give you permission."

I hesitated, balanced between zeal for my paper and desire not to annoy this

charming chap who very evidently had trouble enough at present. In the end I acquiesced.

"Your report is substantially correct," he went on, "but I have a bare hope of saving the day. If I succeed, nothing must be published at present."

He was silent for a moment as if debating with himself.

"I think, in view of your promise," he decided finally, "I will ask Professor Fleckner to admit you to the demonstration he is making inside. You will be the only newspaper man present and what you see will be of great value to you later."

He excused himself and went to consult with the professor. A moment later he returned with the old inventor's consent, on condition that again I pledge secrecy, to which I readily agreed.

What I saw that night gave me the greatest thrill of my life up to that time, though to my present readers it would be the merest every day commonplace.

A few days before Professor Fleckner had reported in confidence to some of his wealthy friends and backers that he had ready for demonstration a wireless apparatus that not merely brought the human voice or any other ordinary sound from the remotest quarter of the globe, but caught the scene and projected it on a screen in front of the operator of the instrument. But a greater marvel still was fact that the instrument needed no sending station. Professor Fleckner could direct the ether rays at any distant point and immediately the image of a person at that point appeared life-size on the screen in front of the operator and his conversation could be overheard as though he stood in the room. Further still the image and voice of the operator could be projected out into space so that he seemed to appear in person a thousand miles away by the mere manipulation of a set of levers.

So this little group, all pledged to secrecy, had assembled on that New Year's Eve to view a demonstration of the first telephonoscope.

Well do I remember my intense amazement, when, after being told to look out of the window to the sidewalk some fifty stories below and note the silent figures moving about there, I suddenly saw a section of the sidewalk on the screen beside me as though the room were on the street level and the conversation of passers-by was heard as distinctly as if we were brushing elbows with them.

It was really no more marvelous than many other inventions of the last hundred years. The first telegraph and the first telephone were as amazing in their day. The phonograph and the motion picture seemed like miracles. When men learned to telephone without wires early in the Twentieth Century it seemed as though the climax had been reached. The telephonoscope which carried both voice and images and could range about at will was really only a short step farther. The wonder is that it was delayed so long.

There were some amusing episodes. I remember that a gentleman from Chicago was present and was curious to know what was going on in his home in that city from which he and his family had been absent for a week.

On the instant room after room of the Chicago house opened upon the screen. Imagine the Chicago man's chagrin when he saw his servants holding a grand ball with half the other servants in the neighborhood as their guests. Professor Fleckner broke up the party by throwing the image of the irate householder into their midst.

But all this is commonplace to my readers and I will weary you with no more of it.

The climax and real drama of the evening came when Tom Priestley, who had been watching the demonstrations with nervous intentness, arose and told Professor Fleckner that he would back his invention to the extent of his fortune and would in addition give him personally a fee of one million dollars if he would sweep the world with his telephonoscope ray and before the stroke of midnight find and secure signatures from his three second cousins, thus saving for him the fortune left him by his grandfather.

That the professor succeeded is well known. The shadow form of Tom Priest-

ley was hurled upon the world that night with the speed of lightning. Two of the three had been traced and, without suspecting the ghostly nature of the image that appeared before them affixed their signature to the shadow of a hastily prepared release paper, the signature taking actual form on this paper in Professor Fleckner's laboratory through the medium of a cunning photograph lense.

But it was the search for the third man that proved most baffling and incidentally shed a bright light on the key-note of the characters of both Tom Priestley and Professor Fleckner. This man had sailed on a Pacific steamer some time before and the vessel had been reported over-due.

Fleckner's magic rays swept this vast ocean from end to end finally locating the vessel wrecked on a South Sea Island inhabited by lawless Bolshevic refugees from the rehabilitated Republic of Russia. At the moment the outlaws were about to fall on the defenseless ship's company and destroy them.

Here Tom Priestley sprang into action. Fleckner had been experimenting with some new types of fire-arms for hunting purposes. There were several in a rack at the side of the laboratory, some loaded.

With these Priestley armed the company in the laboratory and placed them before the screen. He directed Fleckner to hurl our images between the refugees and the bandits and told every one to shoot and brandish weapons.

Here Fleckner balked. He pointed out that there was just time yet before midnight to hunt out Priestley's cousin from among the refugees and secure his signature. There was no time to waste saving lives when $20,000,000 that might be so useful to the professor was at stake.

In a rage Tom Priestley turned on the inventor and consigned his fortune to limbo. Holding his pistol at the inventor's head he ordered him to perform the rescue regardless of consequences.

Not till the terrified bandits had been routed and the survivors of the ship's company were safe did Tom Priestley think again of his fortune. Then the clock on the laboratory wall told us it was past midnight and too late. And yet there was no sign of regret in Priestley's face as he resigned himself to the fact.

But then came his reward. Some one remembered suddenly that, owing to difference in time, it was not yet midnight out there on that Pacific Island. Again the telephonoscope searched it out and this time the third and last cousin was found and the final signature secured. Tom Priestley's fortune was saved and Professor Fleckner got the financial support that launched his great invention but involved his backer in such toils that he wished many times afterward that he had let his wealth and its burden go by the board.

All this, of course, came out afterwards when the method of obtaining the signatures was tested in the courts, as my older readers will remember. But Priestley was upheld.

I well remember my repugnance for the old inventor, after his display of what seemed mere cold-hearted avarice. I could hardly bring myself to shake hands with him when the party broke up.

But I did, and in search of something original to say by way of congratulation my tongue blundered on these fatal words:

"Professor Fleckner, you have undoubtedly established a corner on the privacy of the world."

CHAPTER II.

A REVOLUTIONARY PROPOSAL.

IN my petty vanity over an aptly coined phrase I did not at the moment grasp its full significance. That it was not lost on the old inventor, however, I realized later to my regret when, in the light of subsequent events, I recalled the crafty gleam that suddenly flashed in his cold gray eyes and the tightening of his thin slit of a mouth.

Nevertheless I felt distinctly uncomfortable as the tall, stooping figure hung over me, his claw-like fingers grasping mine feverishly. Then he dropped my hand suddenly and rubbed the point of his sharp chin with his palm for a moment

while he looked off reflectively, then wound up with a flourish of his fingers through his gray, untrimmed hair.

Then he turned back to me with a grin that showed a double row of perfect false teeth, making his sallow, smooth-shaven face look like a death's head. Yet there was for a fleeting instant a faint twinkle in the deep-set eyes under their shaggy brows. For Professor Fleckner, along with his faults, possessed the human grace of a sense of humor.

"A corner on privacy!" he cackled. "That's pretty good, young man! Pretty good!"

As a consequence, I cannot but help feeling to this day a certain sense of responsibility for the suggestion that struck into the yellow streak in Fleckner's genius and for a time perverted it to grave mischief. I still believe, however, that he fully intended at that time to make only good use of his great invention.

On New Year's afternoon Tom Priestley rather reluctantly kept an appointment with Fleckner in his laboratory. They were to talk over the preliminaries of the formation of the company for the manufacture and sale of the telephonoscope.

From the moment when the old inventor had shown his willingness to abandon a group of his fellow men to the murderous band on the island in order to further his own financial interests, Priestley regretted his hasty promise to put his fortune back of a man of such character. He had never known Fleckner before, but the man's noteworthy achievements and his general reputation had led him to feel the highest respect for and confidence in the famous inventor.

Indeed, I cannot discover that the man had ever before displayed to any extent the greedy phase of his disposition. It was evidently a latent quality suddenly brought out in its barren hideousness by the prospect of undreamed-of wealth and vast power.

Now, Priestley for the moment could not avoid a feeling of aversion for the man. But he had pledged him his support on impulse, and for Tom Priestley, once his promise given, there was no backing out.

On Professor Fleckner's part, however, there had come about through the same episode of the rescue of the shipwrecked refugees a vastly increased respect for the young millionaire whom he had considered merely a rich idler with the usual flabby character of members of that class. Now he recognized in him a man of strong fiber, and generous and human impulses. He also recognized a fighter whom it would be much safer to lead than to oppose. He trimmed his sails accordingly and so cleverly prepared the way for the proposal he had in mind that the younger man felt his distrust weakening somewhat.

Fleckner was all smiling cordiality when he greeted his young colleague that afternoon.

"Before we get down to business," he said, "I want to explain my actions of last evening which you opposed with such credit to yourself. I'm afraid in the excitement of the moment I appeared in a rather unfavorable light. I want to say now, though, that while we both acted on impulse, our impulses were from different angles aimed at the same end—the good of humanity. I'm glad to know I've a partner whose principles agree so thoroughly with mine. You met the supreme test, young man, when you impulsively threw away your fortune, or thought you did, to save the lives of others."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow your comparison," Priestley replied a little stiffly.

"I mean, if I may say so, that being an older and more philosophical man, my humanitarian viewpoint was a little broader. You saw only the moment and a little group of your fellow men whose lives were in danger. I saw all humanity for generations to come whose well-being and happiness were to be promoted by this instrument of mine and to whom your wealth was to make it available."

As he spoke his face glowed and his voice rang with enthusiasm. In spite of himself, Tom Priestley was moved. He felt his prejudice weakening still further. Priestley's high-strung, emotional nature had been played upon skilfully by the wily old man.

"Let me outline the plan I have in mind," he went on. "If I had known beforehand that you would be willing to back me to the extent of your fortune, I wouldn't have invited the rest of the group who were here last night to come in on it. I prefer to deal with you alone in view of our common purpose and a method of carrying it out which I'm going to propose to you.

"But these other gentlemen are in on the thing, and they should be given some consideration in return for their pledge of secrecy. So what I propose is this—that we organize two companies, one to manufacture the instruments, in which you and I will be sole owners, and one to sell and install them together with other devices of mine, with these other men as stockholders, but with the controlling interest in my hands.

"That will enable you and me to control absolutely the manufacture of the telephonoscopes without any one else having the right to interfere or ask embarrassing questions if the instruments are not turned out as rapidly as expected."

"But can't we turn them out rapidly once the machinery is installed?" asked Priestley, a little bewildered.

"Yes, but we won't, not until we have accomplished certain benevolent missions which I think you will agree are more important than the mere making of money."

"But I had an idea that the great benefit to mankind was to follow from the practical wiping out of distance, the abolition of travel for business reasons, the doing away with our slow and cumbersome mail service and our inadequate telephone and telegraph system," Priestley demurred.

"Eventually, yes, but first we must educate the public in its use. It means new demands on the self-restraint of humanity. For do you realize, my boy, that distance with its attendant restraints and inconveniences is not the only thing we have wiped out. We have virtually abolished secrecy."

He paused to let that startling statement sink in. Priestley gasped as its significance swept over him for the first time. The younger man had not overheard my casual remark to Fleckner the evening before about a corner in privacy. He had been so absorbed then and since in other angles of the problem that this phase had not occurred to him.

"Think of it," the inventor went on. "My telephonoscope rays pierce any wall, however thick, at any distance, day or night, record any sight, hear the slightest whisper. The darkness of night is no protection. Distance offers no immunity. A man's inmost chamber affords no guarantee that his most vital secrets will not be searched out and spread broadcast if he dares whisper them to another or places them in writing."

The young man was listening eagerly now. His alert mind was leaping far ahead of the professor's argument.

"Have you ever stopped to think what a part secrecy plays in this world of ours?" Fleckner went on, warming to his subject and pacing the floor excitedly. "If men could not have met and plotted unseen, where would have been the secret diplomacy, that breeder of international strife, which up to a half century ago kept the world bathed in blood, and now threatens again to invade the councils of our League of Nations? Think of the corruption in our internal politics, the plundering of our cities by scheming politicians, by which little groups of rascals plotting in secret were able to reach their hands into the pockets of the citizens and escape uncaught!

"Would the world ever have suffered from the oppression of predatory business combinations, if it had been impossible for secret agreements and conspiracies against business rivals to remain secret? And think of the multitude of individual crimes, premeditated murder, robbery, blackmail, and all the other illegal acts that still keep our courts busy. Ninety per cent of these would be impossible if the perpetrator's secret preparations were at any moment likely to be laid open for all and sundry to read."

"Quite true!" Priestley assented.

"We have thought at various times in the last century we had finally curbed many of these evils," the inventor contin-

ued. "The League of Nations, we said, had finally ended war, especially since my violet-ray destroyer, the common property of all countries, has made it inevitable that another world war would practically wipe out the race. But lately there has been new bickerings among the nations. A month ago a minority section of the World Council withdrew after heated debate and went into secret session. A little later the council itself officially held an executive session for the first time in fifty years to consider the crisis, and refused to give out the news of it afterward. Secrecy again.

"We allowed big business to go on and grow in efficiency, but curbed its power by wise restraining laws in the interest of the public which well-disposed business men accepted gladly. But the evilly disposed found ways to get the best of these laws by secret agreement again. Lately these conditions have grown worse, until the labor question we thought settled long ago is again threatening trouble. We curbed the predatory politician only to find he still continues to plot in secret. We think we have solved the problem of humane and effective treatment of criminals, but secret crime still flourishes.

"In other words, secrecy is the root from which these and many other evils spring. We hold in our hands the instrument of its destruction. We can keep our own secret for the present in order that we may strike a blow at evil secrecy. We'll hunt out a number of notable examples and show them up to the world at large.

"We'll punish some of these evil-doers who have kept within the letter of the law, with that most effective weapon, publicity. We'll teach the world a dramatic object-lesson, and then when the lesson is thoroughly driven home we'll give the public an instrument for its continued enforcement. To release it sooner would be most dangerous. Do you see?"

Priestley was by now drinking in every word with eager interest. His idealistic nature was thoroughly aroused and his distrust of the scientist was lulled to sleep.

"Of course I see!" he exclaimed eagerly. "We'll pick out nest after nest of international trouble-makers, political shysters, business crooks, and ordinary criminals. We'll spy on their plans, take pictures and phonograph records of their secret meetings, and publish the results where they'll do the most good. We'll put gang after gang out of business. What enormous good we can do, and what sport!"

"You have the idea exactly," Fleckner assented.

"What a catastrophe it would be if this machine were in the hands of an unscrupulous man!" Priestley went on, suddenly struck by a new thought. "What a chance for a scoundrel to make a huge fortune by blackmail or by stock deals with inside information, or by political intrigue! It's a dangerous weapon in the wrong hands. It's all very well for us with benevolent purpose to attack evil secrecy; but secrecy is only one side of the shield.

"The other side is personal privacy, a thing as legitimate and as dear to humanity as personal liberty. Think of a Peeping Tom with a telephonoscope! Imagine the state of mind of each of us when we became aware that at no time day or night could we be sure that we were not exposed to the gaze of one or more strangers!"

"Yes, the world needs an object-lesson in that phase of it also," commented the inventor.

After further discussion they drew up tentative articles of agreement and arranged to meet a lawyer on the following day and make preparations for Federal incorporation.

I saw Tom Priestley later that evening, and on a sudden impulse he took me completely into his confidence. After reporting his conversation with Professor Fleckner, he added:

"I want you to follow this closely. It will be the chance of a lifetime for you. I trust you to keep it all to yourself until the time comes to write it up. When that time does come it will make your reputation, and for us it will insure a correct and adequate report of what has taken place."

But neither of us as we parted that evening dreamed of the tangled web into which

we had been drawn and how bitterly we would repent the part we had pledged ourselves to play.

CHAPTER III.

A WAR ON SECRECY.

IT was on January 2, 2000 A.D., that Professor Fleckner's famous war on secrecy was begun. It was a bitterly cold winter day, and the subway sidewalks were crowded with the throngs who avoided the open air as much as possible. Since the completion of our universal, double-decked subway system under all New York's streets ten years before, the city administration had stopped bothering to clear away snow, as the upper levels were practically abandoned in winter, and for several days now they had been quite impassable.

Even the subways, however, were cold and drafty for once, and as I started for the Fleckner Laboratories I remember a feeling of comfortable superiority at the thought that in a few minutes I would be enjoying the privilege of practically visiting any section of the city I wished while actually still sitting in a warm and comfortable room.

I had been summoned there by Tom Priestley in a manner distinctly startling, in spite of my previous introduction to the novel method.

I had been sleeping late as usual, as is a morning newspaperman's custom. My rooms, on the inner court of the sixty-first floor of the Riverdale Apartment Hotel, were certainly inaccessible enough. I had locked my door and transom with the usual caution. The window opening on the fire-escape still remained securely fastened.

Yet I was suddenly awakened from a sound sleep by a voice at my very bedside calling my name sharply. I sat bolt upright, instantly wide awake and staring about me in amazement. There was no one in the room. Doors and windows were apparently undisturbed.

At once I decided that I had been having an unusually vivid dream, and lay down again in disgust after glancing at my wall clock and noting that I was due for two hours more of solid slumber.

"Blair! Blair! Wake up!" came the voice again.

I sat up once more, rubbed my eyes, and pinched myself to make sure I was really conscious. There seemed to be no doubt of that. The room looked perfectly natural, but I was absolutely alone.

Then I nearly jumped out of bed in amazement. Tom Priestley suddenly stood by my side, grinning down at me.

"You look surprised, old man," he laughed.

"Surprised!" I managed to stammer. "You nearly scared me to death! How did you manage to get in here, and where were you hiding yourself when I first woke up?"

"I'm not in here at all," was his reply. "I'm up in Professor Fleckner's laboratory, about five miles away. I'm merely giving you a little lesson in the futility of privacy since the invention of the telephonoscope. I wanted you to see how it seems to be on the other end of the instrument. I apologize duly for the intrusion, but I wanted to ask you if you could run up here in about an hour from now. We're going to try our first experiment in our war on secrecy, and we need your suggestions."

"I certainly will," I responded, jumping out of bed and grabbing at my clothes.

In the same instant Priestley's image vanished, and I realized for the first time that I was trembling from nervous shock.

"They'll have to be careful how they work that stuff on people with weak hearts," I thought as I threw on my clothes without stopping for my bath.

Professor Fleckner greeted me cordially when I arrived in considerably less than the hour suggested by Priestley. The old man was standing on a step-ladder in the center of the octagonal room in which his complicated instrument was housed, tinkering industriously with the network of wires and coils that were attached to the ceiling. Priestley sat on a high stool near him, handing him instruments.

As the old fellow turned his huge dome of a head toward me and peered at me out of his big glasses, his long legs spread apart

to keep his balance and his long arms stretched to the ceiling, he reminded me of a great spider with Priestley playing the rôle of fly.

"I'm tightening things up a little," he explained as he climbed down from his perch a moment later and tried the levers of the control-board that stood opposite the screen. "We had a little trouble with it New Year's Eve, you remember, and we can't afford to have any break in the performance we are about to start. The instrument isn't fool-proof yet, by any means.

"Now, we need your help in making suggestions, Mr. Blair," he went on. "We're going to get after our elusive criminal element first, and Mr. Priestley tells me that as a newspaperman you have made quite a study of criminology. What is the situation in New York to-day, and where shall we make a start? We've had some pretty serious crimes lately in spite of the boast of Professor Donald, our police commissioner, that all the known criminals in the country are confined on the reform farms."

"Well," I said, "what I have to tell you is partly from observation and reading and partly guesswork. I'm hoping, though, that your marvelous instrument is going to give me a chance to turn my guesses into positive knowledge.

"Professor Donald is doubtless right, or practically so. We've proved in the last hundred years that the criminal is a man or woman with a defective type of mind. We stopped the foolish practise of punishing him by shutting him up in unhealthful cells for long or short terms, according to his crime, and have been separating him from normal society on our reform farms, where he earns his own living and lives as normally as possible. If he's cured, he's released. If not, he stays there for life.

"Now, the trouble is that the test of normality isn't infallible. There is a residuum of high-grade defectives, so well educated and clever that they have not revealed their criminal bent. To that is added a group pronounced cured, but tending to slip back when under wrong influences.

"Now, the thing I've noticed for years, on comparing present conditions with history, is that the thousand and one minor crimes and many more serious ones that were traced to single individuals formerly have almost entirely disappeared along with the old-time low-browed policeman and his club. The crimes I've studied for the last ten years have been almost entirely occasional big master-strokes, huge robberies, utterly mysterious murders, and the like. And not one of them has ever been satisfactorily solved.

"Of course, we've done away with the motives and causes of most minor crimes. Our modern economic system has largely wiped out poverty among normal people and its tendency to promote theft. The control of alcohol and drugs and establishing of universally healthful living conditions have checked crimes of violence, and so on. But these modern crimes seem to be inspired by individuals whose identity remains hidden, but who have groups of others under their control.

"I believe that just as modern business is in huge combinations, though properly controlled by the people through the state, that modern crime has become a highly specialized enterprise united in a great trust, controlled by a little group of criminal geniuses, perhaps with one supercriminal at its head. I believe if we break into the secrecy of this criminal underworld at any point with the telephonoscope and trace out its ramifications we'll unearth and destroy the whole system.

"Now, such a system must have headquarters and various rendezvous, private houses, innocent-appearing business offices, restaurants, or other unsuspected places. I don't doubt there are gambling-houses and other disorderly places still, but not even a suspicion has been lodged against any definite locality in all of twenty years. Find such a place, and we'd doubtless find it also a meeting-point for members of the crime trust.

"This isn't all guesswork. You remember the famous half confession of Roebling, the man convicted of the North Side Trust Company robbery twelve years ago. He insisted he had handed his loot intact over to some one whose very name he did not

know, and that he was getting an annual salary and a small percentage of his stealings for his regular work as a safe-cracker. That's all they ever got out of him, as he died soon after conviction. Ever since, police and newspapermen have been probing for the men higher up whom he indicated.

"Now, in the old days, seventy-five or even fifty years ago, while we followed the ridiculous custom of allowing well-known criminals to run at large as long as one prison term had expired and no actual proof of a new crime existed, it would have been easy with your telephonoscope to run them down in their haunts, listen to their conversations with their pals, and in no time unearth a new plot and implicate the whole bunch.

"Now the known criminals are all shut up and not a place in the city is under even the vaguest suspicion of being a haunt of the unknown men who are occasionally pulling off these big jobs. So you see we're rather up against it in getting a start."

I had been thus thinking aloud, hoping that my thoughts would lead to some practical suggestion, but I reached the end of my little string of ideas and stopped no nearer to an idea of real value than when I began. We all sat in thoughtful silence for a few minutes.

"You believe this criminal syndicate may be recruited by an occasional criminal pronounced cured and released and who has since suffered a relapse?" asked Priestley.

"Yes. I say that because Roebling, of the North Side Trust Company robbery, was such a case. The known cases have been very few in recent years, to be sure, but several graduates from Ossining Farm have been sent back, though, fortunately, before they had committed any serious offense. The superintendent, Dr. Zeigler, tends to be a little lax in passing on discharges. He's a little too sentimental for his job, in my opinion."

"Why not pick out some graduates from there and shadow them?" Priestley suggested.

"Fine!" I exclaimed. "That's the answer. We'll make a start by running down recent Ossining Farm releases. Can your instruments get at records such as card-files and closed books, Professor Fleckner?"

"Certainly," he replied. "I've been experimenting with that trick. It takes a nice adjustment of the rays to separate out a single page of a book, but I've become quite skilful at it."

"Let's turn it on the executive offices up at Ossining then and see who has left the place lately."

Fleckner stepped to the control-board, switched on the current, and presently the northern section of Westchester Borough began flying in panorama across the screen. The rows of towering apartments with their roof-gardens and wide parkways gave way to detached suburban homes, and in a moment ended at a broad boulevard a little beyond where the historic town of Sing Sing once lay before all that region became a part of Greater New York City.

The other side of this boulevard, which ran inland several miles from the Hudson River, was lined with a high fence of steel wicker work, with sentry towers at regular intervals. Beyond lay a broad sweep of beautiful open country, parkland from which peeped attractive cottages and intensively cultivated fields. Here and there in the center of a garden lay a large building of simple, graceful architecture, one of the factories of Ossining Farms.

We were looking upon one of the most up-to-date institutions of detention in the world, a striking contrast to the grim, gray prison that once marred the landscape of the beautiful river valley near this point.

A moment later the interior of the file-room of the executive offices lay on our screen, and while confidential clerks worked over the carefully guarded pedigrees of the institution's inmates, all unconscious of our all-seeing eyes, we were throwing on the screen the contents of case after case until we found the section we wanted, the one which contained the folders with photographs and histories of discharged inmates. For two hours or more we pored over these pitiful tales of broken and mended lives, now and then making notes on cases that might be worth following up. Suddenly we came to the photograph of a face that was strikingly familiar. I bent over to note

the name, and shouted aloud in amazement.

It was that of Judge Theron B. Tanner, one of the leading and most highly respected members of the bench in New York City.

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE RICCADONA.

AFTER my first outburst of astonishment my second thought was that I had been misled by a coincidence in name and resemblance in features. It could not be possible that one of the most respected and popular men on the Supreme Court bench could be a Farm Colony graduate. This must be some black sheep of the judge's family who bore his name and a strong family resemblance.

This record was in the special secret file of first offenders who had pleaded guilty and waived public trial. Such cases were never made public unless they proved to be chronic. Where the cure was a speedy one or the offense was shown to be a purely sporadic outbreak of a normal character under unusual stress, the term of confinement was brief and the case was glossed over to the public as a nervous breakdown for which the patient had gone to a private sanatorium for a few months.

Judge Tanner's case was recorded as one of this sporadic type.

Five years previous to this, and two years before his election to the bench, while he was still in private practise, he had misappropriated a client's funds. His partner had discovered it and reported it to the Tanner family. Confronted with his crime, he had confessed and waived trial, the family made good the loss without the client ever being the wiser, the partnership was dissolved, and Tanner went to Ossining Farm for a year. At the end of that time he was declared free of chronic criminal impulse and released with his general reputation unimpaired.

I had become acquainted with the judge while following his campaign. Many a time I had interviewed him at the popular old Riccadona Café, down in the Bronx, which long ago closed its doors before the up-town march of business. In those days, however, it was still a popular place, though the center of the city's night life was already far to the north of it, and it was here the judge dined nearly every evening and conferred with his supporters. I had formed the habit of dining there myself then and had run across the judge there only recently.

Priestley, Fleckner, and I commented briefly on this strange bit of private history, but it did not occur to us then that it would pay us to follow up the judge further, so we continued on over the records.

Presently I stopped at another familiar photographic countenance. The name, John Hammersley, meant nothing to me, and I could not recall where I'd seen the face. This man had spent five years at the colony, having developed a propensity for blackmailing. Since his release he had apparently led a blameless life as an advertising specialist.

Still wondering where I had seen him I scanned a dozen more photographs and then came two hauntingly familiar physiognomies in succession. Again I was at loss to place them. Strangely enough this pair had been partners in the pawn-brokerage firm of Hanson & Gormly and had been sent up for swindling. On their release they had renewed business together. We were turning away from them when it suddenly flashed over me where I had seen them. They had occupied a table together at the Riccadona the week before and at the time I had recalled seeing them there several times previously.

"By Jove!" I exclaimed with sudden inspiration. "There may be nothing to it, but I suggest that we hunt these four men, including the judge, and also that we investigate the Riccadona. It may be only coincidence, and again the old joint may be the crooks' hangout that we're looking for."

"Well, it gives us a tentative starting-point at least," Professor Fleckner agreed, "and it won't take long to run it down."

The telephonoscope had multiple foci so that it was possible to throw on the screen several widely separated objects at once. Priestley and I both took a hand at the control-levers under Professor Fleckner's di-

rection and presently all four of our suspected men were thrown on the screen.

At the same moment we watched Judge Tanner charging the jury in a suit for damages against the Trans-Alaskan Monorail Company; Hammersley trying to secure a contract for motion-picture advertising of the Quebec and Overland Company's summer excursions to the North Pole; Hanson waiting on a seedy customer who was trying to pawn an old-fashioned pocket-heater for twice its value; and Gormly, at the other end of the shop, going over the afternoon mail that had just shot out of the delivery tube, and dictating replies to the clicking auto-writer at his side.

All the afternoon we watched this quartet at their various monotonous employments, but saw and heard nothing worthy of note. After court closed the judge went to his chambers, dictated a few letters which held nothing of significance, and then picked up his telephone and punched a number. He got Neil Dorgan, a corporation lawyer in One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street.

"How about dinner to-night at the old place?" he asked.

"Fine! Be there at six thirty," was the reply.

Then he called Assistant District Attorney J. B. Winter and made the same appointment.

About the same time Hammersley turned from his desk, thrust his feet in his automatic shoe-polisher and at the same time slipped a penny in his newspaper delivery slot, pressed the *Evening Planet* button and a moment later that paper shot into his lap. He scanned it rapidly as if in search of a particular item. He found it presently and read it with great care. It was a letter to the editor by Judge Tanner in answer to the paper's editorial criticism of him the day before for ordering the release from Ossining Farm of one Alfred Vary, a violator of the antistock gambling law, whose relatives had appealed to the courts against the Farm Colony committee's decision to restrain him for another year. The letter, which Priestley and I read over Hammersley's shoulder fives miles away, defended Vary's character warmly and declared he had been the victim of misrepresentation.

We agreed that here was a possible clue to a connection between Hammersley and the judge.

The article finished, Hammersley closed his office, entered the subway and, ten minutes later, was seated at a corner table in the Riccadona.

Meantime the pawnbrokers closed shop and a little later they, too, were entering the eating-place on which our suspicious interest now centered. They passed close to Hammersley's table on the way to their own, but if there was any sign of recognition between them we failed to note it.

The partners sat down in silence, looked over the menu and put in their orders in their table phones. The Riccadona had been one of the last restaurants in New York to abolish waiters in favor of the modern mechanical service, and we old-time patrons deplored the consequent loss of picturesqueness. The pair received their dinner presently on the little serving elevator up through the center of the table and for some time ate in silence and watched the phonic moving-picture cabaret.

"I wonder if this is to be another dull night?" remarked Gormly at last.

"I can tell you in just a second," replied Hanson, who sat facing the door.

We followed his glance and saw Judge Tanner and his party just coming in. The judge sometimes occupied a table in the general dining-room and sometimes in one of the private rooms on the second floor. To-night he and his party headed for the stairs.

"Yes," Hanson said as soon as he noted where the judge was going. "To-night's one of the nights. We'd better eat fast and get down."

And while he was speaking Hammersley, who had been likewise watching the judge's progress, hastily swallowed his demi-tasse, dropped his dinner-check and a ten-dollar bill in the pay-chute beside the service-elevator, and, as soon as his change was shot back, arose and hurried out, one of our sets of telephonoscope rays following him.

He left the café by the main exit, turned to the left until he came to the next corner, then turned again to the left, following the cross-street to the next corner, on which

stood a little cigar store. He entered this leisurely, bought a package of cigarettes, lit one, and then sauntered out by the rear entrance, which opened on the side street through a short, narrow vestibule.

In this vestibule Hammersley made his first suspicious move. The door from the store into the vestibule and the door to the street were both solid doors, without glass. The vestibule was lighted by day from a transom over the street door and at night by a dim ceiling light. Hammersley was for the moment alone and hidden from ordinary sight.

He closed the store door behind him, then, instead of opening the street door, stepped in the middle of the vestibule and pressed a finger against the wainscoting. A narrow panel in the wall slid back revealing a flight of steps leading down a narrow passage between concrete walls. Hammersley disappeared down these steps, sliding the panel shut back of him.

Fleckner, impelled by an inventor's curiosity, let Hammersley go for a moment while he sent the prying ray of the telephonoscope searching under the surface of the vestibule walls to discover its mechanism.

"Ah!" he exclaimed presently. "Very neat! The panel is electrically connected with latches in the other two doors. When the panel is open the doors are locked. No one from the street or the store can get into the vestibule while one of the gang is using the passage through the panel. Perfectly safe and fool-proof scheme."

His curiosity satisfied, he turned his ray down the secret stairs and through a long passage, overtaking Hammersley before a closed door at its end, evidently far back under the block of buildings, in which stood both the innocent-appearing little tobacco shop and the Riccadona Café.

Hammersley stood with his hand on the door-knob, evidently waiting. Fleckner sent his rays beyond the door and revealed a small apartment in which another man was adjusting a long black robe, cowl and mask, completely concealing his person. In a moment he finished arraying himself, went to a door opposite the one at which Hammersley waited, and gave a peculiar rap. A small panel opened and another masked face peered out. The applicant gave a password which we failed to catch and was promptly admitted to a room from which came the hum of general conversation.

The moment the door closed a light glowed over Hammersley's head and he, too, entered the dressing-room where we noticed a great number of robes and masks hung on hooks about the walls.

"Clever arrangement!" Fleckner commented. "The whole set of doors is so connected up with wiring along the flooring that each section of the passage is locked at both ends as long as there is any pressure of feet on its floor. In that way only one person or possibly a group belonging together can go through to the main room at a time. That's so the members of the gang won't even see and identify each other. They can't get together anywhere along the line till they are disguised."

"Well, Blair, your guess was a good one," declared Priestley. "We've hit on a meeting-place of the crime trust all right and I think we're about to connect up your friend, Judge Tanner, with the outfit."

"We are about to test another part of my guess," I added. For at that moment Hanson and Gormly, whom we had kept in sight on their section of the screen, paid their bill and departed.

Priestley had been directing the rays that recorded the movements of this worthy pair, and as he followed them out we were not at all surprised to see them also arrive a few moments later in the little tobacco shop, although they took the precaution to approach it by going the other way around the block. They, too, went out by way of the trick vestibule and thence through the secret panel into the passage from which presently our rays followed them, cowled, masked, and robed, into a big underground club-room where there were a hundred or more other human enigmas lounging about in little groups.

The big room was oak-paneled with low beamed ceilings. In one end was a cheery fireplace. There were padded leather chairs and lounges, reading-tables and well-filled bookcases.

Through a broad arch at one side one

caught a glimpse of a pleasant café and bar. An opposite arch led into a series of rooms in which all kinds of games of chance were in full swing. A group of well-appointed executive offices opened off the end of the main room.

Altogether it was like peering into an elaborately appointed gentleman's club, save for the grim, funereal aspect of its strange inmates.

But our attention was suddenly turned from this remarkable scene by an exclamation from Priestley, who having directed his particular telephonoscope ray till he had seen the pair of pawnbrokers into their underground clubroom, had turned his attention again to the section of the screen on which I had kept the image of Judge Tanner. Having seen the judge closeted at a table with his cronies in the little private dining-room and engaged in desultory and inconsequential conversation, I had dropped my set of control-levers and stood studying the more interesting spectacle in the underground clubroom.

"Listen to the judge!" Priestley exclaimed. "I think he's going to give us a line on the general scheme of things!"

CHAPTER V.

THE CRIME TRUST.

IT would be hard to imagine a place of more complete privacy than the little dining-room in which the judge and his two companions were closeted. It was one of a row of similar ones that opened off a corridor at the rear of the second floor and its walls were sound-proof. Its only window, blanketed with heavy draperies, opened out on an inner court, around which pyramided hundred-story buildings. Like the main room below and the numerous banquet-halls on this and other floors the service was automatic and the private diners were undisturbed by the coming and going of officious waiters.

I had not yet become enough accustomed to the prying rays of the telephonoscope to avoid a feeling of distinct repugnance against thus invading the privacy of the august judge and his companions. I still felt as though I must be standing in plain view before them.

But the conversation to which we were listening made me speedily forget my self-consciousness. We could not have selected a more opportune evening for initiation into the secrets of the crime trust. For I knew before I had listened five minutes to the conversation around the little table that my hypothesis had been correct.

It was a strange trio on which shone the soft radiance from the electro-luminous ceiling—the white-haired, courtly judge, his large, well-preserved figure groomed after the manner of well-bred, elderly gentlemen who have not changed their style of dress in twenty years; the grizzled lawyer, whose dark, care-worn face just now bore a particularly anxious expression, and the dapper, modish little assistant district attorney who was studying the judge's face and looking puzzled and astounded by turns. The judge had evidently just completed a statement which I had not caught.

"Do you mean to tell me that you, Judge Tanner, are one of the leaders of a band of crooks?"

The judge smiled indulgently.

"I don't like that term. It's too old-fashioned. Instead of 'crooks' let us say men and women of superior wits and unshackled minds who have learned to live above the ordinary laws of ordinary people and to manipulate ordinary people for their own purposes. Nor would I say 'a band,' but rather 'The Band,' for within the last ten years we have united all lesser bands into one big organization. Yes, I am proud to say I have for some time been one of its leaders, head of the National Secondary Council of Three, to be exact."

"But, if you are in earnest, and your honor is not given to frivolous joking, why are you telling this to me, a member of the district attorney's office, sworn to prosecute criminals? Are you putting me to a test?"

"A test that I am sure you will meet satisfactorily. I am telling you this because this Council of Three just now lacks a member and, after studying you and your methods for some time, we feel sure that you are eligible for that place and will gladly accept our offer of appointment to it.

For, on a certain notable occasion shortly before you were selected for your present office, you betrayed a marked tendency, let us not say criminal tendency—we don't use that expression in our circle—rather a commendable tendency to rise above the shackles of the law."

The young man tried to look indignant, but succeeded only on looking alarmed. His face paled.

"You mean the Zornow case?" he faltered. "But I was acquitted, completely exonerated. It was all a mistake. The money was found. Your honor knows that. You presided at my trial and threw the case out of court."

"Exactly," the judge nodded pleasantly. "You never knew yourself how that money was restored. I did, because I arranged it and the details were carried out by gentlemen unknown to me acting under the direction of our friend here. We knew, of course, that you were guilty, but we saw in you the making of a clever and useful associate. So we arranged to prove you innocent. We cultivated your acquaintance after that and also had our spies watch your daily movements. We arranged your appointment to the district attorney's office. We are satisfied at last and are ready to offer you a place that means wealth and influence you can never get in the ordinary channels today when humdrum people have seen to it by increasingly rigid laws that the wealth and power of their humdrum fellows shall be exceedingly limited."

The young man sat for a long time in silent, intense thought. So delicate was the phonic recorder of our instrument that we could hear his heavy, nervous breathing as though we sat at his elbow instead of being separated from him by miles of roaring city. Professor Fleckner, in a sudden whim, shifted a lever a trifle and concentrated the rays till we could plainly hear the tumultuous beating of his heart.

"Can't hide much from the telephonoscope," chuckled the inventor boyishly.

"Suppose I refuse this—this honor?" asked the young man at length.

"You are under no compulsion," the judge assured him blandly. "We neither coerce nor threaten. We know our secret is perfectly safe with you, because you owe to us your liberty, and any exposure of us would at once involve you. Moreover, the facts of your career have been so recorded that any treacherous move would automatically expose them while you could not possibly prove anything against us and your statement would be taken by the public merely as a fantastic lie inspired by grudge. I merely tell you this, you understand, to explain our confidence in you and in no way as a threat. You are at liberty to refuse our offer and walk out unmolested if you choose. Only one man has ever refused such an offer, however. I don't think he would have made any attempt to expose us either, if he had lived. Unfortunately, he died on his way home after our meeting. It is believed he fell off the Yonkers bridge, as his body was found later in the Hudson. Very distressing!"

The oily hypocrite sighed sadly. The young man stared at him in momentary horror, then pulled himself together with an effort.

"I'll accept your strange offer," he said at length. "Evidently there's nothing else to do. I don't know that I'd refuse if I could, anyhow. Your proposal rather appeals to me, now that my first surprise is over. I suppose I have some sort of oath or agreement to go through with."

"Nothing of the sort," the judge assured him. "An oath could add nothing to the tie that holds you. I will simply outline our organization briefly and then put you in touch with your first duties.

"In the first place you will never know the name or face of another member of this organization excepting me and my friend here, unless you should some day succeed to my place as head of the committee. I know the personality of certain men who work under me and a certain three of them know me as their leader. Where they meet I don't know. Who the man or men over me are I know no more than do you."

"But you said it was a big organization!" Winter exclaimed. "How can you keep it together?"

"It's simple. That telephone there does the trick. It's a perfectly normal-looking instrument. It would even bear expert in-

spection. It connects with the regular wireless system of the city ordinarily. But if you'll notice, the metal ring at the base of the receiver is a little loose—looks as though it had accidentally worked loose with usage. That's intentional, however. If you twist the ring a little to the right you will find yourself on a secret wireless circuit. You will be answered by a voice which represents the organization higher up. Whose the voice is I haven't the faintest idea. May be a fellow judge or the president of my bank or the humble-looking chap who trims my hair, or some one I've never seen in my life. Nevertheless, I get all the orders for our nationwide organization from that voice.

"Then I twist the ring to the left and am at once in touch with a lieutenant under me who transmits my orders to any section I may designate. Not much chance of any one betraying any one, is there?"

"But what is the object of it all? The amassing of wealth for the organization members, I suppose, through what, as a lawyer I have always heretofore called theft and fraud," said Winter.

"Well," the judge demurred, "it's not quite so simple as that. We have, to be sure, a larceny section whose members specialize in all forms of forcible or fraudulent removal of wealth from its so-called legal owners, including bank robbery, forgery, a variety of swindling games and so on all the way down the various grades of defiance to law. We even have shop-lifting and pickpocket divisions.

"All these operatives work on a salary and a percentage of winnings paid from above. They turn over all their plunder, through secret channels, to the group above. Who is the keeper of this vast treasure thus accumulated and where it is stored neither I nor any other subordinate member of the organization has the remotest idea. We only know that this fund forms the basis of our working capital. This fund, aided by the manipulations of our secret agents who have invaded every strategic business circle in the country, controls the economic affairs of America and we hope shortly to make our power worldwide. We control the price of commodities and labor. We run the stock-market up and down at will. So you see our indirect gains both as an organization and as individuals are much greater than the direct winnings of our operatives.

"As a corollary to our business influence we have at last acquired secret but absolute control of politics in America and after the Presidential election this coming fall we expect through the American delegation to the League of Nations to hold supreme power over international affairs."

"What?" Winter demanded. "Do you mean to tell me that your organization can control a national election?"

"Absolutely. We will control the nomination for President by each of the three parties, and see to it that the man and party we choose is elected."

"But I don't understand," Winter objected. "You, your honor, though aloof from politics, as a judge should be, are known to be a stanch member of the Conservative Party. Our friend here is an active Centralist and I am a Radical, appointed as such by my Radical chief. How can we work together in a common political cause?"

"All the better for it," laughed the judge. "We will continue as before, outwardly supporting our various parties, but secretly carrying out the orders from above that will eventually elect the organization's choice."

"But which party has been chosen and who is the lucky candidate?"

"That I don't know yet?" the judge replied. "I expect, though, to know immediately. I am due to call the Voice Higher Up at eight o'clock and get their decision. It's just eight now."

He stepped to the wall phone, put the receiver to his ear, and twisted the ring at its back.

"Did you reach a decision?" he asked without preliminaries.

"Yes. It's 583," came the cryptic answer out of the instrument in a hoarse, wheezy half-whisper.

That was all. The judge hung up the receiver and came back to the table, apparently satisfied.

"The answer is 583," he said.

The older lawyer nodded his satisfaction, but the younger merely looked puzzled.

"Let me explain," the judge went on. "You see, we never mention names in connection with our plots, even when we're in secret session. You will recall our discussing the names and politics of a number of prominent men last week in a purely academic way. We finally arranged them in the order of what we considered their importance in the nation and discussed the idea till I think the list and its order is fixed in your mind, is it not?"

Winter thought for a minute.

"Yes. I remember," he agreed.

"Well," the judge went on, "that was a key list. The number 583 means that No. 5 on that list has been picked to head his party and win the election. The eighth and third will be chosen by their parties to oppose him and thereby serve our purposes."

Winter looked his amazement.

"You don't mean to tell me that those men are members of a crime trust! Why, they are the most substantial and trusted men in the country, particularly the one picked to win!"

"I don't mean to tell you anything of the sort," the judge retorted. "I've told you I don't know who my fellow members are. They don't need to be members to be manipulated by us. You were our tool before you became a member. Your worthy chief is serving us right along and I don't believe he even suspects that our organization exists despite his vague talk about men higher up.

"What I do mean to say is that the next President of the United States, whether he knows it or not, will be the creature and agent of the greatest organization of lawbreakers the world has ever known."

CHAPTER VI.

THE VOICE HIGHER UP.

PROFESSOR FLECKNER turned from the screen, his face alight with excitement.

"This is big!" he exclaimed. "Bigger than we dreamed! Instead of ferreting out and exposing a lot of petty crimes we're on the trail of a worldwide conspiracy. We must trace that Voice Higher Up. When we find the man behind it we'll have control of their treasure and all their secrets. We'll hold the crime trust in the hollow of our hand."

I noted again the crafty and avaricious gleam in the old man's eyes and once more felt momentarily uneasy. But the look escaped Priestley. He was absorbed in study of the parallel pictures on the screen—Judge Tanner, Dorgan, and Winter up in the little private dining-room; and the bizarre, black-robed company in the secret clubrooms under the café's subbasement.

"Something else is happening! Watch it closely!" Priestley exclaimed.

Judge Tanner had turned back to the wall telephone. "He twisted the ring in the opposite direction this time," Priestley explained. "He's getting a subordinate on the line. I think it connects with this underground clubroom. He asked for No. 49. Can we find their telephones down there?"

Professor Fleckner shifted the levers and the various sections of the underground rendezvous slipped across the screen. In less than a minute we located a small room just off the big lounge in which there were a dozen wireless telephone-booths of the modern, absolutely sound-proof type. A black-robed, masked attendant had just taken a call. He turned to the pageaphone beside his desk and announced. "No. 49 wanted on the phone." His voice was repeated all through the various rooms from the numerous little announcer-disks set in the wainscoting.

"What did I tell you?" Priestley exulted. "We already know more about one of the meeting-places of the organization than Judge Tanner himself."

One of the black-robed figures had detached itself from a group in the far corner of the lounging-room and was coming toward the phones. In small white numerals at the top of his somber mask was stamped the number "49." Fleckner drove the rays of our instrument under the mask and revealed the face of Gormly.

He entered the booth, picked up the instrument, and whispered: "This is 49."

"This is the Council," came the voice of the judge reduplicated in our ears, both from the little dining-room where he stood and out of the telephone-transmitter in the subbasement clubroom.

"Arrangements are complete. It's No. 583," he said. "Are your directions all transmitted and your releases ready?"

"All ready, sir," Gormly replied. "I'll fill in the numbers and get the radiograms out to-night."

"Very good. Now, I wish to speak to No. 25."

Gormly left the booth and ordered 25 paged, then retired to a small writing-room next to the telephone and sat down at a desk.

We got our third set of rays into operation again, Fleckner watching Gormly; Priestly keeping the judge and his companions on the screen, and I waiting for No. 25 to appear. I had learned how to control the instrument by now and when another dark-robed figure approached the waiting phone with the numeral "25" marked on his mask, I peeped behind that face-covering and revealed the features of Hammersley, the reformed blackmailer.

"Have you sized up the man I indicated?" asked the judge when Hammersley took up the receiver.

"Yes," he replied. "I've got his whole story and arranged for a meeting to-morrow night when I think he'll be ready for a proposition. I've closed with three other prospects this last week, too; all good men. I wish I could tell you the name of one of them. It would surprise you."

"Never mind that. The less I have to know the better. What's the news from the field?"

"I've just got in the last of the December report. We added a thousand and twenty-nine exactly during the month, four hundred and sixty-nine of them women."

"That's a good showing. Keep it up. We'll need them all for the plan we have on. No more small stuff till after next November. The treasury is full and we can concentrate on the main issue."

"That's the gang's general recruiting-agent," I exclaimed. "We're certainly getting data fast."

"Yes," declared Fleckner, "and here's a long list of the names of gang members."

He had been watching Gormly. On sitting down at the desk in the writing-room the pawnbroker had drawn a sheaf of radiogram blanks from his pocket. Fleckner had switched the camera attachment into the ray he was controlling and the messages Gormly had typewritten on the blanks before him were being photographed on a cinema film.

Each message was worded differently from the rest, a harmless appearing business communication. A blank space had been left in each, which Gormly was rapidly filling in with the key number the judge had given him, conveying to the initiated receiver of the message the names of the three chosen nominees for President of the United States. These messages were addressed to persons all over the country, who had evidently been previously informed of the plan and the part they were to play in carrying it out. They were all apparently obscure local men—members of the crime trust in their district and acting as go-betweens for the central organization and the local leaders. I recognized no big names in national politics.

It seemed to us then with this much laid bare that we would have little trouble in locating the whole membership, including the man or men at the head, and, what loomed largest in Fleckner's mind, the vast treasure these plotters had stored way. But we had entirely discounted the brains of this precious outfit. It was as though they had divined beforehand in some uncanny fashion the marvelous instrument which, when they first laid out their plot, had existed only in the wizard mind of Professor Fleckner. So carefully had they guarded against all possibility of leakage of their plans that, spy on their secret meetings as we might in the following weeks we could gather from their cryptic methods of transferring orders and submitting reports nothing that put us much farther along in unraveling the plot and getting at their real purpose than we were after the flying start made at this first session.

Nothing further of note happened that evening. Judge Tanner's party broke up

immediately after he completed his secret telephoning. Gormly finished filling in his messages and gave them to a messenger to file at various wireless stations about the city. The black-robed throng in the underground clubroom settled down for a night of apparently carefree gaming.

So we gave up the quest for the time being. Priestley and I departed after engaging to meet again at the laboratory early the next morning.

From that day on Judge Tanner, his two companions of that memorable conference, Winter and Dorgan; Hammersley, Gormly and Hanson were never off our screens during their waking moments. We also kept a ray concentrated on the underground rendezvous of the gang. Still another ray was turned on a roving assignment about the country keeping tabs on the list of conspirators revealed by Gormly's messages.

To do this it was necessary for Professor Fleckner to increase the number of ray-senders on his apparatus and for each of us to learn to manipulate two rays at once. Also Miss Stimson, Fleckner's secretary, the young woman of the green eye-shade whom I had encountered on my first visit to the laboratory, was enlisted as an operative. Fleckner had the utmost confidence in her discretion. Furthermore, we agreed to make no unnecessary explanations to her regarding the revelations we turned up.

She made an admirable assistant, silent and intelligent, apparently utterly devoid of the usual feminine curiosity. She never ceased, however, to pique that mental quality in me. The green eye-shade continued to render her face utterly impersonal. Aided by her severely plain dress and treatment of her brown hair, it also lent that quality to her whole being. And her attitude toward us was in the main as impersonal as her appearance. Her momentary show of interest in Priestley's peril when I first met her was a brief exception to her habitual bearing. She paid little attention to Priestley and he seemed unaware of her existence.

With our forces thus organized we followed our quest twenty-four hours a day. I secured a leave of absence from my paper under an arrangement with Fleckner and Priestley to pay my salary. At night we three slept on cots in the laboratory and took turns at watch.

But though we spied on numerous secret meetings and telephone conferences in which members of the crime trust figured we were able to get no inkling as to which of the three political parties they were supporting or what methods they were using. And so the national conventions came on one after the other.

In those days America prided herself as now in having pretty thoroughly eliminated vicious machine politics from national affairs. National conventions had long since ceased to put through cut-and-dried programs. Delegates really reflected their constituents' wishes.

Now, despite our knowledge that a nationwide conspiracy was afoot to dictate the people's will, we could discover no departure from the principle of popular control. We found no point of contact with the crime trust. Not one of the members we had listed took any part in politics. Not one was a member of local, State, or national committees or conventions. Judge Tanner and the other two members of the Central Council, Winter and Dorgan, held no more meetings during the campaign. True, the judge dined frequently at the Riccadona as before, often in the private room with various groups of friends. There was, however, never any conversation that hinted at these companions being in the conspiracy. They discussed politics, if at all, only in the most casual fashion. Judge Tanner held to his pose of judicial aloofness from politics. He never used the wall phone again in any one's presence. Several times after a dinner-party broke up, however, he returned for a moment to the little dining-room on some pretext or other and exchanged cryptic remarks over the wall phone with the Voice Higher Up or with one of his subordinates in the secret sub-basement clubroom. We could make nothing of any of these consultations.

As a matter of fact the choice of national candidates seemed unusually obvious this season. During the preliminary campaign the usual number of Presidential possibilities loomed up in each party only to boil

down to one obvious choice of the people in each case well before the time for formal selection.

And the men selected were citizens of such high standing, so far above reproach or suspicion that we were more than ever in the dark as to which could be the unconscious tool of the crime trust. Furthermore, the backers and counselors of each were men of equally high character.

The Conservatives led off with Henderson Livermore, a statesman of the old mid-twentieth century school, who had served with distinction as Congressman, Senator, and for three terms Governor of Oklahoma. The Conservatives had lost to the Radicals for five successive terms now. During the last two years, however, the tide had shown signs of turning toward the Conservative camp. The selection of a candidate of Livermore's caliber added to the hopes of his supporters.

Against Livermore, as the Radical candidate, was pitted Merton Penrod, of the State of Alaska, whose family had made a fortune in the gold-fields there. A large part of the estate had come to Penrod intact, thanks to his relatives, conforming to the new inheritance law by signing the papers of consent. But the heir had endeared himself to his followers by devoting his fortune to public works and living most simply himself. He had served two terms as American delegate to the League of Nations council.

Incredible as it seemed that either of these men could be manipulated by the supercraft of Judge Tanner's organization, we felt certain that it was one of these two who had the crime trust's backing. For the third party, the Centralist, was as yet a joke in national politics. It had sprung into being as a compromise movement between the two old extreme wings sixteen years before and had never won a national election, though for the last six years it had held the balance of power in Congress.

Their candidate, Mortimer Chandler, was, however, one of the best known and most popular men in America, though he had never been in politics before. He had built up a huge farm corporation on a cooperative, profit-sharing basis and accumulated an immense private fortune of his own. Two years before the passing of the inheritance law he had anticipated it by turning that fortune back into the corporation, part to be divided among the holdings of the other shareholders and part to improve general rural conditions to the benefit of the country as a whole. He had not sought the nomination, but reluctantly accepted it on condition that he be required to take no strenuous part in the campaign. He was frankly looked upon as an amiable dummy to lead a forlorn hope.

Though we could get no positive evidence as to which of the two other parties had the backing of the crime trust, our reason told us it was the Conservative. That party had fought step by step the legislative restrictions on the accumulation of private fortunes.

What we had overheard at Judge Tanner's conference led us to believe that the crime trust, naturally, sympathized with that policy. The indications of popular reaction against undue governmental interference gave definite hope of a Conservative victory.

But early in the campaign signs developed that political calculations had gone astray. The revolt against the Radical platform, instead of swinging over to the opposite wing, tended more and more to take the middle ground of support for the Centralists. From a forlorn hope, their candidate's prospects presently became a lively possibility.

At this point our remaining doubt as to the leanings of Judge Tanner's secret organization was set at rest by the judge himself coming out in the open and taking the stump for the Conservatives on the ground of patriotic necessity. But, meantime, as it became evident that our effort to discover and thwart the plot was in vain and that the plot seemed doomed to failure, Professor Fleckner lost interest in that phase of our crusade. He concentrated his efforts more and more on an attempt to discover the identity of the Voice Higher Up and the treasure behind it.

Election night found him shut up in the work-shop end of his laboratory at work on a new attachment to the telephonoscope

which he predicted would solve the mystery. He paid not the slightest attention to the election returns.

Priestley, Miss Stimson, and I, however, watched the results with intense interest. It was a close race, but by nine o'clock Chandler and the Centralists had won by a narrow but safe margin. The crime trust, apparently, had met with defeat in its great ambition.

Being naturally curious as to how Judge Tanner would take this upsetting of his boastful prophesy we turned the telephonoscope ray on the little dining-room at the Riccadona where the judge and four of his friends had been getting the returns. The party was just breaking up.

At this moment Professor Fleckner burst in from the workroom in great excitement.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed excitedly. "We'll be able to trace the direction of that secret telephone wave now. We're about to see the man behind the Voice Higher Up!"

The old inventor held in his hand a contraption shaped like an overgrown hornet's nest made of small, stiff wires crossing each other so as to form inch squares. In its center was a small electric coil attached to a dial at its base.

The professor set up his stepladder under the center of the overhead webbing of telephonoscope aerleons, climbed up and, with a pair of pliers, attached this contrivance to the junction point of the aerleons. He then connected the dial at its base with the telephonoscope control-board by means of an insulated wire.

"There!" he exclaimed. "That's what I call a ray-angulator. When the telephonoscope ray crosses the wave-impulse of a wireless telephone or telegraph, this dial gives the angle at which the two sets of waves cross, the direction of the telephone or telegraph waves and the distance from their source to the point of intersection with our ray. In other words, we'll be able to plot two sides and the included angle of a triangle and all we'll have to do will be to send another ray from our telephonoscope across the third side of the triangle to the source of the telephone or telegraphic conversation.

"For instance, suppose our telephonoscope discovers Judge Tanner talking with the Voice Higher Up. The dials here will show us at once which direction from the judge the man behind the voice is and how far they are apart. We plot the triangle in a couple of seconds, send a second ray off in the right direction for the right distance and there you have the head of the crime trust!"

"You've got your chance right now!" Priestley broke in excitedly. "The judge's party just left the dining-room. The judge turned back saying he'd dropped a glove and has just gone to the wall phone and connected with the Big Voice."

With trembling hands, Fleckner switched on the angulator after a glance at the screen which revealed the picture Priestley had just described. He read the figures to which the dial-needles pointed, placed his compass and rules on the drawing-board, and a moment later found the direction and distance from us of the owner of the mysterious voice.

Then he adjusted a second ray-sender of the telephonoscope to that direction and distance and, placing a hand on the control-lever, turned to us dramatically.

"Prepare your minds now for anything that may follow," he warned. "For when I press this lever there will stand before us on the screen the head of the crime trust."

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.

Three and the Chevalier

by Robert W. Sneddon

THE Chevalier Capotti smoothed down the embroidered waistcoat over his well-rounded paunch, adjusted the stock about his thick throat, and secure in the cut of his tailed blue coat and trousers falling over varnished boots, beamed upon the spectacle of the crowd in the Piazza of San Marco where an Austrian band played loudly.

All about him in the Cafè Florian, resort of the conquered and the conquerors, Venetians and Austrians, the latter in uniforms, was a buzz of talk. Seemingly unconscious as he sipped his coffee and smoked his cigar, the chevalier was lending attentive ears to the low-toned conversation about him.

On the quickness of hearing of those very ears depended his livelihood, for the chevalier, Venetian by birth, had early recognized that the cards were against the fortunes of the citizens of his place of birth, and had chosen to sell his birthright for a snug salary paid him by Salviotti, chief of the inquisitorial commission established in the Venetian-Lombardy state by His Majesty Francis First, Emperor of Austria, and King of Hungary and Bohemia.

The year was 1820, and six years had elapsed since Venice, after passing like a pawn upon the chessboard of European politics successively from the Doge of the Republic of Venice to Napoleon in 1797, to be transferred by him as a sop to Austria, retaken by him in 1805 as part of the Kingdom of Italy whose iron crown he placed upon his head at Milan, had again fallen into the hands of Austria after the stirring Hundred Days which terminated on the field of Waterloo.

The chevalier let his glance wander from the tower of the Campanile to the yellow and black ensigns of Austria floating proudly on the three tall masts of the Piazza and nodded with a serene smile. Others, rich and poor alike, might have suffered from the Austrians; there was many a Venetian noble who had entertained royally in those palaces along the Grand Canal now content to lay their head in some fisherman's hut, glad of a scanty meal of bread and wine; but he, well nourished, comfortably lodged, clothed like a prince, with money in his pockets had no cause for complaint. Only it was just as well that his profession was surrounded by secrecy. By that means alone could he procure the information which was measured in coins of gold, information gleaned from his coming and going among his old friends who had no suspicion of his calling.

The tale of an inheritance, well authenticated by forged papers, served to answer all questions as to his sudden prosperity. The secret service of Salviotti did things in a thorough way, and the papers had been prepared in the police headquarters in the palace which had once housed the proud

doge, chief magistrate of the former republic. The chevalier was only one of the many eyes of Salviotti, for Venice patroled by the gendarmes and soldiery, was further guarded from Austria by a regiment of nameless spies and informers. He had himself contributed a considerable volume to the records which held the secret and public life of each inhabitant in the city, such items seemingly so unimportant as an account of the daily habits, the acquaintances, the conversations, his or her place of meeting, amusements, dress, love affairs.

Altogether a very satisfactory and not too laborious mode of making one's living, provided that one was not troubled by any foolish scruples. After all it mattered little whether one ate from the paw of the Lion of St. Mark or from the talons of the double-headed eagle. The best set table caught his appetite.

Seated at a table a little distance off were three young elegants laughing and talking. They wore masks, for it was the time of carnival, and they retained them even as they took their coffee.

The chevalier glanced over at them shrewdly. He prided himself on being able to pick out any one by their gestures, but this trio he did not recognize. One of the dandies had hands of amazing whiteness, almost womanly, with which he was demonstrating some plan traced upon the table with a forefinger. What were they talking about now? There was something in the wind which spoke of gold to be earned.

As if looking for a friend the chevalier rose and strolled over near their table, pausing close as if undecided, and he noticed grimly that they hushed their talk. He glanced at the table casually, but could distinguish nothing but the three cups of coffee and the three glasses of cold water, and then after another survey of the crowd, he returned to his seat.

The young Marquis Pareti? He could not be sure. Still there was a little way of raising the hand as if to caress a budding mustache. If it were he, who were the others? The one with the white hands had devilish small feet. He thought vainly in his memory for some one to answer the description.

They had resumed their conversation after a cursory stare in his direction, seemingly much amused. The heat mounted to the chevalier's forehead. Insolent puppies! Nothing would have pleased him better than to saunter back to them and demand that they remove their masks, but to do so would have disclosed his motives. And fuming inwardly, though he still contrived to smile indulgently as if at peace with the spirit of carnival, the spy puffed at his splendid cigar.

Suddenly he saw advancing through the crowd and looking for a vacant table, an old acquaintance, Rignano, a prosperous silk merchant, and signaled to him.

"Well, *signore*, this is a busy night," puffed the merchant as he sat down heavily, "and a warm one. A glass of *tamarindo*, waiter. I wish the carnival were over, for I have not sold over a score of yards of silk since it began."

"But before, I warrant you loaded your store on these same merrymakers with dominos. 'Tis an ill wind that blows nobody any good. I myself am blessing the death of an aged cousin in Verona."

"I did mark that you wore an air of prosperity, Signore Capotti, and I thought to myself that you were well favored by fortune in these times. But the less said the better, eh, friend Capotti?"

"It is a wise man who knows his friends," rejoined the chevalier with a knowing wink, "but we know each other, *signore*."

"True! Still—" the merchant nodded in the direction of a white coated officer at a near-by table. "Well, what is left unsaid goes no further than one's own lips. I pay my taxes, lock my doors at night, and obey the laws. But what are you doing?"

"Nothing. I am living in the shadow of my cousin, and a very comfortable shade I find it, *signore*. But tell me, who are the three at that table? They seem to be very merry over something."

Rignano shook his head.

"I cannot tell you, chevalier. There are many strangers in town for the carnival. And under these masks you cannot say which is friend and which is enemy."

"Happy the man who has no enemies," quoth the chevalier with a yellow-toothed smile. "I flatter myself," he added in higher tones as he noticed the three had looked his way curiously, "that I sleep more soundly than any one in Venice. I at least have no case for conscience."

"God pray you may continue to do so," said Rignano piously. "I wish I could say the same. They say there is to be a new tax upon the import of silk in a month's time."

The chevalier blew a cloud of smoke. Hum! Rignano in this frame of mind would bear watching. Rebellious, eh?

The three at the table rose and, walking slowly, disappeared in the throng.

"Well, it grows late," said the chevalier, "I must home to a good night's rest. Good night, *signore*. Here, waiter. Keep the change."

The chevalier drew out his handkerchief, stooped to flick his varnished boots, then turned to walk away.

"Stop, *signore*," cried the waiter, running after him. "You have dropped something."

The chevalier wheeled around sharply.

"What?"

"A letter, *signore*."

The chevalier fumbled uncertainly in his pockets.

"Nonsense. I had no letter. You are mistaken."

"No, *signore!* As you drew out your handkerchief this letter fell from your pocket."

"Let me see it."

He turned the letter over. Written on it in careful lettering was his name—The Chevalier Capotti.

Still puzzled, the spy moved over to a lamp, and breaking open the gummed wafers which held the sheet of paper closed, with bulging eyes read its contents:

> A friend warns you that your life is threatened. If you value your skin flee from Venice at the earliest opportunity. Above all, beware of the sleeping hours. Your profession is known to your enemies.

A cold sweat broke out upon the chevalier's brow as the meaning came home to him. In one moment his peace of mind was destroyed. That secret which he had imagined so closely locked within the records of the police was now the property of others. And he who had fancied himself secure in his ease was in a twinkling marked out for the assassin's knife.

For a moment he hesitated. Would he take himself at once to Salviotti. The memory of that pale, cold grin which concealed so much contempt in its seeming cordiality recurred to him. Had he not been at pains to impress upon the Austrian that he was absolutely intrepid, a lion of courage among the jackals of Venice. To confess his fears was to stop the flow of those golden coins which had been earned so easily. Salviotti had no use for the weakling. No! It was out of the question to seek aid or advice in that quarter.

Where had the letter come from? Who among that crowd of masked merrymakers had been adept enough to thrust this note into his pocket without attracting his attention. Who was his unknown friend? Suddenly he recalled that he had paused by the table of the three. One of them had contrived that friendly warning. The one with the slender hands perhaps, hands which seemed made for intrigue.

If only he could get speech with them he might learn something further.

Like a man distraught he passed from one side to the other of the Piazza, but he could see no sign of those whom he sought. The night had swallowed them up. He walked warily, with an eye for every one who came within elbow length, tugging at his stock as it seemed to tighten in strangulation about his throat. A curse upon this heat of the blood which laid one open to chills. Already he felt he was about to catch a fever or an ague.

At last giving up the search he went down to the water's edge and hailed his gondola.

The gondolier was asleep.

"Wake up, rascal," the chevalier cried roughly, applying his boot unceremoniously.

The gondolier stirred himself sullenly.

"I am ready, excellency," he muttered and stumbled to his feet.

"Take me home as quickly as you can," his master commanded.

Bending his head, he entered the little cabin which sits amidship of the gondola, and swept his hand along the seat to settle the black leather cushion.

As he did so his fingers touched an unfamiliar object, cold and smooth. He started and drew back his hand as though stung by a scorpion, then gingerly picked up that which had startled him—a stiletto of glass. Attached to it by a cord of red silk was a label which read: "For a traitor's heart."

"How come this here?" he asked, holding out the stiletto.

The gondolier stared stupidly at it, then shook his head.

"I know nothing, excellency."

"Blood of Diana! Is this how I am served, that any cutthroat may place his tools in my *felze*. Speak, you rascal, who bought you to place this here?"

"By Saint Mark, I swear I know nothing of it. I was asleep. Some one must have crept upon me unnoticed."

"Then keep a quiet tongue between your teeth, Antonio. Let no word of this get abroad, do you hear me, or it will be the worse for you. Body of Bacchus, will you shilly-shally at the landing all night. To your oar, rower, to your oar, and hasten."

The chevalier sat down in the shadow and mopped his brow. Then conquering his aversion he picked up the weapon and examined it. It was made of clear glass with a keen point of delicate fineness. He felt it with his thumb and shuddered at the prick. It was an old instrument of death of the Venetian bravo. Once planted with a straight, swift stroke, a twist broke the brittle glass leaving the point buried in the body, so that when the remainder of the blade was plucked out, the mouth of the wound closing would show but little trace of the injury. Sometimes by way of making sure the point was poisoned.

Shaken by a tremor, the chevalier cast the ill omened toy from him.

What if it *were* poisoned? Fool, fool that he was; he had pricked his thumb. Perhaps already the swift venom was coursing through his blood to his heart. He bound his handkerchief round his thumb and drew it tight.

The gondola moved with a slow running ripple of water, the oar creaking dismally in its iron support.

The chevalier peered over his shoulder past the gondolier. Some distance off another gondola held the same course, but no light burned in the *felze*. There was no movement of figures on it save that of the gondolier, but the spy's eyes, searching the darkness, thought he discerned shadows concealed under the canopy.

"Quicker, rascal!" he called out in a low voice.

"Yes, yes, excellency."

The stroke of the oar doubled, but as if in derisive rivalry the gondolier of the other craft increased his efforts.

The chevalier thought he could make out three shadows in the *felze*. His unknown friends of the Piazza—the writers of the letter of warning? Should he halt the gondola and attempt to speak to them?

All at once he struck his forehead as if to chide his stupidity.

A week past had not Salviotti spoken to him of a secret nest of mischief makers—a society of three, whose names so far had been undiscoverable by the agents and spies? Salviotti had shaken a missive at him saying with that sneer of his:

"This bodes ill for Venetians, my dear chevalier. These anonymous writers appear to resent the loyal efforts of those of your countrymen who have chosen to serve us rather than starve in the company of ancient memories. Death to traitors is their watchword, but be under no apprehension, my friend, in a couple of days we shall have this mysterious society of three under bolt and bar in the Leads. They are bold, however. This letter was slipped into my pocket at a *conversazione*."

Three? That was it? But why the warning?

He wished he had questioned Salviotti further. At the time he had smiled, knowing that his coming to and going from the palace was by a secret way, and that he entrusted nothing to paper, nor gave receipt for any moneys. A trusted clerk re-

corded his verbal reports and filed them away under a number.

The gondola grated on the painted pillar, and jumping out without a backward glance he disappeared within the tall, narrow doorway of his lodging. There at least he was safe. And as he turned the key and shot the heavy bolts he sighed with relief.

Chance and a full purse of Austrian gold had given him this place of refuge, once the dwelling of a noble banished from Venice and his estate confiscated. Here he lived attended by an old woman deaf as an adder, an excellent quality in a house which held so many secrets. By now she was safely in her bed on the upper floor.

A candle? *Per Dio!* Where was a candle. With fumbling hands he lighted one and held it over his head to dispel the shadows.

It was incredible that a man of such proven courage as he should be affected by the mummery and tricks of the clowns of carnival. It was possible that all that had occurred was a jest of some of his friends in disguise. An excellent jest and one that he would laugh over in the morning.

He ascended the marble stairs, however, with headlong steps and entered the suite of living rooms. Wine! He must have a glass of good Capri, red wine for red blood. How dark it was! Hastily he went from candelabra to candelabra lighting candles until all the rooms were illuminated as though for a ball, then going to an ebony sideboard he took out a flask and a goblet, carried them over to the long table and drawing up a tapestried chair sat himself down.

A neighboring church clock chimed the hour of two. In no long space of time it would be dawn.

For a long time he sat drinking, his mind busy. After all it was not the first time his life had been in danger. There was the husband of the beautiful Marianna who having the bad taste not to relish the honor the chevalier had paid him by choosing his wife as the object of his attentions had threatened his life and done nothing. He had come out of two duels with credit and unscratched. He had soldiered, yet not a bullet had touched him. There was another fate reserved for one so fortunate as he. When he died, it would be in a bed, a soft and luxurious one, without loss of blood. So indeed had prophesied an old hag camp follower in the campaigns some fifteen years ago. He would drift out of life, she had said with a chuckle.

Well, if the worst came to the worst, he would speak with Salviotti and demand a transfer to Vienna. A post about the court would suit his mode of life, and report spoke well of the women of that city.

Gradually, his mind dulled to sleep, and nodding in his chair, he dozed off.

Suddenly he started to consciousness and blinked. The candles still burned, and in a tall mirror behind him, as he looked round, he could see reflected the image of the other rooms. They were empty. But what was this whispering as of unbidden guests in secret conclave? Voices he could certainly hear, hushed, but still audible. And added to that, the sound of stealthy footsteps on the stone paving and the rustle of garments.

The skin of the chevalier's scalp tightened and he set his jaw firmly.

If there were thieves in the house they would find little of value. He had a bag of gold securely hidden. The furniture? That was too heavy to move. As for plate and jewels, he had none as yet, though he had promised himself such a gift when his prosperity was assured. Insolent dogs, he would teach them a lesson. Silently he pulled out a drawer in the table, and took out a pair of pistols cocking the hammers before he rose to his feet.

Choosing his steps with infinite care, he walked warily to the tall doorway. There was no one in the next room, nor in the one beyond. He paused and listened, then taking a candle mounted to the upper story. The old woman snored in her room, and nothing met his eye in the other chambers but the remains of ancient furnishings falling into decay. The flooring creaked dismally under his tread but no other sound was audible.

Puzzled, he descended and replaced the candle in its holder. All at once he realized that the blaze of light in the long suite

had dimmed to a faint glimmer in the room at the end. Some other hand than his had extinguished the candles in the intervening rooms. He was not alone.

He listened with indrawn breath. He could hear a new sound—the clinking of bottle on glass. The intruders were drinking his wine.

He raised the pistol in his right hand. His finger was on the trigger and held it rigid.

A clear ringing voice had proposed a toast:

"Long life to the Chevalier Capotti!"

There was a peal of mocking laughter from several throats, silenced by a report and the crash of glass. The chevalier's bullet had shattered the mirror at the end of the suite.

He balanced a moment uncertainly on his feet, then rushed forward like a madman.

As he stopped short at the door and looked about him he shuddered with superstitious fear. The room was empty. Only on the table beside his own glass sat three other goblets, each with their wine dregs.

But of those who had drunk from them in that mocking toast there was no trace.

Like one possessed, the chevalier ran from corner to corner, peering behind the tall chairs, then in a moment of enlightenment hurried to the shuttered windows giving onto the balcony. One of them swung open to his hand, and cautiously crouching he looked out and over the balcony balustrade. As he did so, a gondola moved swiftly out of the hanging shadow and passed out of sight.

The chevalier gave a sigh of relief, then coming in, he closed and bolted the inner shutters. To-morrow he would have iron bars placed upon them for further security.

Things had come to a pretty pass when rascals could enter a house and make free with one's wine. Standing by the table he looked angrily down at the glasses, and as he did so a great terror assailed him. Three glasses. The significance of the number took possession of his senses.

He knew now and only too clearly that the Society of Three were upon his trail. Sooner or later when they had played with him as a cat with a mouse they would strike and he would be found with a stiletto in his back or strangled in bed with a silken noose. Or they would discover means to poison his food. His life was not worth a *zwanziger*.

He sat down again to await the coming of the dawn. In the daylight he would be safer.

When the forenoon was well advanced, he looked out from the house and sighed with relief to see Antonio's gondola lying at the landing. He would risk all and pay a visit to Salviotti. Warily he came down the steps and embarked.

Leaving Antonio to wait for him at the landing nearest the palace he hurried to the secret door. There he met with disappointment. Salviotti had left without warning for Padua. He would not be back until the next morning, and the clerk heard his story with an air of such incredulity that the chevalier knew he could hope for no assistance in that quarter. He left him with a cold bow and going to a restaurant dined in a private cabinet. When he came out distrustfully, a flower seller endeavored to thrust a flower upon him. There was something familiar about the girl, but where he had seen her he could not say.

"Get you gone, baggage," he said roughly. "Carry your wares elsewhere."

She tossed her head saucily, and thrusting her to one side, the chevalier hurried on to the landing.

His mind persisted in running upon the girl's appearance. What white hands she had! They reminded him of the hands of the gallant of the night before. What if her dress had been a disguise, a ruse to attract him to some dark doorway or courtyard. Suddenly suspicious he felt in his pocket. His fingers closed upon a paper and pulling it out unfolded it and scanned the writing. The message it conveyed was brief and to the point.

> Chevalier! The air of Venice will after to-night be no longer healthy for one of your temper.

The signature was a large figure 3.

The chevalier stood for a moment slowly crumpling up the message in his bloated

hand, then cast it away from him like a thing infected with some subtle poison and hastened to his gondola.

"Take me home, Antonio. I shall need you no more to-day."

Once within his lodging he sat down to consider, his loaded pistols on the table in front of him.

The game was up. At dawn of the coming morning he would betake himself to Padua on the first stage of his flight. In Milan he was unknown, and he was sure Salviotti would find work for him to do, if he would not dispatch him to Vienna. He set to work packing a traveling bag with a change of linen and his sack of gold.

He passed the day in a fret of impatience, supporting his courage with his wine flasks. The old woman brought him a meal, and he read and dozed till nightfall.

At midnight he was aroused by a knocking at the outer door. For a time he sat irresolute, then pistol in hand went down and opened a wicket. Outside at the landing lay a large gondola, and upon the steps of the house stood four men.

"What do you want?" the chevalier demanded curtly.

"Is this the dwelling of the late Chevalier Capotti?" the spokesman asked.

"What do you mean?" asked the astounded chevalier. "What nonsense is this? The late? Blood of Diana! This is strange talk to me. I am the chevalier."

The man stared incredulously.

"But, excellency, it is only an hour ago since a friar came in haste to us to beg us to take a coffin to this house."

"There is no one dead here. Am I dead? I have no need of an undertaker."

"Then there is some mistake. Your pardon, excellency. Some carnival clown has sent us on a fool's errand. Well, good night, excellency, and our apologies for disturbing you."

They turned to go. All at once the chevalier had an idea.

"Stop, *signors*. Are you willing to earn a little money. Two can play at a jest."

He threw open the door.

"Come inside. Now, listen, my friends. You want a tenant for that coffin of yours. I will rent lodging in it for a night. I am annoyed by the attentions of a jealous husband who seeks my life. Here is a way to escape."

He laughed hoarsely at his invention. Here indeed was a way to get away unobserved. Who would think to look for him in a coffin?

The undertakers heard him in seeming astonishment as he continued his directions.

"By St. Mark, chevalier," said the leader. "This is a jest indeed. So be it. We shall bring in the coffin, and make the air holes, fit you in snugly and you will lie softly, for the coffin is well cushioned. Then we shall screw down the lid lightly in case any try to examine it and ship you to Fusina. Bring in the coffin, Jacomo and you, Benedetto."

The chevalier ran up-stairs, and returned with his bag of money. New linen he could always buy.

The undertakers had placed the coffin in the hall and removed the lid. With a bit they had made several air holes in the latter. The chevalier nodded his head approvingly and extended himself in the coffin.

"*Ser Racco!* A better fit could not have been made by measurement. It suits your excellency to an inch," explained the undertaker. "Now, *signore*, we shall screw on the lid."

The chevalier laid his head back upon the soft pillow. He would travel in luxury and safety. Only he had a momentary shudder as the lid descending shut out the candle light. He heard the screws bite into the wood.

"Have a care, friends," he shouted, "not too tight."

"Have no fear, excellency," came the muffled voice of the undertaker. "The screws are easily removed when the time comes. Now we shall lift you. In an hour's time we shall be in Fusina."

The chevalier felt himself lifted in the air. He heard the door clang, and the grating of the coffin bottom as it slid into the cabin of the gondola. A moment later he perceived by the swaying that the boat was moving. So easy was the motion that he dozed to sleep with the murmur of

voices and the squeak of the oars still in his ears. By some strange hallucination he fancied he recognized one of the voices —it had a strangely mocking note—but he dismissed the fancy from his mind. In the morning he would eat a good meal at Padua. He must contrive a tale for Salviotti's duping.

When he awakened it was with a start. He lifted his head and it struck sharply on the wooden roof above him. How strangely silent all was. Surely he had come to Fusina. He could hear no voices, no creak of oars. He called aloud. There was no answer. To his cries succeeded curses, and then exhortations as he struggled frantically in his narrow prison. It seemed to him that there was a strange incline to the couch on which he lay and that his head was lower than his feet. And as he tried to call again, he became silent and shuddered convulsively. Through the air hole over his head there had descended upon his upturned face a splash of water. Another and another. There was a gurgling all about him as if the waters were lapping the coffin sides. And in some strange way he seemed to hear again the words of the old fortune teller—a soft bed—drifting out of life.

As the dawn broke a fisherman coming out from the Lido saw in the open sea a strange sight which made him fall upon his knees and cross himself.

A red gondola, hearse of the Venetian dead, its gunwales level with the water, sank slowly before his eyes.

That evening the Contessa Miracoli gave a *conversazione*. Young and beautiful even among Venetian women, she moved amidst an illustrious company of guests, with a smile and a word for all. She turned swiftly to the door as a late comer entered, a young man dressed in the height of elegance who advanced to her, and bending to kiss her slender white hand, murmured a single word:

"One."

then giving her a swift glance of warning as her lips framed the name:

"Capotti!"

turned to greet another dandy who had come forward to make the third of the group.

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THE PATIENT LOVER

PATRICIA hath so haughty grown,
Since she hath reached eighteen,
That, seeing her, you'd scarce have known
She once loved me so mean.
But I shall not bemoan the fate
That leaves me thus ignored;
My motto is to watch and wait
My ultimate reward.
For should she love some other swain,
To wed her would be wo;
And if she does not, then, again
She'll turn to me, I know.
When Patty reaches thirty-two,
And nearing thirty-three,
I'm pretty sure, 'twixt me and you,
She'll fix her eye on me:
For what the maids of eighteen slight,
The virtues they ignore,
Are apt to fill them with delight
When nearing thirty-four!

John Kendrick Bangs.

That Affair at the Cedars

by Lee Thayer

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

PRECEDING CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RETOLD

BILLY WAINWRIGHT, having been wounded and taken prisoner during the war, is reported dead, and when after many months he returns to New York he finds that his fiancée, Betty Boswell, believing him dead, has yielded to the pleadings of her vain, impoverished mother and married a rich man who has long been in love with her.

The day after Billy's arrival the husband, Raymond Austin, is mysteriously shot in his library. The coroner accepts the theory of suicide, but Jack Austin, Raymond's brother, being in love with Betty himself, encourages her belief that her lover is guilty and offers to help her recover some letters that might convict Billy. Meantime Dr. Pryor and Jane Norman, old friends of all parties, are reluctantly suspicious of both Billy and Betty, and also are aware that motive, at least, exists in the case of a neighbor, George Hull, whose young daughter has just died in childbirth, Raymond Austin being her betrayer.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE AUTOMATIC.

"DO you know Lieutenant Wainwright well enough, Mr. Gregory, to call on him without any tall-hat-and-stick business?" It was Peter Clancy who spoke, and he looked as carefree and cheerful as the morning.

"Why, yes, Peter—of course. I knew his father well. I visited them down here. That's how I came to know about this place. He used to own the house we were in yesterday."

"You mean Lieutenant Wainwright's father owned the Austin place?"

"Why, yes. Nobody around here calls it that. It was named 'the Cedars' long ago, on account of all those cedars that grow around the back of the house; but the natives still refer to it as the Wainwright place."

"H-m," said Peter. "How long ago did it change hands?"

"About five years or so ago. Pretty sad thing, too. Will Wainwright—I'm speaking of the father—was as fine a man as ever stepped; but he didn't know a great deal about business. He inherited a lot of property, mostly real estate. Owned a big farm here. The little house Billy lives in was the old farmhouse. All he has left now, poor boy.

"There was a good deal of gossip going about at the time the Wainwrights lost their money. The father died soon after, and a lot of people said that he'd been cheated out of it. But I know that nothing was proved against Raymond Austin. He got the big house, anyway, and has been very public-spirited about village improvements and that sort of thing.

"He never lived here, exactly. Came down pretty often, though, and always kept part of the house in commission. Very different from what it was in the old days. The Wainwrights kept open house all summer long. I wasn't exactly intimate with Will Wainwright, but I was invited there often and often. And there was always a house full of charming people. Dr. Stephen Pryor, for example—and the Celts and the

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for December 4.

Braytons and lots of others; among them Mrs. Boswell and her daughter, Betty, who married this Raymond Austin.

"I never did like the mother much—one of those has been rich and can't stand being poor sort of people—and she was what I call an invincible talker. But Betty was all you'd ever wish to see.

"Then there was Jane Porter—Mrs. Norman she is. Married a scamp who deserted her. Fine, clever girl. She— What! Have you finished already, lad?" the old man broke off as Clancy rose from the table. "I thought, from the way you started in, that you'd keep it up for an hour. I like to see young people enjoy good food. Sign of good health and a clear conscience."

He clapped Peter on the shoulder as the younger man rose from his chair. Gregory, who had finished his breakfast some time before and had been walking slowly up and down the sunny room, smoking a cigar, now linked his arm in Peter's and the two men went out onto the porch.

"It's good to have you back, lad," said the old man affectionately. "I think I was pretty generous to share you with those people last night." He waved his cigar in the general direction of the Cedars. "I thought it might turn out to be something interesting in your line, possibly, but it looks now as if it must have been suicide, as they thought. The discharged pistol on the floor by the body—and all."

"Yes," said Peter slowly. "Yes. If some one can testify that he was accustomed to shoot with his left hand. Some one would know—his wife, perhaps."

"Yes, she would know, of course—poor girl. But they said she was ill from the shock last night, and no wonder. She may not be well enough to testify at the inquest."

"An affidavit from her ought to be enough to convince a native coroner's jury. She was known and liked about here?"

"Oh, yes. All the Wainwrights' intimate friends were very popular."

"Then nobody would have any cause to make trouble, and a verdict of suicide would be the best thing for her and the soonest forgotten."

Peter rose from his chair and walked restlessly up and down the porch. At length he paused beside his host.

"Well, how about that little morning stroll?" he asked. "I don't like to chuck a hint that while I've been away you've been growing ung-bung-pung, as we learned to say in France."

The old man rose and kicked back his chair.

"I'll walk as far as you like and as long as you like, my lad," he said with pride, stepping briskly into the hall, from which he presently emerged with Clancy's cap in his hand and an old Panama set at a rakish angle on his head.

Peter walked with his cap off, the bright sun glinting on his thick, red hair. He looked as unlike a professional detective as it was possible to imagine as he paced beside the old man, whom he amused by his lack of knowledge of country life, customs, and pursuits.

There was no immediate object suggested for their morning stroll, but Clancy turned to the right when they reached the road, and to the left when they came to a crossroad, idly, with no apparent purpose. But when they had walked some distance he went back to the subject of Lieutenant Wainwright.

"I heard a good deal about him over there," he was saying. "We Department of Justice men get hold of a lot that doesn't get into the papers, and of course everybody knew that he got the English D. S. O. Not so many Americans can make a roar about having won that. I'd like to meet him, anyway."

"Well, there's no reason why you shouldn't. His house is just around the turn. We might drop in now. We don't stand on ceremony in this country."

"All right, if you think he won't mind," said Peter innocently; and a few minutes later they were walking up a narrow, worn brick path between thick hedges of box, toward an old Dutch farmhouse half hidden in untrimmed vines.

"I always think there's something extra generous about the honeysuckle," said Gregory, pointing to the drooping tendrils, starred with white and yellow flowers, which

hung over the door. "It's the only thing I know of that almost always blooms twice in the year in these parts. Sort of makes you think of a good woman, flowers full in the spring and then blooms more quietly in the fall when the heat of summer has gone by. Always reminds me of my mother, somehow." He broke off a little cluster of the flowers and sniffed them luxuriously before he placed them in his buttonhole and turned to lift the knocker on the half-open door.

In a moment an elderly woman answered his summons. She was neatly dressed and broke into smiles when he saw Mr. Gregory.

"And how do you do, sir?" she said heartily. "Mr. Willie certainly will be glad to see you—and any friend of yours, I'm sure," with a kindly glance at Peter. "He hasn't been well, the poor boy. I made him have his breakfast in bed, but he's up now, and I'll call him."

"I hadn't heard he was ill," said Gregory sympathetically. "I'm afraid I'm a poor neighbor. But we're glad to have him back, well or ill, aren't we, Mrs. Baker?"

The old woman clasped her hands and raised her eyes with an expression which spoke volumes.

"If Mr. Wainwright isn't well," said Peter, partly to Gregory, partly to the old servant, "perhaps we'd better come some other day. Has he been ill long?"

"Well, you know, sir," said Mrs. Baker, "he was treated terrible bad by them awful Germans, but he seemed pretty good when he got here at last. That was only the day before yesterday. But that night he went out for a walk and tripped over something in the dark and got a bad fall. I went over for Dr. Pryor first thing in the morning, and Mr. Willie was laid up nearly all day.

"After the Austins' man come over with a note for him he went out for a walk. But I think he done too much, for he came in just at sunset as white as my apron and went right up to his room. He wouldn't take any supper, but he ate his breakfast pretty good this morning, and I'm sure he'd be glad to see you both. It 'll make him feel better to see folks, I think. I'll go up and ask him."

"Thank you," said Gregory, "but don't insist, Mrs. Baker—there's a good woman. Tell him I'll understand."

Gregory, familiar with the house, turned into a long, low room, sparsely but comfortably furnished with faded chints and old mahogany. They had been seated only a few minutes when a step was heard on the stair and a man appeared in the doorway. He was young, not over thirty, but his face was pale and lined with suffering. Not above the middle height and slender, he held himself so well as to seem much taller than he really was. He had clear, brown eyes, a straight, short nose, well-cut lips, and a determined jaw and chin. As he advanced to greet Gregory, his expression showed so much cordial appreciation of the qualities of the old man that Clancy was prepossessed, perhaps in spite of himself.

After he had been presented in form, Peter unostentatiously took charge of the conversation and led it through various phases of the war, dwelling on his admiration of Wainwright's part in it, an admiration apparently as sincere as it was well, though colloquially, expressed.

They talked at length of men they had both known, and Gregory listened with vivid interest. Peter spoke little of himself. What he did say implied a diplomatic mission, without suggesting the Department of Justice. And when Gregory, in pride of his protégé, made a remark tending to disclose Peter's profession, that astute young man adroitly turned the conversation to a question of the League of Nations and from that to disarmament.

This led to a discussion of fighting forces, arms in general, and at last to a comparison of the merits of the inventions of the different countries during the period of the war.

"I was telling Mr. Gregory last night," said Peter, "that, though it's nothing very new, our automatic pistol is the best in the world." The old man opened his eyes wide, but, meeting Peter's glance, looked puzzled and said nothing. "He's such a hayseed that he hasn't ever examined an automatic, and I haven't mine with me. Is yours anywhere about? I'd like to show him the fine points of a real pistol."

"Why—yes," said Wainwright, hesitating slightly. "I think I left it up-stairs. I'll go and see, if you'll excuse me."

Not until the sound of footsteps could be heard on the upper floor did Gregory find his voice.

"What the devil are you after, Peter?" he asked.

Clancy, looking hard at him, held up a warning finger. Almost immediately Wainwright returned, carrying an ordinary officer's service pistol in his hand. Peter thanked him, and, pulling out the cartridge clip, carefully explained the mechanism to Gregory, who stared at him blankly, being already perfectly familiar with its every detail.

There was one cartridge missing from the clip. Peter replaced the clip, and, still holding the weapon in his hand, he glanced at the muzzle.

"Much hunting down here?" he asked casually. "I see you've been letting this little dog bark at something lately."

"Yes," said Wainwright slowly. "I'd forgotten it, but I did take a pot-shot at a rabbit down in the woods the morning I came home. I missed him, but, since it's against the law to shoot them in October, it was just as well that I didn't hit him."

Peter's face wore no expression at all as he handed the weapon back to its owner, who slipped it into his pocket.

"Well, Mr. Wainwright, we saw plenty of blood and death over there to last us our lives, didn't we?" said Peter. "Seems a pity that a quiet neighborhood like this can't escape its share of 'em even in a time of peace."

Wainwright had paused half-way across the room to light a cigarette. While Peter was speaking, he struck a match and held it between his fingers. Peter noticed that the flame of the match wavered as if in a strong draft, though the air in the room was still.

Wainwright eyed him sharply, but no child's face was ever more guileless than Peter's.

"You mean—Raymond Austin's—"

"Suicide, yes. Terrible, wasn't it? And the widow young and beautiful, they tell me."

The match had burned down till the flame touched Wainwright's fingers. He dropped it on the floor without looking at it and automatically put his foot on it and ground it into the rug.

"Yes," he said slowly; "it was a hideous thing."

"Was he a friend of yours?" asked Peter, showing a readiness to be sympathetic if such were the case.

"No, not exactly; though I knew him." Wainwright spoke absently.

"Surprising how fast news travels in the country," said Peter after a slight pause, in a conversational tone. "It only happened at sunset, I believe, but we heard about it early in the evening. When did you hear it? Last night?"

Wainwright nodded. The cigarette in his hand was still unlighted. His eyes were on the floor. He seemed preoccupied.

"I've always heard that things got around in the country faster than they do in town, but this is the first time I've seen it happen," said Peter. "In New York we have to wait for the papers and—"

Gregory had risen from his chair.

"I think we'd better trot along, Peter," he said. "Take care of yourself, Billy. You don't look well, lad. Take things easy for a while, and this good air will set you up. You'll soon be yourself again."

Wainwright roused himself, said good-by to the old man, and held out his hand to Peter, who took it with no apparent reluctance. In fact, he hoped, with great cordiality, that Lieutenant Wainwright would soon be as fit as if he'd never heard of a boche.

When they reached the road Gregory turned on his young friend.

"What was all that fooling about the pistol for, Peter?" he asked sharply. "I want you to understand that Billy Wainwright is a friend of mine, and I tell you frankly that I didn't like it."

Peter's face was grave and stern and his square jaw was set.

"I can't tell you about it yet," he said. "I will some day—and that soon. But don't be afraid. No innocent man is going to suffer if I can help it. Justice plays no favorites."

And with this enigmatical remark Peter fell silent.

CHAPTER IX.

PETER GETS A LINE.

PETER'S silence remained unbroken for some time, and Gregory was too troubled and angry to make any further remarks. He knew Peter of old, and could trust him not to go far wrong; but there was much about the morning call which disturbed him and left him totally in the dark.

That their casual stroll had had a premeditated end was now clear. What the end was Gregory could only infer. He would dearly have liked to question Peter, but he knew from experience that it would be of no use.

His anger slowly faded, and he was about to turn to Peter with some conciliatory remark, when, at a turn of the road, they came upon Mrs. Baker walking briskly ahead of them in the direction of the village.

Peter said something under his breath which sounded like "Bun chance!" and when Gregory would have passed a word of greeting to the old woman, checked him by a touch on his arm and accommodated his own pace to hers, forcing Gregory to do the like.

"It's a peach of a morning, Mrs. Baker, isn't it?" said Peter, pulling off his cap. "Can't I carry your basket for you, since we seem to be going the same way?"

"I'm just going into the village to do my marketing," she said, "so the basket's empty and light, thank you, sir. They mostly brings things out to us. The telephone's been out of order for nearly a week, and anyway, when it comes to steak, I says to Mr. Carr, I says, 'Steak is steak, you think, cut it where you will. But there's steak *and* steak, I *know*, and I'll see it cut myself,' I says. And steak the price it is, sir! And Mr. Willie just home, and all, why wouldn't I be particular?"

"You're quite right, Mrs. Baker. If there's one person in the world you can't trust, it's a butcher. But the basket 'll be heavy coming back. Wasn't there some one you could send?"

"No, sir; there's nobody just now. My son Frank, he went away yesterday, or last evening rather. He'd only been back a little while. And good service he done on the other side"—the mother's pride beamed in her eyes—"as good as any gentleman, be he who he may—except Mr. Willie, of course. He might 'a' done better—I don't know. They both done their duty, anyway, like true men."

"Sure they did," said Peter cordially.

"And who's to blame the boys if they get a bit restless after they've been back a while? It's terrible dull for 'em in a quiet place like this. Never any excitement. And then," she rambled on after a slight pause and a glance into the sympathetic face of her listener, "there was Alice Hull. Frank was awful fond of Alice before he went away to fight, and she seemed to like him, as boys and girls do. I don't know how much—but she seemed to like him, and I know he set an awful lot of store by her. Well, sir, she died night before last—poor girl."

"Too bad, too bad," said Gregory. "I'm sorry to hear that, Mrs. Baker. I am, indeed. I haven't seen her this summer, but I remember her very well. A beautiful girl—very pretty manners, and well educated, too."

"Yes, sir. She was all of that. Mrs. Norman, that used to visit at the Cedars in the old days, she took a fancy to Alice when she was a little girl, and when Alice was about sixteen Mrs. Norman paid for her to be taught in a good business school in Brooklyn. She done well, too. Had a good position, and came out every week to spend Saturday afternoon and Sunday with her father, which is more'n most young girls would do."

"Then that's why I haven't seen her this summer," said Gregory.

"No, sir, it ain't. I wish it was. She had to give up her place some time in the summer and come home. Neighbors didn't begin to talk and gossip till a little while ago, and I wouldn't believe it at first. But Frank saw her, and now I can't help knowing it was true. Nobody knows how it

happened or who the villain was. Some man in the city, I suppose. Frank was just heart-broken, poor boy, but he said he'd stay till Mr. Willie got back, anyway."

They walked on a little way in silence. Gregory, being the sort of man who finds it difficult to express his feelings in words, stepped around to the other side of Mrs. Baker and gently patted the old hand which held the basket.

She looked up at him with tears in her eyes.

"He saw Alice again the day before she died," the old woman went on sadly, "and he come home looking like death itself. He didn't say much, but he went out and tramped the woods all the next day. He didn't come home till after dark, and he looked so bad I was scared. He went right into his room, off the kitchen, and packed his bag. 'I'm going into the city on the evening train, mother,' he says. And I was so upset, what with Mr. Willie's coming home looking so poorly, and then Frank like he was, that I just sat right down and cried. Frank was nice to me as ever a boy could be to his mother, and when I really seen how much better it would be for him to get away from it all, I was willing."

Gregory patted her hand again.

"So he went up and said 'good-by' to Mr. Wainwright and went away," said Peter, musingly.

"No, sir. He wanted to, for they was always great friends. But I went up, myself, and found Mr. Willie's door shut. I opened it, very soft, and he was lying on the bed with his face to the wall. He didn't move, so I knew he was asleep. And Frank went away without seeing him again."

"He'll come back soon," said Peter hopefully. "You see if he doesn't. And you'll write to cheer him up. It isn't as if he was over in France. At least you know where he is."

"I know that he went to New York, and he'll write as soon as he's located and give me his address. He's a good, dependable boy, and won't let his old mother worry."

"No, he won't," said Gregory. "Now you cheer up, like a good soul, and think of something else! Keep your mind off it as much as you can."

"I suppose all Mr. Wainwright's friends are just crowding to see him now he's back," said Peter, to change the subject.

"Not so many as you'd think, sir," said Mrs. Baker. "They don't all know he's back, and we live so far off the main road that we don't have many callers."

"Didn't any one come to see him last night or this morning?"

If the question was an odd one, the old woman did not seem to think it so.

"You were the first callers this morning, and no one came to see him last night at all. People don't do much calling at night in the country where they have to travel heavy roads," she said, smiling at his ignorance. "It's easy to see you're from the city, sir."

Peter laughed.

"Yes, Mrs. Baker. A farmer called me a 'city rube,' once, and I guess that's what I am, all right, all right."

Their leisurely progress had brought them, at last, to the crossing road which led to Gregory's house, and they stopped to say good-by.

From where they stood, far-away among the trees, could be seen the roofs and chimneys of the house which had been, till yesterday, Raymond Austin's proud possession. Peter glanced toward it.

"Your case is hard, Mrs. Baker, but not so hard as your neighbor's," he said, motioning toward it with his hand." At least your son is alive, and you have that to be thankful for."

"What do you mean, sir? What does he mean, Mr. Gregory?" she asked, turning in surprise from one to the other. "Are any of the Austins dead?"

Gregory told her briefly the news of the suicide.

"Well, now, isn't that too bad?" said the good soul. "And poor little Betty Boswell, Mrs. Austin, I mean. I knew her well when she was a child, and I always did think—" She paused and sighed. "Well, young folks will change, you can't help it," she went on with apparent irrelevance. "But here, I'm keeping you gentlemen,

and I must get on, myself, or I won't be back in time to cook Mr. Willie's lunch."

"What, are you cook and housekeeper and everything?" asked Peter.

"Oh, yes," answered Mrs. Baker, with a toss of her head. "I can do for Mr. Willie as well as any half-dozen of these young girls they have nowadays. I don't need help, and I won't have none. Not while I have my strength to work for him as has always been as good as my own son to me."

And with a pleasant good-by, the good old woman trudged on down the road.

Peter, immersed in thought, stood looking after the retreating figure till it was lost to sight at the bend of the road.

"Come on, lad. Let's go home and get a wee nippie to cheer us up," said Gregory. "That poor old thing has made me feel sad as the devil."

Peter, with a visible effort, roused himself from his abstraction. He turned abruptly and looked Gregory full in the eyes.

"My dear old friend," he said, very seriously, "I've struck something that I can't dodge and keep my self-respect. I know I'm not much of a chap and, since I'm a private detective, there's, maybe, nothing to bind me except my own conscience, but did you ever yet know me to shirk what I believed to be a plain duty?"

"No, Peter," said the old man soberly.

"And when a case came my way, and an interesting case at that, did you ever see me give it up till it was finished?"

"No, Peter," still more soberly.

"Well, Mr. Gregory, that's what I'm up against, and I'm just plain determined to get to the bottom of this affair. I'm going up there now." Peter indicated the Cedars with a motion of his head—"and I don't know when I'll be back. I may stay on there if I can make good. I'm sorry as the devil to give up part, or maybe all, of my visit to you; but I can't help it. It's up to me, as I see it, and I've got to put it through. I'll see you or phone you as soon as I can. Don't worry, if you can help it—and wish me luck."

"I do, of course," said Gregory with a sigh, shaking Peter's outstretched hand. "Good luck, my boy."

Peter walked briskly up the long drive to the Cedars, his thoughts keeping pace with his steps.

"*She* didn't tell him, for she didn't know," he considered within himself. "She didn't know till we told her just now. The telephone was out of order, so he couldn't have found out that way. There was no one in the house but the old lady and her son—and he came in afterward. The two men didn't see each other, that was clear. And no one but ourselves had called either last night or this morning. Then how did he know—how in hell did he know—unless—"

CHAPTER X.

AN EMPTY SHELL.

SOME time before noon, Dr. Pryor, with a worried look on his face, sought and found John Austin in his room.

"Sorry to disturb you, John," he said kindly, "but Gregory's friend, Clancy, has just turned up, alone, and he says he must see you and me at once. He said 'in the library,' so I took him in there. I don't know what the mischief he wants, but I suppose we'd better hear what he has to say."

Austin looked displeased, but acquiesced with a curt nod and followed Dr. Pryor to the library.

They found Clancy standing by the window in front of which the tragedy had taken place. He turned as the two men entered and saluted Captain Austin gravely.

Dr. Pryor motioned him to a chair, and when they were seated, Clancy began abruptly.

"Gentlemen," he said, "as I told you before, I have no wish to butt in on a family affair, but circumstances have come to my knowledge that leave me no choice, as I see it. Finding out the truth and bringing criminals to justice is my job. I take it where I find it, whether I'm asked to or not. Maybe you can't see why, but I can.

"Now, I came over here last night with Mr. Gregory because he wanted me to, hoping to save his friend"—here he looked

earnestly at Dr. Pryor—"some annoyance. These hayseeds are a pretty stupid lot, and likely to go bull-in-the-china-shopping about all over the place if they aren't steered by a man who knows his business. I've had experience with them once or twice. They're easy enough to steer, I'll say that for them."

Peter paused, and Dr. Pryor said—

"We appreciate your motives, Mr. Clancy, and are grateful to you, I'm sure."

As he spoke he looked at John, who only frowned and said nothing.

There followed a short silence. Then Peter said:

"I came over here last night with the idea fixed in my head that Mr. Raymond Austin had committed suicide. You seemed to think so, too; but you can take it from me, gentlemen, that such was not the case. Your brother, Captain Austin, did not die by his own hand. He was murdered!"

Both men started in real, or feigned, surprise. Clancy regarded the two faces before him with deep attention as he grimly repeated:

"He was murdered and the murderer has got to be brought to justice, whoever he is. I want to do it quietly, because you're all friends down here, and any friend of Mr. Gregory's is going to get the best deal possible from me. But it was a brutal murder, and I'm going to see that the man who did it gets his! Now, it rests with you. I'll let the coroner's jury, this afternoon, call it suicide, and it 'll go to the papers that way, if you'll give me a free hand here and help me all you can. Then, if I fail to make a case, no one's the wiser. What do you say?"

"But how can you be sure that it isn't suicide?" asked Austin, speaking for the first time. "If you're basing your opinion on the fact that the wound was in the left side of the head, I can upset that theory at once. I wasn't sure when you asked me last night, because I, like everybody else, knew that my brother ordinarily used his right hand for most things; but I saw Mrs. Austin for a few minutes this morning—she's still confined to her room—and she'll testify, from her own better knowledge of him, that my brother prided himself on being able to shoot with either hand, and, consequently, the position of the wound can have no special significance."

Peter looked sharply into Austin's forceful, determined face.

"She'll swear to that?" he asked.

"Yes, since it's the truth," Austin answered firmly. "And that being the case, how can you imagine that it was murder?"

"Because," said Peter, slowly, "the shot that Mr. Raymond Austin fired, whether with his right hand or his left, is in the casing of that door behind the stairs."

"Great heavens!" cried Doctor Pryor, leaping to his feet.

"Come and see for yourselves," said Peter, rising also, and the two men followed him to the spot where, on the evening before, Clancy had stood looking down the private stair.

He pointed to a small hole about five feet from the floor.

"You can see that the wood is freshly broken," he said and, not waiting for a reply, he opened a knife and began to dig in the woodwork. Presently something fell to the floor. Clancy stooped, recovered it and presented to their gaze a pistol bullet.

"I think that settles it," he said. "If he fired this shot, he didn't fire the one that killed him, that's a cinch. There was only one cartridge gone from the clip."

"And there was only one shot heard. How do you account for that?" asked Austin, sharply.

"If both shots were fired together, it would sound like one. There was a fight, that's certain. You both remember the position of the body. It was in a swivel chair and, of course, with the force of the bullet and the falling of the body, the chair might have swung around some and the bullet that killed him may have gone through one of the windows, or it may be found somewhere in that end of the room. It couldn't, by any possibility, be in this end. That's as plain as my face, and I can't say more than that. There were two shots fired, not one. And another thing—just come here, if you please—"

He crossed the room to the place where

the body was found, the others following, and placed the swivel chair before the library table in the exact position it had occupied at that time.

"Now look," he said. "I sit here," suiting the action to the word, "and have a pistol in my left hand. I put it to my head, so," illustrating, "and if I fire it, in what direction is the shell ejected?"

"It comes out of the right side of the pistol," answered Doctor Pryor, excitedly, "and, naturally—"

"Exactly," interrupted Clancy. "—it would drop somewhere pretty close behind me. "You needn't look," he added, quietly. "It isn't there. "But now—supposing I take the gun in my right hand and shoot at some one over in that corner —like this." He illustrated again. "Where would the shell fall?"

The doctor looked at Clancy's hand and then toward the right on the floor.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, suddenly. "Here is it!"

He put his hand on the back of a low, upholstered chair which stood near by and tipped it, raising the front legs clear of the floor.

On the edge of the large rug which occupied all the middle of the floor space and near the place where one of the legs of the chair had been, lay an empty cartridge shell.

John Austin bent over to look at it and then, straightening, faced Clancy.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well," answered Clancy, "that queers the suicide theory altogether, in my mind. I'll admit that the pistol lay well over to the left, under the chair. I can only account for its position by supposing that it struck one of the curved legs when it fell and bounded off on that side. I can't think how else it could have fallen that far over to the left, can you?"

"No," said John Austin, slowly, "unless it fell from the left hand and the shell had been moved. They cleaned up here last night, took away the rug which was in front of the table, as you see. The shell might have been on the end of the rug and, when they raised it, it might have rolled across to the place where we found it."

Clancy shook his head. "Not good enough," he said. "It wasn't likely to have rolled that far and across the strip of bare floor between, without some one seeing or hearing it. And besides," he added, after a pause, "I saw it, last night, where you found it this morning. I knew about the place where it ought to be as soon as I discovered the bullet hole in the casing of the door over there. It was taking a chance to leave the shell and say nothing, but I wanted the time to think it over and I figured that nobody would do any very strenuous cleaning here right away."

"Well," said Captain Austin, "supposing that you are right—"

"I am right!" exclaimed Peter, impatiently. "The theory of suicide is knocked into a cocked hat. There is no doubt about it in my mind. I'm the one you've got to deal with and I hold on like a bull-dog once I get a case between my teeth. I want to handle this thing in my own way. If you don't give me a free hand to clean it up, I'll blow the whole thing at the inquest. I mean it."

Austin and the doctor looked at each other but neither spoke and Peter went on—

"I'm sure that you both have reason to suspect somebody. There's some one you're trying to protect. I don't suppose you'll tell me, but I'll find out. You watch me."

"I suspect nobody," said Doctor Pryor, firmly. "I may have had a momentary suspicion, but it's gone, absolutely."

Clancy looked steadily into eyes which returned his steady gaze. Then he turned to Austin.

"And how about you?" he asked.

John Austin looked down at the floor for a moment, then his brilliant eyes, showing very light in his bronzed face, met Peter's.

"I suspect no one," he said.

"Very well, then," said Clancy, "I may have the dope all wrong, but you'll have to put up with me till I'm convinced."

"You have no right," began Austin, angrily, but Doctor Pryor checked him.

"John," he said, "Mr. Clancy has much on his side. A man who has devoted his

life to the detection and punishment of crime has no choice but to do his duty as he sees it. Finding this bullet hole with the bullet still in it, and finding the shell where it was, put a very different face on the matter. In any case we are in Mr. Clancy's hands."

"That's just what I want you to see," said Peter, eagerly. "There's no use in putting up a roar—and I give you my word, Doctor, that I won't make things a bit harder for anybody than I have to. Mr. Gregory will tell you that I'm square. If I don't make a case, nobody will ever hear a word from me. I promise. Is it a go?"

"Yes," said John Austin suddenly, throwing back his broad shoulders and holding out his hand. "I still think the theory of suicide isn't altogether untenable, but I believe you mean well, Mr. Clancy, and if my brother was murdered, the criminal must be brought to justice! It might have been some tramp, some thief! Who can guess what it might not have been? Some native who held a grudge, perhaps. Do you know any such man, Doctor Pryor? You know this locality better than I?" He spoke hurriedly, with an unusual appearance of excitement.

"Raymond did much for the village," said Doctor Pryor. "He should have been well liked here."

"Whoever came in that door," said Austin, "must have come up the path or through the shrubbery from the east. We would have seen him from the terrace if he had come from any other direction. I think we ought to look outside to see if he's left any tracks. Don't you, Mr. Clancy?"

"Just as well to make sure," said Peter, leading the way.

As the doctor followed, John touched his arm.

"The gravel wouldn't hold a footprint, if there were any," he said meaningly, in a voice too low to reach Peter.

Doctor Pryor nodded comprehendingly, and then frowned. The fear which he had, with difficulty, dislodged from his own mind had evidently found place in John's. Had he, also, seen Billy Wainwright on the place and so near the fatal time? What did John know or suspect? Jane's confidence in Billy had struck an answering chord in the doctor's mind. He would not allow it to be vibrated again by any fortuitous circumstance, but the whole thing was a hopeless tangle. Anyhow, whatever John knew, they were working together. That was a comfort.

They had passed down the stairs without speaking further. When they had walked a little way along the path, they were aware that Clancy had left it and was now kneeling a few paces off to the right, under a wide-spread oak.

"Do you know a lame man who lives around here, Doctor Pryor?" he asked as soon as they were within range of his lowered voice.

The doctor started.

"Why?" he inquired sharply.

"Because a lame man crossed here after the rain, yesterday. He went toward the house and came back again."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, he wouldn't have left much of a track if the ground had been dry, and as to his being lame, here's a print of a toe and a whole print and another print of a toe. It's as simple as A B C."

He rose to his feet and passing around outside the shelter of the branches, he crossed a narrow strip of grass and entered the shrubbery by the faintly discernible entrance of an unused path, the others close upon his heels.

The path was sandy for the first few yards, but where the wood was thicker there were patches of loam, still damp from the previous day's drenching.

"Here we are again," said Peter. "Look at this. It's as I thought. You see he didn't come from the house and go back. He came up the hill and went down again and when he went back, he was in a hurry. Look! This track which points down the hill is on top of the one that comes up and the heel touched just enough to make a mark and no more. And here again. He hardly touched the heel of his good foot at all, going back. That means he was as near running as he could make it." He straightened up and looked at

Doctor Pryor. "You know the people around here, Doctor Pryor. Do you know any lame man that would have had any business being in these woods yesterday afternoon?"

"Captain George Hull, an old sailor, who lives by the shore of Saint's Orchard Bay, just down there, is lame. He used to work for old Mr. Wainwright who lived here at one time, but I don't think he's employed about the place now."

"Tough character?" asked Peter, watching the doctor's face narrowly.

"No; decidedly not. He's lived here all his life and everybody respects him, though he does swear beyond anything I ever heard." A smile touched the doctor's lips but left his eyes grave. "The elder Mr. Wainwright employed him to take care of his boats and had every confidence in him."

"No use following this trail, then," said John Austin. "He probably came into the woods looking for rabbits or to see some of the servants. Most likely we'll find his tracks going on around the house when we go back."

Peter's eyes went swiftly from the doctor's face to Austin's and as swiftly back again.

"I think I'll go down and risk an eye on the old bird, anyway, now we're this far," he said. "You needn't come if you don't want to. Probably lead to nothing."

"Sure to," agreed Austin. "I'll go back and make certain of the other end before any of the servants take a stroll in that direction. Come on, doctor."

"I think I'll go with Mr. Clancy," said Dr. Pryor. "I find his methods very interesting. It isn't far. We'll be back very soon, John."

Was there a slight stress on the last words and was it meant for a signal to Captain Austin that if he had anything to do, it must be done quickly? Peter could not be sure. That there was some understanding between them, he felt confident. Else why had Austin stopped to whisper to the doctor at the head of the stairs. It was all very puzzling. The doctor was worried about this old man, Hull, now. Why? It wasn't Hull that he was troubled about yesterday. Of that, Peter was certain. Then why? Hull, Hull, was that the name. Peter set his teeth.

"I'll find out! I'll find out, in spite of them, everything that happened in that room. I'll get everything clear, down to the last two-spot," he thought, doggedly, "and then we'll see who holds the trumps!"

CHAPTER XI.

GEORGE HULL.

THE red brick house down on the edge of the marsh looked very peaceful in the morning sunshine, as the two men approached it. Built by an ancestor of the present owner at a time when the bay, now filled up by the shifting sands, had been navigable for large sailing vessels, it had fallen, like Saint's Orchard Bay, to smaller uses.

The old white door, with its pediment and fluted columns, was closed and had been for so long that the sand and fallen leaves had drifted in a mournful heap against it. The windows of the front room were closed and the faded blinds were pulled down to the sill. It would have seemed utterly deserted had it not been for the sound of a carpenter's plane, worked slowly, with long intervals between the strokes, somewhere at the back of the house.

As they drew nearer, Peter and the doctor were surprised to see a man come around the corner of a small, tumble-down building by the edge of the tidal creek which ran along the margin of the rough lawn. With bent head, he advanced slowly toward them. His feet had made no sound on the thick grass and as they were walking in the deep sand of the narrow roadway, he was unaware of their proximity until he was almost upon them.

Then startled, he raised his head and looked up at them sidewise, disclosing a face, narrow and sharp, with little ferret-like eyes. He was dressed in a suit of dark material and wore a broad tan-colored felt hat. A flaming red tie gave the only vivid touch to a most unprepossessing exterior.

He passed them at once, without a word of greeting and Dr. Pryor turned to look after the small, stooping figure.

"Pretty little party, isn't he?" said Peter who had also looked back following the slinking little person with his eyes. "Know him, doctor?"

"Never saw him before. He doesn't look or act like a native, but he may have been living here for some time. It's been a long while since I've been over on this side of the Point.

They walked on toward the house, the doctor dismissing the stranger from a mind already full of conflicting thoughts and emotions. The idea that Hull, driven to desperation by his injuries, had taken their requital into his own hands and had, thereby, thrown a possibility of suspicion on Billy Wainwright, steeled the doctor's heart.

If Hull was innocent, Clancy was more likely than not to find it out and Steven Pryor had seen enough of Peter to feel sure that he would handle the present situation with decency of feeling. Only, he would go with him to make sure. If Hull was innocent, he could not be treated with too much consideration.

"Well, George," said the doctor as they turned the corner of the house.

The person addressed looked up from his work slowly, like a man dazed. His skin was tanned and creased like a piece of old leather. His light blue eyes were small and red around the edges as are those of most men who spend their lives between the shine of the sun and the shine of the sea. His lean, clean-shaven face might have been taken from some old Colonial portrait, so little had the type changed in this isolated community, where the strain had been good and the intermarriages, many.

"How'n 'ell are you, doctor?" he asked with as courteous an intonation as if his salutation had been the usual one employed in polite society. Slowly he hobbled around the end of the long plank he had been planing and took the doctor's hand. "'Y God, it's good of ye to come to see me so soon again."

"And this is Mr. Clancy, George."

"H' are ye, sir?" And, having spoken, Hull seemed to forget all about Peter and went back to his work.

They all stood silent. The plane moved slowly forward and stopped. The sun shone golden on the salt grass of the marsh. A belated red-winged blackbird fluttered in a small bush at the side of the creek. The tide, almost on the turn, still flooded in from the bay without a sound among the reeds.

"Makin' it fer her myself, ye see, doctor," the old man murmured at last. "She's lyin' in there, peaceful and quiet. Nobody's touched her but me an' nobody but me 'll ever touch her again. None of the neighbors come to help, of course, damn 'em!" His voice rose furiously, and then fell again. "I'll bury her over there, under the old pear tree. Tide never comes thet high. She'll be safe there and I c'n watch over her. Nothin's goin' to hurt her any more."

The plane moved forward.

Peter, with raised eyebrows, questioned the doctor.

"His daughter," Stephen Pryor answered with his lips but made no sound.

Peter nodded his comprehension. This, then, was the father of Alice Hull.

"Ye see what it is, doctor?" The old man motioned to the plank. "The Alice H. of Saint's Orchard. She'll sail no more on any sea, come calm or fog or storm. Her planks 'll hold my little girl as they've held her sence she was a baby. An' this 'll be her head-stun. She'll need no more."

He stooped and lifted from the ground the name board of a boat. It was painted bright blue and on it, in gold letters was the name:

ALICE H.
Saint's Orchard

Doctor Pryor reached over and placed his hand compassionately on Hull's shoulder. An uncontrollable spasm of pain crossed the old man's face and he winced away.

"What the matter, George?" Are you hurt?" asked Dr. Pryor in surprise.

"It's nothin', nothin'," Hull muttered. "Just a scratch."

"You'd better let me have a look at it. A scratch that hurts like that!"

"N', no! Leave it be. It's all right. Let 'er alone, doctor. It's nothin'. Let 'er take care of 'erself."

"How did you come to get a scratch on your shoulder, George?" asked the doctor, curiously.

"I dunno how 'n 'ell I come to be so clumsy," he grumbled. His eyes shifted quickly from the plank to the doctor's face and back again. "Breakin' up the boat yestiddy, I raked 'er on a nail. But I tell ye, it's nothin'! Nothin'!" he repeated, his voice raised querulously.

Just then, a light footstep sounded on the pebbles and Clancy and the doctor turned quickly. The old man, engrossed again in his task, did not hear or heed. It was Jane Norman who stood before them. Her face was flushed and her hand shook as she silently beckoned to the doctor.

Clancy did not move. He recognized her as one of the doctor's sort and class of society and guessed that she must be, quite possibly, like the doctor, a guest at "the Cedars." He watched them disappear around the corner of the house.

"I'm so thankful that you were here, Stephen!" Jane Norman was almost breathless and her eyes were dilated by some intense emotion. She glanced back toward the head of the marsh and again at Stephen Pryor.

"What is it, Jane? What is it, dear?" The doctor grasped her arm and spoke hurriedly, alarmed by the excitement which could so thoroughly upset the composure of this strong and self-reliant woman.

"Did you see a man—a little villainous looking man with a red tie. He came from this direction. Did you see him, Stephen?" Her tone was quick and imperative and her voice shook.

"Yes, Jane. We met him crossing the marsh, on the road. What of it? Who is he?"

"I don't know, Stephen. I don't know who he is."

"Then—"

"Stephen!" she checked him with a swift gesture. "Did you look at him closely? Did you see that he had on—"

"What?"

"The seal I gave Bruce for a watch-fob—years ago. I couldn't be mistaken! The man was wearing it openly, on his watch chain, in plain sight. You can't have forgotten it, Stephen! The two lions holding a big topaz. It belonged to my grandfather. It was very old. I'm sure there couldn't be another like it in the world. You must remember it!" Her words rushed past each other.

"Yes, I do. It was a very odd piece. I don't think—"

"Of course it's the same, Stephen," she interrupted impatiently. "I would know it anywhere. Now the question is, where did he get it? He must have seen Bruce—perhaps lately! Oh, Stephen, I don't know what to think!"

The doctor took both her hands in his with a strong, quiet pressure.

"Don't worry, Jane. We'll find the man at once and have it out with him. If he was wearing the seal openly, he probably came by it honestly and won't object to telling where he got it. It may give us a clue to Bruce's present hiding place. I'd like to find Bruce," his square jaw set, "as much as you, perhaps."

She looked at him with trouble in her eyes.

"I'll go to him if he needs me, Stephen," she said.

"Yes, yes, I know. You think so—but it's been a long time. Something may have happened. Anyhow, I'd like to meet Bruce Norman, face to face." His mouth shut into a straight line. "Where was the man when you saw him?" he went on abruptly.

"Back there," she pointed, "around the turn of the road."

"You go on and see George Hull, Jane. Tell him what we agreed. He mustn't let any one know, just now, that he had any reason to hate—" He gave his head an indicative jerk toward the west. "Impress it upon him. You can do it better than I can. And you needn't be mixed up in this other thing. I can do that alone. Or—by Jove," he broke off, struck by a sudden thought. "Clancy! I'd almost forgotten him. He'll handle it better than any of us. He's around there talking to George. You

must have seen him. I must get him out of your way, in any case."

"Clancy?" Mrs. Norman's brows met in a puzzled frown.

"Yes. Clancy, the detective. Gregory brought him over last night."

She raised her head, startled.

"Stephen! What is he doing here? Poor old George! Is he suspected already? How did it happen?"

"I can't tell you now. We're wasting time. But you see that George must be warned. Don't tell him who Clancy is. We want to keep it as quiet as we can. Just tell George he must be careful. If he's innocent he mustn't be allowed to run his head into a noose."

She nodded comprehendingly.

"Now which way did that man go? The man with the seal, I mean?"

"He went up the hill where the road branches. I met him just at the turn."

"All right. Now don't worry, dear. We'll find out all there is to know."

They had been absent only a few minutes. When they returned they found Clancy unobtrusively endeavoring to get some response from the old sailor. The latter, however, answered Clancy's friendly questions in monosyllables and went on with his work.

At a signal from Dr. Pryor, Peter stepped over to the doctor's side and Jane Norman advanced to the old man.

"George." There was a world of pity in her voice.

He raised his head.

"Mrs. Norman!" he exclaimed. It was as if a light had suddenly been lit behind his eyes. "Ye've heard?" The light went out like a blown candle.

"Yes, George, my poor old friend." Jane Norman went over to him and took his hand.

"'Y God, I think ye're the best woman in the hull round world," the old man said, brokenly.

Mrs. Norman glanced at the doctor and with a slight movement of her head, motioned him to go.

Clancy had been standing a little apart, watching. The doctor went over to him and touched his arm. Clancy roused himself, nodded, and followed Dr. Pryor back toward the road. He was not loth to go. The moment was inauspicious and Hull's state of mind made it difficult to find out anything without alarming him.

Peter could see that the doctor and this fine looking woman were intimate friends and he suspected a possible collusion between them for the protection of George Hull in whom they both seemed to take a very great interest, but he felt that he was more than a match for them in guile. They wouldn't be at all likely to help the old sailor to run away. The inference would be too incriminating and Peter judged that if once convinced of his guilt, although they might sympathize with the old fellow, they would realize that his best chance was to stand his trial. They would then step aside, hoping for the effect the "unwritten law" would have on the minds of a jury of his peers.

CHAPTER XII.

FALSE TRAILS.

ONLY murmurs of the late conversation between the doctor and Mrs. Norman had reached Peter's ears. He had not been able to distinguish a word but he felt sure that it related to George Hull. So convinced was he that he experienced a distinct shock when the doctor, as soon as they had passed the house, made eager reference to the strange man they had seen on the road.

Peter remembered him, of course. "A beastly-looking little rat. What about him?"

Stephen Pryor sketched the story in swiftly and as he talked their footsteps kept pace with the rapid words. The doctor was careful to give Clancy no hint that Bruce Norman's disappearance was connected with anything of a discreditable nature. He spoke of it as a probable case of amnesia and enlarged on Mrs. Norman's desire to find and care for her husband. The unpleasant looking man might know nothing of his whereabouts, of course. The seal might have been lost, or sold, perhaps. But still, there was a chance—

"Odd, this thing happening just now," said Peter, a puzzled frown deepening on his face. "If there's the least cause of a suspicion of a tough guy like the man we're talking about, it will be necessary to look up his record since a serious thing like murder has been pulled off with him hanging round the neighborhood. Did this Mr. Bruce Norman have any connection with the Austins, do you know?" he asked with apparent irrelevance.

The doctor pondered a moment, then shook his head. "He and Raymond Austin knew each other, certainly. At least they went to college together, but I'm sure that they haven't seen each other for many years. Mr. Norman disappeared a long time ago."

"Well," said Peter, after a thoughtful pause. "We'll have to look up this guy with the red tie anyway, on Mrs. Norman's account—and then he hadn't what a friend of mine would call a spiritual face. He looked as if he was capable of anything from pocket picking to grave robbery. He went this way, do you think?"

They had reached the turn of the road. The doctor nodded. Peter glanced carefully about in the sandy road bed. It was churned by wheels and bitten into by horses' hoofs, but all the marks were dim and blurred by the soft dry sand.

"Nothing here," said Peter, shaking his head. "Better ground higher up, maybe. We must hurry. He's got a good start on us."

They went on rapidly, Peter engrossed in his task and the doctor watching him. As they neared the top of the hill, Peter, repressing an exclamation, pointed to the side of the road. Here, it was evident, a man had stepped from the sand and gravel in the centre to an exposed spot of damp greenish-grey clay. The marks were quite fresh but the footing apparently was slippery for each print showed a deep scrape at the toe and they continued only a little way. The man had, presumably, returned to the less treacherous sand and gravel.

It was warm work and Peter stopped for an instant when they came to the top of the steep hill to wipe his heated forehead. All about them the wind murmured sadly in the trees. The shivering rustle of dried leaves filled the air. Otherwise the silence was unbroken. There was not a house in sight but just over the brow of the hill, the road branched again.

"Now which way did he go?" asked Peter, pointing impatiently. "Damn this road. It's as bad as Broadway for holding footprints. We'll have to take a chance. You go that way and I'll go this. If you see anything, sing out."

They had been separated only a moment or two when Stephen Pryor heard a low whistle from beyond the screen of trees and bushes at the fork of the road. Without an instant's hesitation, he plunged through the undergrowth and saw Clancy proceeding at a rapid pace down the winding road.

When he heard the doctor crash through into the open, Clancy turned without slackening speed and beckoned him to follow. Stephen did so at a run, catching him up in a couple of minutes. He had already seen the cause of Peter's haste. The road here was almost level and, though sandy in spots, there were long stretches of loam in which a continuous line of footprints showed clear and distinct.

"He isn't far ahead now," Clancy whispered. "He never came along, hell bent for election, the way we did I'll bet. We may see him at the next turn."

They hurried along through the woods, being careful to make as little noise as possible. At the turn, Clancy went cautiously forward by himself to reconnoitre. The doctor waited, breathless.

In a moment he heard Clancy's voice raised bitterly.

"Oh, hell, Doctor. Come here!" it said with no further attempt at secrecy.

Stephen plunged around the turn.

"Look there!" said Peter, pointing. "Wouldn't that jar you?"

The footprints continued as clear and distinct as before and at a little distance down the road, a man could be seen still adding one after the other to the unbroken line. He was an old man with snowy white hair and he walked slowly, throwing the weight of his great bulk from one foot to the other with obvious effort.

"The wrong man," exclaimed Dr. Pryor, unnecessarily.

"That's what it is all right, all right," said Peter, gloomily, and suddenly he laughed.

"Don't we look very like two damn fools; I beg your pardon, doctor, but if you could only see your face!" And he laughed again so heartily that the doctor, perforce, joined in.

"We've probably been following the wrong trail from the beginning," said Clancy," and God knows where our man has got to by this time. I'm some scout, I am, I don't think! This pathfinder stunt isn't in my line for sour apples and I've made a damn fool of myself. But it can't be helped now. I'm sorry, doctor," he went on, soberly. "It's no use our trying any further. We might mess about in these woods all day and not get anywhere. But cheer up. The man's too queer looking to be very hard to find if we go about it the right way. I'll get a man down from town, a man I know, that can track like a bloodhound. He'll do the business in no time. And when he's found our bird, we do the head work. Now let's get back as fast as we can."

The doctor did not remonstrate. He could see plainly the difficulties of the task they had set themselves and realized that it would take all of a trained man's time to locate the person they sought. He could hardly expect Clancy to abandon his more pressing interests to investigate this side line. He gave up for the present with a shrug of disappointment and together they rapidly retraced their steps.

When they came again within sight of the house on the marsh, Peter Clancy broke a long silence.

"Pretty hard case over there," he said with a nod in that direction. "Daughter of the poor old guy got into trouble?" It was hardly a question.

Dr. Pryor, roused from his preoccupation and noting the kindliness and sympathy in Peter's voice, nodded assent.

"He tried to keep it secret, of course, but it leaked out. You can't hide that sort of thing in a place like this," said the doctor, "but I don't think that any one except her father knows who was to blame."

"Her father—and you," said Peter shrewdly.

Dr. Pryor looked up, startled.

"You're not much good at hiding things, doctor," said Peter, pleasantly. "Better give it up. I can put two and two together as well as the next man. You're quick and you see a lot but you've never had anything to hide and when something serious comes along, you haven't had the practice. Your tongue would never give you away, but your eyes do. You were surprised when we found Hull's footprints. That shows you hadn't suspected Hull before. But you were worried right away, which means that you had some reason for thinking he might have had a motive. The motive's plain enough if he—the dead man—was to blame. Now the question is, why didn't you think of Hull in the first place?"

Dr. Pryor spread out his hands in a characteristic gesture. Peter was too sure to make a denial of any effect. Besides, it could do no good. As much frankness as was possible in the circumstances, was best with this astute young man. Stephen Pryor could see that the old sailor had the benefit of every doubt.

"I didn't think of him because it's so outside of his character," he said. "I've known him for many years. Been sailing and fishing with him time and time again. He isn't religious at all, but he has a sturdy strength and uprightness, a decency of bearing and breadth of outlook very unusual in a man of his opportunities. You couldn't judge him by what you saw today. He was wrapped up in his daughter and she adored him. I think the only secret she ever had from him in her life was the fatal one which caused her death.

"But that seems to me only another reason—"

"Yes, yes. I know it might be. But the way Austin was murdered," (the doctor dropped all pretence of thinking it suicide), "makes me sure, in spite of everything, that Hull didn't do it. I can imagine, possibly, in the condition of his mind yesterday, that he might have gone over to the Cedars and strangled, or tried

to strangle, that beast with his bare hands. But Hull is a fisherman, a sailor. He has had no experience with fire-arms. And where would he get a modern pistol? For nothing but a modern weapon of high power would have inflicted that wound."

Peter shook his head.

"A service pistol wouldn't be hard to get just now. Any boy around here who had been in the army and hadn't been mustered out yet, would have one."

"But he hadn't any practice with fire-arms. I'm sure of that."

"A beginner shoots straight sometimes," said Peter and added, slowly, "if his hand is guided by a just revenge."

The path was narrow and steep. They walked on for a time, in silence. Then Peter stopped and turned.

"And how about that scratch on Hull's shoulder, doctor? It was very painful for a scratch. What if it was a bullet wound?"

He did not wait for an answer but turned and walked on again. When they were nearly out of the woods he paused.

"This path hasn't been used much lately, but it was once a good one. Hull came over this way nearly every day in Wainwright's time, for orders and went up to see the old man in the library. He knew that private stair well. Am I right?"

Stephen Pryor nodded sadly.

"But still you're not convinced?"

The doctor shook his head.

"My instinct tells me that if he had killed Raymond Austin, it would have been in some other way."

"And my instinct tells me that Hull knows a hell of a lot more than he's giving out," said Peter. An excitement which he could not disguise thrilled in his voice. "It tells me that it was Hull who was in that room with Raymond Austin yesterday and that it was Hull that bullet hit before it buried itself in the door casing."

"You see," he went on after a slight pause, with an engaging smile at the doctor, "I'm taking you into my confidence—because I'll gamble on your being straight and I'm dead sure, when it comes to a show down, you'll let the cards fall as they fall. And I need you in my business. Are you wid me or agin me'?"

The doctor studied Peter's face for a long moment. Then—

"I'm wid you," he said and held out his hand.

CHAPTER XIII.

FOR LOVE'S SAKE.

AFTER he had parted with Dr. Pryor and Clancy in the woods, Captain Austin made all speed back to the house. He walked a little way past the oak tree where Hull's footprints had been found but discovered no more for the grass was thick beyond the shelter of the branches.

"It doesn't matter," he said to himself as he turned back. "That's a wild-goose chase, anyway."

A moment later, passing down the narrow hall from the library and crossing the larger hall, he met Dorothy White at the head of the stairs.

"Oh, Jack," she said, pushing her bright hair back from her troubled forehead, "isn't it terrible? The house is so still it seems as if I couldn't bear it. Paul and I've been out since breakfast. Dr. Stephen made us go. And now Paul is talking to some of the workmen who came this morning. Parker had sense enough not to let them go on with the painting and things but he didn't like to send me away till Paul had seen them. Now, I suppose that Betty will close the house as soon as she's well enough to leave and Paul thinks he'd better go into town this afternoon. And it's going to be awfully lonely. I wish you'd make him stay."

"I think your persuasions would be more effective than mine, little Dorothy," said Jack with a smile, raising her chin with a tip of his forefinger so that her eyes met his. "Don't you think so, yourself?"

"No, I don't," said Dorothy, flushing. "I wish you'd tell him to stay."

"All right, little girl. I will if you want me to. It's pretty rough on you, this whole thing. Don't you want to go into town, too? I think—"

"But I haven't any place to go," said Dorothy, tears coming into her eyes.

"That's the worst of being an orphan. And besides, I think Betty might rather have me here. I'm not much use—" She threw out her hands with a hopeless gesture.

Jack Austin patted her shoulder gently. "Now brace up, little girl," he said. "Of course Betty needs you and I'll see to it that Paul doesn't go—not yet, awhile, at any rate."

"Oh, Jack, I do wish you wouldn't call me 'little girl'," she said, drawing away petulantly. "Everybody treats me as if I were a child!"

"Dottie, dear!" reprovingly.

"Oh, I know! It's horrid of me to be thinking about myself! But I always was a selfish little beast." She gave her bright head a disgusted shake. "Don't think about me any more. How's Betty?"

"I was just going to ask. I saw her for only a few minutes this morning. Dr. Pryor went in later and said that she was resting quietly. Will you find out if she's awake now? If she is and can see me I'd like to talk to her for a few minutes. There are some things I must ask her about." With a slight motion of his head, he indicated the closed door at the other end of the hall.

Dorothy, shuddering, shut her eyes for a second and then opened them and looked at Jack.

"You know I can't take it in. It seems like a dream. He was well yesterday—and we were all afraid of him." Her voice was full of an almost superstitious awe. "And now, whenever I think of him, I'm more afraid of him than ever. I try not to think—"

"That's right, dear. Try not to think. Now find out if Betty will see me, that's a good girl. And tell her it's important, will you, Dottie. Tell her I said so. I think she'll understand what I want. And hurry, dear. There isn't much time to lose."

They had been talking in subdued tones for Mrs. Austin's rooms were not far away. Noting the earnestness of Jack's face, the girl nodded and, going a little way to the right, she knocked softly at the door of Betty's sitting-room. It was opened immediately and she went inside.

Jack, who had been chafing at the delay which he had not been able to avoid without treating Dorothy in a way which would have surprised and, perhaps, alarmed her, was relieved to see her come back almost at once. She beckoned him from the doorway.

"Come in, Jack," she said, softly. "Betty's up and she seems much better."

As he passed her in the door, Jack, with a look and a touch of the hand, silently asked her to leave them. The girl's pretty, intelligent eyes showed her comprehension. Funeral arrangements were not pleasant things for a young girl to hear discussed and Dorothy thought she understood why Jack didn't want her there. He was very considerate, and so wonderfully good looking—and so brave! She had heard of the wild, adventurous things he had done "over there." Things to make one's heart stand still. An Ace of Aces! Her young pulses thrilled with admiration—with hero-worship.

"Paul seems very tame, like a long, sleek, well-kept house cat," she thought as she went slowly down the stairs. "But he is amusing—and—nice. And he does take one's mind off one's troubles. If he were only—"

Betty Austin's old nurse, Mary Maguire, sat by the window, sewing when Jack entered. She raised her head and nodded to him and then dropped her eyes again to the black gown from which she was removing a blue, silk-embroidered collar.

Betty was half lying on a chaise longue, wrapped in soft folds of creamy-white silk. Her hands lay still, with an almost deathly stillness in her lap.

"Are you well enough to talk to me, Betty?" asked Jack, looking at her with concern as he took a chair close beside her. "There are some necessary arrangements to be made and I don't like to go ahead without consulting your wishes." He glanced, impatiently, at the old woman in the window.

Betty, not heeding his look, bowed her head, wearily.

"I'm well enough, Jack," she said. "But it isn't necessary. Do anything you think best."

"I know that Raymond wanted to be cremated," he said, quietly. "He expressed himself about it very strongly to me once, quite recently. Have you any objections? I know some people have—but it was his wish."

Betty shook her head. "I have no prejudices. Make any arrangements you think best," she repeated.

Jack touched her hand to attract her attention and glanced sidewise at the old nurse.

"Tell her to go." Though the words were soundless, the message was plain.

Betty's hands clenched suddenly, but her voice was calm.

"Mary," she said, quietly, "you'll find some white lawn in one of the trunks that were taken up to the store-room. I think it's the one marked with a green band. I wish you'd get it now. I want to see if there's enough."

"It wasn't in that trunk," she said, swiftly, as soon as the door was closed. "It will take her some time to find it." Her lithe figure had lost all of its lassitude and her hands were clenched tightly together. "What is it, Jack? What has happened?" Her voice was full of alarm.

"Nothing. Nothing, dear," he answered, laying a quieting hand on hers, "only I wanted to warn you so that you would be prepared. That detective I spoke to you about who was over here last night, Mr. Gregory's friend, he came back just now and insists—don't be alarmed, dear—he insists that Raymond was murdered. It seems that he found a bullet hole by the side of the little door under the balcony. He is sure that Raymond's assailant came up that way. That they both fired at the same time—"

"Oh, God, God help us!"

"But listen, dear! A very fortunate thing for us. I suggested thieves—tramps or something of the kind and he took the bait at once. We all went out to look for footprints. I knew—listen, dear—I knew that the path was gravel. That it wouldn't show any marks. Clancy said, himself, last night, that it wouldn't. It was perfectly safe. But he's pretty clever, in a way. He did find some footprints, over under the trees and he got all excited about them. They led into the woods over toward Saint's Orchard Bay.

"They weren't *his*, Betty, nor anything like them. Clancy seemed to think they might lead to something and he and the doctor followed them up. I left them and came back as fast as I could, but Dorothy stopped me in the hall and I'm afraid they'll be back soon now. I wanted to warn you. Clancy may insist on questioning you and it's best to be prepared for everything. Our stories must agree, absolutely. Did you see him," (again he emphasized the pronoun) "in there with Raymond, or did you only hear him?"

"I only heard him."

"Then you can't be sure! See, dear! You can't be sure."

She shook her head in agonized denial.

"Betty." His hand closed firmly over hers. "You saw nothing—heard nothing. Not even the report of the pistol. You had taken some medicine for a headache and were sleeping soundly."

"But Dr. Pryor and Mrs. Norman both know that I was awake." Her voice, though still vibrating with emotion, was becoming steadier.

"They'll never give you away. You can trust them. I'll warn them at once. Dr. Pryor knows how serious the situation is and Mrs. Norman is quick and clever. There is no danger from them. It's understood. You were asleep. You heard nothing," he repeated, firmly.

A sudden thought seemed to strike the girl's clearing senses.

"But you, Jack," she asked, "how did you guess?"

"I didn't guess. I knew. Raymond took me into his confidence. He told me that he had sent for him—and mentioned the hour."

"Oh, dear God, those letters!" she cried, starting to her feet.

"Hush, dear. We can't look for them now. It wouldn't be safe. Clancy will be coming back at any moment. We'll have to wait."

She sank back slowly, her hands against her temples.

"Now, there's one thing more," said

Jack after a moment. "Clancy has agreed to let it go through as suicide at the inquest this afternoon, if we'll give him a free hand. If he doesn't make a case, he swears no one will ever hear of any of his suspicions from him and I think we can trust him to keep his word. It will only be necessary for you to testify as we arranged this morning that Raymond could have shot himself with his left hand. If I hadn't been such a fool as to admit before I saw what was coming, that I didn't know, I could have spared you this. You still feel that you have the courage to do it? Perhaps an affidavit from you would be enough and you wouldn't have to appear. We could say that you were ill. Poor little girl! I want to save you all I can."

"No, no, Jack. It would be better—more convincing—for me to go, I feel sure. I'm strong enough now to do anything that must be done. It's no worse to swear to a lie than to tell one. I'll do it well. You need have no fear of me. I'd swear to anything to save him."

A painful frown darkened Austin's brow.

"You love him still," he said, sternly, "in spite of everything?"

"Yes, Heaven help me! I know it must seem wicked, monstrous, perhaps. But he's suffered so much. I can't hold him responsible. And I've always loved him."

Rising to his feet, John Austin threw out his hands with a tragic gesture and dropped them with an air of finality.

"You make the necessity of my course very plain," he said, bitterly—and left her.

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.

"Advertising Can Do It"

by Jack Bechdolt

THE greatest fortunes in America are not always the most conspicuous. For instance, the offices of the Bushwick Estate are located not far from Fifth Avenue, a few blocks north of Fourteenth Street, in a neighborhood where the old-fashioned houses of red brick are changing slowly into business structures by process of simple alterations. It is a quiet neighborhood, and the building is an old-fashioned business house of the seventies. A small brass plate beside the door announces "Bushwick Estate," and below that is a smaller and newer plate bearing the legend, "John Bushwick." At about eight o'clock any business morning an old colored man with a shining, bald head may be seen polishing the two plates. At nine o'clock the employees of the place report for work, a conservative-looking lot of men and women, some of them quite old. They remind one of the staff of a substantial bank. And at a quarter past nine an automobile — touring-car in summer, limou-

sine in winter—a car that conceals all its cost and power under a very sober exterior—drives up. The chauffeur opens the door and a youngish man who is easily six feet in height, broad-shouldered, blond, and otherwise like a great many other men of his age, steps out and hurries into the building unnoticed.

The young man is John Bushwick.

In his own person John Bushwick is one transcontinental railway system, two trust companies, a half-dozen banks, controlling interest in a great newspaper, a Wall Street firm, one of the greatest landlords in America, and Blue Monday soap—though most people have forgotten about the soap.

If John Bushwick chooses to lift his hand he can change the destiny of a regiment of men in Java, or a republic in South America; a fleet of ships will scurry about at his whim; tens of thousands of families in the Bronx, Harlem, and on the lower East Side bless or curse his name as he chooses; he plays with the destinies of men like an emperor, and his sneeze can raise the dickens with rates of foreign exchange. That is the power of John Bushwick.

To see him going to work you would think he was, perhaps, John Bushwick's head bookkeeper; or perhaps a private secretary.

II.

Oscar Hayden, head of the greatest advertising agency in America, sat aghast in the presence of John Bushwick.

Hayden was a man hard to stampede. He had undertaken some of the biggest advertising gambles of his age—and he usually won. All of his training and experience and personality tended to conceal his emotions—in fact he recognized few emotions, even to himself.

But what young Bushwick asked him to do was so extraordinary, so fantastic, so chimerical that for once he was robbed of his poise and he sat regarding the young multi-millionaire with a look that mingled amazement and fear.

The chief and founder of the Hayden Agency was past middle age, a distinguished cosmopolitan who looked and dressed the part.

The Hayden Agency occupied a good share of a handsome twenty-story building of its own, located where everybody could find it. But Hayden himself was a hard man to find. His appointments were sifted as carefully as the appointments of the President of the United States, for he was very busy and important. Yet when Bushwick sent for him he came eagerly, much as one of his own solicitors might have done for a customer of lesser caliber.

He came, listened, and was terrified.

"I know what you're going to say, Hayden." Bushwick leaned across his flat, broad desk in his plain, private office. "You're going to tell me this is impossible. Don't say it—don't make a fool of yourself—"

"But—"

"Nothing is impossible — not with advertising to accomplish it," Bushwick persisted. "You know that, Hayden—"

"But—"

"Why, look at my own case—the Bushwick money. Advertising made that—advertising, nothing else. What was Blue Monday but common, laundry soap, until it was advertised? Nothing! But paid publicity made it worth millions. And it was advertising—the cleverest form of publicity that my father used to stand Wall Street on its head. Advertising got him control of a railroad and banks, and God knows what all. You know that, Hayden!"

"Ye-e-es—"

"Yes. The whole thing—the whole damn thing, Hayden, is founded on advertising. Advertising made something out of nothing. And look at the late war! What raised billions for the Liberty Loan? What sold the war to the American people? Advertising—nothing else. Now we're going to start a campaign that will eclipse even the Liberty Loan, the greatest of them all. You're going to direct it, and, Hayden, we've got to win. You're going to find the woman I love—by advertising. You're going to make her my wife—by advertising. You're going to make her love me—*by advertising!*"

Hayden the astute; Hayden the voluble diplomat had no words at his command.

"Don't you shake your head at me," Bushwick warned him grimly. "Don't you do that. You understand what I want —get it for me."

Hayden tried feebly. "The cost, Mr. Bushwick—"

"Cost? You've got all the money you want behind you. Figure the cost of all the war publicity—go double that amount if you need it—triple—"

"No—no reputable magazine or newspaper will publish such copy—"

"Is it dishonest?"

"No—"

"Dishonorable?"

"No, but—"

"Then you'll find a way to make 'em take it."

Bushwick's eyes flashed.

"I can't do it."

Bushwick's voice took on a soft, velvety quality.

"Hayden, if you don't," he purred evenly, "I'll smash you and your agency. I'll buy you up; I'll sell you out; I'll throw you into the street, smashed—flat."

Hayden recognized the tone. So had Joshua Bushwick, in his day, threatened—or rather announced the inevitable. He knew the son would make good as the father had made good. He turned whiter, but he bowed his head with grim finality.

"Very well."

For a few moments there was silence across the table. The head of the Bushwick fortune stared grimly at the distinguished, gray-haired man whose acceptance of a death sentence had the dignity of a great soldier's defeat. He reached a hand that shook a little across the broad desk.

"Hayden," he said hoarsely, "I wouldn't smash you—I couldn't. You were my father's friend, and you have been my friend. I'm asking you to do this because you are my friend. Hayden, you know I'm sane — normal — level-headed enough, but—I'm in love! I can't help it. It's like—like the flu or any epidemic of that sort — I can't help it — and I don't want to help it. But I must find this girl. Think! I saw her only once—just a minute—and that was three months ago. I've never forgotten her a minute since! I must find her again—I must make her love me. Thinking about her—wanting her—I'm not fit for anything, Hayden. She's making a wreck of me.

"Hayden, I don't suppose you believe in love at first sight?" Bushwick's voice was eager.

Hayden shook his head. "I—I don't know—"

"No, I suppose not. I never believed any of that stuff either—then it happened to me. I met her just that once—in that crowd at the Grand Central. We were two among thousands, two insignificant figures, and something drew us together a minute —and it was all off with me. I haven't rested since then, trying to find her. I've tried every sort of detective I know of, tried every scheme—can't you see that advertising is my last hope? Advertising can do it—"

Hayden's lips again framed the word "impossible."

"But it can! Advertising—the sort I mean—with millions to back it, can do anything. And I ask you to try—because you are my friend, my father's friend, and —Hayden, you were a very good friend of my mother. Would you let my mother's son suffer all the torments of the damned?"

Hayden was shaken. He never had forgotten for a moment young Bushwick's beautiful Spanish mother, the mother from whom he inherited this queer streak of romance that jibed so oddly with old Joshua Bushwick's heritage of hard, common sense and business drive.

He stirred uneasily. Finally, with a gulp, he said, "I'll try it, John. I'll try—though God knows it's rank lunacy. Yes, it's probably my finish—but I'll try!"

"All right," Bushwick nodded, suddenly old Joshua again. "You can do it—you've got to do it. Find her, Hayden, win her for me. Damn the cost. If all I've got won't bring her to me, then what I have is no use to me. Go ahead, find the girl; make her love me. Advertising can do it—"

III.

WHEN Oscar Hayden promised anybody to do a thing he went ahead and did it with

all his heart and soul. That was one of the things that made him so successful.

He called together the staff of the Hayden Agency. In the big directors' room they gathered, copy-writers, artists, and space contract experts. There was present the head of an art department who received almost as much salary in a year as the greatest movie star; advertising psychologists more important than foreign ambassadors, and all the assistants and subordinates as low as Miss Maggie Smith, recently promoted from filing to an apprenticeship at preparing copy.

Keeping young Bushwick's identity secret, Hayden told them the story of Bushwick's chance meeting with an unknown young woman in the Grand Central Terminal—of his instantaneous love for this woman—his frantic attempt to find her again, to learn her identity—and finally his determination to spend all his millions, if necessary, in making known to this woman that he loved her. So thoroughly had Hayden convinced himself of the feasibility of John Bushwick's mad idea that he was able to convince the staff of men and women before him. They believed in Hayden; they had seen him do many seemingly impossible things; they even came to believe in this wildest of all campaigns, and the first of all to accept the idea were Hayden's women employees.

"Our unknown client has fallen in love 'at first sight,' as the novelists put it," Hayden summed up. "The young woman he loves is unknown to him. Their one meeting was the chance encounter of a minute in the Grand Central terminal. It consisted of a collision between them, each laden with a suit-case, each intent on his own path; on his part a perfunctory 'I'm sorry'; from her the usual polite disclaimer of injury; a few seconds in which they untangled their bags; sidelong glances; a smile; a bow, and that is all. To find the woman and convince her of his honest love our client is ready to spend millions.

"Our problem then divides itself into two parts: First, find the woman; second, persuade her that the young man loves her with an honorable and lifelong affection.

"This may not be the easiest task in the world. Probably some of you already know it is not easy to persuade a woman to accept love; how much more difficult when the offer must come anonymously! If we succeed it will be a remarkable demonstration of the power of advertising; if we fail—but we dare not fail!"

That was the way Hayden set his staff to work. Every employee in the place was instructed to submit ideas for the love-letter campaign, and the most generous rewards were assured those whose ideas met the approval of the unknown client.

Hayden's speech heralded the start of the busiest and most nerve-racking period in the history of the agency. Experts both great and small laid their heads together or paced their studios alone until early hours of morning. Digestions were ruined by excesses of hot coffee and cold tea. Interest in the anonymous romance and hope of reward spurred them all to a superhuman effort.

Data was pitifully slight. Young Bushwick supplied a vague description of the girl of his dreams. He remembered her hair. It was golden—or perhaps a light brown, say a golden-brown and somewhat fluffy. He did not think it curled. He spoke of her eyes, wonderful eyes that mirrored the soul of an angel—but he was not sure whether they were blue or black. She was slender, but rounded; not too tall, perhaps five feet five inches—not more than six feet. She wore a hat, he thought it rather a large hat—at least it had a brim that shaded her face; and she wore clothes of some dark stuff—rather trim-looking clothes, perhaps a tailored suit. Of one thing he was sure, she carried a suit-case—or was it a Gladstone bag?

There seemed just one thing of which the mysterious client was sure—it was a woman he had jostled in that unforgettable moment at the Grand Central terminal, probably a youngish woman—or was she young? The description failed to say!

Yet because these men and women who worked for Hayden were the brightest in their profession, and because the reward for success was so unusual in promise, they did their mighty best. The story of the meeting was set forth in a hundred ways;

the plea of the anonymous victim of the young woman's charms was expressed with every manner of appeal, tenderly, sincerely, passionately, grippingly. Cupid and cupidity alike were invoked.

Pages and double pages for the magazines, pages in black and white and pages in color were sketched in dummy form. The most famous illustrators and decorators were called in to design settings for the type matter that combined dignity worthy of a great love with beauty sufficient to move the hardest heart. Newspaper campaigns were mapped out with lavish disregard of cost. Billboard experts designed gigantic valentines addressed to the fair unknown, and electrical authorities suggested still others that would glow at night along every White Way in the world.

When the work was done the entire mass of data was despatched with great secrecy to young Bushwick. For several days the young man pondered, reading and viewing, criticising and considering. Finally he set aside on the one hand a small pile of manuscript and sketches; on the other a large one. The small pile he had approved.

As a direct result of this selection several members of Hayden's agency were summoned to Hayden's office. Rewards for their good fortune in pleasing the unknown client were all they dared to hope. Congratulations from their fellow workers were generous and whole-hearted, surprising as some of this good luck seemed to be. But more surprising than any promotion was the selection of Miss Maggie Smith, late of the filing system and apprentice copywriter, who was chosen to direct the preparation of all future letter press.

By some astounding fluke, so it was learned, copy prepared by Maggie Smith had met more generous approval than the efforts of a dozen of the brightest advertising writers in America. Those who failed thought they had good grounds for terming the campaign the greatest bit of advertising madness known to history.

The campaign was launched. Of a sudden the pages of all the periodicals in America bore the startling news that love and a fortune awaited the young woman who, on a day between July 9 and 13, at Grand Central terminal, between 8.30 and 10 A.M., had momentarily jostled a young man with blond hair and plain, irregular features; slight cast in one eye; dressed in light gray flannels, wearing a dark blue tie, soft linen collar, brown socks, brown Oxford shoes and a straw hat. For information that would positively identify the young woman a liberal reward was offered. To the lady herself a rich, honest, unattached young man of good education and good health offered the devotion of a lifetime.

In all the skilful, subtle ways by which the illustrator's art and typographical composition can suggest, these announcements gave the impression of truth. And their sincerity had a dignified beauty that stirred the hearts of readers.

It was not the easiest thing for Hayden's agency to get these advertisements printed. Explanations and guarantees were necessary before the great periodicals would vouch for the story. But Oscar Hayden was America's advertising genius. His lifetime had been devoted to the exploitation of honest goods, and he himself was a leader in the movement to eliminate fraud and grafter from paid publicity columns.

Coincident with the flood of announcements in the literary and trade periodicals came the burst of daily newspaper displays. And everywhere in America painters were busy blazoning the message on billboards that hung on skyscrapers or bordered roadsides. When Hayden's foreign agencies finished their work there was no place in the civilized world that did not hear about the heroine of that little incident in Grand Central terminal.

Hayden foresaw the immediate result of this broadside of publicity. To meet the emergency he established a special bureau to hear the claims of all the would-be Cinderellas in the world.

The staff of the bureau worked until late hours. For a time it seemed that every single woman in the United States and Canada had been in Grand Central terminal at the time mentioned and jostled the particular young man mentioned. The claimants were of every description, and a large percentage of them obvious frauds.

Many were theatrical aspirants seeking publicity. Many were adventuresses. Others were honest but mistaken. They wrote, telegraphed, and came in person, women of all ages, both fat and lean, blonde, brunette, and medium, tall and short, ugly and beautiful.

When one considers the number of persons of Bushwick's age who frequent Grand Central terminal in a day and naturally collide with many others, it is not strange that the claim bureau considered so many applications made in good faith. Each claimant who seemed to stand any chance at all was photographed and the pictures were sent in batches to the mysterious client. In a few cases where there still remained doubt in Bushwick's mind, it was arranged by Hayden that he view the claimants, unseen by them. But eventually all were turned away.

IV.

"HAVE you tried everything, Hayden—everything?"

John Bushwick's voice was sodden with despair.

Hayden had called at Bushwick's office after dark, approaching the building by a devious route in order to throw off his track six of the brightest newspapermen in the world who did nothing but trail him twenty-four hours a day in an effort to learn the identity of the love-mad millionaire.

Hayden placed his hand affectionately on Bushwick's shoulder. He was white and tired.

"John, it breaks my heart to say it, but what more can we do? We've gone onto the motion-picture screens. We've translated our ads into Braille for the blind to read. We've hit every magazine page from the *Old Cap Deadeye Library* to the *Oceanic Monthly;* every newspaper from the weekly *Tilikum Wa-wa* of Hootalinqua, Washington, to the London *Times;* every rock and billboard visible to the naked eye. Love speaks a universal tongue, wakens a universal interest, and from Canton to Monte Carlo men and women are voluntarily enlisted to aid you—I scarcely exaggerate when I say that nations are leagued in your behalf—and the result is nothing! Either the girl is dead or happily married to somebody else. Give it up, John—drop it."

"You're dead sure, Hayden? If you had more money—"

"All the advertising and all the money in the world can't do it—can't find that girl—"

Bushwick rested his head in his hands. His shoulders sagged. His voice came to Hayden muffled and hopeless. "All right—Hayden—give up—"

Hayden lingered awkwardly. "God help you, John," he mumbled.

Bushwick raised his head quickly, his eyes blazing. "Did you think I'd neglected that!" he rasped. "I have asked God—and even He won't help me—"

A long time after Hayden had gone, Bushwick roused. From a great filing-case he pulled out sheafs of printed pages and sketches—the library of his love. There was a coal fire on the hearth, and one by one he began to lay the valentines that had cost him millions on the pyre. Sometimes he stopped to read a bit here and there, reviewing all the circumstances of his great passion.

V.

As a result of a message from Bushwick that had brought him shivering in a bathrobe to his telephone at three o'clock that morning, Oscar Hayden was one of the first connected with his agency to reach the office. There he found Bushwick already before him in his private office. Hayden called a boy and left word that Miss Maggie Smith should report to him directly she came to work.

Then the two men began their waiting. They were too nervous, too overwrought to talk. Bushwick paced a steady route across Hayden's rugs; Hayden looked stonily from the window with eyes that saw nothing, his thin, artist's hands twisting restlessly behind his back; his pointed mustache the worse for constant chewing.

Before their waiting was done both men felt old and gray and haggard; time had ceased to function and the solid world had

crumbled into dust. Then Maggie Smith came.

She was a plain-featured, wholesome young woman of twenty-three. Her hair was always a trifle untidy and of a baffling color between brown and black. Her eyes were a grayish green, honest eyes, and she had a delightful, humorous smile that made little crinkles in her upturned nose.

"Miss Smith," said Hayden, trying to keep his voice level, "may I present Mr. Bushwick, a client of ours, who wishes to discuss—"

Hayden got no further.

Maggie Smith had entered with her usual morning smile and a faint look of inquiry in her glance. Then she discovered Bushwick. The roses in her cheeks withered to a dead white and her eyes grew large and dark.

With a queer, mechanical step she moved slowly toward Bushwick—a step at a time, as if something drew her to him.

Bushwick's arms extended to welcome her. Neither said a word when the arms folded about Maggie's shoulders.

It was then that Hayden closed the door and left them alone.

An hour later, after a discreet knocking, Hayden returned to his office. Young Bushwick was beaming; Maggie Smith was rosier and more lovely than any person had ever seen her.

"Hayden, old man, congratulate us," Bushwick grinned.

Maggie broke into Hayden's exclamatory delight. "How"—she demanded breathlessly—"how in the world did you find out it was I?"

Hayden handed her a clipping, one of the famous valentines that had cost Bushwick almost as much as a new battle-ship. "That explains it," he said.

Maggie looked up from the clipping with knitted brows.

"I—I fail to see—"

"You prepared that copy?"

"Certainly; I supervised the preparation of all the copy—"

"And personally wrote the description of our unknown client—at least so you told me?"

"Yes—"

"Oh, Maggie — Maggie Smith! You can't see how you have betrayed your love—"

"Mr. Hayden, I'm absolutely in the dark—"

"Last night, Maggie, John here gave up the search. He was convinced, finally, that all his millions could not help him; that advertising could not help him; that even God would take no pity on him. Then, rereading these advertisements for the last time—hesitating to throw them on the fire and admit defeat, he read this description you wrote. That was how he found you. Maggie, when John described himself for the advertisement he wrote this:" Hayden produced a slip of paper and read: "'Young man, blond hair, plain, irregular features, *et cetera;* light gray flannels, *wearing a dark-blue tie.*' Here is what you wrote: 'Light gray flannels, wearing a dark-blue tie, *loosely knotted and slightly askew!*' You added that Maggie. Whether it was absent-mindedness or a Heaven-sent inspiration, who can say; but you added, '*loosely knotted and slightly askew—*'"

"Then," Bushwick supplied eagerly, "I remembered. It was during the time my valet was sick—I tied that tie myself. And when I reread that last night—and remembered—I wondered how *you* knew, Maggie—and, Maggie, I began to hope! But, Maggie, my darling, why did you keep me waiting so long—"

"Yes, Maggie, why?" Hayden urged. "All this expense, this worry, this agony—"

"Why?" Maggie echoed. "You ask me that? How was I to know? How could I tell? Every week day, twice a day, I am in Grand Central—I transfer there to the subway for Astoria. Every day of summer I jostle young men who wear straw hats and brown oxfords—"

"And was I no different, not a bit different than any of them?" Bushwick cried reproachfully. "Did you forget me, Maggie—I never forgot you—"

"I never forgot you, not for one second." Maggie's voice was soft, and it sang like a throbbing note from a violin played

by a genius. "I never forgot you—John—"

"Maggie!"

"Well—well, good Lord, Maggie, if—if you felt that way about it—if you didn't forget him—all the more reason for revealing yourself at once," Hayden protested.

"There was no reason—no reason at all!" Maggie's chin went up and her eyes flashed indignation. "I met John, yes. And I—I thought about him always after that. I—I knew I loved him. And when you, Mr. Hayden, first told us of the advertising plans, I hoped—oh, how I did hope that man was John. And then I saw the description, and I knew that the man of our advertisement was not the man I could never forget—"

"What!" Both men shouted.

"Yes, the description of him. Listen. 'Blond hair, *plain, irregular features, slight cast in one eye*—' look at him!" Maggie was regal in her anger. "Does that describe him? Does it? Never in a thousand years. Plain features indeed! Irregular! A cast in one eye — why, Mr. Hayden, John is the handsomest man in all the world!"

A MODERN POCAHONTAS

I USED to draw the color line—
No cheek of chocolate for mine!
It never entered in my plan
To wed a dusky Indian.
I never wished to have a squaw
For loving wife or mother-in-law,
And turned away with sullen "No!"
From all companionship with Lo.

But now all's changed. I find my heart
With passion deep is rent apart;
For one who makes me think of her
Whose story set the world astir
In ancient days—that copper maid
Who once the murderous bludgeon stayed,
And won thereby undying fame—
Yes, Pocahontas was her name.

A maid with raven tresses long;
A maid whose voice is purest song;
A maid whose eye is eagle-keen,
Yet soft as any I have seen;
A maid whose cheek suggests a line
Of warriors erect and fine—
The Iroquois, or Apache—
Yes, she's the maid of maids for me!

My heart is simply in a whirl
At sight of this ecstatic girl!
By day, by night, my glances seek
The dusky glories of her cheek,
And 'fore the world I'd gladly stand
Possessor of that little hand—
The hand so soft and deeply brown
Of Phyllis, tanned, returned to town!

Blakeney Gray.

Soda to Hoc!

by George Gilbert

Author of "Midnight of the Ranges," "The Flame Orchid," "They Were Seven," etc.

"Stick to your friends; play all hunches straight—Soda to Hoc!"—SQUARE HANK BURNS.

PROLOGUE.

AFTER his lonely search over toward Red Buttes for a stray bunch of broomtails, Asa Beaumont, range rider for the QV, bedded down warmly in bunchgrass, the friendship fire glowly near by, slept. His cow-pony, from the QV corrals, freeing himself of his hobble, lured by the passing of a band of the very mares Asa had been searching for, went off with them. Thus Asa, awakening with the sudden dawn, found himself stranded a good day's ride from home.

Hiding up his saddle, taking his rope, against a possible meeting with the fugitive horse, Asa strode away across the prairie, following the trail of the roaming band of horses that took him, it seemed, toward home. But it turned a few miles south, and Asa, noting that the sign of his own horse left the wanderers' and pointed toward Bar-U, abandoned hopes of overtaking the animal and prepared for the long walk in.

Beaumont walked steadily until toward noon, then, coming to a collection of splintered boulders, he sought a rest-place among them, in the shade, and settled himself for a siesta.

His great heart all but bursting from the strain of the long, long, long chase, his mighty thews extended to the utmost, the giant stallion, hide besprinkled with white dots, his four white stockings showing as he plunged forward, neared the boulder heap that, instinct told him, must be the place for his last stand.

The lean, gray leader of the pack that was driving the horse never slackened in his distance-devouring lope, yet, as he saw the stallion swerve toward the boulders, he gave, as he swept forward on silent feet, a single signal yap. At its insistent sound the dozen huge loboes in the leader's grim train stretched out flatter and flatter in their stride, in the effort to come at the flashing hind legs of the fleeing prey and hamstring the giant equine.

But at the menace of the leader's signal the stallion, too, snugged down closer and closer to the plains-sward and let out the final saving link of his awesome speed. The great, Nemesis-like leader of the pack put out a final effort—sprang, but fell short. The stallion, spurred on anew by the snap of the teeth so close to his hamstrings, flashed out into ultimate striving and barely came to the rocks, a scant stride before his pursuers. That gave him time to turn and face them, teeth bared, forefeet stamping, as the then baffled pack drew up, in semicircle, to rest before the final death rush!

The giant, grizzled leader flashed in, teeth bared, tongue a-drip with avid yearnings for blood. The stallion's forefeet clashed, and missed. A stealthy but smaller wolf, keyed to his superior's trial, essayed a low, scurrying attempt for the side of the neck, but a quick side-leap foiled him, as well.

Yet the big mother-wolf of the pack, crafty, subtle, fared better, for as the younger she failed, the wicked old harridan closed from the off-side and for a single second was fairly at the palpitating throat of the badly winded horse. The stallion, squealing, threw her off, but the effort laid his other side open to attack and they all closed in—yapping, snarling, teeth bared, eyes gleaming with the blood-lust.

The stallion fought them, all four feet, teeth as well. But they were many, snakelike in deathcraft; he far-spent. His eyes were glazing, his flanks heaving, his lungs on fire from exertion, his knees were trembling to the final collapse that would mean that he was down, their prostrate victim, when there came spurts of fire, the roar of a flaming gun, the yell of a human voice, and the lobo-pack, leaving half its numbers dead, scattered, howling.

A single instant the wild stallion stood, too exhausted to flee from the hated scent of man. Then, his eyes rolling, he caught sight of the man, who was whirling something lank, serpentlike, above his head. The snake-coils shot out, the noose was on the foam-lathered shoulders that, until then, had never known a restraint. He shivered at the touch of the rope, plunged, but was too weak to resist much.

Asa deftly rolled loops up the bight of the rope until one came flicking to where the stallion's right forefoot was. The horse felt it, stepped aside—into the loop. Then, looped about the neck, hobbled about his right forefoot, he was helpless. Soon, inch by inch, the hand of the man crept up the rope, until it came onto the muzzle of the panting, staring-eyed stallion.

"Steady, you darned lil old cuss!" the range rider said with an accent of tenderness that forced his cajolery into the spent animal's brain. "You sure are a beauty an' you're a goin' to be mine. Whoa, there, darned lil old cuss! You're black, sprangled with white, and so I'll call you Starlight. Steady, Starlight; whoa, gentle, now—"

The stallion barely shivered at each new touch. There was a sympathy, a kindness, about the man that drew forth trust and did away with fear.

But, although Asa got the tired stallion into the home corral, it was not without many struggles on the way in. And if he finally broke him, it was not without hard riding, for the big animal had a will and mind of his own. Yet when he did give in it was fully, loyally, and thereafter the horse was the man's very own. No other person would he let bestride him, unless Asa's friendship for that person was made known, and he would follow the range rider about like a dog. The bond between them, growing out of the eleventh-hour rescue from the pack, was strong.

And in time, in the workaday stress, the pranks, the serious testings of cow-country life, other men learned to not molest or seem to molest the sweet-tempered range rider while the big stallion was about, for he was prone, on call or without it, to defend his master with teeth and hoofs. Asa never found out whence the unbranded stallion had been chased by the wolves.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE MESA HERMOSA TRAIL.

STARLIGHT, softly fox-trotting the Mesa Hermosa trail, stretched out his glossy neck and whickered. The powerful stallion was tall at the shoulders, finely formed. His eyes were wide-spaced, intelligent, loyal.

Asa Beaumont came out of his day dream to note that while he had lolled, half asleep, in the saddle, two riders had rounded the slight bend in the trail a bit ahead—the bend where the branch from Tin Cow made into the main trail.

Asa had nothing on his mind then but going on to Tin Cow—Tin Cow, just waking from dying cattle camp somnolence to mining strike fervor, beckoned. There would be plenty of folks there, just folks. And Asa liked folks, just folks. Also there would be opportunity to risk the small bills

of his thin roll on seductively turned cards, the money sprangled out over a spade-suit layout.

Little puffs of smoke-fine dust whiffed up from under each hoof's beat. The land drowsed in afternoon's warmth. The road-runner scooting the trail ahead of Starlight twitched out of a rut a long-past buck-board had made, dodged into the wayside weeds. On high a dun hawk wheeled; from a lone, vagrant palo verde that had sprung up from some freak far from its proper desert nursery, a mocker scolded: a faint, wistful zephyr wandered through the wine-sweet immensity between.

Old times were passing on the ranges; new times were hardly at hand.

The riders—a man and a girl—came forward steadily. Asa nudged Starlight off-side to let them pass.

The man was beyond mid-age; his face harsh, jaw hard, eyes steely; sandy beard drabbled and tangled. Altogether an unfriendly man, riding with a careless ease that the years had not filched.

So much Asa noted in one eager, flashing glance of his own gray eyes that twinkled from under heavy brown brows, lighting up a face that was open; inviting, nay, even compelling, confidence and friendship from folk of good will.

Then the range rider's eyes went to the girl, whose seat in the saddle, astride, bespoke the resourceful, enduring, skilled plainswoman. He saw:

A few strands of hair straying from under the wide-brim of her hat—strands warm-toned, provocative. A face sunned and that could be sunny, yet not harmed by the sunning. A face troubled now, but that could be sweetly frank and satisfying with its shadow gone. A form that swayed about from present weariness, but that could be erect and pleasantly erect and alluring when its muscles had been coaxed back to tautness by rest, and the form was clad in a cheap dress of brown.

The poor little boots of her matched the dress, and together they went well with the well-worn, loose-fitting, dingy gray clothing the man wore—matched it for indication of low, worldly position, yet matched it not in manner of wearing, for, whereas the man, too, evidently had no pride of person, the girl had about her a sweetness, a womanliness, an aura of beauty's self, that made even her commonplace, worn, but neatly mended and clean clothing take on the similitude of niceness.

As the two came abreast of him, Asa's hat swept low and he bowed over his saddle's horn and gave:

"Howdy!"

The man's lips barely writhed; his greeting had in it the quality of a half-snarl that cut through the tail of Asa's warm word like a slashing knife. Asa's eyes went wide, then caught the girl's face in their focus. He waited for her word, but she said nothing, yet held back the veriest mite on her bridle, causing her roan to lag. Then, the man having passed fully, the girl partly, and as Asa was bringing his hat up to replace it on his brown, curly head, he saw her lips frame themselves for a single word, that vibrated to him, more by the shape of the ripe lips than by the sound she uttered and the word was:

"Come!"

Like a passing cloud-shade, the mouth of her smoothed into calm; the eyes of her were turned ahead, and as the man slewed in the saddle to snarl a hasty phrase, ordering her to hasten, Asa found himself wondering if she really had invited him, as he had sensed, rather than heard.

Finding his master not urgent, Starlight spraddled into the trail and half turned. He wanted companionship after his master's four-day ride down from Red Buttes, during which they had passed the shacks of nesters, sheepmen, through cañon-ends where farmers let their dairy cows graze peacefully, and all that time Starlight had not smelled a smell like a brother cow-pony. So now he was anxious even for a chance to chum with any old animal that wasn't a sheep, a cow, a goat, but that could whicker. Starlight talked to the horses of the hastening twain. The girl's answered. Starlight turned squarely into the trail toward the two. The two nags were not cow-ponies, but they were horses, his own kin.

The girl turned in her saddle and flicked a glance back—a single glance. Tin Cow,

the fun of spending his lean roll there, faded from Asa's ken—blurred by that single back-cast glance.

Asa let the rein slack on Starlight's neck. The horse foxed toward the girl and man. The wise stallion knew his master's mood perfectly.

"No good comes o' sticking your nose in other folk's doings, Starlight," Asa said, half aloud, "but she sure asked me to take a hand in her game. I don't know what it is, but we're going *through* with her."

The man turned in his saddle and noted Asa's coming. He urged forward his horse. The girl also made an effort to hasten. But Starlight came swiftly from behind.

"They'll turn off at that side trail two mile back," Asa told Starlight, who twitched his ears back to catch the loved sounds. The many white spots on the horse's black skin explained his name. His four white stockinged feet made light work of the easy going. "No harm riding that far. Plenty of time after to make Tin Cow by night and play Soda to Hoc on my straight hunch."

At the side-trail's branching Asa was alongside, Starlight capering emulously as the girl's roan switched a tired tail. The man stopped his horse and pushed his hat back from his partly bald brow and waved his hand in the direction the main trail took and his words cut, knifelike, into Asa's half-formed first phrase:

"This is the main trail; keep on it. Nothing on this side trail but our place."

"I thought I'd ride out thataway," Asa offered, eyes aglint at the other's churlishness. "I sure dote on scenery. Starlight and I'll sleep out up near your place or beyond, dependin' on how far we fox-trot before dark."

He glanced at the girl. Her face was blank. Had he erred?

"It's a free country; you c'n ride whar you please," the man snarled; "only keep away from us two."

He urged his horse forward. Asa saw the girl's face flash from its blankness into life. Again the ripe lips said "*Come!*"

Then the mask fell anew and he saw only her trouble in features that would have been so pleasant without it. And he yearned to banish it.

Starlight followed the girl's horse. The man glanced back, scowled, then seemed to accept the situation.

"That old son-of-a-gun, he seems to resemble hi'se'f a whole lot," Asa confided to Starlight's off-ear.

CHAPTER II.

ONE KIND OF HOSPITALITY.

THE side-trail wound and rambled, up and up, and Asa, self-bidden, felt more and more uneasy over his bad manners in following the two at every lift or twist of it. An hour the trio made such unsocial progress, then, with sudden sweep, the faint track bent into a tiny rift between two rolls of sparse land, and in the cup of it was the discouraged, leaning house, the scant outbuildings, of the place for which they were bound. A trickle of green grass marked where the faint leakage from the tank dribbled toward the trough that was inside the little corral's circle of barbs; some struggling crops, corn, potatoes, and a small kitchen garden near the house, completed the scene.

Asa drew up while the man and girl dismounted. The man stripped the gear from his horse with practised hands and sent him shrinking through the corral bars from a mean kick aimed at the horse's body. The girl was afoot in a twinkling and had her horse ready for the corral before Asa could bethink himself to offer to help her, or rather while he was still cogitating whether he should or no. Her horse raced after the other. The man slammed the corral bars to and then turned to face Asa.

"Now't you're here, you c'n edge right round an' ride right out. This is th' jumpin'-off place."

Asa glanced toward the girl. She had turned toward the house, her back very uncommunicative. But she was within easy earshot.

"I was aiming to shack along a ways and make camp under some friendly stars, for this one night, old-timer," Asa lied. "Not far away."

The sullen man glowered and turned on his heel, going toward the house. Asa,

so left, nudged Starlight forward so the horse could stick his muzzle through the wire of the corral to get a drink from the trough. While the horse drank Asa produced papers and makin's and rolled one. This very openly, lolling back in the saddle the while. Then, letting the bridle-rein drop, he swung down and went toward the house, cigarette thrust forward, in proof of need, in lips that held a placating smile about their corners. Never before had his smile failed to make friends for him and he wanted it to win for him now,

The door, fast shut behind the man, resounded to Asa's knuckle-dusting. He heard a sudden word or two inside, angry, alarmed. Then came the scuffle of feet and the door inched open, the man's face appearing in the stingy crack. Seeing Asa there, he swung the door still farther open. Asa noted that while the left hand held the door open, the right was not visible—was behind the man's back. Gun-play times were history; Asa was looking for nothing more harsh than a verbal rebuff. He wanted another glimpse of the girl; yearned for a new signal!

" Can I beg a match or two? Mine's lost or something—"

So Asa began, then blinked in the muzzle of a six-gun that was held steadily.

" Come in an' visit a while. You *would* follow whar you wasn't wanted? Come in or I'll shoot you, cold turkey!"

Asa saw the mean, grim eyes that told of deeds to follow words. The sudden blazing of the man from blank surliness, sheer unneighborliness, to blood-red, potent, devilish anger, caught the young range rider off balance. He stepped in, hands up, and in a moment was backed against the side of the room farthest from the door. The door the man had kicked shut as he had drawn back from it, after forcing Asa past him at point of menacing gun.

The girl he saw not then. From a nearby room—there were four to the house—he heard sounds of dishes rattling that seemed to hold an explanation of her absence.

" Now, what d'y' mean by scroungin' into me all the time?" the man demanded after passing his hands over Asa's clothing in search of gun or knife, his own gun's muzzle against the young man's chest the while, tense thumb on well-worn hammer which he kept half-fanned. But Asa had no weapons.

" I on'y wanted a match or two," Asa insisted.

The other backed off and sat on an upended box.

" You are a plumb fool or nacherly loco," the mean man rasped, " but either way I can't have you anteing into my game thisaway."

He began to turn the problem over in his mind. Asa, shifting his weight on his feet, felt something against his cheek. A side glance told him it was a gun-holster, hanging on its peg. It was not cold, that leather. It was warm!

" Had the gun on, under his coat, all the way," Asa permitted himself to note; " hung it up as soon as he got inside, where it would be handy. He must be packing secret sins to be so forehanded in weaponry."

The man called:

" Bess, you, Bess. Com' 'ere!"

The dish rattling ceased. The girl came through the connecting door, hat off, sleeves rolled up as from workaday effort in kitchen. Asa noted that the door through which she had entered had a very bad hinge, that squeaked meaningly.

Her face went white as she saw Asa, so humbled. Then she steadied.

" Get that rope under the table and tie this snoopin' fool's hands for me," the man ordered.

There was a veriest second of hesitancy. Then she suddenly stooped, reached behind the partition on the side where she was, and came out into the room, a length of stout snaffle-rope in hand. Asa wheeled at the command of the man with the gun and held his hands behind him for the girl's ministry of capitivity. Her flesh touched his in the hateful operation, and he felt his flesh tingle at the then unwelcome contact.

" There, that's better," the mean man snarled; " he's tied and can't make a sudden break. Now tie his feet. Sit down, you sneakin' houn'!"

Asa sat down on a box. She tied his

feet, deftly and well, displaying, as he could note, amazing knowledge of secure knottings.

"I don't know what your game is, but you'll travel some to outfoot Sime Rawlins," the man grated as the girl, sharply bidden, went out.

He sat and glowered at Asa, who felt, for the first time that day, very, very foolish. Somehow the romance had all trickled out of the occasion.

He went over in his mind the whole course of events that had led to this ignominous outcome. He had followed the girl because he had imagined she had asked him to come! And now he was hog-tied and unable to explain his amazing course even to himself. To tell the man that the girl had asked him to come would be to make matters worse—for her. Yet, she had tied him calmly enough.

"There's an ace buried—somewhere," he found time to assure himself before the mean man called again:

"Ho, Bess, you scoot out an' see if any one's in sight!"

She came in presently to say that no one was.

"You watch this," indicating Asa, "while I go turn his horse loose an' hide his saddle an' bridle. You sit in th' doorway, so I c'n notice if anything goes wrong while I'm a-doin' it."

Then to Asa: "She's a girl, but she c'n *shoot*. You be good!"

Asa offered no phrase of objection or acquiescence. The man eyed him for a few seconds, then, turning the gun over to the girl and watching while she sat in the doorway, facing Asa sidewise, he stepped over her and into the open. He came back soon, after the clatter of hoofs had told Asa that Starlight was at liberty.

The man took the gun and the girl went into the other room again. The man, silent, glowering, ceased not to eye Asa, who continued to self-accuse himself for a fool. Finally Rawlins got up, stepped to the hanging holster, flicked it about his waist, and buckled it on; dropped the gun into its place in the pouched leather. Then he relaxed, breaking into snarling laughter as he sagged onto a box-seat.

"Jus' whar you'll end, sneak, ain't plain jus' now, but it 'll be somewhar out o' here. Whar you f'um?"

"QV ranch, over Bradeeda way," Asa said truthfully; "riding for a job. Some folks call me Asa Beaumont. I meant to play a hunch at Tin Cow to-night. Anything else?"

"You oughta kept on ridin', then," the other rasped. "Any one't dodges his own straight hunch to keep cases on another's game's a sucker."

He fell on stubborn silence again. Then the girl called:

"Coffee's b'iled," and she flung the door open. The odor of very strong coffee streamed into the room; the simmer of a fire could be heard.

"I made it good and strong," she said. "You said you wanted strong coffee, so's you c'd stay awake—" breaking off as the man glared.

"I'll eat first; you watch this sneak," he ordered, edging past her. He seated himself at a rough table, and began to eat wolfishly. From his position he could see Asa. The girl, from the doorway, eyed the young man stonily. Asa eyed them both—and ceased not to deride himself inwardly for a fool.

"This coffee's too bitter an' strong," the man objected.

"You always want it strong," she explained; "you wanted it strong, so you c'd stay awake—"

"You shet up!" in a booming menace.

The clink of a spoon, the sound of stirring, told Asa of an attempt to assauge the bitterness of the strong brew. The man ate noisily, hurriedly. He poured himself a second, a third cup.

"This strong coffee's good, once you get used to it, Bess," he praised finally, "lots o' sugar fixed it."

He lighted his pipe, came out and towered over Asa. The girl went into the kitchen. She emerged with some food.

"No; don't give th' sneak a bite!" Rawlins ordered. "He's no claim on our good will, scroungin' himself onto us. You go 'bout your bus'ness."

The girl backed out. Asa, his wrists and ankles throbbing from the bonds, found

is temper giving way. From mentally tongue-lashing himself for a fool he wanted to swing to speaking his mind to his captor. If there had been a word of plausible explanation for his presence, he would have spoken it. But there seemed to be none.

Rawlins sat down, satisfiedly, opposite Asa. Flies buzzed. The moments marched by. The rattle of things in the kitchen went on. The man smoked. Asa was burning up for a smoke.

The man settled himself more and more comfortably on his seat. Then he glared at Asa.

"Wish I knew what your game was," he said.

"Being a sucker," Asa said explosively.

The man nodded, settled himself more comfortably still. He blinked. The flies buzzed. The man shifted the holster and its menacing load, yawned. Then his eyelids dropped, for the veriest fraction of a second—snapped broad open again. He raised his hands for a stretch, dropped them half-way, yawned. The flies buzzed.

Asa's gaze wandered about the meager room with its meager plenishings—a deer-horn rack on which no gun rested, a few old prints on the walls, a few box-chairs, some quartz pieces on a little shelf. He gazed out through the one little window and thought of Starlight. His eyes roved back to the man.

The man was nodding. His eyes were shutting. He fought the somnolence, then yielded to it, quite as if he did not realize its creeping palsy. He nodded, his chin sinking lower and lower. Of a sudden he nodded too far forward—toppled to the floor, half arose wildly, sagged down again and then, with a sigh of comfort, stretched out, prone on his back, breathing deeply.

A creak, as of a rusty hinge, was heard!

Asa glanced from the recumbent man to the kitchen door. The girl's face was in the crack of it. Her finger was on her lips.

How long the three remained thus Asa did not know. It was the girl who broke the tension:

"There was plenty o' laudanum in that coffee, stranger," she said, stepping to the room, "an' I'm going to show you why I had to tie you and take this way of besting him. I didn't want no shootin' on my 'count."

She bent over the sleeping man and felt under the left armpit. From a slit in the shirt there she produced the butt of a small but very businesslike revolver. A single-shot, beautifully made Derringer, accurate, deadly.

"He always has that on him," she said, putting it on the floor beside the big six-gun, "and he can kill with it, like lightning, farther than most can with a six. I had to make *sure* he didn't get you and I didn't want you to get him—not now—don't want no one killed he'ping me out of trouble, and if 'twas me alone, I'd ask no he'p. But it's some one else's trouble, too—"

She stopped talking and paused in her movements, as if considering. Then she went to the kitchen and came back with a knife. She cut Asa's bonds deftly. He began to rub his ankles and wrists, too astonished to inquire into her motives. She watched him for a moment, and then bent over and knotted the rope about the sleeper's legs and arms quickly.

"He will sleep for hours," she said: "we've got to hurry."

"Where to?" Asa demanded.

"Tin Cow," she replied; "you and I, to save a man—my brother."

While Asa watched, she went to the side of the wall, under the shaky mantel-shelf and slid aside a board. She reached inside the gap the loose board left when it slid and pulled forth a package wrapped in brown paper, starred with many a splotch of sealing-wax. A single glance told Asa that it was a money package!

CHAPTER III.

TWENTY THOUSAND DOLLARS.

"THERE are ten thousand dollars in bills in there," she said quietly; "it must be back where it was last night and be there by midnight to-night, or my brother will be in deep disgrace. Oh, will you help me? You were my only chance for help, for we would meet no one else on that trail, I was sure. I could not do what had to be done alone. If I failed

the boy would be implicated. I had to have a good man's help. I trusted you when I saw your face. You will help me? I counted on your making a camp near by for the night and that I could slip out and talk to you. But I had to take a roundabout way when he suspected you."

"Sure," and he tucked the package inside his shirt front; "put a name to it. I'll help you, anywhere, any time."

"I'll talk as we make the ride," she said; "our horses are tired, but we can make it, perhaps—"

"I'll call mine," stepping to the door. "He'll let any one ride I tell him to; buck any one off I signal him to and fight for me to kill."

"He's gone; he turned him loose."

"He didn't know my star-sprinkled hoss," he smiled. Then, putting his crooked fingers to his lips, he blew a shrill call. "He'll do anything I say; he's trained to saddle, to go in harness or carry double. A bird-hoss."

There was a glad neigh, the clatter of eager hoofs. In a moment the horse was nuzzling at Asa's shirt front.

"I'll take you up with me," he said, "and Starlight 'll carry double better than either of your ewe-necks will carry single. If you've any getting ready to do, do it now. I'm going to saddle up. I'll put a pad o' blankets behind the saddle for you, or you can sit in front, acrosslike."

"I'll ride with you," she accepted simply. "Any way you say."

"And this—" pointing to the sleeper.

"Let him lay—he ought to sleep till morning after that dose."

"Your father?"

"Stepfather, yes, sir. My own father died six years ago. I've made a home for Rawlins since mother died last year, after he had broken her down with hard work—a home so my brother would have a place to keep away from drink, that he would dabble in every time he could get to Tin Cow. At first Rawlins was mean to my brother Dick; then he turned nice to him of a sudden and edged him on to drink, on the sly, although I only found that out just lately, and it led up to the act that brought that money into the house and that will end by putting Dick in prison unless we are in time—"

She paused, the urgency of her trouble too plainly on her face to be disregarded.

"I'll saddle up, if I can find my hoss-gear."

"I saw him hide it out behind the shed."

He went quickly out, Starlight following him like a dog. He same back presently, astride. Starlight foxing daintly. She was at the threshold waiting. She had the big six-gun in its holster, and proferred it to him. He took it without a word, and swung it into place, snugging his coat over it. She swung up behind him and they started off, Starlight dancing on tippytoes to show he didn't mind the extra burden.

"Feels good, foxy lil cuss," Asa said, bending over to pat the horse's arched neck. Then he thought of something and asked the girl as she clung fast:

"His name"—jerking a thumb back toward the house, "is Rawlins. What's yours, then?"

"Maunbrey—Bess Maunbrey."

He gave her his name. By now they were where the going was better, and Asa called on Starlight for speed. The good horse began to lay down to his work, not in spurts, but with gradually increasing power, as an enduring, kind horse will for a rider he loves.

"And now," Asa encouraged, "let me have the story, as you can tell it while we are riding so."

"It begins with the death of my father. Up to that time we had lived happily, if poor. Then he died—suddenly, heart failure. And then, I was thirteen, Dick fifteen. We-all, mother and we kids, managed it, poor, but happy, until Rawlins came along one day and asked for work. Mother needed some work done then that only a man could do and he did it well—fixing up the walls of our water-tank, breaking some new ground and such. He had a pleasant way when he wanted to, and was decent—at first. He and mother were married, and then Rawlins showed what he was. He drove Dick with work and loafed himself. He drank, and in his drunken babblings we found he'd been bad off down Tumencaro way and had to ride out or face his record.

When he sobered up mother talked with him about what he'd blabbed and he admitted his past was black, but he promised to go straight if she'd overlook that. She was married to him—and a little stranger was coming. She told him if he'd go straight she'd stand by him.

"Her babe was born a few months after and it died in a few weeks. Rawlins turned sour again and mean to her especially. Dick and I fought him—but when we found it made it harder still for her, we held ourselves in and hoped for better things. Then he began to be nicer to Dick, and before mother and I knew it, Dick was drinking with him on the sly and things went on, now better, now worse, till mother died a year ago. By that time he had Dick under his influence and I stuck to Dick, hoping to get him out of this life when he grew older and more able to see for himself. Dick's always been kind to me, and Rawlins was, too, when he found I was a grown-up girl and worth something to him as a housekeeper. But inside I knew he was mean as ever."

All this she had told in jerky, yet clear fashion as they sped onward.

They were now where the Mesa Hermosa trail and the side trail joined.

"And the money?" Asa asked.

"I'm coming to that. Dick got to spending time in Tin Cow, picking up money working about the wagon-yard and serving papers for Sheriff Bart Redfield—sort of a deputy, but not sworn in, because he wasn't a man yet. He's twenty-one now and has the promise of the first deputyship open, so he's remained. Rawlins was about the town with him a lot and I was left alone for days and weeks. Then they'd come home and hang about. The place was running down. I was trying to get Dick in a mood where he'd say he'd go away with me somewhere and begin again and let Rawlins go where he pleased. But Dick hung on, hoping to get on as a real deputy with the sheriff and to sell our place and move to Tin Cow. The gold strike just beyond Tin Cow got him excited, too, for the town has been booming lately. At times Dick got hold of money and played faro at the bank over at the mines.

"A week ago a stranger rode into Tin Cow. When he put his horse out in the wagon-yard before going for something to eat, Rafe Laureda, one of the sheriff's deputies, who was there watching for a friend he was expecting to come into town that day, saw that the man, in dismounting, by accident, showed that he had a gun under his vest. As nobody is supposed to carry a gun now, except law officers, Rafe judged the man was some sort of bad man and he told Bart Redfield.

"Bart went into the Brown Cat, where the man was eating, and stuck him up—and he turned out to have an express package that had twenty thousand dollars in bills in it. The address and sender's name and all other marks had been cut or blotted out, but the seals were left, although they had been broken enough so that the stuff had been taken out and with it whatever note or other identification marks might have been inside.

"The man refused to talk, or tell his name. Redfield sent inquiries broadcast, but no notice was received of any theft of such a sum from the Wells Fargo, whose seals were on the wrapper. The money was mostly in large bills, with some smaller ones, and Redfield said it probably was a shipment of currency to some bank from Denver or San Antone, some new bank that wanted to make a showing by having big stacks of bills for folks to look at.

"Redfield put the money in his office safe, just as it was, slipping it back into the cover. He's kept the man and has been writing and wiring to find out who lost that twenty thousand dollars."

"How does that bring your brother and Rawlins into it?"

"Like this, Mr. Beaumont." She clung the tighter as Starlight loped steadily over the better going of the main trail. "Dick was in Tin Cow yesterday. I had noticed that he and Rawlins had been more than usually chummy ever since the thief was picked up. He had told at home how the money was in Redfield's office safe. Rawlins went into Tin Cow, and after a time I decided to lope in, too, as we needed some groceries. I started to hunt up Dick, for I heard when I got into town that

he had been drinking again. But I couldn't find him or Rawlins, although I didn't look for *him.*

"Then Rafe Laureda told me he'd seen Rawlins and Dick riding back toward home and I thought they'd gone back, and so when Rafe asked me to stay and help his wife, who was to have a little party for Carmencita, their daughter, I felt free to stay, as I thought Dick and Rawlins would take care of the things that needed looking after at home and they wouldn't be alarmed, as I often had remained with Mrs. Laureda, to help her."

It was now fully dark. Stars, that seemed low-hung, beamed kindly on them as Starlight swept forward.

"Go on," Beaumont encouraged, "after we light down to rest the old scoundrel a mite. I feel he'll need all he's got later."

He pulled the horse up, and urged her to swing down. He alighted beside her with the born horseman's easy grace and they walked side by side, while Starlight breathed deeply in relief and then shook himself and followed, nuzzling Asa's hand, that was held behind for the horse to play with.

"It was after the party had begun that we found we lacked dishes enough, and I said I'd go down the open space behind the houses and stores to the back of the Brown Cat, to borrow some from Sam Calder, who keeps it. I got a basket and started. But I was too late, for when I got there, I saw that Sam had closed. I was about to go away when I heard two men talking in low tones in the alley between the eating-place and the Cat Harpen —where the faro game is dealt. They were Dick and Rawlins!

"They were going over their plans then. They had ridden out of town to make up an alibi and had hobbled their horses in a side draw, off the main trail a few miles out and slunk in unobserved, so far. The plan was, in short, for Dick, using his key to the sheriff's office, to get in and work the safe-combination, that he knew, and get the twenty thousand dollars, leaving a package, wrapped in brown paper and rumpled and sealed like the original, in its place, so that when Bart Redfield opened the safe he would see the fake package, think the money was still there, untouched, and there would be more chance of their getting a good start before the theft was discovered. Or they might even stay in town, if they got the money without being detected, and trust to others being suspected.

"I was dreadfully upset, but I came upon them and faced Dick, who had been drinking, but not enough to be befuddled. Rawlins drew back and after Dick had promised me not to get into the dishonest scheme, Rawlins came forward and thanked me for interfering, saying he had given in to one of his old-time dishonest impulses and was sorry. He shook hands with me, in what seemed to me to be a feeling manner, and the two of them went away, saying they were going home, for sure this time.

"Greatly relieved, I went back to the Laureda house, to find that Bart Redfield had just come in to tell Rafe that a rider had come over from Agua Frio, our nearest rail town, with a wire for the sheriff that the Wells Fargo had just given out that a package was missing from a big shipment of currency from Denver to Los Angeles—had been thrown off the train near Agua Frio by a crooked messenger who had had the armed stranger Bart had arrested in the Brown Cat stationed alongside the water-tank there to pick up the package and get away with it.

"By forging signatures the crooked messenger had made it impossible for the company to locate just where the theft occurred and the company had kept still for a few days, advised to do so by their detectives, in order that they might work on the case with more secrecy. The man Bart has in jail is Tony Cassaine, gambler, who had been forced out of Tumencaro for welshing bets, and had disappeared and had entangled the messenger, who lived in El Morte, in some of his crooked gambling schemes and then forced him into the plot to steal the big package. Another, larger package, was missing, too, and thinking to get trace of that by secrecy as to the twenty thousand dollars, the company had not acted before.

"The rider's message informed Redfield that officers would be over to get Cassaine some time in the night—to-night; coming

a covered wagon, so that he could be got out of the foothills country and into some distant jail without danger of a lynching, as Cassaine was known to have killed a popular cowboy down Agua Frio way and, when it became known he was also the man concerned in the express robbery, talk there was strong for lynching him. Have I made myself clear so far?"

"I am beginning to see something of the true state of affairs that I blundered into this afternoon," Asa said; "go on; old Starlight will be able to make a long carry next time, on his second wind."

"Remember that the deputies from Agua Frio are expected in Tin Cow to-night at midnight.

"I was with Mrs. Laureda all night and started home early, for my mind was troubled and I wanted to get to Dick before he had a chance to get away from home that day. I remembered that he and Rawlins had planned to get their horses where they had hobbled them, before I had overheard their talk in the space between the Brown Cat and the Cat Harpen and I knew the place, from their talk. So when I came to the side-draw, I rode up it a bit and saw—"

She stopped and caught at her bosom in her agitation.

"Go on," Asa urged.

"I saw Rawlins and Dick. They saw me coming and got up in a flurry from their little fire. I rode up to them in a hurry and was ready to have it out with Dick, when he spoke up:

"'I don't know what you coming a-taggin' up here after us for, sis, we ain't done nothing.'

"He was shamefaced and kept away from me, but I thought it was because I'd overheard him planning robbery.

"After they had told a rambling tale about camping there because they didn't want to ride home that night and I had seen a couple of empty bottles, I thought they had just stopped so because they wanted to drink and then had fallen asleep. But I soon knew better, when we had all ridden out to the main trail again, instead of turning toward home, Dick said to Rawlins:

"'I'll be in the Brown Cat till eight. Be there before then.'

"With that he rode abruptly back toward Tin Cow. I was satisfied to see him go away from Rawlins, who started toward home. I rode with him. He never had offered the least personal violence toward me, being mean to me only with his tongue, in his surly fits, so I didn't fear him.

"We rode slowly, for his horse was very tired. About a quarter of the way he got off to adjust his girth and I saw, as he swung down, his coat brush up, and under it was the butt of his big six-gun. I knew he always carried the small gun, under his armpit, for mother had told me of it. He carried that in the belief that some day he would be wanted for old crimes and would have to shoot it out or be taken. But I never had seen him wear the big six away from home so before, although he had used it around home to knock over small game for the pot often and was a dead shot, lightning-quick.

"I asked him point-blank what he was carrying the big gun for. He flared at me then and said he had his own reasons. I watched him closely.

"Getting fairly alongside of him as we rode, I saw that his shirt-front bulged. There was a package in there! One of the buttons came off with the weight and chugging of the weight from riding. I saw the end of a brown parcel that had red sealing-wax blotches on it!

"They had robbed the sheriff's safe. My brother was a criminal!

"I told Rawlins what I'd seen and thought. I thought he would shoot me down, for his hand went to the butt of his gun. Then he snarled.

"'You come with me, or I'll kill you. If Dick does as I've told him he'll be gone clean away before they suspect him—'

"'You want him to run and get caught while you get away in another direction,' I charged; 'you are using Dick for a stool pigeon for you. You're letting him have part of the money so he'll get caught with it on him.'

"He laughed at that. I turned my horse once to go back to Tin Cow. He was at me in a moment.

"'Your brother has half the loot,' he said; 'and a fair chance to get away. I'm

going one way, he another. I told him I'd be in town to-night to go with him, but I won't. Let him go alone. A split trail is always best. You come with me or I'll gun you and take a chance on getting away after.' This thought flashed into my mind: 'If I die, Dick will die a thief!' So I yielded.

"It was just then that your horse whickered and we came upon you. I saw at once that you were a man of honor, and so I appealed to you. I hoped you would ride with us and that I might be able to tell you the situation when Rawlins was not near, through some accident of the ride, or that he might, to allay suspicion, receive you as a guest at home or that you would make a camp near our house and so I could steal out early to-night and tell you the facts. His watchfulness prevented the first and his determination to keep to himself prevented the second. When you made that excuse to come to the house, despite his opposition to you, he drew his gun and made it necessary for me to seem at first in favor of binding you and later to drug his coffee with laudanum we had left from mother's last illness."

"And when we get to Tin Cow?"

"We must find Dick and get his share of the money back and make restitution, in some way. In such a way that he will not have to suffer, if possible. With it all together, I am sure I can make Dick, if he is sober and now that he is away from Rawlins, put it back into the safe again. Then I can get him home, and with this as an object lesson to him, we can get rid of Rawlins."

"Let me do that—for you, Miss Maunbrey," Asa said eagerly.

She was silent.

"But first we must get into Tin Cow—in a hurry," Asa said, "and as old Starlight seems rested, we'll mount again and make the rest of the ride in."

He drew the horse to him by the reins and swung up. She came behind him with an ease that drew from him a warm compliment. The horse again stretched out to his work and the trail became an umber ribbon, flowing between the gallant steed's thrumming hoofs.

Asa found it altogether pleasant to ride so, to feel the girl's warm body against his back and to know that she trusted him so deeply. He felt often to make sure that the money was safe inside his shirt-front.

The moments passed, the stars wheeled, the good horse put the miles back of them.

"We are making good time," he encouraged her.

"Yes, but not until I see Dick will I feel safe," she breathed over his shoulder.

Starlight shied, reared, despite the double burden.

CHAPTER IV.

ASA PROMISES TO GO THROUGH!

"WHOA, come down, lil ol' cuss," Asa cajoled, glancing down at the trail side. He gave a low whistle of surprise.

"Man there, beside the trail," he said.

In a moment he was down; the bridle-rein he had left in the hand of Bessie. She leaned over, patted Starlight's proud neck. He snorted, a snort that was reserved only for Asa's dearest friends. Beaumont whistled in surprise.

"Come down and look," he called excitedly after he had flashed a palm-cupped match onto the face of the prostrate man; "he looks like you."

Fear gripping her heart, Bess slid down, went to where the man was. She bent over, as Asa lighted another match. Her fear became certainty.

"It is Dick," she screamed, beginning to shake the limp form. The reek of heavy alcohol-fumes came to them.

As Bess worked over the brother, Asa scrabbled about for bits of wood for a fire. He found some—mesquite, stubbed weed-stalks, tinder-dry. In a moment he had a bit of flame-glow showing against the gloom. By now the girl had the head of her brother snugged into her lap and she pleaded with him.

"Dick, Dick, what is it? What are you doing here, like this?"

He flickered open his eyes, muttered:

"Is—that—you, sis?"

"Yes, Dick. Where is the money you

stole? What are you doing here? Where is the money—*the money*, Dick? Please tell me. *The money!*"

He was partly roused now and spoke haltingly.

"Money? Oh, yes. I lost it. How did you know about it? Rawlins told you? Oh, yes! Well, I lost it—at the Cat Harpen—at faro. I was drunk or I wouldn't played. And after I lost all, I started home to see you, sis, before I went away—for good and all. I thought Rawlins might mebbe give me a grubstake, and as I rode for home I fell off my hoss. I lost it at faro, I say, sis. I told Straight Hank Burns at th' Harpen I got th' money bustin' the bank over at th' mines. I told 'em all that in Tin Cow. They believed it; I'd played over there and won a lot two or three times lately—"

His head twisted aside. The alcohol had overcome him again.

"The money's lost," she said in a low, dead tone. "Lost, lost, lost. And we can't make good the theft now. To start a row and get it back from Burns, even if we could, would let the whole story out and disgrace us. Oh, my poor, poor brother!"

Sobs racked her as she sat there, mothering his head in her lap. Asa could not stand to hear her sob so. He stepped aside.

Asa sat down and made a cigarette deliberately, then lighted it and puffed with eager force. He got up decisively; a vague hunch crawling over him again. He strode to where she was, asking:

"Could you stay here, alone; would you be afraid, while I go down to Tin Cow?"

She mastered her emotion somewhat, and replied: "No, I am accustomed to take care of myself—and of him"—pointing to her helpless brother. "There are no dangerous, wild animals about here now and a girl of age ought to be able to take care of herself."

He passed his hands over the brother's form. He fumbled under his vest and drew forth a gun.

"There," he said, getting up and dropping it in her lap, "keep that and let me carry the boy aside into the brush a bit. You stay with him until I come back and if I'm not back by dawn, go home. Forget that this boy stole that money. Treat it all as if it never happened. The money is going to go back to Redfield before midnight. All of it. I'll go see Burns. I was aiming to call on him when I got into Tin Cow, anyhow. Don't you fret."

She put up her small but strong right hand and he took it between both his, then raised it to his lips respectfully but warmly.

"Don't you go a-fretting, lil girl," he said, "me and old Starlight are going to see you *through!* I'm goin' to see Burns—on bus'ness."

"Something urges me to trust you," Bess whispered.

He picked up the boy's limp form and carried it aside a few dozen yards. He saw that the girl was comfortably settled beside her brother, who was sleeping in deep stupor. Then he went to the trail and mounted. He gave her a cheery word of farewell and soon the hoof-thuds of the good horse were heard by her, fainter and fainter, as he loped toward the town. She heard the whicker of a horse near by and soon had found the horse—Dick's, that, of course, knew her and let her catch him. She led him to where Dick was sleeping and hobbled him. Then she settled down to wait for the outcome.

It was at the top of the little rise, just before the trail dipped into the cup of land that sheltered Tin Cow, that Asa stopped.

"We're peaceful folks and oughtn't to have no weaponry," he told the horse. "I'll just hide that old skunk's cannon here. What's to be done, we do with our heads, not our muscles or trigger-fingers. I'm goin' to call on that ol' Burns, on bus'ness, Starlight, but I don't know him f'om a side o' bull-beef."

He mounted and rode into town, singing a stave of "Sam Bass" as he went. The street was quiet; the hour early, for Tin Cow. The Brown Cat was bright, also the Cat Harpen, side by jowls with it. Pianos were tinkling in dance-halls, an early jingler reeled here, another argued loudly there.

Asa, lolling easily in his saddle, self-examined his state.

"One fifty-two of mine, ten thousand of Wells Fargo, with ten thousand more to come. But how, Starlight?"

Starlight flicked his nigh ear.

"Wise lil cuss, you ain't telling, eh?" Asa scolded lovingly. Then he got down and left the beauty outside the Brown Cat. Asa called for a sandwich, and as he munched it, made talk with the proprietor.

"I'm riding for a job. I've got a lean roll that's itching for action. Can I get it here?"

"Sure," Sam Calder encouraged, "right next door, in th' Harpen. New owner there, Square Hank Burns; he bought out Monte Frank three days ago."

"Good name for a faro joint, eh, the Harpen? It sounds good."

"Yes, square game, too. There was big play in there late to-day. Kid named Maunbrey rode over to the mines early to-day and broke th' bank there, then came here and dropped it in th' Harpen. That Burns is one of the ole-time faro kings that's won an' lost fortunes in his day; says he aims to stay here a while."

"Tha's the way the money goes; pop goes the tiger," Asa joked. "Is there a tie-rack out behind? I gotta look this Burns geezer over."

"Yes, back of both places, this and the Harpen. "Better put you' hoss in th' wagon-yard. I'm goin' to close 'bout now. But you can tie out back if so be you want. But better put you' hoss in th' wagon-yard."

"No; I on'y got a lean roll; probably be gone soon. It's a-burning me. So I'll jus' tie my hoss to you' rack behind."

"Well, good luck," as Asa strolled out. "You'll like that old cuss Burns. Square as they make 'em. You'll get action, right smart, too."

Beaumont found Starlight right where he had left him. He took the reins and, together, the two went between the buildings to the rear. Asa passed the reins around the tie-rack rail of the Brown Cat, but made no knot. He patted Starlight lovingly and then looked over the back of the faro joint. It was a low, squatty, tin-covered structure, red-rusted. A small light flared at its rear, over the rough-cut door that was fast closed. Asa glanced at that approvingly and went out front. He sauntered inside and found himself at the bar. Behind the curtain that ran across the room he could hear turns being called and bets laid.

He stopped for a moment to chat with the bartender, then passed through the curtain. A score of men were about the table. The dealer Asa scrutinized with great care. He saw a giant of a man, with black 'staches down-hanging, and at them the giant tugged thoughtfully from time to time in pauses of play. He was, it was plain to see, the new square-dealing proprietor of the joint.

CHAPTER V.

SQUARE HANK BURNS.

SQUARE HANK BURNS was a survivor of the old days—"the days of old; the days of gold!"

His vest of the finest broadcloth, his trousers of the same, were of the best cut and make. His shirt, many-frilled on bosom, silk, immaculately white, was in line with the old-time gambler's traditions. His coat, of broadcloth, too, a long, impressive frock, was hung over the back of his chair, the shoulders caught on the tops of the arms of the chair with a neatness that told of a habit of thoughtfulness in keeping his working habiliments in perfect order—a determination to "keep up his front."

The man's eyes were black, intensely so, his complexion ruddy, yet that ruddiness told of age defied by vigor of constitution more than by good living. One thing sat on the brow—honesty, squareness, not legal-wise, but of the man-to-man sort. His voice was soft, deep; his every gesture in dealing polished, his English, when not dealing, correct to a hair's weight. His face was cleanly shaven, except for the mustaches. His fingers—long, lean, wiry, deft—held the eyes of the onlooker—the fingers and the wonderfully keen eyes that could be hard when danger beckoned or a mean human impigned upon their owner's placidity.

"You old beauty," Asa commented inwardly on Square Hank; "I'd druther buck you than any tiger-tamer I've seen this long-come-short. You look good to me. Be fun to play you a whirl, man-to-man."

Behind Square Hank sat the lookout on

his high stool, hands crossed over his lap. It needed only a glance to tell Asa that the lookout had a gun on each hip. The case-box man was thumbing his markers slowly; Hank was turning slowly, play was easy; it was the peep o' the night. The case-box man was a mild, easy type, Asa judged, but the lookout held his attention. He saw in him a lean, wiry, tense lad, not over twenty-two, with restless eyes that lost no motion of player or feature of entrance of the newcomer into the room. The table ran lengthwise of the room; the lookout's back, like Square Hank's, was to the wall; they could thus command front and rear doors at need. The back door, barred, plainly was not in use. Asa noted it was wide and high—a door for carrying big, wide articles in and out of at need.

"I thought I'd come in an' see you waste your lean roll," a voice at Asa's shoulder drawled. Asa turned his head to see who it was.

He grinned aside at the speaker. It was Sam Calder.

"Some class to that old-time dealer; I like him," Asa beamed.

"I tole you, didn't I?"

"You sure did, a right smart."

He turned to the table again.

Sam took up the burden.

"That lookout boy and Square Hank are like dad and son. I heard Hank say last night that when he cashed in the layout was Kelly's. That's the lookout's handle."

"Seems to me, from Kelly's sit on his stool that he's packing some artillery? Must be he's some use besides jus' watching that bets are laid honest and no one steals his neighbor's goods or takes live bets for sleepers."

"He packs a few. We had a mighty quiet game here for years. None of us was ambitious and Monte Frank was tame. But the mines brought in a new, rough element—foreign laborers and wild-catters. Square Hank is afraid of being jumped here some time by some of those behunkuses."

Dick swept his eyes over the players—the usual sort, he thought at first: a miner or two, a few old cow-men, town folk, in for a tiny whirl.

But one group, gathered about the far end of the board, held his attention. It was made up of four swart men, in the garb of mine laborers, mud-splashed as to clothes, guttural as to speech. They were quiet, but had the air of men who waited upon an expected event. They had glanced up quickly as Asa and then as Calder had entered; then they had focused upon their play again, occasionally speaking to each other in low tones. Often they glanced at the door.

Square Hank gave a slight hitch in his chair that told Asa of a big six being eased to one side. Hank at that moment cast his eyes at the silently intent foreign quartet and Asa caught the flick of that keen glance and he held Hank's glance as the gambler swept it up-board. The old-timer smiled, friendly, openly, and tugged at the right horn of his 'stache.

"You look some open-faced to me, son," he smiled again, idling until a slow bettor had made his choice for the ensuing turn.

"Same to you an' many o' them," Asa answered, edging forward.

"You honin' for excitement? It's quiet in here to-night."

"Yes; I guess I'll sit in an' waste my pay."

"Good luck," and Sam Calder turned and sauntered out. The four foreigners noted his exit, then came back to the play again with centered interest. A new deal was about to be begun. Hank shuffled the cards anew.

"Go far's you like," Square Hank guyed Asa, as he slid over the chips the range rider bought with his lean roll of one fifty-two, "with play so light I'm banker and dealer, too. But I warn you I've got my hunch to-night after the big killing I made here to-day."

"I heard of that," Asa said, settling into a place made vacant by an outgoing Tin Cowite. Hank began to deal slowly. Asa stood out several turns.

"Yes, gay young squirt. He acted and looked full-man size, but I heard after he was through that he was not much over twenty-one. Then I was sorry that he lost his money here. But I suppose if I had not taken it, some one else would have. He said he cleaned out the bank over at the

mines early to-day. So he must be a hardened case?" Hank said, continuing to turn.

"Sure, the kid's a hard one," a Tin Cowite at Asa's right chimed in; "that kid's been burning holes in th' air for weeks, honin' for devilment."

"Some one tells me he's a sister that's O. K. I've a notion to send her half a thou of what I won from the boy," Hank said quietly.

Asa shot an approving glance acrosstable at this remark.

"I sure like you a whole lot," he said to himself. Then he dipped into the current of the game.

Cards were turned for player, for bank. Asa, hardly noticing his play, won and lost. He ran his stack up to two hundred dollars; then a split caught him and he fell off to one hundred dollars. This made him cautious, for he never had wanted so to win as then. He focused upon the game, but he felt cold toward it. The hunch he had had before he had met the girl and as he had smoked that cigarette just before leaving her and Dick had cooled. He felt limp, found the game distasteful. There was no urge to play, no impelling motive in his gaming. Instead of playing, as he had intended, straight down the layout, he found himself, in his intense desire to win, working out combinations, keeping close watch of the cue-box, seeking for cunningly thought-out, seemingly safe, bets in calling the turn, watching warily for unfriendly harpens. The cat always had used him ill; he usually laid off it. Now he made a dab at it at the end of the deal—and lost fifty dollars.

"Even," he joked back at Hank; "you take half; leave me half."

"I sure like to see you play; you nurse them so," Hank joked; "you act to me like a man that wanted to win a lot."

"Maybe I do," smiling frankly at the broad, brave old face.

Kelly shifted on his high stool. The swart four at the table's end had ceased play and were merely looking on. Again Asa had the impression that they were waiting for something or some one, merely idling time. He glanced at Kelly. The lookout's hands were crossed, left to right hip, right to left.

"Looks like a big night," Asa said to himself.

A new deal began. Asa, still cold, against his judgment, inched in. He spread his chips unwisely. His money began to dribble away.

"I have to be down to my last bean," he bantered, "before I really get up my nerve for quick action. If I lose, I'll go dig up some more. I'm just trying out my pompousness now, to see if I'm any good. I had a hunch and it's faded on me."

"You're getting down to the last bean fast, boy," Hank beamed. "If your hunch has left you, quit. But if you go broke, your friendly face says I'll stake you for a few turns against the bank, my ownse'f."

Asa smiled again at this plain compliment—coppered the king, lest. He laid off till the turn was called, picked the trey to come first when it came last and found himself with a few small chips left. Half-way through the next deal he was out of chips—his own money all gone. The clock on the wall struck ten. Only two hours remained!

Asa's heart was like lead. The elation with which he had entered had all oozed away. There was no tug of gaming fever in him. His was ice, drab.

"I gotta walk around and change my luck," he said lightly in outward seeming.

CHAPTER VI.

THE STRAIGHT HUNCH.

"PLAY a few turns on your credit; it's good," Hank urged.

"No; thanks, just the same, though," Asa answered, getting up. "I have just been practising like. I'll go out and get a load of kale."

"All right; come back, son, any time, any time," Hank crooned, turning again. Asa went out front, stood irresolute some time. Then he idled about, unable to decide. Asa went out and into the space between the Harpen and Brown Cat, to the rear, where Starlight was waiting, patiently, his velvet nose to the tie-rail. Asa felt of the reins to make sure they were not holding—much. Then he patted the horse and waited. He was hoping to feel the sweep,

the compulsion of game; the tug of venture. He distrusted his present precise, chilly mood. He never had won that way. He found time passing without being able to act sharply. Finally he thought of the old straight-dealing faro dealer inside.

"Yes; he's a darn *straight* dealer in there," he said to Starlight.

The one word set him afire again!

"Straight!"

Yes, and he had been coming to Tin Cow before he met the girl. And for what? To play a straight hunch! *Soda to Hoc!* Straight! No wonder he had gone cold when he had been afraid to play his hunch!

"Straight, Soda to Hoc! Dealer's Straight Hank Burns! And he's straight, too, folks say so; they may not know, or lie. But his face says so."

He felt the rush of warmth, the pringling of the backbone. It was crawling, right up. It stopped between his shoulder-blades!

"Mine's all gone, old hunch," he said softly; "I got Wells Fargo's ten thousand dollars; Hank's got its mate. It's his'n. He an innocent receiver for value or what will pass for value out here on the edge o' things. No law ag'in' faro out hereaway. His title's good in the Court of Public Opinion. Mine's bum, all ways from the Jack—"

Starlight nuzzled him.

"You began it, lil old cuss," and he batted the horse softly on the nose, then threw an arm about his neck and hugged him; "you horned into her game an' now look at me, receiver of stolen money, pondering how to break a faro bank with it."

He thought of the girl at the trail-side, nursing back her erring brother to sanity. He thought of what life would hold for her if—

The thought numbed Asa Beaumont's usual sense of mine and thine. And the gaming fever had gripped him. He felt of the bulging ten thousand dollars.

Asa shoved his hand inside his shirt and fished out the package. He stripped the paper cover from it, folded the paper and put it back inside his shirt. The bills he distributed evenly about his person. Then, with a parting pat to Starlight, he went in between the Cat and Harpen, to the front of the faro joint. He stepped inside—the urge of play strongly upon him, compelling. His fingers fairly itched to begin.

His mind held a clear picture of the lay-out, from King Spade, around the turn to back under it, where the ace was. He could think of but one word:

"*Straight!*"

Asa noted at once that the room had begun to fill up. The play was livelier. The four swart foreigners, still playing slowly, had six companions with them, idling. They formed their own group and gave grudging or no room to others who came near to them. Townsfolk, miners, retired cow-men, old-timers, grizzled, bronzed, and younger sons of such, were amusing themselves by dropping bets here and there. Asa glanced at the clock, eleven ten! Fifty minutes left!

A bluff-faced, sunny-haired man came in at Asa's heels. His star and the greeting, "H'lo, Bart," told Asa it was Redfield.

Hank motioned for room for the sheriff.

"I'm just takin' a pasear; I'm not reesking anything to-night," Bart said cordially. "Don't move, boys."

"Glad to see you any time," Hank gave him, turning slowly.

"Take my place, young-timer," the friendly Tin Cowite who had been at Asa's right before said as Asa ambled forward, looking for an opening; "I'm through."

Asa thanked him and was seated. He noted that Bart was behind him.

Hank glanced inquiringly at Asa.

"I'll lay off a few," Asa said.

"Suit you'se'f," Hank answered, calling the next card.

Asa heard the sheriff edge back.

"Good night, Hank," he called; "I'm going down to the office to play seven-up with my deputies till the boys from Agua Frio come up to get that express robber. Be glad when I get him and that money off'n my hands. I look at the safe every hour to see if it's still there and, sure enough, there she be, the seals showing, right between my copy of the code and ledger, whar I put her."

"Good night, sheriff," and Hank turned again.

The sheriff passed out, calling urbane good nights to his constituents. The ten foreigners glowered at his back as he passed them, after eying them contemptuously.

The deal ended. Asa guyed across to old Hank, whose kindly eyes turned to him approvingly.

"I was beefin' when I said I was broke and wanted to go out for more luck. I just went out and unloaded my saddle's pockets of their burden of wicked roots of evil. I'm going to nick your roll, deep, now, Mr. Dealer."

"Hop to it, boy, I'm feeling plumb guilty with that fool kid's money on me," Hank crooned back at him, preparing to turn. "It came too easy."

Asa reached into a side pocket and pulled out a layer of bills.

Hank, gazing at them, smiled broadly.

"You' hoss is some weight-carrier?"

"Some," Asa chimed.

He flashed a glance down-table. The players picked up and replaced won bets. Asa saw that the eyes of the swart ten were greedily upon his money. His gaze, sweeping back up-table, noted that Hank, too, had caught their eager glares of avarice. He noted that Kelly, the silent, was tensed, as if for a spring.

The guardian of the bank was not to be taken off-guard!

There came a mite of scuffle as a man near the swart ten dropped a coin and edged down for it, several making sarcastic remarks upon his clumsiness. Under cover of it Hank shot across to Asa from a primly held mouth-corner:

"Bad lot those; they'd jump the bank, if they dared, I think."

"Count on me if they do," Asa gave him.

Old Hank smiled, his face lighting up with sunshine that was genuine.

"I'm putting that remark to your credit, young-timer," he crooned. "You're straight!"

He was set for the beginning of the deal. *Straight!*

Asa caught the tang of the word. It chimed pleasantly in his game-nerved mind.

"Ever play fool faro?" he joked at Straight Hank.

"Yes; often—when I lose."

"If I could get action, real, quick action," Asa said, a challenge in his tones, "I'd play fool faro. It's sure some rapid."

Hank eyed him with increased interest.

"What do you mean by fool faro?" catching at the nascent defiance in the young man's tones.

"Plumb fool, crazy man's faro. It means *action!*"

"Oh, you can get all the *action* you want here."

The buzz up and down table ceased. Men were craning forward. The swart ten below were quiescent now. But alertly intent.

"If I can get all the action I want, get rid of fussing with these puling chips and room according to my strength, I'll play you, what I call fool faro, till either my roll of ten thousand dollars or your ten thousand dollars of yours is gone; play to go on until either one has lost a full ten thousand dollars," Asa said banteringly.

There was a sudden silence as men caught their breath.

CHAPTER VII.

ASA ASKS FOR ACTION.

"ONLY that much?" Hank gave him easily.

"Yea, just that much; till either of us has lost ten thousand dollars."

"What is this fool faro of yours, sonny? I've seen many variations of the game and, from the player's standpoint, it's all fool; and generally from the banker's. What is your particular brand of fool faro? Maybe I'd be a fool to play it anyway; a man's a fool to play the other fellow's game."

"It's just this," as men leaned forward to catch his word; "you shuffle the full deck and box it, face up, as usual. We let the top card go Soda, same as usual."

"That sounds easy. Your speech runs to words mighty well."

"Then I lay you one hundred dollars I can come nearer to calling the next card than you can; we'll call the cards by numbers, from ace up to king, the Jack, queen, and king being eleven, twelve, and thirteen, respectively. And we'll consider that ace is

neighbor to king on one side, same as to deuce on the other."

"And if we call alike or come the same number from it on either side?"

"We double the bets and let 'em lay."

"Gentlemen," old Hank said, his eyes warm with the light of battle, "you have heard the laws of fool faro laid down. They are simple. Do you understand?"

"Yes," from several.

"Yah, yah!" from the eagerly watching ten foreigners.

Alert Kelly just shifted his weight on his high stool. Asa saw Hank ease his abdomen of the sinister burden it carried. Seemingly careless, the old man was dominating the scene still, by sheer force of personality, and even the winning-mannered range rider felt that he was himself in second place.

"Gentlemen, this is a public game and every one's welcome, of course, as long as the box is not turned," Hank said to the crowd, sweeping his eyes over each face; "but a favor is appreciated just the same. The young gent, as I understand it," he eyed Asa for confirmation, which he had at the next phrase, "wants the whole board till our own personal gambling grudge is settled. If you'll give him room according to his strength, he'll show us how to play genuine fool faro."

"Let 'em riffle," an old cow-man called.

"Hop on, my pony," another bystander encouraged.

"Thanks, gentlemen; play will begin," Hank said.

He swept up a pile of neat bills out of the bank drawer. He spoke a few words to the cue-box keeper, low, whisperingly. A few more to the tensed Kelly on his stool, flinging them over his broad, silk-clad shoulder from a close mouth-corner.

Silence claimed the room—hardly touched by the breathing of the onlookers.

"Let Mr. Cue-box keep cases," Asa hinted; "we may get more action later, when the old cat hops, if we're sure of what's in the discard."

Cuebox slid his hand out onto the nearest buttons, smiled.

"Ready?" Hank asked.

"Yes."

Hank shuffled, held the cards out for a cut.

"No; you cut or not; you deal—I leave it all to you, old-timer," Asa said softly. "Your face says you're *straight*."

The old man looked at him and bowed with old-time grace, arising to do so. Then he sat down again, attentive. He turned the pack over, boxed it. He took his hand off.

Soda showed—ace of spades.

"A hundred says a king's under it, No. 13," Asa said, laying down a bill. "I'll lay my money on the king, for luck."

"I call for a seven," Hank countered.

Hank matched the bill with another yellow one. He slid off the ace of spades. King of hearts showed. Asa took in the money.

A sigh went around the room.

"Under that is the queen of something," Asa said quietly, fluttering another one hundred dollars, this time laying it on the lady. "A queen, No. 12."

"I lay it on the queen to show which card I favor," he added.

"I call for a ten," Hank came back with.

He slid off the king. Queen of diamonds showed.

"I'm playing them straight, like the layout," Asa bantered, taking in the winnings.

"Keep right along, you'll stub your toe soon," Hank laughed.

The people crowded forward still closer. Those who came in from time to time joined the silent ring at a word of caution not to disturb the big play.

"Knave's under the queen," Asa said quietly, laying out another bill. "A lil Jack, whose number of eleven in this fool game."

"No, a queen," Hank insisted. "My money says so."

It was a queen. Queen of spades.

"I said you'd stub your toe," Hank chided, taking the stake.

"Never mind; next is a ten."

"I say an eight," Hank countered.

It came nine of diamonds.

"Double the stake," Asa said, coming in with his share. "We're tied, old Square Deal."

Hank laughed warmly.

"Sure got your nerve," he chimed.

The bets were laid.

"A nine," Asa offered.

"An ace," Hank said.

It came nine. Nine of clubs.

"Didn't stub thataway," Asa laughed.

"No, but you will soon," Hank jeered.

"An eight shows," Asa wagered.

"And I claim it's an ace."

An eight came out. In the suit of hearts.

"Next is a seven," Asa judged, backing it.

"I pick the king," Hank retorted.

Seven of spades came.

"I name six," Asa snapped, eager now.

"You're feeling sassy," Hank smiled, edging in. "I pick four." It came a trey; Hank won. It had been the trey of hearts.

"And now for a five," Asa bet, laughing lightly.

A lone foreigner came in and his hobnails sounded like rumbling of barrels, so tense was the silence. He came close to his ten compatriots, spoke only one word, was still as they were, caught, it seemed, in the fascination of the game that was being unrolled before them all.

"No," Hank objected, "it won't be a five, son, it 'll be seven."

Six stood uncovered at the deft slide of the old man. The six of diamonds.

"Tie we are. Double the bets," Asa said. Hank's bill fluttered down.

"Four hundred in the pot," he said. "You still playing the layout straight down?"

"I call for four; that's my answer."

An anxious tension had crept into Asa's tones. He leaned forward. There was a stir near the door. Some one said in low tones:

"H'low, sheriff; watch the big play."

Hank flicked a nod over the heads of folks to Redfield, who was smiling at the scene, hand on hip. The foreigners whispered, then stilled.

"You sure want to win a lot?" Hank said, an undertone of seriousness in his gibe.

"All your ten thousand dollars," Asa said quietly.

"I say it's going to be a two," Hank said.

It came a trey—that of clubs.

"Eight hundred in the pot," Asa said crisply.

"It goes," Hank replied, laying.

"A deuce," Asa claimed.

"A king," Hank let fall.

It came ace of hearts.

"Sixteen hundred in it," Asa said in gray, level tones.

A guttural hum from the foreigners showed their avid interest. Alert Kelly shifted his weight a shade, but his crossed hands never left their fixity.

"An ace," Asa bet.

"An ace; I'm getting superstitious you got the cards witched," Hank smiled kindly.

It came ace—clubs.

"Thirty-two hundred in the pot," Asa noted, laying a large stack of bills on the king of the layout; "no reason to lay my bets on any particular layout card; I do it, just for luck, old-timer. It's a king."

"I know," Hank said, laying down his bet. "It's a king."

He turned. A faint sigh went around the room.

It was a king—of diamonds.

"Sixty-four hundred each," Asa challenged."

"Just right," Hank said cheerfully.

"It's a queen," Asa said.

"No, an eight," Hank ventured in level tones.

Every man was holding his breath. They all leaned forward. The noise of even the smooth card sliding out seemed to grate. It showed the face of

Queen of clubs!

"Take it," Hank said quietly.

The people relaxed, shuffled on numbed feet or shifted in chairs.

"My hundred goes on Jack," Asa said without a trace of open emotion. But inside his heart sang: "I've won seven thousand dollars of the ten thousand dollars needed."

"Mine that it's Jack, too; there's four in the box; ought to be safe," Hank bantered.

It came ten of diamonds. Another tie!"

"I'm seven thousand dollars to the good," Asa permitted himself to exult, inwardly again.

"Pick your card," Hank warned, preparing to turn as stakes were doubled on the tie.

A subtle change came into Asa's consciousness. He felt cold, drab again. The warmth between his shoulder-blades faded out. He glanced at the clock. It's face seemed like ice. The time left was so short!

"I ought to pass a few hands," he thought to himself; "I ought to wait a few turns. But I must force my luck; I can't trust it *through*."

And then he thought again: "Seven thousand dollars ahead! I can take a chance now that I'm that far ahead. I'll force my luck."

Disregarding the inner voice, he called: "Five hundred says it's a king."

"Breaking your straight run?" Hank chided. "Don't desert your warm hunch like thataway, boy."

"Yes," a feeling of irritation with himself ruffling his calm; "but it goes as it lays if it is off my straight run."

"All right," Hank said, turning. "It's a ten."

It was a nine. Hank had won on the nine of hearts.

From then on fortune steadily veered to Hank's side. By hundreds and on doubled bets by twos, and even fours, the beam fell his way. Asa at times caught off odd hundreds; then lost two, three, five. He noted his winnings fade away to six thousand dollars to four thousand dollars. Then, with a sudden break, he was even again. It was eleven thirty. Only thirty precious minutes left, if the Agua Frio men were on time! And if he had the money in his fist then, there was much to do after getting it.

"I plumb lost my hunch when I broke my system," he said; "I sure got to change my luck somehow."

"You want to win a heap lot?" Hank said kindly.

"I sure do, or I'd not be playing, a man always wants to win at this game," Asa joked.

Hank laughed grimly.

The play went on steadily. Asa was nervous. He had lost his fighting edge. His thoughts would stray off to the girl waiting for him, to the folly he had committed. He had made her trouble mountain-high, whereas it had been foothill-high only before he had begun to play the second time!

He awakened with a start from his fog of worry to find that, laying wager for wager, he had dwindled his pile down to an even five thousand dollars.

The thought of it made him throw all caution aside. There was no warmth about his heart or brain; only a chill of doubt. He knew he had not ought to be playing, yet a dumb urge to have it through with, to end it, drove him forward.

"Let's get some real action," he dared Hank. Three cards, the cat, remained, in the box. That is, it would have been cat in regular faro.

"Action! I thought we were having some," Hank said.

"A trifle," Asa heard the sheriff whisper to a neighbor.

"Yah, yah!" the foreigners jabbered, greedily eying the money.

A buzz went around the crowd's fringes. Hank glanced over at Asa. Silence claimed the room. Men were just breathing.

"The cue-box shows that there's a king, ace, and Jack left for the cat," Asa said; "five thousand dollars even says I can call the turn."

He spoke recklessly.

"The odds ought to be," square old Hank objected.

"Never mind them; if I play fool faro and give you the better of it, that's for me. Do you take it or not? My five thousand dollars says they come out king, ace, and Jack. In that order."

For answer Hank laid down his thick stack of bills to cover Asa's.

"Yes."

"Riffle, then."

Hank pulled the two top cards as men inched forward soundlessly. He showed—

King, ace—and the Hoc—was Jack!

Asa reached over and took in the ten thousand dollars.

"Let's have some *action*," he urged recklessly anew.

"Name it," Hank said grimly, the light of battle in his eyes.

On his high stool Kelly shifted again, his hands firmly on opposite hips, elbows snugged in tightly. His eyes swept the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

ALL OR NOTHING!

"SHUFFLE the deck, Mr. Square Dealer," Asa said.

Hank riffled the cards deftly.

He held them out for Asa to cut.

"Want to cut before we go farther?"

"Not after you, old-timer. You are Straight Hank Burns."

Hank's eyes flashed gladly.

"Thanks, young-timer," he said with deep feeling; "you'll never be sorry for that word. Now what?"

"My ten thousand dollars says that the fifth card from the top of the pack is the ace of spades."

Why Asa had picked that card he could not have told. He was playing a blind, unreasoning game of desperate chance. He had flaunted his luck, lost his judgment. Only his nerve remained. If he had been playing for himself it would not have mattered. But for her. And he had fumbled so far.

"Boy!" Hank said. "I won't bet that-away. It's clear robbery. I think you are a plumb fool or loco."

"Take it—or leave it," Asa persisted.

"I'll leave it, if you won't take big odds."

"You promised action on my own terms, until either of us had lost ten thousand dollars."

It was eleven forty-five. Asa felt that he had to win or lose, or even if he won it would be too late to restore the money before the Agua Frio men came in at midnight.

"I insist," Asa challenged.

Hank's eyes met his; their glances caught, held. The deeply drawn breaths of men whistled as they felt the increasing tension of the moment.

Square Hank toyed with his money a moment, glanced at Asa's scornful face.

"Two fool youngsters in a day are too many," he began. "I feel guilty at pulling in ten thousand dollars at a turn, after winning ten thousand dollars earlier."

"I might win," Asa cut in with; "perhaps you're 'fraid."

"You ought to have better manners to age," Hank said easily. "Gentlemen, you've heard him make his own terms. I take them. I might as well have his money as some one else."

Hank's big pile of bills slid over the green cloth, even-Stephening those of Asa. He was glad to note how evenly they stacked on their pile, for it meant, if he won, they would all slide easily and neatly into the package-cover!

"Fifth from the top, eh, ace of spades?" Hank said. "One turn, like that, for ten thousand dollars each."

"You said it," Asa agreed.

In deathly silence Hank lifted the first four cards, one by one.

He fingered the corner of the fifth, turned it over.

Asa glanced up. The clock was marking eleven fifty.

Asa could hear it tick, so still were the men. He glanced down at the slowly turning card. He shuddered to think of what might be on its face. He counted the clock ticks—up to ten, as the card was turned up.

Then his eyes saw all of the fatal card.

"The ace of hearts," Hank announced, showing it fully.

"Beat me fairly at my own game," Asa said loyally.

Hank flashed a look of admiration at him. Hank began to sweep the big pot into the drawer under the table.

A long sigh circled the room. Men's bodies relaxed; they shifted on their feet and in chairs.

Crash!

The door flew open. A man bounded in, crying:

"Sheriff, an attack on the jail; men are trying to lynch Cassaine."

There was the sound of shots off down-street. There was a roar as Bart Redfield plunged for the portal, the crowd after him. Asa, still in a maze, watched them go. Hank and Cue-box and Lookout Kelly sat, quiet, watching the door. Hank had

poked the last bill into the drawer as the crowd surged out.

The swart foreigners, by some peculiar coincidence, were all on the rear fringe of the crowding mass. They seemed to be trying to get out.

"Those cattle don't seem to be able to get out," Hank said to Asa.

Asa did not answer. He sat still, his thoughts on the catastrophe he had brought into his life—and others—by his mad play. By nature he was no squealer, and knew that what had been lost was lost to him by the rules of the game, his own foolish, boastful, futile game.

The confusion at the door suddenly fell off as the packed mass gave away and the crowd bulged out, as massed crowds will, without apparent reason. It took in its surge all but—

All but the swart ten. They suddenly faced inward and stood, tensed on the balls of catlike feet. It was such a sudden shift that Asa might not have noticed it, had not Hank called out suddenly:

"Kel!"

There was a roar. Bunched, the foreigners, low-browed, dove forward. They were wedged, the wedge's apex a giant in corduroys. The bartenders and other help, except Lookout, fled. Case Keeper, a Tin Cow slow-goer, was inside yet.

Kelly whipped out his guns and began to shoot as they came. He dropped two. But it was only a few strides and they were ringing him as Asa leaped the table. The Cue-box man crumpled from a club-blow and was out of it. Hank surged up, his gun out, spitting. Kelly wrenched himself free for a moment and shot again dropping a third. Asa could hear men thudding at the rear door. The fists of Asa found marks a-plenty, and he regretted that he had left his gun outside the town—the gun of Rawlins that the girl had given him.

A spittoon came soaring—crashing against Kelly's head. He doubled up and went down. Asa stood over him. Old Hank's gun found a mark, another. In the tangle bodies were so close no accurate shooting could be done.

Asa, firm-gripped with the giant in corduroys, had his back temporarily to the rear door when he saw a man glide to it and open it. It belched men inward, more of the same ilk as the attackers!

Asa saw old Hank wheel to meet the new menace. Asa had the corduroyed giant firmly in play. Over his shoulder he could see the open door through which the newcomers had arrived from the alley.

Asa strove to be free of his assailant, for in such a case close grips were fatal, as one of the giant's comrades easily could fell him from behind. In the swirl of the struggle he saw old Hank make a stand before the green table, with his form before the cash-drawer. His pistol was empty. He was using it as a club. As Asa spun about with his opponent he saw old Hank strike down two attackers with the gun. Then he lost it in the stress and struck with great, deft fists, thudding home awful blows that made their recipients groan. The ring drew back from the old lion in amazement. Asa, finding he had the giant in peril, stooped to his work and lifted him, up, up, up—and over!

With a crash the man in corduroy fell to the floor, a mere heap! Asa, gasping with the exertion, turned to help old Hank. He plunged through the ring about him and took his stand at Hank's side. His coming seemed to daunt them. He felt something underfoot. He gave a hasty glance down—it was the form of Cue-box Man. And he saw something else—when he raised his eyes like a flash—saw it too late, though.

A single man at the center of the half ring about them stirred, his hand going up to the back of his neck.

"A knife-thrower," Hank yelled. "They only drew back to give him room to end it without more noise."

The shining blade came, whizzing. Asa heard Hank groan.

"In my—chest—"

The gang roared with bestial triumph. Yet hesitated before closing in. For Asa, as Hank crumpled, seized the big dealer's chair and whirled it like a giant flail, standing guard, lionlike, over the old gambler's form.

"No use; I'm out, save yourself," Hank called to him from the floor.

"No; I'm going through, straight," Asa said gaspingly.

He caught for breath. He wanted one breath—he got it. Pursed his lips toward that open rear door as he heard a low, inquiring whicker.

They bunched for their charge—a dozen against one.

As they came Asa whistled, then he called:

"Starlight, Starlight!"

He heard the answering neigh, the thud of rescuing hoofs. The encircling human wolves hurled themselves toward him as he stood, lionlike, over the form of the man who had stripped him so honestly of honor, money, love-chance.

They started to close, hooked, talonlike claws gripping for his pulsing, gasping throat, as he struggled for air to give him strength to battle on in straight, clean fight. Their white teeth were bared as they gnashed upon him. He did not wait for their onset—he himself lunged at them.

They thronged the last human opponent between them and the wealth they craved. The nearest gripped him, others were surging in at a step's distance in the aisle between table and wall.

A cyclone of equine terror whirled in through the open door!

The great stallion it was, teeth skinned, ears laid back, as he squealed with rage. His forefeet struck; then he whirled and began to lash with hind feet. He turned again, to use forefeet and teeth as Asa called dully, with failing breath, and began to bite, to tear, to stamp, stamp, stamp, ragingly.

The men in the aisle broke and ran, screaming with terror. One swerved aside into a corner. Starlight sought him, worried him while Asa, close after the last trio of those in flight, battered them from the room. He staggered against the door-jamb.

The room was oddly silent. The horse, trembling with reaction as the fighting fervor left him, stood shivering. Fallen forms were silent on the slippery floor.

Asa passed his hand over his brow. A hell-born voice inside whispered its impelling lure:

"Steal the bank-roll now. They're all down or gone. You've got to have that twenty thousand dollars."

A chill rode his shoulder-blades. He shrank.

"Take it! say the raiders got it. You've fought a good fight, have a good alibi," the tempter whispered.

Asa glanced at Starlight, so loyal, so true. He found his gaze wandering to the face of the stark old gambler, so fair, so straight!

"You two are square, lil old cuss and old-timer," he found himself whispering to the accusing stillness.

The clean thought beat down the tempting, evil one. The chill left his back.

"No," he argued inwardly again; "I went crooked once to-night for the first time in my life, too. No; I'll play this hand through straight now, come what may.

He felt the warmth of the new, mighty hunch creep up his spine and cling in between his shoulder-blades. It was genuine, good!

There was a rush of feet outside. Townsfolk began to stream back in. Questions were flung at Asa, but he was too exhausted to answer them all as yet. Starlight, nostrils still quivering, stood quietly enough.

"What's this alarm about lynching? Only a fake to cover a raid on the faro bank?" demanded Sheriff Redfield, forcing his way into the wrecked room.

Asa leaned against a table. He found himself unhurt, if a bit weak. Half a dozen men, badly shot, were lying about. Hank was breathing hoarsely under the table.

Kelly turned over, staggered up. Some one called that the casekeeper was only stunned. The sheriff bent over old Hank and took the deeply buried knife from his terrible chest-wound, the scarlet stain spreading over the frilled silk of his shirt-bosom as he did so. The old gambler sighed, opened his filmed eyes. Out of the aisle townsfolk carried half a dozen forms, trampled terribly by Starlight. Asa told briefly of the stallion's awful charge, and other details of the fight.

Redfield whistled amazedly as Kelly confirmed Asa's story up to the time Kelly had been felled.

"Take that battlin' hoss of yourn out into th' alley," he counseled. "I see old Hank is coming to an' I want to talk this over with him.

"Here, boys, tote these carrion crows, dead or hurt, to either the town morgue or calaboose, as the case may be, and rout out a doc or two to patch up those that have a chance."

One of the injured foreigners, partly conscious, signified that he wanted to talk to the sheriff. Bart bent over and listened to him, then straightened up and announced:

"They planned to raid Hank when they heard of the big winning he made from young Maunbrey. When they saw that Beaumont here had a big wad they stalled off on the rail till it was all in one spot—the bank's drawer. Then they tried the riffle. They had it all planned before Beaumont came into town."

Asa, thankful that this explanation made it plain that his coming, with the big pack of currency, had not been the prime cause of the fight, led the stallion outside and left him at the tie-rack again, with a loving pat.

"You-all got me into this and helped me out of that narrow squeak, but the rest is worse than ever, lil old cuss," he told Starlight.

The horse whickered, deep in his dark chest.

Asa left him and went back into the room in a daze. The clock chimed twelve as he did so. The bodies of the defeated were being carried out.

"Men from Agua Frio are overdue now," Redfield said. "Give me the rights of this now; I've spoken to Hank and he says you did a square man's part, young-timer. He's too weak to talk much; chest is cut bad."

Asa nodded his head. He noted that they had Hank up in his big chair. Kelly and Cue-box were tending him.

Asa told the story. Redfield nodded.

"I ordered some of my deputies to chase the men we saw running away from here, on the chance that something was wrong," he said; "so I ought to have news of them soon."

A man called from the doorway.

"There's Petersen, my first deputy, now," Bart said, going to the door. He came back in a moment to call:

"They went out the Agua Frio trail, boys. Get after them. They may run into the men from Agua Frio and get delayed. Those fellows are late now."

The crowd surged toward the door.

Asa breathed easier at hearing the Agua Frio men were not in.

Redfield went to Hank's side and asked:

"Whom shall I put in charge here, Hank, Kelly?"

"Yes," whispered the old man. "Kelly's good. I've no one else nearer—"

"I'll hurry a doctor here."

"You may, if you like. He'll do me little good, though."

"Cheer up, old-timer!"

"I'm cheerful, but—is the young man that fought for me here?"

Asa stepped forward. Hank smiled at him and stretched out his hand.

"Leave him with me," Hank pleaded.

"Will you be here for the inquest on this?" Bart demanded, sweeping Asa's face searchingly with his keen eyes.

"Yes, sheriff."

"Your word's good, and your face's good," Bart said, turning on his heel to meet a call from a deputy who came in hurriedly. "Stay with old Hank; help Kelly. Now," turning to the deputy, "what is it, McCandless?"

"Petersen sent me back to get some gun-fodder; some of the boys' thimble belts are half empty—and if we corner thet crowd it may mean a thunderin', whalin' big fight ef they hole up an' stand siege—"

"Always th' way," Redfield stormed, making for the door. "Petersen's apt to go after b'ar loaded f'r gopher. I was just ready to swing wide my safe door, to count the big bundle o' bills, so I'd be sure it was all right to turn over to th' Agua Frio crowd, when th' alarm over th' faro-bank raid was sounded. I slammed th' safe door shut and ran. McCandless, you sally down to th' office an' tell Rafe Laureda, on guard there, to let you swing the door open—combination's not turned, I'll bet a stack o' blues—and get those three boxes of fresh forty-fives that are in th' draw' whe'e I

keep th' hard coin. It won't hurt if th' ol' safe ain't clear locked with Rafe sittin' in front of it with his artillery on, so jus' slam 'er shut an' scoot. I'll git onto my hoss an' be ready. I'd go after th' shells my own se'f, but no one else on this terrestrial ball c'n cinch a saddle onto my hell-roarin' hoss. I figger we won't be out long; lope, now, McCandless—"

"Yes, sheriff," and McCandless bolted out, close after Redfield. "No one 'll bother thet ol' safe with Rafe on guard; he's sure pizen with his six-gun, an' ever' one knows it in Tin Cow."

The sheriff gone, the panting deputy gone, the crowd gone, stillness claimed the room.

After the uproarious affray, preceded by the strain of the plunging against the bank, the silence that ensued was oppressive. Lamps guttered; the reek of powder hung in the air; flies buzzed.

Old Hank called softly:

"Young-timer?"

Asa stepped forward.

"Lift me up onto my own table," Hank pleaded. "Boys, I want to die on my own layout. I don't want the doc. Shut the door. Turn the box up. My game's ended. Pull off my boots. I'm going to cash in on this deal."

They lifted him out and laid him on his layout. He sighed as he stretched out. He put his hand to his heart. They took off his boots, turned up the box. The game was ended. The dimming eyes told that Square Hank would not deal again.

Outside all was still. Every one, it seemed, had streamed off to join the posse.

Old Hank began to call softly:

"Young-timer! Young-timer!"

"He wants you," Kelly said, shoving Asa forward to the old man's side. A gripping something kept Asa there. He should have been elsewhere, he knew. But he felt bound by hooks of steel to the place. He could not have told why. The warm spot between his shoulder-blades was fairly buzzing!

He answered the whim of the dying man. He sat down beside the table on which he was laid out, his mouth near the old man's ear. The frilled shirt, drabbled with blood, retained yet, in its unstained parts, a freshness, a cleanly radiancy.

CHAPTER IX.

HANK CALLS HIS LAST TURN.

"I AM here, Hank," Asa whispered. Kelly and the other were standing close at hand.

"Listen," the dying man pleaded; "I've faced many a man across the green cloth in my time, but you were the most eager to win money of any, for all your smiles and banter. What was it for?"

Asa hesitated.

"The secret's not mine," he said finally.

"You wanted to win—for some one else's sake?"

"Yes, old-timer, to save a boy—a girl."

The wise old head wagged, the white chin touching the red-drabbled white silk of the frilled bosom at each wag. A deeper film was gathering over the wise old eyes that were staring fixedly up at the rusty-red ceiling.

"To save a boy and a girl! I had both—once. Gambled their chances away. They died. I gambled their mother to death. I've been square to just one thing all my life—my game. I wasn't square to my own flesh. They're all gone."

He was silent again. Flies buzzed; lights guttered. People raced back and forth outside; some tried the door, went on.

"Let 'em try the door. The box is turned, for good," Old Hank mumbled. Then he began again:

"To save a boy and a girl? Whisper it to me, boy. I don't even know your name. I don't want to. But you've got a good face. I read honor on it the first thing."

He fixed his great, compelling eyes on Asa's. Asa felt himself drawn forward by the dominant will of the passing guest; the strength of Hank's purpose for the moment swept aside the death-film from his eyes. Asa found himself wondering at the sudden trust he felt in the old gambler.

Yielding, he bent over, and in a few phrases whispered the story as he had had it from Bess Maunbrey.

"I knew it," Hank said, as Asa closed. "You wanted the money—not for yourself, though. I wanted you to win that ten thousand dollars. I didn't feel right winning all that from that kid. But it came so easy. And yours, too, after you stopped playing—*straight.*"

He stopped, coughed.

Asa thought he was going out then, but he rallied with a great effort.

Hank reached a weak hand for Asa's and found it.

"I could read that money-hunger in your face all the time you played," he said, speaking so much easier that Asa was deceived as to his real condition. "And I could read something else—down deep—and that was that, away down under, you were straight and clean. I banked on it to myself. We old gamblers know a lot about human nature. If we didn't, we'd not last long. Well, son"—and he brightened more and more, in outward seeming—"as you played I was pulling for you to win and me to lose that ten thousand dollars; but it was not to be so. As soon as you threw off from your own hunch, I felt mine come back, and it came with a rush, boy.

"When I went down, that knife point deep in my chest, I saw something else. I saw you over me, like a lion, fighting for the man who had stripped you. And I was helpless; Kel was down, every one else in the room but you was out.

"You had only to take the bank roll, hide it, and say that the bohunks had stolen it, and who ever would have known the difference, boy? You had it, to yourself, thataway, for a full two minutes before people came. But you didn't give in—you were playing it straight again, boy! *Straight! Soda to Hoc!*

"I'm glad you did, for my motto is 'Stick to your friends and play your hunches *straight!*' I'm going to prove to you that that's my way of living—right up to the edge."

He called weakly: "Kelly! Ho' Kel!"

The loyal, lean lookout tiptoed to the other side of the table—the one where the bank-drawer was swung under the dealer's station.

"Kel," Hank whispered, his voice rattling, "pull out the drawer and get that big stake I won from this young-timer. Quick, Kel."

Loyal Kelly swept his hand inside and brought out the high stack of orderly arranged bills.

Square Hank's eyes lighted up as he saw them.

"One of my biggest wins," he managed to smile feebly; "and it is going to do good, not harm. Kel, give it to this lad, free, clear—outright."

Kelly placed the thick stack in Asa's trembling right hand.

Tears were streaming from the range rider's eyes—real, clean, honest man's tears. And he was not ashamed to have them seen."

"I oughtn't take it," he protested; "you've got folks to leave it to, Hank. You won it fair; are an honest receiver for value."

"Take it, lad; I've not a blood-chick in the world. Only Kel, here, that I picked out of a snowdrift in Denver once, and who's been at my back all these years. The barkeeps and other help were local pick-ups. They didn't stand the gaff when the break came. They are ruled out. But Kel and I have traveled together, like father and son, for years.

"Kel, you've got the little will I made. It gives you everything—layout, bank roll, whole outfit. Cash in on it when I'm gone, and quit this gambling game. Nothing in it but tears. It should net you fifteen thousand dollars, in all, Kel. You're welcome. I'll never need it again."

He fell on silence, then suddenly turned to Asa, with:

"Go to the jail office, young-timer. They are all away, chasing those raiders. Be no one there, unless sleepy Rafe Laureda. Go, do your job. I'll not tell what it is before I cash in. Go now. I've a hunch it will make good!"

Asa started up. The thought came that perhaps he might make it, after all. There was a stern compulsion about Old Hank's words that thrilled him. He got up from his station near the dying man, went to a corner, got the cover from the express pack-

age from under his shirt front, pouched the thick stack of bills in it, put the lot inside his shirt front, buttoned his coat over.

He came to Hank's side, shook his chilling hand. The clock was pointing to twelve thirty. Asa went out quietly. The street was almost deserted. A passer-by coming for information as to Hank's condition informed him that Sheriff Redfield and a posse, made up of almost all the males of Tin Cow, had gone off on the Agua Frio trail, after the fleeing foreigners who had tried to raid the faro bank. The aliens apparently, he said, had drifted into town unmounted, from the mines, and were trying to get around, across-country, back among the crowds of their clacking comrades, for safety, before being overtaken.

Asa went toward the sheriff's office. It was the last building on the left side of the straggling street. The little adobe square of it was umber-dark now under the lowering sky. The little jail, behind it, was as a mass of sheerest gloom.

Asa stepped lightly forward. No one challenged him. He mounted the steps, rapped softly, then louder, to make sure there was no one who would hear before he tried desperate measures.

There was no response. He tried the door —and it yielded. He edged in—heard a snore. He remembered the old gambler's dying hunch about the sleeping guard.

Asa smiled to himself. For he could make out, in the half-glow from a sheltered light, a form, recumbent on three lined-up chairs. Rafe Laureda, tired from the two-day fiesta in honor of Carmencita's birthday, was in dreamland.

Asa stepped lightly past the sleeper, focusing his eyes onto the door of the old safe, one of those time-grimed, huge iron boxes of the ancient régime. He got his hand onto the knob without arousing the somnolent Rafe, and, with the words of Redfield in mind as to his haste in slamming it and his hint to McCandless to merely slam-to the door, Asa's heart fluttered as he thought of the " long chance ", that the door would yield.

He fingered the knob lightly, then, with sudden urge that he was still playing the straight and square hunch, he came down onto it. It turned, and so sharply that Asa was apprehensive that the click would awaken Rafe.

But, no! Rafe, lolling, easeful, slept on —his slumber, the combination unturned in the haste of the stressful night, winning cards for Asa!

Asa swung the door softly back. He saw the fake package, slipped it out, the good one in its place. He put the dummy packet under his shirt front. Then he got up quietly, tiptoed past the sleeper, outside, going prayerfully.

Outside he sat down on his heels and wanted to roll or yell or something else to let off tension. It seemed too good to be true. He had won by playing straight! The warm spot between his shoulder-blades glowed.

There was a clatter of coming horses—shouts of joyous men. Asa slid across the road like a gray fox and waited in the shadow of a building there. It was the posse, returning successful, a dozen swart captives in their midst, as the flaring torches showed.

And with them were the Agua Frio deputies, lean, hard-bitten, gaunt men, heavily weaponed, with their covered wagon for taking out Cassaine, the express robber. Asa watched them anxiously as they went into the sheriff's office. He saw Redfield go to the safe after a few moments and proffer the restored package to the head of the other posse, who pulled out the bills and riffled them in rough but satisfying count, then smiled a plain and assured O. K. at the sheriff of Tin Cow. It was done: *the boy was saved!*

Asa dodged behind the buildings and made his way back to the rear of the Cat Harpen. He knocked. Kelly came to the door. Calling a little love-phrase to Starlight, Asa prepared to enter, then thought of something. He told Kelly he was going to see to something about the horse, went back, and, while he idled a moment, rolled a cigarette and lighted it. He opened the fake package, scattered the waste, stacked papers in it, then he set a match to the counterfeit cover of it. Then he went in, at another hail from stanch Kelly.

"He's going fast," Kel said. "He's calling for you, lad."

Asa stepped forward. He found the dying man with his face chalky, his eyes rolled back. Yet at the sound of Asa's voice in his ear Hank rallied, put out his lean, stiffening hand to Asa's, which he patted gently.

"You made it; I know it. My hunch told me, laddie. You called the turn on the cat of that deal of yours?"

"Yes," gladly answered Asa; "the money is restored, the dummy package destroyed. It's all all right, straight through, soda to hoc, and it's my last time at cards for money, too. *I'm through.*"

A look of profound peace spread over Hank's face. He tried to speak, one, twice, thrice, then managed to whisper with failing breath:

"The first bit of my money that's done real good was that twenty thousand dollars; first in years, except for a few grubstakes and chance charity gifts. I'm glad we played her thataway, boys. Yes, keep away from gambling. Nothing in it. Unless you're a crook. I know. I've been clean through for fifty years. Now I'm done! But I've always dealt a square game, and the proof is that, barring some luck lately, I'm not rich. Only crooks can get rich dealing faro. The splits won't pay bank expenses—"

His voice wandered off.

Asa glanced at Kelly, the faithful. His eyes were filled with tears.

"Go to the little gal now," Hank said suddenly, reaching out and pressing Asa's hand. "Go to her. Kel will vouch that you'll be in for the inquest on these dead ones. Give me your hand, too, Kel."

Each of the men held one of his fast-chilling hands. It was Kelly who broke the intense silence:

"All right, old-timer; I'll promise never to touch a card for money after you're gone. And thanks for all you've done for me."

His voice broke with emotion.

Old Hank smiled, then choked, caught and strained for breath. He began to talk: "Three to one you can't call—the—turn! Ah, kiss me, Dora! I'm sorry I made you cry."

He opened his eyes. They looked past the two and seemed to catch from somewhere a brighter glory than man had seen. A heightening wonder was limned out on his kindly face—then enshrined there was peace!

Deep silence. Flies buzzed, buzzed, buzzed. Kelly's tears spatted onto the face of the dead. Asa's kept them company.

Kelly reached across the body and wrung Asa's hand.

"You went through with us. Call on me any time," he said simply, man to man. "Go, as he said. I'll tell Bart you'll be back and vouch for you."

Asa answered Kel's hand-clasp with equal fervor. Then he went out. Soon the thrum of Starlight's steel-shod feet told of his passing out toward the open trail.

CHAPTER X.

FLAMING GUNS!

AT the edge of the town Asa found the old six-gun where he had concealed it on the way in. Yes, on the way in. And it seemed days ago since he had left Bess there. After he had buckled on the worn holster, he urged Starlight forward. The kindly moon had come to light his way.

He came upon the two, brother and sister, beside the trail. The brother had recovered from his alcoholic stupor and then had slept quietly, Bess said, as the range rider rode up.

"I've told Dick why you went to Tin Cow," she informed Asa as he swung down beside them.

Asa put his strong arm about the shoulders of the young man, who swayed with weakness and emotion.

"It's all right, young-timer," he crooned; "that money is back where it belongs, in the hands of the law's own guardians. I got it into the safe in time, too."

"Oh, oh," Bess was sobbing now, happily. Starlight nuzzled at her face. She drew his velvety nose to her and kissed it, then laughed.

"And no one ever is going to know that

that money was taken," Asa said, after his hasty sketch of the night's events had been completed.

"But that old gambler who is gone! What can we do to repay him?" Bess whispered. "The living who serve us we can serve, reward, and honor; the dead, who are beyond our reach, and who have served us—ah, what can we do to show our appreciation for them?"

"I can at least do as he asked me to do," Asa said simply, giving her his hand in pledge. "I can let cards alone, and go straight!"

She pressed his hand warmly, whispering:

"Keep your pledge, please. And you, too, Dick?"

"Yes," Dick answered, joining their hands with his. "Yes, I'll go straight from now on!"

He had his reward in her kisses.

"And now," Asa suggested, "let me go home with you; there is still one danger unchecked."

She faced him in the moonlight, demanding, her voice terror-riven:

"Oh, you mean Rawlins? We forgot him."

"Yes," firmly. "We must get him away—clean away."

"Leave him to me," said Dick, in harsh, ringing tones.

Asa glanced at the brother. The boyishness had all gone out of his face, as the moon-gleams showed. The crisis of the last few full hours had brought him to sudden manhood and responsibility.

"No; there must be no violence," the girl protested.

"Let me go home with you; I'll take care of it," Asa offered.

Bess accepted eagerly.

He seemed so strong, so upstanding there, that no harm could come to him from a bound man.

"You mount up, behind me," he urged. "Old Starlight will carry double again if I call on him to. Darn lil ol' cuss," lovingly. "Dick can ride his own horse. We'll make in to your place by dawn. Speed doesn't matter now, anyway."

Dick mounted, then Asa. Bess swung up. Starlight tippytoed a moment, just to show that he was not too tired to respond to another call. Then he settled, at a word from Asa, to show the way to Dick's horse, up-trail. And again Asa felt the girl, behind, sweetly anear him as the brave stallion's hoofs thrummed out their rhythm of "homeward bound!"

So they traveled the long, moon-filled hours through.

Dawn found them swinging up the side-trail toward the Maunbrey place.

The sky was rose and gold as the coming sun marched in stately processional through the horizon's enrimming haziness. A mocker on a thin shrub jeered at them. An old rooster came out to crow welcome.

Starlight whickered. The two ewe-necked nags in the corral answered the great stallion. All seemed peaceful.

Dick turned his horse into the corral before the others were ready, and waited. He was first there because Bess had to dismount, then Asa, as Starlight was dancing to show his delight at meeting up with the ewe-necks inside the corral fence; and the girl, at a word from Asa, slid off, and left Asa to gentle the giant equine down from his funning mood. He made several pasears across and back, then whickered again and was good, turning back to glance at Asa as who should say:

"There, didn't I cut a pretty pigeon-wing for the lady?"

Asa dropped the reins over Starlight's head, and he stood, head down, as a prime cow-horse should when left so.

"Lil old cuss," Asa ragged at him, smiting his neck lovingly.

He turned, led the way toward the house, his hand on the butt of his gun. Dick, too, had his gun-butt grasped. A vague foreboding of trouble to come tugged at Asa's heart.

Yet, as he swung open the door, all seemed quiet. A few flies were buzzing in the early light that streamed through the room's one window. The range rider bade the other two remain outside until he was sure.

Asa stepped through the portal. Dick and Bess remained outside. They heard him call:

"Come in; it's all right!"

They went in. Rawlins, eyes rolling with rage, was just as they had left him.

Asa got a knife from the kitchen and slashed off the ropes. He and Dick got the man onto his feet, then into a seat. Rawlins began to rub his stiffened limbs with his stiffened arms, kneading aching muscles.

"Sorry we had to leave you so long," Asa said pleasantly.

"Sorry--" Rawlins glared at them.

"None of that now," Asa warned, tapping his gun-butt.

"Well, what's th' game?" Rawlins demanded.

"We'll all sit down, and I'll tell you," Asa said.

When they were seated he sketched out the night's events for Rawlins. He noted how the man's mean face went from plain amazement to rage as he progressed.

"It sounds nice and' soft," Rawlins grated at them all; "so sweet like, eh? Well, you've taken a clean ten thousand dollars out o' me, Beaumont, and that's all there's to it."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" Asa faced him squarely, strong jaw outthrust, eyes blazing.

For a moment it seemed that a clash would come. But Rawlins dropped his eyes and continued to fumble with his ankles. He kneaded them with eagerness.

"Let me get some liniment and rub your muscles," Bess suggested.

"No; I want no help from you or yours," snarlingly.

He fell upon silence again. They watched him. His glance wandered out--through the open door, to where Starlight stood, head down, dreaming perhaps of his long rides that night—perhaps of other rides.

"I give in," Rawlins suddenly said. "It's best as it is. You git me a snack to eat, an' let me git my savin's in th' hole in th' wall, an' I'll quit, an' you-all never 'll hear of me again."

Bess flashed a happy smile at him. She got up and went to the slide in the wall and brought out a lean pocketbook. Rawlins took it humbly enough.

"I'll get you some breakfast in a moment," she said. "We'll all eat together and part--friends."

"Yes," said Rawlins. "I'm clean, plumb beat out."

The sudden change from tense hatred to acceptance of the situation was agreeable to Asa, as well as to Dick. Rawlins continued to rub his ankles. He flexed his leg muscles, got up, limped about. As he passed the open door he cast glances at the great stallion out there, so peaceful, so pretty. And at such times a half smile seemed to flicker across his harsh face.

Bess got up to start for the kitchen door. In doing so she came between Asa and Rawlins. Dick's seat was at Rawlins's right hand. Pretending to bend down for another of his usual rubs at his ankles, the man grasped the butt of Dick's gun, got the weapon, had the girl shoved between himself and Asa's gun before the range rider could wink an eye-lash. So shielded, Rawlins, the gun at the girl's ear as a threat of what he would do if molested, got to the door, slid outside, drawing the door to as he went.

He left the girl in the closing crack as he went, using her, to the last, as his effectual shield.

Asa hurtled against the door, raging, as Bess swung aside to let him come back. The latch caught. The very force of the efforts of the two men served to slow them up, each tugging at cross-purposes. They heard the man's feet go thudding down the short path toward the corral—or so their ears seemed to tell. They heard a few such steps—then the door gave way—swung open, and the two men tumbled out, the girl behind them—to find that Rawlins, instead of fleeing in such blind, foolish fashion, and so leaving himself uncovered to Asa's fire, had trampled with his feet cunningly, and now stood, against the house, Dick's gun covering Asa and another gun, a little one, the other Bess had plucked from under his armpit when he had first fallen inert from the drugged coffee, in his left.

The men tensed. Rawlins's face was wreathed in a smile of malignity awful to see. Bess, seeing Asa and her brother so endangered, started back.

" You plumb forgot that little gun, eh? I was 'most shed of my tie-ropes when you came up—and I faked most of that leg and wrist soreness," he leered. " I played it to win, big! Altogether, you've bilked me, but no man ever yit got the best o' Sime Rawlins. With my six-gun and Derringer, I got you faded."

" You resemble yourself, a whole lot," Asa drawled, hoping to anger the other into making some sudden, ill-considered move, at whatever cost to him, Asa.

" You're th' harpen I'm after," Rawlins flared at him, his little gun, snakelike, at Asa's heart. " You come with me. I'm goin' to kill you, and ride off on you' hoss. No other hoss will head him on these ranges that I c'n tell. Gimme you' gun."

Asa tensed for the shade of a second; Bess breathed deeply, and Dick warned:

" Be careful; don't give it to him; he'll not play fair, and he never misses."

" You're after *me,* Rawlins, I know," Asa said. " Well, a fight might result in this girl or boy being killed. I can't have that. But ride away on your own horse. That stallion of mine won't let you mount him alive. Here—"

He handed him his gun, butt first. Rawlins, after holstering the little Derringer under his armpit, keeping Asa covered with Dick's six the while, grasped his own gun, that Asa had thus returned.

" There, now I've got my own gun, that I never missed with yit," he cried wildly, an unholy joy on his harsh countenance. " I'm master now; no need for tomfoolery. You two, you mis'ble Maunbrey whelps, stay here, by the house, till I'm through with this carrion. I've got all th' guns on th' place now."

He advanced his gun, and Asa thought it was the end. Then Rawlins laughed, edged back. His voice took on a new quality—that of peace.

" Let me have the horse—and go," he said; " and it will be all right. Come and gentle him by his nose till I'm in th' saddle, an' he'll have to carry me whar I want to go. On him I'll be safe, for he's lightnin' fast."

" Take him," Asa said eagerly. " I'll give him up to save bloodshed. I'll go to him and signal him he's to be gentle to you."

" I can handle any hoss ever bucked," Rawlins laughed, " but come, as it suits my humor. You hold his nose till I'm astride; then I'll go. I'm willing to trade you' life for a chance to escape straddle o' that big hoss."

Bess and Dick watched them go down toward the corral. It seemed too good to be true that he was to go so, without bloodshed.

Asa reached Starlight first. As they walked Rawlins holstered his guns in seeming content, using his belt to hold them, simply thrusting them through it loosely. The stallion whickered deeply. He put out his head, nuzzled Asa's open hand. Asa put his arms about the animal's neck and kissed his skin, pushing up the black mane to do it. It was a lingering, good-by caress. Then Asa rubbed the horse's nose in a peculiar manner. The animal looked at Rawlins and whickered.

" He's all right now, lil ol' cuss," Asa said, stepping back. " He'll go now for you."

Asa swung himself aside as Rawlins vaulted into the saddle. He came down squarely, gripped his knees firmly. Starlight whickered again.

" Good-by, lil ol' cuss."

So Asa, putting out his hand for a farewell pat, his eyes off Rawlins, all for the gallant stallion.

" Asa!"

It was Bess's voice. Back at the house she and Dick were too far off to come into the scene that followed in time to affect its outcome.

He glanced up.

He was looking into the muzzle of Rawlins's gun. A smile of hell-born content was on the mean, writhen face.

" Got you," he snarled; " hoss, life, all. I can kill you, so, then the girl and boy get away—you loco fool. Did you think you could best Sime Rawlins?"

Old Starlight looked around, his eyes reproaching Asa for sending him off under another rider.

" Kneel, kneel and beg, and I may let you off," Rawlins snarled. " Kneel before the girl, show you are a coward. Kneel, before I count three!"

He began to count: "One, two, three!"

Asa sank down on his knees before the towering, hulking killer, the muzzle of the deadly six following him, keeping the tube in line with the bowed head. Bess and Dick, spellbound, watched. Old Starlight, unmindful of human ways in all their complexity, whickered softly. Often his master had bowed thus, to fix a shoe, to rub a hock, in love—or in one of his secret signals.

And now—

"Now that you're down, in the dust, I'm going to kill you," Rawlins flared at Asa's bowed back.

The gun tensed. Asa seemed to put forth a hand to beg for mercy. His finger-tip touched Starlight's hock. The horse started, as there came—the crash of a flaming gun!

The giant stallion spun about, as on a pivot, began a buck.

Asa fell forward, staggered upright, as the stallion reared, squealing and reaching back for his cruel rider, unmindful of crush of agonizing bit-iron on tender mouth. Rawlins, caught unaware, pitched headforemost out of the saddle, struck on the hard ground, rolled over and over. Starlight slid, hoofs outspread, trying to turn. As Rawlins rolled, a gun whirred from his laxed belt. It came sliding across the firm-packed soil, to Asa's very feet.

It was Dick's gun. Asa stooped and got it. A blood-mist before his eyes, he strove to come upright, to get the gun's muzzle in line, to fan the hammer, to drive failing muscles to do his will.

Rawlins's own gun, as he slithered, sprawled out, flew aside too. Rawlins ceased to slide, staggered to his feet, like a cat, for activity, yet dazed from the shock. His avid hands sought for the weapons, pawing his belt futilely. Then the Derringer, that never yet had failed him! He slapped his right hand over under his left armpit, whirled out the weapon, steadied for the shot.

Starlight, behind him, was advancing.

Asa called hoarsely: "*Starlight, take him! Oh, Starlight!*"

Stiffly erect now, Asa swung his gun into line—it wavered—his body sagged forward—Rawlins, unmindful of Starlight's advance, snarled into wolfish laughter. Asa's gun-muzzle fell; the six exploded futilely, the bullet thudding into the ground at his feet. He pitched forward, on his face, too weak to go *through*.

"Got you th' firs' time," Rawlins bellowed. "I never miss."

He was so intent upon his revenge that he did not heed or hear the thrumming hoofs. Starlight reared over him as the Derringer flamed out at the prostrate man. Asa's body jerked as the ball smashed into it—a red weal showed at his temple. And then—

A whirlwind of death descended upon the old-time killer—an irresistible avalanche composed of stamping hoofs, shod with steel that flashed with death.

Followed now the brief threshing of a swart soul from a hate-brewed body. In a flash it ended. The horse, eyes blazing, stood over his master's form. Then his head drooped, his eyes paled to kindly, yearning luster.

He nosed at the form that was there, so still, so limp. He whickered, ah, so softly. There was no answer.

"Asa!" Bess called as she reached the stricken man. "Asa!"

He glanced up wanly.

"He got me, he did, lil girl," murmuringly; "got me, yes, twice; but *not deep*. Old Starlight threw his aim off, first by his buck, then by his rush. I'm goin' to keep right on livin', now that there's so much to live for—more than I ever had before, lil girl. It's all right now. No one's ever going to know about that money. It's all right now."

Starlight edged his nose in between the girl's face and that of the one being he loved—and whinnied a deep love-note.

Asa nudged his head deeper into the soft cushion of the girl's shoulder. Her cool hands were on his brow.

"Lil ol' cuss, you Starlight," Asa whispered. "Lil ol' cuss. You got me into this—an' out!"

And Starlight? He whinnied again!

(The end.)

From Natural Causes

by Raymond Lester

"I'VE had more than enough. I'm through!" Further expressing his disgust with an angry curse, Franklin Kent pitched the leather dice-box across the table. Then kicking back his chair, he stood up unsteadily and scowled resentfully at the four men who shared among them the money that *had* been his.

"Kent's a poor sport," grunted one of the players. "Let's get on with the game. What? You going, too, Genter?"

"Yes; it's nearly three o'clock. I'll leave you fellers to fight it out. Wait while I find my hat, Kent; I'll walk down with you."

At the door of the shady hotel Kent lurched in the direction of Sixth Avenue, and Genter followed. He kept on the curb-side of his companion, and more than once prevented him from stumbling into the gutter.

"It is the fresh air coming on top of all that smoke and booze," remarked Genter as he steered Kent around the corner of the block into Sixth Avenue. "You'll be all right in a while. Here, take this. It 'll pull you round and in five minutes you won't know you've had a drink."

Dispensing with the formality of a word of thanks, Kent gulped down the little white tablet offered by Genter, and walked on without stopping his hurrying, erratic stride. Genter kept pace, and with every tenth step it was noticeable that Kent had become more erect and steadier. By the time the two had passed Fourteenth Street, he was walking normally, and the stupid look of partial intoxication had gone from his face.

"Better now!" exclaimed Genter with a sidelong scrutiny of the young man's dark, regular profile. "That's the dope to straighten you up. Trust me, I know what 'll put a feller straight or—knock him cold."

"You've certainly proved the first part, doc," agreed Kent, glancing at Genter's sallow face. "Got any more tablets?"

"I have."

"Slip me a couple. They might come in handy another time."

"No doubt they would," agreed Genter, with a sneering quirk of his loose-lipped mouth; "but I'm not giving them away or selling them. Now and again I don't mind passing one to a pal—like you, for instance, who takes it right on the spot, but I'm not chancing a druggist getting hold of one. He'd analyze it, pinch my formula, and clean up a fortune."

"Why don't you make them in bulk and sell them?"

"No capital to advertise and corner the market. Before I sold half a gross I'd be swamped with competitors. I need money, same as you. I suppose you're really broke again?"

"Sure. Anyway, that fifty bucks I dropped this evening wouldn't have been much good to you."

"I wasn't thinking of that," retorted Genter; "but—you remember what I said last time? And take it from me, I'm not letting anything pass me." The yellow, prematurely lined features took on a crafty look of caution. "Look here," he went on, "you never know when either of us might see a chance, with a little help, of making a clean-up. Are you game to come in with me if I spot a good thing?"

"Sure. Provided there's not too much risk. I've got a soft, easy job that's worth keeping, unless something real good turns up."

"And if you should see an opportunity, you'll call on me?"

"I'm not likely to run into anything worth while," muttered Kent. "It's up to you. Maybe in a hundred years from now you'll run into a sure thing—"

"And maybe I might find the bonanza right near where you hang out. I'm awake and you're half asleep. Doesn't it stand to reason that an old man who can afford to pay you fifty dollars a month for doing practically nothing must have a nest-egg stowed away somewhere? You told me he seldom goes out, and you handle all his mail. Therefore—well, think it out for yourself, and if you strike a promising line of thought, let me know. Here's my shanty."

"So, that's what he was working round to," thought Kent as he walked toward lower Fifth Avenue. "Queer bird, he is. Seems to know all about drugs. He don't sniff, but I bet he makes his bit passing round the snow and coke. That's the graft of those broken-down doctors and chemists. Doc Genter's an old-timer. I wonder what he went up for? Some devilment with drugs, I'll bet. That tablet he gave me is some setter-up, all right. He's as clever as they make 'em, but I suppose the booze got him, like it gets me—when I can get enough.

"Gosh! If I could make a stake, I'd give that old fool Hennepin the go-by. Crazy old bug! Makes me sick. I suppose if he knew I flew the coop from twelve to three, he'd shove me out on the street. I guess that saffron-faced Genter is right. The old boy's got a pile in that safe of his. No doubt about it. Does that foxy doc know more than he let drop, or was he kind o' prospecting and egging me on to giving a look around?"

These jerky thoughts of Franklin Kent throw an interesting, if appalling, sidelight on some men's capacity for ingratitude of a particularly base order. Kent, if one did not observe too critically his close-set, dark eyes, and the quick readiness of his smile, would pass as a pleasant, good-looking young man; but he was an example of stupendously callous selfishness. He owed much to Michael Hennepin, yet secretly nursed contempt and resentment against his benefactor.

"You will abstain from all alcoholic liquor, and you will not be out later than eleven—is that agreed? Have I your word of honor that you will keep these conditions?"

These had been the simple words of the sole restraint placed upon Kent's freedom of action when old man Hennepin had salvaged him from a park bench and taken him into his employ as secretary and companion.

With glib earnestness Kent had promised to keep his word; but his sense of honor, compared with his love for drinking and gambling, was a bad second. He had crept out of the house on the night he received his first month's pay. For nine months he had successfully lived this life of deception, and easily stifled the old man's inquiries respecting the disposal of his money, by explaining that he sent nearly all of it to his mother.

Kent had no memory of a mother, but he had no compunction about embroidering his lie by reading bits of fake letters to the old man.

Michael Hennepin believed it all, and Kent flattered himself that he was a devilish clever fellow. Fed, clothed, sheltered, and well paid by his employer, the young

man had no memories of gratitude for the night he had been rescued from starvation and complete destitution. It is true he had been vaguely puzzled, and very suspicious of the old man's extraordinary kindness, but when he found that Hennepin really trusted him he put him down as a simp and a crank.

Doc Genter's hint at future prospects took root; and when, next morning, Kent went up-stairs with the old man's newspaper, his hypocrisy was working with suave smoothness.

Michael Hennepin was in a mood of peevish irritability; but the young man read the paper for half an hour, and when he went away he smiled soothingly at the old man's snappy order to go.

"Cranky, disagreeable old beast," muttered Kent when he returned to his own room, and placed Hennepin's ill-temper down to crabbed old age. In this he was wrong, for Hennepin's grumpiness was due to an alarming discovery.

It was his habit, immediately upon getting up in the morning, to open the safe that stood by his bedside. This custom of the old man did nobody any harm, and gave him some comfort in his old age. All of Hennepin's kith and kin had either gone the way of all flesh, or had lost touch with the old man.

In addition to treasures, intrinsic and sentimental, that were locked in the safe, was a photograph. Coincident with the arrival of Franklin Kent, the old man had made a practise of looking at the photograph; but this morning he had been unable to do so. He awoke, clear-headed as usual, but the combination of the safe had entirely gone out of his mind.

This bewildering failure of memory filled the old man with dread, and when, toward noon, he succeeded in calling back the forgotten letters, he hastily scribbled the combination down on a slip of paper, and, absentmindedness persisting, laid the paper in the folded sheet of a rough draft of a letter he had written in reply to an appeal from a charity organization.

When he closed the safe Hennepin wrote out a check, and, summoning Kent, gave him the letter to write.

When the young man came in with the typewritten copy for signature there was a watchful and suspicious look in his eyes. Had Hennepin "planted" that slip of paper in the letter, or was it an accident?

Toward evening the old man remembered that he had written down the combination, and although the letters were now again fixed in his mind, he could not think what he had done with the paper. He had no memory of placing it in the letter, and when he found the slip on the floor near the door he contented himself with the belief that it had blown off the table.

At twelve o'clock that night Kent hurried round to Genter's lodgings.

II.

"So soon!" exclaimed Genter, when he opened the door of the room that served him as bedroom, living-room and laboratory. "Any news—or have you come to try and borrow a bit more to carry you on till next pay-day?"

"I can do with a ten-spot," snapped Kent quickly; "but I've got something to tell you. Maybe it is only a try-out of the old man's, but I don't think so. Anyway, I've covered my tracks. Say, what's all that junk? Those tubes, and that microscope? I'll bet that cost a pile."

"It certainly did, but it was bought in the days before my—er—indiscretion. All you see here are the remnants of my laboratory, before I was crossed off the rolls of recognized practitioners," said Genter indifferently, and added with a cold, cynical sneer: "I still manage to make a bit on the side, doctoring secret drinkers and doping imbeciles."

"Then you're really a doctor?"

"One time specialist in bacteriology, if you know what that is. However, it doesn't matter if you do or not. What is it you've been up to—cracking your patron's strongbox?"

"Not quite, but something near as good. I've got the combination."

A flush stole over Doc Genter's yellow cheeks and tinted them a dull orange. Fast and thick came his questions, and although Kent would not show him the combination,

Genter dismissed the idea that the old man had laid a trap.

"It is a million to one it was an accident," asserted the disgraced doctor. "Depend upon it, the old man's memory has been playing him tricks. You say you've noticed he's been getting absentminded and forgetful. Well, there's the answer. Now, the thing to do is for you to get back to the house soon and don't slip out at night until I'm ready.

"This is too good an opportunity to spoil by letting him find out you're not the good little boy he believes you to be. Keep him quiet, and we'll rake in a worth-while stake. Wait, run over all the ordinary things you do in a day. I've looked up the old man's past, and although he's been more or less of a hermit for twenty years, I'm precious near to proof that he has something worth over a hundred thousand dollars in that safe."

An expression of flaming greed distended Kent's eyes, but his lips curled in mocking disbelief.

"Why not make it two hundred or a quarter of a million?" he asked sarcastically. "May as well go the whole hog while you're about it."

"Very well, then, I will; but let me caution you, young-feller-me-lad, not to develop an overplus of freshness. I can cure lots of ills, and I can also—well, no need to go any further. It won't pay either of us to fall out, but listen to this: in less than twelve hours I'll know almost to a certainty whether Hennepin has actually over a quarter of a million dollars' worth of stuff by his bedside; and if so, it is ours for the taking.

"Finding that combination helps a lot; for neither of us would be any good trying to force that safe. And I had no fancy for bringing in a third party."

"But the old man's a light sleeper, and keeps an automatic under his pillow. It's a cert he'd wake up, and we'd have to—"

"Put him to sleep again," finished Genter, with a horrible leer. "What of it?"

The young man raised a trembling hand to his lips, and bit nervously at his fingernails.

"Too risky," he muttered. "I'm off violence. Sooner or later we'd be sure to get caught."

"Of course we would, if we went for him the way you are thinking of. You forget there may be another way of closing the old man's mouth without hitting him over the head or plugging him with a bullet. My dear fellow, you lack imagination. Supposing I guarantee that the old chap can be safely put into the long sleep, and that the cleverest doctor in the whole world will not be able to tell that he did not die from *natural causes!* What then?"

The thing seemed impossible, but the grim, revolting earnestness of Doc Genter's words carried conviction.

"Then I say yes; but how—"

"That's my part," said Genter. "Now, don't waste time arguing; you don't know anything about anatomy, or drugs, or bacterial cultures, so leave me to do my part. Now, tell me everything that takes place during the day, from the moment he wakes until you leave him at night."

With a fair degree of consecutiveness Kent outlined an average day's program.

Doc Genter listened without a word of interruption until Kent came to the end of his narration.

"Conditions are favorable. You're all alone in the house with him, and I don't suppose that any one in the world suspects what he has in his safe. Not that it matters, for he'll pass out from natural causes, and we can open the safe without leaving the slightest clue. How often have you missed massaging the old chap's arms and shoulders before he goes to bed?"

"Once, that's all, and then he called me up in the middle of the night. He kids himself he has rheumatism, but I reckon it is just a fad."

The yellow-skinned doctor rubbed his bony hands together.

"Fine," he gloated. "A useful fancy, anyway. Come and see me the night after next, and I'll tell you everything. No, not now. You've been away too long. There's a remote possibility he might discover your absence and—well, you can see the risk. He'd fire you, and we'd be done."

Ruled by the older, stronger willed man, and by the hope of realizing a huge for-

tune, Kent obeyed instructions and went straight back to the Hennepin house. Stealthily letting himself in with the key he had had made for his private and sneaky use, he went to bed and lay awake all night spending in fancy the money he hoped would soon be his.

As for Genter, ten minutes following Kent's departure he went for a short walk, and returned to his room with a strange aid to the crime he contemplated. Under his coat he carried a stray, half-starved cat.

"From natural causes," he muttered with an evil grin as he carefully gagged the animal and placed it in a wire cage connected with a small electric battery. He then set this contrivance to deliver a mild but sleep-preventing shock every thirty seconds, and then he went to bed. He slept, but in the gloom flared a pair of feline, wakeful eyes.

In the morning, with scarcely a glance at his prisoner, Doc Genter went to the public library, and looked up the files of a twenty-year-old newspaper. There he found the full story of the misfortune that had sent Michael Hennepin into retirement, and in the reports of the transactions and change of ownership that had taken place in the sales of valuable and notable precious stones he found again the name of Hennepin in three noteworthy instances.

On the following evening Doc Genter took a few drops of blood from the cat. Its purpose being served, he then turned it loose. Not having closed its eyes during its forty odd hours of incarceration in the cage, the animal staggered away a few feet and dropped down in a sleep of utter exhaustion. Before twelve o'clock the doctor's final preparations were complete.

"If that young fool Kent does his part, nothing can stop me," he gloated as he filled two hypodermic syringes with a pale, straw-colored fluid and placed them carefully in a drawer. "It's a cinch I shall—"

A sudden spasm shook him, and in the grip of constricting pain he staggered to a closet. A red cloud was before his eyes as his fingers closed on a small vial. He pressed it to his mouth and drained the contents.

The change was miraculous. The greenish pallor faded from his drawn face, the light returned to his eyes.

"Elixir of life!" he gasped as he drew a long breath. "I'll have to prepare some more. Plenty of time for that, though. I don't suppose I'll get another attack for a month or more. They're pretty regular. Ah! Here's my young friend. It's a bit risky to have him here, but once is quite enough for me to go to the old man's house. To-morrow will be my turn, and if I'd gone to Kent to-night I'd double my risk of being seen and remembered."

III.

It was a very brief but clear and promising tale that Doc Genter told the eager, listening Kent.

"I believe you're right!" exclaimed the young man.

"Of course I am. Twenty years ago the old man lost his only son. He retired from business and shut himself up in that house. I have the dates and the prices he paid when he bought those three famous diamonds, but there is no record of their resale. They were well known, and if he had disposed of them the names of the new owners would have been reported. The inference is, he's got them. Now, here's the plan."

In a few rapid words Genter outlined the villainous program he had made out for the following night.

"I'll be at the basement door at ten minutes of nine. I'll bring the stuff with me, and all you'll have to do will be to prick the old man just here."

Kent shuddered as Genter prodded the back of his neck with his bony forefinger.

"It 'll be easy enough to do while you're rubbing his shoulders. He'll go off in fifteen seconds. In the morning you'll report his sudden death, and the very fact of your being the one to do so will clear you of all suspicion.

Not that it matters, for as I have already told you, no autopsy, however thorough, will reveal any poison or drug. The coroner's verdict cannot be other than death from natural causes. I'll take the diamonds, and in a few days we'll be on our

way to Amsterdam, where we'll have them recut."

With nervous doubt Kent went backward and forward over the minute details, but as he could find no improvement on Genter's scheme he had to agree to the nerve-testing job of staying in the house.

"Poor simp," muttered Genter, when he had at last got rid of his confederate. "It is best to let idiots like him talk until they convince themselves. To-morrow night it will be my turn, but I won't need to do much palavering. I wonder what made Hennepin take Kent in? He's not worth his board."

At ten minutes to nine Genter slipped unseen through the basement door, and on the stroke of nine Kent entered the old man's room.

In his right hand he carried the bottle of liniment, and clenched in his left fist was the syringe.

"Just one prick at the base of the skull," Genter had instructed, and the words repeated themselves in a mad refrain in Kent's treacherous, agitated mind.

"You don't look so well as you might," remarked the old man as Kent approached. "I shall have to send you away on a vacation. What's the matter with you? You are trembling like a leaf."

"It is nothing—only a bit of headache," said Kent in a hoarse whisper. As he spoke he passed behind the old man's chair. "How are you feeling?"

Michael Hennepin made no coherent, audible reply. He gave a faint cry, muttered a word or two, and sagged gently in his chair.

Allowing his victim to slide to the floor, Kent stooped in front of the safe and twirled the knob. In a morocco case, beneath a folded sheet of stout paper which he hastily threw aside, he found his reward, and the blaze of the big stones awakened his cupidity, drove all fear from his mind, and he crouched there feasting his fascinated eyes.

Creeping upon him unheard came a venomous, greater criminal. *His* hand did not tremble, and the needle of the second syringe went true as the dart of a viper's tongue to the vital spot.

Younger, stronger, and therefore offering more resistance to the immediate effect of the toxin, Kent dropped the case and sprang to his feet with a loud cry. He lurched as he leaped at Doc Genter, but his clutching hands got a hold before the other could avoid the totally unexpected attack. A short but fierce struggle followed, and overborne by the weight, more than by Kent's rapidly failing strength, Genter fell back against the table.

The lamp overturned and the bulb exploded. Came the sound of a heavy fall. Followed a gasping, half-strangled curse, a stumbling scuffling that diminished and dwindled to a dragging halt. Then came a shuddering, animal-like moan and—silence.

Until day broke and dawn strengthened to bright sunlight, there was no further sound of movement in the house of tragedy. Yet in one of the figures that lay on the floor of Michael Hennepin's room there was a fluttering breath of life that grew stronger and more regular as the day advanced.

The hand of Franklin Kent had trembled, but that of Doc Genter had gone true to the mark. It was Michael Hennepin who stirred and presently sat up. It was some time before his confused and badly shocked mind enabled him to partially realize his position and what had taken place.

Dragging himself to his feet, the old man bent over the body of Kent. He shook him feebly, then staggered to the door. Half crazed with horror, he stumbled over a figure that lay crumpled on the floor outside his room door.

The distraught old man gave one look at the horribly contorted, yellow face that lay staring upward with unseeing eyes, and tottered down the stairs. Unconscious that he had nothing on but pajamas, he flung open the front door and shrieked for help.

When the policeman pushed his way through the gaping crowd the old man was sobbing with hysteric abandon.

IV.

THREE days later the detectives pieced together the plot that Genter had originated

and instilled into Kent's willing mind. The chief detective and the doctor called on Michael Hennepin. He was in bed, and a nurse was in attendance, but his recuperative powers were a wonder to the doctor.

"A marvelous escape!" he exclaimed. "He missed inoculating you at the apex of the spine. Otherwise you could not have recovered. Kent's death proved that. Although we have found that Genter gave him a much stronger dose, the weaker inoculation would have caused your death if it had been administered in the right spot. Kent passed from poison-induced exhaustion to the long sleep of death.

"Had we not been able to analyze the toxin left in the syringes, it is probable that we could not have obtained absolute proof of anything but death from natural causes."

"Genter," observed the detective, "undoubtedly planned to let Kent do the dirty work, then finish him, get away with your diamonds, and leave us with a mystery to solve."

"But how did Genter die?" asked the old man.

"Natural causes," observed the doctor dryly. "He had a heart that was nearly as rotten as his mind, and his struggle with Kent finished him. I've never heard of a more cold-blooded brute. The appliances in his laboratory show that he must have kept a cat prisoner there and tortured it by keeping it awake. In fact, the very cat he used was found. We discovered the puncture where he drew off the poor animal's fatigue-poisoned blood. From this he made a culture of redoubled strength. In other words, he used his scientific knowledge of bacteria to a bad end, and made a poison far subtler than anything that can be obtained from drugs."

Michael Hennepin sighed.

"Don't have any regret, Mr. Hennepin," said the doctor bluffly. "They both deserved their fate."

"Yes, that may be so, but it was so—so unnecessary. Look at this."

From beneath his pillow the old man took a faded photograph and a folded sheet of stout paper. He handed the photograph to the doctor, and the chief detective looked over the former's shoulder.

"Seems to be a bit like Kent," he remarked. "But it is not him, I can see that."

"It is a picture of my son," said Hennepin. "He died over twenty years ago, and in memory of him I took Kent in, and although I never told him I intended to do much for him, I was going to legally adopt him if I found him worthy after he had been with me a year. And in the event of my sudden death before that time, I made this out. I kept it in the case with the diamonds."

"Your will!" exclaimed the doctor and detective simultaneously as the old man unfolded the paper.

"Made out in favor of Franklin Kent," said Hennepin sadly. "His own hand actually touched this document when he opened the case to rob me."

THE RIFT

YOU pass unseeing by me, and I hate you:
You are so selfish, and so few in years;
And you are rude with joy, and hard, bright laughter
To one who has known tears.

But if some day we come again together,
When you have suffered, and my great wound mends,
O then, there will be love and understanding,
Ah, then, we can be friends!

Marion Ethel Hamilton.

While Dorion Lives

by 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 has 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 steamers 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, and he won the support of Paul Cawmill, lumberman, whose business he took over after repulsing a mob of the McGraemes single-handed and humiliating La Rue, the latter bank manager and justice of the peace, and the former schooner owners and smugglers with their stronghold at Presqu' Ile, where Maitland discovered the very timber of which he was in search. The work of cutting began, but La Rue instituted a strike and became Maitland's bitter foe. Meanwhile Maitland had met Jeanne Dorion, at first in an unfriendly encounter as her uncle, Jeremiah McGraeme, claimed for her the timber lands Maitland had purchased from the government, but later, when she came to know Will better, she told him how she had become a mere tool, having been forced to marry Emile Dorion, the seigneur, formerly at enmity with the McGraemes, in order to get the disputed lands into the family. But she had been Dorion's wife in name only, he having been lost at sea a few hours after the ceremony. In the walk in which Jeanne confided all this to Maitland, they chanced to meet Philippe La Rue, who offered to escort Jeanne as far as her uncle's house. But when she explained that she had the escort of Maitland, La Rue retorted: "That is why I offered you mine."

"Just what do you mean by that?" Will demanded, stepping forward.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRAP.

THE girl stepped hastily between them. "Never mind, Mr. Maitland," she began. "I do not need your escort, Philippe. Won't you please leave us?"

"Unless he has something further to say to me," suggested Will hotly.

"Since you invite me, Mr. Maitland," sneered the notary. "I am not afraid of you, as you suppose, and if you lay your hands on me you'll learn that there's law and order even in Bonne Chance. Don't presume too far on our tolerance, or think that you can impose on our community with your fists."

"Is that what you have to say?"

"No! This is what I have to say! I've just come from Mr. McGraeme's house, and I understand that he wishes to show you every consideration pending the legal decision. But nevertheless you and Mme. Dorion are opponents in this case. I am her representative. I am justified in advising her not to permit herself to be waylaid by you and perhaps persuaded, or even compelled to take some action inimical to her interests."

"I was not waylaid by Mr. Maitland!" cried Jeanne hotly. "And I am quite capable of protecting my interests!"

"Now," said Will, "you have advised her, and you have heard her answer."

La Rue turned to Jeanne. "*Madame,*

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

I ask again to be allowed to see you home. Otherwise—"

"Are you going to threaten me, Philippe La Rue?" asked the girl, with sudden anger.

"I am going to do my best for you and your uncle," he answered sullenly.

"Then I don't want your escort, if you must have it!"

"Therefore, you will kindly go on your way," Will added.

La Rue removed his hat again with a mocking bow, and, without glancing at Will, proceeded along the road. Jeanne watched him for a few moments. Then she turned to Will with a troubled look.

"He is going to make trouble for us," she said. "But I'm glad"—she held out her hand again—"glad we are friends!"

On the following morning Will's tide of ill-fortune began to turn, and Jeremiah's prognostication proved to be true.

It began with a deputation from the strikers, followed by the whole gang, and headed by Poulin, imploring Will to take them back again at their former wages. Ten days of steady drinking had depleted their funds to the vanishing point; nagged by their wives incessantly, and with the fear of their winter's jobs gone irretrievably, they had leaped at the mysterious hint circulated the night before that they would better go back to work.

They were frantic with fear of such a winter as Bonne Chance too often knew, through which one lived on food doled out by Alphonso Belley, the usurer, to be worked out with bitter labor among the seals, and in the camps during the ensuing summer.

By noon Will had the whole gang in the woods at work again, and the sound of the ax rang everywhere. The mill hummed, and the sawn fir-planks rapidly accumulated, ready for conveyance to Quebec.

Jeremiah McGraeme proved as good as his word, and, if he or La Rue chuckled in secret over any ulterior plan, everything ran for Will with perfect smoothness. It was now the middle of November, but the schooners were already being loaded, and would depart in a day or two.

Jeremiah's two vessels, those owned by the clan, and several more had been requisitioned, and the small sample load was going to become a fair-sized shipment. Angus, Eudore, and Alexandre participated in the loading; their manner was surly enough, but they were not Will's employees, and they seldom met.

It was a day or two before Will met Jeanne again. That was outside the post-office. She came up to him at once.

"I want to tell you," she said hurriedly, "I am convinced I was right when I said some scheme was being planned to injure you. The McGraemes laugh about something among themselves. You must be more careful than ever. Philippe La Rue is my enemy, now, and he has told my uncle of our meeting, and my uncle has not said one word to me. That alone would make me suspect some scheme. They are suspicious of me. They mean to ruin you. I want you to promise you'll be careful."

"I promise you I'm not asleep. But when shall I see you?"

She seemed disconcerted. "Mr. Maitland, I spoke foolishly to you that day. I was distressed, and I hardly realized what I said."

"You are not going back on our pledge?"

She laughed. "If it meant anything to you—"

"It meant that we were to be friends, whatever the outcome of this trouble about the lands."

"You didn't think, then—"

"What?"

"That I was presumptuous in asking help of you, after the way I had treated you, and that I was foolish?"

"I thought you were honoring me in making me your confidant."

"I've been worried since, because I thought I should not have told you what I did. But I meant it, Mr. Maitland," she continued earnestly. "Only just now this wretched business upsets me, I am so anxious about your shipment, and afraid some trap is being laid for you. You will be as careful and watchful as you can?"

"I will," he answered, impressed by her seriousness.

He knew that Jeanne had come to occupy his thoughts to an unreasonable degree. Now there would flash into his mind a picture of her, heading the crowd at the hotel, commanding him to leave the settlement, now he would see her taunting him from her horse upon the dunes, now apologetic and ashamed, but always loyal and brave, and strong in a sort of innocence which was, as it were, a spiritual armor.

Because it was years since any woman had entered his life, he told himself that he was a fool, and twice Jeanne Dorion's age, and put himself to work the harder. At last the loading was completed, and the schooners were to sail on the morning's tide. Will sat in his shack resting.

He was thinking that he would at last have a little leisure, and he meant to use it in order to discover the secret of the approach to the interior of Presqu' Ile. There must be a way through the swamps, a passage across the ravine.

Paul, to whom he had spoken of the matter, had at first professed ignorance, and had then given him one of those mysterious looks that were at once irritating and baffling. Jules Gingras had denied all knowledge of such a road.

Will was sure that it was known to every one of his workmen; but in their fear of the McGraemes, and with the natural secretiveness of the rustic mind, even his most loyal workmen had banded themselves together not to reveal it.

He did not blame them for preserving this secret of the countryside, but he was all the more resolved to find it out for himself. He was to discover it much more speedily than he had imagined. For as he sat there of a sudden the gibbering presence of Jean Desmoulins loomed out of the fog that had enwrapped Presqu' Ile.

"Ai, *monsieur*, you are to go to her!" babbled the idiot.

Will got up. "What's that? Who sent you here?" he asked.

"Ai, *monsieur*, it is she! It is Mme. Dorion! She has fallen down the cliff! She cannot move! She must see you at once, to tell you something!"

Will took him by the shoulders. "Who sent you to tell me that?" he said.

"Ai, *monsieur*, Mme. Dorion is hurt! Ai, come at once, *monsieur!*"

It was like the mechanical repetition of some record, impressed on the half-wit's brain. There was nothing more to be learned from Jean.

Will strode out of the shack in the wake of the half-wit, who was already striking his way across the swamps. The road which he had cut to the bay, along which the flume was ultimately to run, had been built with a great deal of patient labor and care; it ran in places on a firm substratum beneath shallow deposits of quicksand; piles had been driven here and there for a foundation, and corduroys laid down; out of it little trails ran everywhere, made by no stronger agency than the foxes which swarmed on the peninsula, and any of these might bear a man's weight or plunge him into a fathomless depth of bog and muskeg.

Yet Jean, leaving the road, struck out with sure confidence, and made his way along a narrow trail with withered swamp growth on either side of it. It wound interminably along the base of the hills, and Will could only vaguely estimate that they were roughly paralleling the Presqu' Ile shore.

Then, of a sudden, when he imagined that they were a quarter of a mile from the bay, there was disclosed before them a wide creek, narrowing, at the shore, into a hardly perceptible inlet, overgrown with bushes.

Yet in the mouth of the inlet, filling it entirely, a schooner lay moored and afloat. One might have swept the Presqu' Ile shore with glasses from the bay, and never dreamed that such an entrance existed.

Before them the ravine extended, its sheer cliffs sloping to the water's edge. They had approached through a break in the near side of the rocky wall, accessible only by means of the trail they had taken. It was impossible to follow the stream inland along either bank, for, at a distance of fifty yards, the cliffs rose to their prodigious height on either side of it.

Jean gibbered, and pointed to the schooner, and then, with a gesture of secrecy, swung to the left, and they began

to traverse an upland tract of spruce. Ten minutes more, and again the transverse ravine yawned in front of them. Will saw that at the point which they had reached the two sides, almost hidden beneath the trees, which grew to the very edges, approached each other within four or five feet.

Only here, for the ravine widened east and west, and the whole locality was so overgrown with brush and taller timber that one might never have guessed such a place existed, unless he stood there.

Jean leaped the chasm, and Will followed him. The half-wit struck straight out toward Bout de l'Ile. The river was not within sight, and Will was completely puzzled by the many twists and turns they had taken. He realized, however, that the chasm could be crossed from either side at this one point, and that there was a second passage down to the bay.

As they went on, with the woodsman's eye Will began to recognize the scenery. He had passed that way on the day of his exploration of the farther end of the peninsula from the lighthouse. He had traversed the same glades, turning back just where he was walking at present, and Jeanne must have been just across the leaping-point when he had seen her.

It seemed that Jean was leading the way immediately toward the lighthouse, but the man skirted the ravine, and presently came to a stop on the extreme edge.

At this point huge boulders overhung it, their bases enlaced with roots of trees. The tap-root of a huge pine formed a great arch between two rocks, each as large as Will's shack. Jean glanced back, gibbered, and swung himself beneath the archway.

Peering into the gloom, Will saw the rungs of a ladder just below the surface of the ground.

In a moment he was descending. The ladder was a long one; he counted twenty rungs before he saw a faint light at the bottom, and emerged in a cave half-way up the face of the cliff, concealed from sight on either side of the ravine by the overhanging rocks. From the mouth of the cave a winding track led down to the bottom of the cleft.

Jean looked back and pointed. Will followed him down the track, which had been widened here and there by cutting into the débris of the rocky wall. In a minute or two they reached the bottom of the ravine.

Jean scampered on. At first the passage seemed to lead straight toward the bay, until Will expected to see the rocky shore in front of him; but then it turned northward, paralleling the length of the peninsula. They began to scramble up among great masses of rock that strewed the ground as fantastically as if they had been hurled about by giants.

They struggled up a trail. High overhead towered the great watch-tower of scarp, the heart of the peninsula. They reached the summit of the precipice. And now the secret of the ravine disclosed itself.

They were standing on a road, the two or three inches of snow that covered it trodden hard by innumerable footsteps. The road ran down from the uplands to the gorge in which the stream flowed to the bay. They could hear the beating of the waves against the rocks of Presqu' Ile shore, which could not have been more than three hundred yards away.

But those three hundred yards were impassable, except by water. The road ended on the hither side of the great cliffs that barred the entrance. The only access by land was the immensely circuitous route that Jean had shown. By boat one could pass immediately into the bay through the hidden entrance. It was small wonder that the retreat of the McGraemes had remained undiscovered.

Will followed Jean up the road, which presently began to dip into a small, cup-shaped valley. It was a settlement, for it contained two or three fairly substantial cabins, and a strip of cultivated land, ragged with weeds and stubble. They passed a small, square structure, the still where half the illicit brandy of the countryside was brewed. A thin coil of smoke issued from the low chimney, and there came a blast of warmth from behind the locked doors.

A sudden squall blew in from the sea. The rush of mist obscured the stars. The

rain came down in drenching torrents. Struggling against the fury of the storm, Will followed his guide into the valley.

Here it was more sheltered. The clouds of rain, which drove overhead and lashed the mountainsides, here dropped only a drizzling sleet; but Will's hands were numbed with the frost, and the long journey aroused his fears for Jeanne to fever heat.

They passed a long, barnlike building. Will could see, by the light of two lanterns suspended from the interior of the roof, that it was packed with cases of all sorts and sizes, stacked up against the walls, containing contraband. Within the entrance a large number of brandy kegs were standing, as if they had just arrived, or were awaiting removal.

Jean ambled past, and, approaching the nearer of two cabins, which stood some little distance from the third, began to hammer upon the door, turning round to gibber at Will, who reached the threshold just as the door was opened timidly by the frightened, harassed-looking woman whom he had seen outside the stone chapel on Bout de l'Ile. She screamed a shrill inquiry at the grinning half-wit.

Will glanced past her into the cabin. It was a typical *habitant* dwelling, with a kitchen and living-room on the ground floor, and an upper story. The beams and rafters were of blackened pine. A long pipe from the kitchen stove protruded its sections through the wall, ascending to the upper part of the structure. There were a table, two or three chairs of the cheapest kind, and a gaudy, ill-woven rug of native workmanship upon the floor. On the walls were chromo lithographs of Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the Holy Family.

"Where is Mme. Dorion?" demanded Will, turning upon the woman. And, as she stared at him in fright, muttering unintelligibly, "She has been hurt!" he continued. "Where is she? Is she in this house?"

"*En haut, monsieur,*" gibbered Jean, pointing up the tumble-down stairs, which now began to be discernible in a far corner, by the light of a flickering oil lamp upon a shelf.

Jean disappeared into the rain. Disregarding the woman's shrill exclamations, filled with suspicion of some harm to Jeanne, Will ran toward the stairs, scaled them, and emerged into a single room running the whole length of the upper story, and containing three stretcher beds covered with dirty blankets, and a guttering candle.

Jeanne was not there. The room was empty. Will turned and went quickly to the head of the stairs. The woman was standing below, peering up at him with her hand over her eyes, and chattering in her shrill tones.

"Where is Mme. Dorion?" shouted Will again. And, as the woman shrilled back something that hardly sounded like mortal speech, he made his way quickly down.

"Mme. Dorion!" he bawled in Mrs. Angus's ear.

"She is not here!" she shrieked. "How should she be here?"

"She has been hurt. She sent for me."

"They lied to you, *monsieur*. It was Jean the Fool. Nobody listens to Jean the Fool. She has not been hurt, and she did not send for you. Merciful Heavens, what should she be doing at night on Presqu' Ile? You have been betrayed, *monsieur*. Run, while there is time!"

She clutched him fiercely by the arm. "The men will be back here in a moment!" she cried. "If they find you here they will murder you. I can't have murdering; I've got enough to stand. Go, M. Maitland!"

She pointed desperately through the open doorway into the darkness. The storm had increased in violence; gusts of wind drove the rain violently against the windows of the cabin, whistling into the room, and all but extinguishing the flickering oil-lamp.

"Go, M. Maitland!" shrilled the woman, and suddenly stopped, finger on lips. She darted to the door and closed it. Above the squalling wind and pelting rain they heard shouts of men running toward the cabin. There came a beating of fists against the door.

"Hide yourself!" whispered the woman, trembling, and pointing up to the loft.

"Quick! They'll kill you if they find you!"

The voice of Duncan bellowed without. "Open the door, Rose! We know you have that spy, Maitland, with you!"

The woman cast a desperate look at Will. She seemed now paralyzed with fear. There came a renewed onset.

"Open the door!" yelled a half-dozen voices. "We've got him! Open! He's trapped us this night, and, by Heaven, he'll pay for it!"

"I'll open the door when my husband orders me!" shrieked Rose McGraeme. "There's nobody here. Angus! Angus!"

The voices yelled in execration. The outlaws beat their fists furiously against the door. They set their shoulders to it. It cracked and swung from the top hinge, disclosing Will standing at the woman's side. With a roar of triumph they flung themselves against it, and the broken door collapsed inward, striking Will to the ground.

As he fell, he saw the little woman tossed aside, and run screaming into the rain. Then he saw Duncan, Eudore, and Alexandre, with two or three others. Eudore thrust a revolver muzzle against Will's forehead.

"*Eh bien, monsieur, l'espion,* we've got you now!" he snarled, his puffy face working with fury at the remembrance of his former punishment.

There was one second of imminent death, and then, as Eudore's finger tightened upon the trigger, one of the band leaped forward and dashed the muzzle aside. This man seemed less drunk than the rest, and Will fancied that he had once worked for him.

"Put up that pistol, Eudore!" he cried. "Give him a chance to tell how he came here."

"*Maudit!*" yelled Eudore, "the Blanche is off the point! That's why he came here!"

Will had managed to struggle to his knees. He remained perfectly still, but every single muscle was tense for action. For an instant a peaceful explanation seemed a possibility.

Then Duncan bellowed, pushed Eudore aside, and came leaping at Will, knife in hand. He struck furiously at his chest. Will's coat caught the knife, which glanced upward, only ripping the skin of his breast, and Will, as if uncoiling himself from his knees, plunged forward, his shoulder catching the smuggler in the stomach. Duncan, losing his balance, collapsed over him.

At the thrust the whole gang sprang forward. Eudore, with an oath, pressed the trigger. But his arm was shaken, and the bullet buried itself in a plank across the room. In the instant of confusion Will found his feet, and, with a sudden bound, wrested the revolver out of Eudore's hands and smashed the butt into his face.

By chance this blow struck the puffy-faced youth in exactly the same place where Will's fist had struck him before, and with exactly the same effect. But this blow had twice the force. Eudore's false teeth went flying into his throat again.

The ruffian plunged his fingers frantically into his gaping mouth, screaming in a high, whistling key, until he had freed his gullet and got his breath, when he bolted, out of action for good, sobbing with pain and choking with blood from the reopened wound.

Meanwhile the remaining five had hurled themselves on Will and wrested the revolver from his hand. He fought back grimly, and they struggled all round the little cabin, smashing into the furniture, which went crashing to the ground, staggering into the walls and rebounding from them.

The lamp was hurled from its shelf, and went out upon the floor with the smash of broken glass. But in the ensuing darkness it was impossible for whoever had the revolver to aim it, and this saved Will from immediate murder.

As the lamp went out he perceived Duncan in front of him, his knife in his hand, pressing through the mob to thrust at him. Upon the outlaw's right was Alexandre, also with a knife. Will seized Duncan's right wrist with his left hand, and ran his knuckles down the back of the fist, a schoolboy trick, the pressure on the sinews opening Duncan's fingers with a spasmodic jerk that sent the knife clattering upon the floor. At the same time he drove his fist

full into Alexandre's face, catching the man between the eyes and hurling him back into the mob behind him.

Conscious that Duncan was his most dangerous antagonist, Will did not loose his hold upon his wrist, but, dragging him with him as he advanced, used his right fist like a piston, with terrific effect against the struggling crowd, closely packed in the dark room.

In this way he inflicted unbearable punishment, knowing that every man was his enemy, while the smugglers could not distinguish him among the crowd, and became jammed together in the door, toward which Will was fighting his way.

Will's hand closed upon a broken chair. Swinging it about him, he cleared his passage; but to do so he was compelled to release Duncan, who made a furious rush at him, butting him in the chest and sending him staggering back. The chair, whirled round his head, struck the long stovepipe, and brought it clattering down, striking Will to the ground, and filling the room with dust and soot.

The fall of the mass of iron dazed Will for a moment. As he tried to rise, the whole pack was upon him with whoops of triumph. A wooden bar struck him across the forehead. He staggered to his knees, but everything was turning black, and Duncan's evil face, glaring into his own, was fading. He heard the smuggler shouting for a knife to finish the job. Blows and kicks rained on him.

And suddenly there came a roar of fire. Coals from the fallen stovepipe had come in contact with the spilled oil from the broken lamp. In an instant the wooden cabin was ablaze. It was so much dry tinder, rotted by years and weather, and parched to a powdery fiber by the inner heat of the cabin. The wind fanned the flames, and they took hold and ran with lightning speed from rafter to rafter.

Duncan, who seemed nonplused without a weapon, kicked Will again and again with brutal savagery. There were yells outside the blazing cabin. Suddenly the smugglers turned and ran. Will, upon the borderland of unconsciousness, was faintly aware that Duncan's kicks had ceased.

He tried to rise, but the fiery heat was all about him, and a wall of fire between him and the door was driving inward upon the wind. Dimly he fancied that he heard Jeanne's voice calling him. He fell back, and a vast pit of darkness seemed to open beneath him.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TRAP IS SPRUNG.

JEANNE'S spontaneous confession to Will had left her ashamed and troubled. She could not understand how she had come to voice her secret thoughts to this stranger, this man who had been, the week before, her enemy. She was careful to avoid him thereafter.

After the meeting outside the post-office, however, she felt more comfortable. He had neither presumed nor misinterpreted her. She thought of him a great deal more than suited her ease of mind, all the same, and the consciousness that something was afoot increased her restlessness.

Her feelings toward La Rue had undergone a complete revulsion. Perhaps it was the contrast between him and Will Maitland.

She could hardly look at him now without aversion. She knew, though his manner toward her was unchanged, and he made no allusion to the encounter on the road, that he had told her uncle. And, as she had told Will, Jeremiah's silence was what convinced her that trouble threatened Will.

The old man, who had come to dominate Bonne Chance by luck and sheer personality, was no match in brains for La Rue or any educated man or woman. He made up for this lack by an intense, half-malignant, half-curious suspicion of every one. Jeanne knew that his impulse would have been to have stormed at her and wrung from her an explanation of her conversation with the common enemy.

He said nothing. He even became jocular. His kinsmen, the McGraemes, who were never admitted to his house as equals, visited him, and he drank their own brandy with them. There was a vast, half-con-

cealed amusement among the members of the McGraeme clan over the fir shipment.

And all of them had come to look upon her, not as an enemy, but as one who could not be trusted. Jeanne had been Jeremiah's go-between; it was she who had enabled her uncle to carry on his business with the smugglers, while maintaining his dignity and aloofness. It was she who signalled "All clear" to the smugglers' schooners from the balcony of the stone chapel, when they lay in the secret cove, awaiting the dip of the flag that was to start them on their run.

Now she had tacitly become an outsider. And, burning with loyalty to her people and hatred of the revenue men, Jeanne felt the new situation intensely.

On the day before the schooners were to sail with Will's lumber, Jeanne could not rest a moment. The household duties were mostly performed by an old *habitant* woman who had worked for her uncle since his wife's death, a number of years before. This left the girl largely free. She spent the day wandering along the shore; a dozen times she was tempted to go to Will; but always the inadequacy of any possible excuse restrained her.

Sunset came. When she returned her uncle seemed in a feverish impatience. He upbraided her with her absence.

"I suppose ye've been with Mr. Maitland, eh, Jeanne?" he purred, in his soft falsetto that preluded the storm.

"Why should you think that?" she demanded, turning to meet his gaze steadily.

Jeremiah exploded in a string of French oaths—he never swore in English; perhaps he had some hazy notion that the Deity spoke English. "Havena ye been gossiping and hobnobbing with him day in and day out along the road, and at the post-office?" he stormed.

It was his first allusion to what he had known for some time.

"I have talked with Mr. Maitland—yes," answered the girl defiantly. "Why not? He is not my enemy."

"Whose is he, then? Tell me that, eh, Jeanne? Whose lands am I fighting for and spending good money with lawyers for?"

"Mine. But did you ask me? Have you consulted me, or given me any accounting for these expenses?"

"Ye're not of age!" thundered Jeremiah; but he winced; she had dealt a home thrust, and he felt as if the ground were cut from under his feet. Jeremiah had considered Jeanne's interest in the lands as something that he need never regard seriously. Legally, an accounting would be due shortly.

"If you are bringing a suit against Mr. Maitland on my account, you haven't treated him rightly," she continued. "You know he is no government man—yet you have set our kinsmen against him. You have permitted Bonne Chance to think that of him, and you knew in your heart it was not true."

"I told him I knew it wasna true!" shouted her uncle. "Go on, Jeanne! Tell me next ye'll marry him and bring the lands to him!"

"You are unjust to me as well," she retorted. "And it all springs from the same root. Since my father brought me to you, you have used me for your own ends. You—"

He took her by the wrists and drew her to the window. His face was pale with passion.

"Dorion again, eh, Jeanne?" he asked; but there was no sneer in his voice now. "Ye're quit of him. It wasna for me. It was for the McGraemes—for you, for the children ye might have had. They were not my ends. Ye've got a bitter tongue, lass, when your heart's speaking through it. Aye, I know!" he let her hands fall. "Go your way, then. If duty counts for nought—"

She was full of remorse instantly. "It's no use saying any more, Uncle Jeremiah," she said. "Let us forget this."

"Aye, we'll forget," he answered sullenly.

She left him and went down to the shore. It had been a clear evening, but the fog was creeping over the bay like a white wall, blotting out, one by one, the distant lights of Bonne Chance. She had never felt so lonely and so wretched. She had told Will of her desire to leave Bonne Chance, but

she knew that its associations hateful though they were, were woven inextricably with her life.

Her uncle cared for her in a way, too, as she for him. If there were some way in which she could turn his mind from his besetting passion, everything would be changed for her. Mingled with these thoughts was her ever-present fear for Will, and her fear lest he should realize the extent of her interest.

She had turned back toward the house when the sight of a dark figure upon the beach startled her. Then she recognized Jean Desmoulins. The half-wit was ambling forward at his accustomed gait; he would have to pass her at that narrow angle of rock and sea, and she stood still and awaited him.

He saw her and tried to dodge past her, but Jeanne held her ground, put out her hand, and caught him by the shoulder.

"What is the matter? Where have you been?" she asked breathlessly.

"Ai, ai, let me go!" mewed the half-wit. "I am a poor imbecile!"

"Not too imbecile to tell me what you have been doing!"

He squirmed in her grasp, but Jeanne knew that the least show of force cowed him. "You shall not go until you tell me!" she cried. "It is Mr. Maitland!"

"Ai, ai, let me go, Mme. Jeanne!"

"You are going to tell me!" the girl persisted vehemently. "Where is Mr. Maitland?"

"He is in Mme. Angus's house," answered Jean sullenly. And, as the girl started involuntarily, he squirmed out of her clutch in an instant, and was running along the shore, looking back every score of paces to utter menacing shouts.

Jeanne, half stunned by the news, and dreading the worst, suddenly heard a sound that brought her back to herself effectively. It was the dip of oars in the sea, followed by the grating of a keel upon the shingle beyond the rocks. In an instant she was racing along the beach. She climbed the rocky ledge, and saw, beyond it, large against the mist, the uniformed officers and sailors of the revenue department, guiding their rowboat into the secret cove.

She turned and ran full speed into the woods. As she reached the ravine she heard the voices of the seamen below, echoing in sibilant whispers from the flank of the precipice as they guided their boat up the stream. She swung herself down the ladder and ran like a chamois along the rocky trail, climbing with panting lungs, but never slowing her steps, until she saw a blaze of light leap fiercely from the valley beneath her.

In front of it the figures of the smugglers moved, black against the flames. Within she saw two struggling forms. She darted to the entrance. Will lay, apparently unconscious, and almost encircled by the fire. Bending over him was Duncan.

She grasped the ruffian by the arm and swung him fiercely away from his victim. She dashed her fists into his face. With an oath Duncan turned and broke from the hut.

Jeanne grasped Will's body in her arms and dragged him to the entrance through the approaching walls of fire, which singed her hair and scorched her clothing. The reeking smoke stifled her, and she stumbled upon the entrance, half unconscious. Then hands seized her and Will and carried them into the open.

Will, opening his eyes, became confusedly aware that the choking heat was gone. The rain dropped softly on his face, but suddenly the clouds parted, and the moon shone out, filling the whole valley with light. He looked up into Jeanne's face.

"Where am I?" he muttered, wondering why his head was on her knee, and why she wept.

And, fighting back the stupor, he sat up. His head reeled from the blow he had received, and the fumes of the blazing cabin; he was bruised by the ruffian's kicks, but neither burned nor wounded.

As Jeanne tried to restrain him he heard a jovial voice addressing him.

"*Hein,* you had a narrow escape, *monsieur!*" it cried. "He is recovering. I told you so, *madame!* How do you feel, M. Maitland? Take it easy now; the danger is over, and if I had the chance I would lie there forever!"

Will recognized Lessard, captain of the

Blanche, coatless, black, perspiring, and pertinaciously devil-may-care.

"Just in time, M. Maitland!" he went on. "Another minute and I wouldn't have given a keg of *habitant* brandy for your life. Excuse me!"

He darted forward to receive and direct a procession that was coming through the trees. It consisted of some sailors from the Blanche, led by another officer. Herded into their midst, handcuffed, and scowling at Will with murderous hate, were Angus, Eudore, and Alexandre McGraeme, with two others. The first of these, who had taken no part in the attack on Will, had returned just in time to walk into his captors's arms and see his home in flames.

Eudore was hardly recognizable with his cut and swollen lips. Alexandre's eye was closed, and fast blackening, from Will's blow. As they passed Will they snarled at him like wild beasts.

"Just in the nick of time, M. Maitland!" continued Captain Lessard heartily, coming back to where Will sat. "I am glad, for your sake, for assuredly it was a brave act that you performed to-night. Those men admit that they meant to murder you. Well, we've got them, anyway, and we'll take no chances on their getting away before we reach Quebec. It's a feather in my cap, if I say so myself. We'd been trying to locate this place these two years past, but we'd never have found the entrance if your men hadn't guided us."

Will heard a sharp exclamation from Jeanne. She had drawn away from him, and was looking at him with an intense questioning upon her face. Not far away he became conscious that Paul Cawmill was standing, sheepish, but smiling. Paul favored him with a wink of enormous significance.

"The neatest trap I ever heard of, *monsieur*," continued the garrulous captain, turning to watch some of the seamen, who were carrying out the kegs of brandy. "To let them think that they could run their brandy right into Quebec beneath your lumber! I don't know how you contrived to win those fellows' confidence. I had a man along this coast six months, and he knew no more when he left than when he arrived. And twenty score of gallons—the largest consignment ever captured! Well, *monsieur*, your wood will now get free freightage to Quebec, anyway, and we'll get the schooners, and maybe a taste or two of the brandy all round, eh, boys?"

Will began slowly to realize something of the snare that had been set for him, although he could not follow it in all its implications. He saw that Jeanne had gone.

"Captain Lessard, I sent you no message!" he cried angrily. "I had no men to guide you!"

Lessard looked ludicrously penitent. "Ah, *monsieur*, no need to say any more," he answered. "I understand. Perhaps I have been a little indiscreet. But it should be five years before these good fellows"—he winked toward his prisoners—"are home again, and you will find your work more profitable in their absence. Five counties got their brandy from that still, which we shall demolish to-morrow morning," he added. "Well"—to the captives—"'tis the fortune of war, *mes braves*. Next time we shall bring back M. Duncan to keep you company. *Ben! Marchez, donc, mes enjants!*" he cried cheerily to the captives.

And sullenly the handcuffed men took up the trail toward the waiting boat, while the sailors followed them, carrying their spoil. The burning cabin was already sinking into a mass of red-hot cinders. The rain had recommenced. Will waited till he was alone.

Not wholly, for he became conscious of Paul Cawmill, wearing that intensely irritating look of wisdom upon his face.

"Well! What have you to say?" demanded Will, rounding sharply upon him.

Paul rubbed his hands. "Ah, *monsieur*, it was wonderful! It was a masterpiece!" he exclaimed. "Did I not tell you that you could rely absolutely on my discretion? Yes, *monsieur*, and, when you kept up the play with me, did I not give you back as good as you gave, telling you that I knew nothing of the entrance to this valley?"

"You showed those revenue men the path in my name?" shouted Will.

Very slowly the pleased grin faded from

Paul Cawmill's face. *"Ah, la, la, monsieur!"* began the foreman.

Will struck out straight from the shoulder and knocked Paul flat. Without waiting to ascertain the effects of his blow, which set his own head to aching again terrifically, he turned and made his way past the smouldering ruins of Angus's home toward the smaller cabin, whither Jeanne had gone.

He knocked at the door, and, when no answer came, opened it. Two women were within. One was Mme. McGraeme, seated huddled up in a chair, her apron over her face, rocking herself and moaning. The other was Jeanne, leaning over the table, her face in her hands, and the tears streaming through her fingers. She did not look up or pay the least attention as Will entered, nor when he began to speak.

"You saved my life—" he began huskily. "Mme.—Jeanne Dorion, listen to me!"

She raised her head and looked at him steadily. There was neither scorn nor hatred upon her face, but it seemed to Will at that moment as hard as the granite face of her uncle.

"You must listen to what I have to say," said Will.

"Please say nothing, Mr. Maitland!" she answered. "I realize that you had your duty to do. It was your task to betray and help capture those poor men. You used the only means that were in your power. If you traded on the good-will and faith of a woman, and used me—well, I should have understood that you had no alternative."

"You shall listen to me!" said Will insistently.

"I do not intend to, for there is nothing that you can say. I have uttered reproaches to you where I ought to have remained silent. I mean neither to reproach you nor to speak to you again. I take the blame. I have only this one thing to say: I have known good men, and bad men, and treacherous and loyal men, but never before a man whose duty it happened to be to trick a woman as you tricked me!"

"What were the words you used to me in Bonne Chance?" asked Will vehemently. "That some scheme was being planned to injure me. That they meant to discredit me, and ruin me besides."

"I heard what Captain Lessard said to you."

He went to her side. "Jeanne, won't you look at me and see if you still believe that I am a trickster?" he asked gently.

Mme. Angus raised her head. "No, he is not to blame, Jeanne," she muttered. "He came to find you. They trapped him here. Jean the Fool brought him."

Jeanne caught her breath. Under the compulsion of Will's demand she rose to her feet and faced him. Her eyes, resting on his, tried to search into the depths of his soul. Neither of them perceived the shadow that the moonlight cast on the wall, where no shadow had been, nor the vicious, evil, distorted face of Duncan as he lurked outside the door, the revolver leveled.

"Will you swear to me—" began Jeanne. "Will you swear to me that it was a lie—what Lessard said to you? That I"—she caught her breath—"I can believe in you again?"

The shot rang out before Will's lips could frame an answer to the girl's challenge. Will spun round, pitched forward upon his face, and lay motionless upon the floor of the cabin.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WHITE DEVIL.

THOUSANDS of miles away a man reclined under the slight shade of a thorn tree in the jungle of Guiana. His convict suit was rags, rent by the jungle thorns that had crisscrossed his face and hands and arms with bloody scratches. Wherever the blood had oozed a little cloud of flies clustered and buzzed and settled, so that each scratch was an inflamed ulcer. He was half-naked, starving, worn from want of sleep, and upheld only by the implacable resolution that seemed like a coal in his heart.

His hair and beard were blond, but his skin had been burned to a dull yellow-red by the sun's rays, scorching and peeling until it had acquired a protective pigmen-

tation on the exposed parts that gave him a strangely mottled look. He was in odd contrast with the littler, plumper, dark-haired man at his side, who awoke out of his sleep to lift up his voice in lamentation.

"Curse you!" he wailed. "I wish that I had stayed on the Devil's Island instead of joining you in this crazy adventure. There we had food and sleep, and some day we might have been set free. Now, if they catch us, we shall never be free. At least, why won't you give me a chance to rest, instead of hurrying on like this? Let us turn back to the last village. We were well fed there, and there is no danger of pursuit now."

The other snarled back at him in tones that quickly reduced the little man to submission.

"God knows I didn't want you for my companion, Blackbeard! Why did I take you? Because they made us companions, being both from Miquelon. Well, go back and give yourself up, if you love captivity! The gendarmes are not far behind!"

"No, no, I'll stay with you, Ironlimbs," wailed the other. "I'm a true comrade. I'm a man of my word. I said I'd stand by you to the end, and I'll do it. But other men are not like you. When you were dying of dysentery your coffin was already made, and the grave blasted in the rock—yet you got well. Are you a man or a devil?"

The other's face twisted into a grotesque grin. Crouching beneath the thorn, he looked like some huge jungle beast, rather than a man.

"I don't know whether I am a devil or a man, now, Blackbeard," he answered. "Once I was a man. But, if I am not a devil now, there is a devil inside me, and he has promised me that I shall not die until I get my hands about the throat of the man who betrayed me. He is a good devil, and I trust him just as much as I used to trust God."

"What did you do, Ironlimbs?" whimpered the other. It was the one question that convicts never ask each other upon the Devil's Isle, because the murderers would be at the throats of the traitors to France, if they knew who they were. But in the jungle this convention lost its hold over the dark man. "It must have been something magnificent," he continued. "You killed a priest, perhaps!"

"I killed a gendarme. But it was on Miquelon Isle, as you know, and they sent me to France, and France sent me here to rot, all because there is no guillotine on Miquelon. That's nothing. They did their duty. It is the man who betrayed me that I am after. I don't know who he was, but my devil will tell me when I am near enough to get my hands round his throat and see his eyes bulging out, and his face blackening. What did you do, Blackbeard?" he continued, without much interest.

"Me?" whimpered the other. "I killed my woman—not in Miquelon, but in France. She had a lover, and they would have acquitted me, only there was a little insurance in my name, and so they would not believe me. Listen, Ironlimbs! Let us turn back to that comfortable village, and rest till we are strong enough to continue the journey. We shall be quite safe there, and we can sleep."

The fair man, giving a contemptuous shrug, rose and began to limp along the track, and his companion, after voluble protests, limped after him.

Thus they made their way in single file along the path frequented equally by the Indian, jaguar, tapir, and deer. It was nothing but a trail, generations old, through the saw-edged grass. The low-lying lands along the French Guiana coast are a fever-stricken morass, and almost uninhabited. The black-haired man's teeth began to chatter as the cool night wind struck him. He followed his companion, moaning and cursing under his breath, until at last they emerged into a little clearing, planted with manioc and cassava.

Among the plantations a few huts were clustered. In front of these a half-dozen Indians and coolies were squatting over the cassava pot. Without a word, the famished men joined the circle, dipping their hands greedily into the mess. The stolid natives evinced no surprise at their appearance.

When they had eaten, the two fugitives made their way into a near hut and sat down, the fair man squatting with his knees drawn up and his back against the circle of poles, the other lying down, with his tattered coat for a pillow. He let his head fall back, and was soon asleep.

Notwithstanding his contemptuous reception of the dark man's plea of fatigue, it was clear that the fair man was fatigued to the point where it was impossible to keep awake. Gradually his eyes closed. Once or twice he opened them with a slight start, surveying his companion with a suspicious stare. Then sleep conquered him. His head drooped on his breast, his hands hung limp at his sides.

As soon as he was sure that his companion was not feigning, the black-haired man sat up, crept to his feet, listened for a moment to the other's breathing, and slunk out of the hut, heading back along the trail by which they had come. His gait was altogether different now; he ran at a steady jog-trot, with occasional pauses, covering the ground at a rapid rate, until he stopped, a little more than an hour later, at the village through which they had last passed.

It was very similar to the other, with the same huts and manioc fields; the only essential difference consisted in the young French officer and two troopers of the Guiana Police, who, having just arrived, were unbuckling their belts and seating themselves at a folding table, on which a native servant was laying a cloth for supper.

"Well, so you are here!" growled the lieutenant. "I thought you had betrayed us!"

"Not me," laughed the black-haired man. "But that fellow is a devil. He would walk, and he hasn't slept for two nights till now. I knew you would not wish to capture him awake, for assuredly he would be more than a match for all of you, in spite of your revolvers. *Diable,* I have seen him catch a bushmaster and wring its head from its body!"

"We'll see about that!" snapped the lieutenant. "As soon as we have dined you shall lead us on the way."

"Wait a moment," pleaded the convict. "It is understood, then, that my pardon is to be recommended to the Government in return for this service? *Diable,* he would tear me to pieces if we were put together on the Island again!"

"That was promised you by the magistrate at Petit Pot, to whom you went with your project of betrayal. It is the custom, and assuredly you will not be wrongly dealt with. But you've been a devil of a time in getting him in our hands."

The other shrugged his shoulders. "It is hard work to catch a devil," he said. "If he had suspected me, he would have torn me limb from limb. I had to go cautiously."

"Lead the way, and let us have no more of your talk!" said the lieutenant, finishing his meal hastily.

The three soldiers buckled on their belts, and the black-haired man led the way along the trail, followed by the lieutenant, with his loaded revolver in his right hand, and the two dismounted troopers, each similarly armed. After about an hour and a half the party reached the village. It was abandoned by the Indians, who, fearing the white man in the hut, had taken to the jungle.

"Where is he?" demanded the lieutenant in a low voice.

The traitor, stricken with a ghastly fear that his comrade was likewise gone, crept to the entrance of the near hut, and peered in. Then he smiled, and beckoned to the officer, himself stepping out of the way.

Inside the hut, reclining exactly as when he had sat down, was the escaped prisoner. A long knife lay beside one knotted hand, and the great chest rose and fell with labored breathing. The man's teeth gritted as memories of the past flitted, ghost-like, through his brain and tormented him.

Suddenly, as if impelled by the gaze fixed upon him, the man's eyes opened. And instantly the prisoner was awake. With a single bound he was upon his feet and in the midst of the party. As he sprang, he had contrived to seize the knife in his right hand.

He did not stab, however, but, still holding the knife, grasped the traitor, lurking in the entrance of the hut, and flung his

arms about him. The black-haired man, helpless in his grip as a rabbit caught by a constrictor, yelled frantically. But the two were so intertwined in their struggle that it would have been difficult for any of the soldiers to fire without the risk of killing the informer.

The knife, held at the traitor's throat, pricked the skin lightly. A drop of blood appeared. The black-haired man's terror grew extreme, and turned his face a livid grey. One of the soldiers stepped up and placed his revolver behind the blond man's head, turning to look at the lieutenant, who, however, shook his head as, with a short laugh, the fair man threw the knife out of the hut and turned to salute his captors with a bow of mockery.

"Enough, *Monsieur!*" he said to the lieutenant. "I do not mean to hurt him. I have bigger game than that in mind. That was an experiment, so that I may know how I shall feel when my devil tells me that I am holding the right man."

"He is mad!" whispered one of the soldiers to his companion, who nodded. But the madness passed out of the prisoner's eyes, and the man waited patiently for his handcuffs.

"You were wise not to kill him," said the lieutenant, who felt that he was speaking with a man of character. "I have had exceptional interest in tracking you."

"And I have had enough of traitors," answered the other. "I am glad to be taken. He need not be afraid of me; you can leave is two together if necessary. He is a pretty rascal, and I suspected something like this when he told me that he killed his woman for the insurance money."

"It is a lie! She had a lover!" screamed the black-haired man, dancing frantically in a cloud of dust raised by his own movements upon the mud floor of the hut. "*Monsieur,* you will solicit my pardon from the government according to the promise that has been given me?"

"Shut up!" said the lieutenant, casting a contemptuous glance at him. "You will receive your deserts and more, you may be sure of that." He turned to the fair man again, and a smile broke out on his face. He addressed him as an equal.

"It has been a great pleasure to me to find you, *monsieur,*" he said, "because I am able to inform you that your pardon arrived from France three days after your abrupt departure from the Island. Consequently, you have been a free man these six weeks past, although it will probable be necessary for you to wait till spring for a government transport."

"Damnation!" shrieked the other. "But you will still recommend me to the government, *monsieur?* I did my best! You will tell them that—"

"Stop his noise!" said the lieutenant curtly to the two troopers, who stopped it.

"So, *monsieur,* you will return with me, to await the government vessel, and to receive the customary gratuity," the lieutenant continued.

The blond man was silent, but the light that had been in his eyes when he had the knife at the traitor's throat was there again. It was possession. Men who had looked into his eyes when that mood came upon him had spread the story that he was possessed; and even the wardens, brutalized as they were, had found it advisable not to meddle with him too much at the time of his seizure.

"Oh, I'm willing! I've nothing against the government!" answered the fugitive, bursting into a peal of laughter. "They've treated me all right. I earned what I got. I have other fish to fry."

The lieutenant looked at him curiously. "Yes, *monsieur?*" he asked politely. "I trust you will not find that things have altered much in your world since you came to us."

"Oh, no, indeed! I'm going home to kill another man," responded the other nonchalantly. "And my devil has just told me that I'm going to do it."

CHAPTER XV.

THE STORY OLD.

FOR three days and nights Will's life hung so evenly in the balance that it was impossible to say which way the scales were likely to fall. The bullet had passed under the left shoulder, piercing the

lung, breaking a rib, and emerging an inch above the heart.

There was no doctor in Bonne Chance, but a bonesetter, brought from a neighboring hamlet, came, looked, and reported that Will would certainly die four days later, coinciding with the full of the mon.

During those three days and nights Jeanne sat at his bedside, hardly stirring, and never closing her eyes until the fourth morning, despite the peremptory messages of her uncle. Then the scales fell. Will opened his eyes and knew her.

After that the danger grew gradually less, and Will's semi-consciousness began to be permeated by glimpses of faces—Jeanne's, and that of Mme. Angus, once Paul's, and, later, those of Gingras and Poulin.

By the end of the second week the danger was past. Will was sitting up in bed in the cabin. Jeanne now came to sit with him daily, returning home at nightfall.

One of the first men whom Will asked to see was Paul. Paul had come every day, always to be driven away by Jeanne, after a brief glimpse at Will. Will noticed a fading bruise upon his cheek, the mark of his blow. That had weighed on him throughout his illness and he had been eager to make things right with the little foreman at the first opportunity.

Paul, admitted at last for an interview, after Jeanne had registered a strong protest, came in with his customary joyousness, rubbing his hands.

"*Eh bien,* M. Maitland, how are you to-day?" he cried. "We are all happy to know that you are getting on so well. You will be pleased to see the work we have done on the corduroys since you have been ill. And the snow is sufficient for hauling now, *monsieur*—if, indeed, it is your intention to continue the cutting," he continued, fixing his eyes somewhat dubiously on on those of his employer.

Will glanced out at the landscape, now snowbound, and back at Paul.

"Paul," he said, "never mind the lumber now. I'm sorry I struck you. It was a cowardly thing to do, and I hope you'll forget it."

"Ah, *monsieur,* that was nothing at all!" answered Paul. "I was discreet enough to understand, *monsieur.* You thought that Mme. Dorion overheard Captain Lessard, and so you must carry on the play. And yet, *monsieur,* I feel that there exists a misunderstanding between us."

"I feel that decidedly," said Will, "because I don't understand in the least what you are talking about. I want to have this out with you. Did you warn the authorities that there was a plot to smuggle brandy into Quebec aboard those schooners, under cover of the lumber?"

"But no, indeed, *monsieur!*" protested Paul warmly. "It was not my business. It was you who did that, as we all know, employing the half-witted man!"

"I?" cried Will, so loudly that Jeanne came to the door and stood there for a moment in frowning irresolution, half-minded to end the interview, and send Paul away.

"Ah, *monsieur,* what need is there now to keep up the pretense with me?" pleaded the foreman.

Will drew in a breath to calm himself. "Go on, Paul," he said. "Explain to me why you suppose I knew anything about the Blanche."

"But certainly, M. Maitland!" answerer Paul confidently. "Did I not tell you that day at the hotel, when you offered me the job, that I am a poor man with a wife and family, and therefore I will spy for you?"

"Either you are a liar or a lunatic!" shouted Will, growing enraged at Paul's infantile air and look of injured innocence. "No, Jeanne! I am going to have it out with this fool before he leaves. It would throw me back terribly if he went away before I've finished with him."

"But, *monsieur,*" pleaded Paul softly, "did you not tell me that day at the hotel, when you hired me to work for you, that it was to cut fir for airplanes? And that I must not tell a soul about this?"

"I did. And you blabbed the story immediately."

"But, M. Maitland, did I not wink at you, and did you not wink back at me?"

Will, remembering that wink, which he had most certainly not returned, was silent, because there no longer existed any words

which were of service to express his feelings.

"*Ben, monsieur!*" began Paul, gathering confidence from Will's silence. "For a minute I believe you. But then quickly I understand. 'He is a poor, ignorant *habitant*,' you think. 'He will believe me.' But what man in his senses would believe such a mad tale, *monsieur*, about cutting down fir trees to make airplanes?

"So I understand what passes in your mind, because, although a *habitant*, I am a discreet and intelligent man. 'He is a poor, ignorant *habitant*,' you think. 'He will tell everyone about these airplanes. So much the better. That takes the suspicion from me, and very soon I trap the McGraemes and seize all their brandy, and take it to Quebec with me.'

"Good God!" was all Will could say.

"*Puis*, M. Maitland," continued Paul, growing quite bold with his explanation, "I wink at you, and you wink back at me. You say to yourself: 'He is not such a fool after all, this *habitant* Paul.' So then I pluck up the courage to tell you of Hector Galipeault's brandy-cellar, because you hire me to spy for you. But that is too small a thing for you. It is to trap the big men that you are come here. That I see, because the Government has given you so much money to play at lumbering that it is evident they will pay anything to capture the McGraemes.

"Well, *monsieur*, you pretend not to understand me. You put me on my mettle. I have already told that story about the airplanes through Bonne Chance, and they are all deceived by it; yet you do not trust me. Every time that I approach you, as man to man, you say: 'Paul, do not be mysterious!' In vain I tell you of my discretion. You have no faith in me.

"So there is nothing for me to do but wait. And when Jean comes to me and tells me that you have arranged for the Blanche to come that night, and have gone ahead, and that I am to show the way to the officer, of course I obey. And *voila!* Everything comes off just as you planned it. It was a masterpiece."

"I begin to see at last," said Will, gulping. "I thought you were a fool, Paul."

"But now, *monsieur*, at last you see that I am to be trusted," suggested Paul hopefully.

"Now, Paul, I understand why God made the backwoods and put men like you in them," answered Will. "Well, the mischief's done. The work must go ahead. You will understand in future that you are hired by me to take charge of my lumbering, and not to spy, eh, Paul?"

"It is your intention to continue to lumber, then, *monsieur?*" asked Paul, mystified. But, as Will stared at him without answering, a look of illumination spread over his countenance, and, favoring him with a wink of enormous significance, he withdrew.

As Will had said, the mischief was done. The smugglers' haunt was a secret no longer; the gang had been effectually disrupted. Only Duncan remained, and he had departed for parts unknown, and was not likely to return.

Bonne Chance breathed a sigh of relief. The opinion was general that Will was in some way responsible for the betrayal, but Bonne Chance did not care. The lumbering promised a winter's occupation to all who wanted it. It was now December, and the thick snow made conditions ideal for lumbering. Navigation had closed, the lighthouse gleamed no longer, and ice choked the bay. Two weeks before the buoys had been picked up by the pilotage vessels from Quebec. The land lay bound by winter.

Jeanne and Will had grown very intimate in those days of his illness, when she had defied her uncle's command that she remain at home, and had gone daily to the cabin to care for him. She had brought linen and comforts, and when Jeremiah alternately sneered and menaced, had demanded of him whether he was willing to have Will's death on his conscience. Of late, however, the girl had grown more reserved toward Will; he could not help noticing this, but, wrestling with his own heart, he had said nothing.

The love that he had put out of his life so many years had returned with a strength that overwhelmed him, and he fought it instinctively, because he knew that it

threatened to sweep away the personality which he had built up, and carry him away with it. He fought his realization of it from motives that he did not himself understand. Perhaps it was that to confess its power would be to nullify and make foolish the past twelve years which now began to seem incredibly futile to him.

He was out of bed now, and they were walking together along the frozen road through the valley. There was an intense peacefulness in the still air, one of those perfect winter silences, broken only by the occasional cawing of the crows, and the distant grinding of the ice against the shores.

"You are anxious to get back to your work?" asked Jeanne.

"I'll be glad to tackle it again. It's been a stiff job, stiffer than I dreamed of; but the worst's over, and there's nothing to do now but go ahead. I suppose there's the lawsuit to face. That's folly. Your uncle is throwing his money away. If you could convince him—"

"Will," she said in a low voice, "I must tell you something. I have defied my uncle's wishes in coming here to take care of you. I did what was right; but, now that you are well, I—I shall not be coming here any more. And—I shall not see you often. I must stand by my own, even when they're wrong."

Will laughed and drew her arm through his. "I've been doing some thinking, Jeanne," he said, "and I've come to the decision to go up and talk things over frankly with your uncle. He was very conciliatory when we met in the chapel. Surely a little face-to-face talk will enable us to get together, and persuade him to abandon that absurd lawsuit."

She shook her head. "You don't know how embittered he is against you, Will. You see, he has lost his last schooners now, and our kinsmen's, in which he had an interest. He had invested everything in this smuggling. He thinks that you betrayed him. When I tried to convince him he was angrier than I have ever seen him before. He almost struck me. Had he done so, he would have lost my loyalty forever.

He refrained from that, but he was beside himself with anger at the mention of your name. And since I have been coming here he has hardly opened his mouth to me. He has lost everything, and he is likely to lose the lands that he mortgaged to Philippe La Rue."

She clenched her fists. "If my uncle had listened to me from the beginning!" she said. "He has fallen completely into that man's power. Philippe La Rue schemed from the beginning to usurp my uncle's place in Bonne Chance. He led him on to borrow money from him. And I know now it was he who betrayed my uncle's sealing schooners to the government, in order to ruin him, just as he persuaded my uncle to smuggle his brandy underneath your lumber, and then betrayed him again, and tried to have you go to your death under suspicion of being the betrayer.

"I had thought such a man would be driven out of Bonne Chance. But everybody knows it now, and nobody cares. They think it smart of him. People are like that. He has only my uncle to deal with now, and he has him in his power.

"So, Will," she said more quietly, "you see what my own duty is. I have come to see that I was wrong in abetting my uncle, in signalling to the schooners when they were ready to run out of the cove. I thought they were rebels against an unjust government. But it was all money, and greed; something has opened my eyes; only—I must stand by my own."

They had stopped at the rim of the valley, and faced each other. Will drew her toward him. "Jeanne—Jeanne, dear, make me your own," he said.

She tried to free herself. "Will, this is folly—it is impossible—"

"I love you, Jeanne. We'll stand by each other, and see this thing through." He had taken her in his arms. She turned her face away in brief resistance. Inevitable as she knew their love to be, it was equally impossible; everything was between them. The moment's indecision paralyzed her will. She had surrendered before she was aware of it. At the touch of his lips on hers happiness filled her whole being.

"What can we do, Will?" she faltered. "We are enemies. I am fighting you for my lands. I am a traitor to everything I have ever learned, disloyal to my uncle—"

"I am going to see him and ask him for you. I'll make him listen to me."

"Will!" Terror came into her voice. "You—must not! Not now!"

"Do you think he'll feel any sweeter toward me as time goes by? Especially after he's—after you've lost that lawsuit?"

"How do you know that he's—that I'm going to lose that lawsuit?" she asked, in laughing challenge.

"Because my case is clear. I lease the land from the Government. You have no title, Jeanne."

"I don't know about that," returned Jeanne thoughtfully. "Philippe La Rue has assured Uncle Jeremiah that he'll win, and I believe he meant it. But, anyway, you must wait, Will. Until my uncle has had time to get over his loss a little. If you go to him now, and Philippe La Rue gets wind of it, there'll be no chance at all. I mean, Will, dear, I'd have to choose between giving up the man who adopted me, and brought me up, and to whom I do owe a great deal—"

"You owe him nothing, Jeanne!" Will interrupted angrily.

"—Or you."

"You couldn't do it, Jeanne! Why, we're engaged! I come before everybody now."

"I don't want to be put where I'd have to decide, Will. So promise me to wait a little."

"I shall see you?"

"Just as often as I can, dear."

He took her in his arms again. "I want to know one thing," he said, with newborn jealousy. "Philippe La Rue never cared for you, Jeanne?"

"I—don't think so, Will."

"Nor you for him?"

The shudder that ran through her answered before her words did. "I didn't hate or dislike him; he was nothing to me until that night when he threatened me. Then, all at once, I began to see him in a different light. I have hated him since then."

"And you have never cared for anyone, Jeanne?"

"Nobody," she answered solemnly. "And, Will, dear, not even he—you know who I mean—ever kissed me."

Suddenly the specter of the dead man, which had seemed to intervene between them, with one menacing arm catching at Jeanne, faded out of Will's consciousness. He kissed her, and laughed gaily as he said:

"I'll wait as long as you wish, Jeanne. But our engagement is true, none the less?"

"The truest thing in all my life—and the dearest," answered Jeanne solemnly.

CHAPTER XVI.

LA RUE GROWS BOLD.

JEANNE'S attendance on Will during his illness was the fly in the ointment of La Rue's triumph. The notary had seen them with hands clasped that evening on the beach. He had suspected more than the truth, and he had seen all the structure of his schemes toppling under the unexpected blow.

The approaching culmination of years of scheming had awakened in him a passion for the girl who formerly, illusive and immature as she appeared, had hardly attracted him. From thinking of her as something between a necessity and an aspiration, he had become enamored of her. That was after their ride. Now the fear engendered by this new intervention had united in him an intense hatred for Will, far stronger than his former antagonism, with an overmastering desire for Jeanne.

He recognized the difficulties that beset him, and he was too cautious to go rashly. He sensed that Jeremiah would resent any appearance of undue interest in the girl's actions. And he had kept away from him for several days after the raid, not knowing whether the old man suspected his part in it. With Jeremiah in his power, it was easy to go slow—except for Jeanne.

However, he came face to face with Jeremiah in the street of Bonne Chance. From every window busy eyes were watching the old man, whose parade was more

ostentatious that was his wont. Jeremiah was going down with flag flying, and the flourish of his great stick, the pompous, slow stride were more lordly than ever.

Though all Bonne Chance suspected, Jeremiah was the last to guess who had betrayed him. His greeting of the notary was condescendingly magnanimous, and La Rue, too wise to condole with him, exchanged commonplaces about the weather. After a while he threw out a hint about the girl, as one wise man advises another to beware of scandalous tongues.

Jeremiah shut him up sharply. Mme. Angus had the care of Will, he said, and Bonne Chance would go to a place not on the map, which he named in the French tongue.

He went on his way, oblivious of the looks of the villagers, who had been watching the interview, and frowning heavily at the remembrance of La Rue's words. He was too proud to show his resentment of the insult to Jeanne, but it infuriated him against the girl.

This was the first occasion on which Jeanne had positively defied him. He had found himself wholly unable to cope with her. He had been compelled to resign himself to her ministrations of the wounded man, and for the two past weeks had virtually sent her to Coventry.

La Rue went on his way, too, which happened to be to Belley's store. He financed the storekeeper in his petty usurious transactions. Returning toward his house, he looked across the bay, and saw a woman's figure on the shore of Presqu' Ile. Tiny as it appeared, it was unmistakably Jeanne's. *Habitant* women do not walk by the sea, unless to pick something up, nor do they linger.

The sight whipped La Rue's senses into insistence. He had not spoken to Jeanne since the night of the raid. He hurried to intercept her, acting for once without forethought.

Jeanne, who had just left Will, and had gone to share her delicious secret with the sea and the sun, did not perceive the notary till he was close upon her. She started in dismay. La Rue was the last person whom she desired to see just then, and the very air of the man told her that he had come purposely to waylay her. It had been very different when he had met her riding, before Will's love came to her.

The notary interpreted her little movement quite accurately. He bit his lip. "Well, Jeanne, it is a long time since we had a talk together!" he said. "And so the old friendship vanishes when the new love comes, *hein?*"

"You have no right to speak to me like that, M. La Rue," she answered, feeling her heart begin to hammer, nevertheless, at the bare reference to Will.

"It's not my statement," he retorted. "It's what all Bonne Chance is saying about you, Jeanne. People are wondering how a McGraeme girl can make up to the man who betrayed her folks to prison."

She turned and faced him, flaming into swift anger. "Don't you dare speak that way, Philippe La Rue!" she cried. "I know who betrayed my kinsmen!"

"Some of the spy's lies, eh?" he sneered, devouring her with his eyes. "If you can swallow those, you can swallow his professions of love, I suppose!"

"Have you come here to insult me?" she demanded scornfully. "Go away from me! I didn't invite you here! I won't see you!"

Her anger, her flashing eyes made his heart begin to pulse furiously. He dissembled his emotion with difficulty. He grew pleading. "Jeanne, I'm sorry," he said. "But you know we are old friends, and we mustn't quarrel because of a little jealousy on my part. It's natural, isn't it?"

"You have no right to insult Mr. Maitland, nor to mention him to me at all!"

"I shouldn't have done so. But, Jeanne, you know I've cared for you a long time. I never found the courage to speak to you. You're above me—at least, I've always felt so. I—"

"You must not tell me that, M. La Rue."

"Why not? Have I lost the right? Has he—has somebody else cut in before me? Or is it just that you don't care for me, Jeanne?"

"I don't care for you, if you must know.

And won't you please take that answer and go away? I sorry if I hurt you, but—that's my answer."

"It's M. Maitland!" shouted the notary, beginning to lose his self-control again. "It's the man that's stolen your lands and betrayed your kinsmen, the man you should hate above all others, that you've fallen in love with! And mark my words, he'll trick and fool you as he has the rest of the folks in Bonne Chance!"

"You are a coward to say such things to me!" cried Jeanne. "Go to him and say them to his face, if you dare!"

Her anger lashed his passion as if it had been a whip on his back. With a stride he had seized her, grasping her wrists tightly. "I won't take that from you, Jeanne!" he cried through his clenched teeth. "Once you told me it wasn't what our families had been, it was what we are. Your uncle's the dirt beneath my feet now, and you're not going to play fast and loose with me as if you were—"

She struggled, and tried to strike at him, and her resistance overcame the last vestiges of his prudence. He shifted his grasp until he had her in his arms, imprisoning her own, and, bending her head back, tried to reach her lips with his. That effort, which Will's kisses had made sacrilegious, gave her the strength to resist successfully until a shout behind them caused La Rue to start and release her.

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.

White Man

by L. Patrick Greene

LION'S SKULL is the name given to one of the many water-tank stations on the line from Bulawayo to Victoria Falls. The station consists of the usual low-lying tin shack, which serves as an an office, also the living and sleeping room of the white man in charge.

The wife of the agent seeks to vary the deadly monotony of her life, and at the same time supplement her husband's meager salary, by serving refreshments to the train-weary travelers: coffee—thick, murky, scalding coffee with the temperature 118 degrees in the shade—and soggy, unpalatable pastry.

Nailed over the door of the shack is the skull of a lion. To the inquisitive the agent will relate, with great gusto, how he, single-handed, killed the tawny lord of the veldt whose skull gives the name to the station. And if the story varies, day by day, what then? "A man must get some amusement in this dead hole. Six months I've served in this place, and no sign of a transfer in sight. Why—"

But listen to the story of Ekontse, a headman of the Matabele people:

Ye ask me for the story of the skull, white men, yet it is a tale that I am loath

to tell. It is not well, look ye, to tell of great deeds to those lacking understanding. Many men have asked the white man, at whose commands the train stops and goes, and have believed the tale he told them. As I have said, other men have sought the hidden story of the skull; but they were men without knowledge, understanding not the speech of us black ones.

Tobacco? Thanks, white men. The scent of it is truly good to these old nostrils of mine.

Know, then, that not far from this place —no farther than a man could run in the space of a hundred heart-beats—stands the kraal of Ekontse. Aie! even so. My kraal it is, for I am, as ye have perceived, a headman. Ye cannot see the kraal, for it is hidden among the heavy leafed bushes of the veldt land, but there it stands as it did when I was a boy—before the coming of the iron spoor; as it did when my father's father was yet unborn. The same it will be, unchanged, after my children's children have gone to their last resting-place in the Land of the Great Spirits.

Well do I remember the coming of White Man.

My father had died, and I, in the full prime of my manhood, was headman in his place. We were celebrating, as I remember, with much feasting, much drinking of beer, the marriage ceremony of my son. The moon had risen. The old men had gone to their huts to dream, perchance, of bygone feasts; of the time when they were bedecked with flowers and led to the hut where dwelt the maidens of their choice.

The young men and maidens were playing games—chasing and being chased. One maiden, seeking to evade the importunities of an undesired lover, fled laughingly from the kraal.

Suddenly we heard her call for aid, and, running to the call, found her bending over the body of a white man. He was sick, a mighty fever had a hold of him, and he moved not nor opened his eyes when we carried him back to the kraal—to the shelter of the guest-hut. He was, I judged, a man of twoscore years and five; perhaps more, perhaps less.

White men were hardly known to us in those days, and there were none near at hand to whom we could appeal for help. So we nursed him through the delirium of fever and brought him back, after many days, to strength. And alway the maiden—Selele was her name—who had first found him was in constant attendance on him.

When he was first able to walk abroad I sent for him, intending to question him concerning the strangeness of his coming to my kraal; to make plans whereby he could be returned in safety to his own place, to his own people. But he could speak little of our tongue, and I none of his.

Yet this he made known to me: that he desired not to return to his own people, but would stay forever among us. To me he gave his gun—gave me all that he had, keeping only of his possessions a large hunting-knife, cunningly engraved. This he would at no time suffer us to touch.

So I was content to let him dwell among us, for by his gifts he had made me rich and greatly envied by other headmen of the district.

But how shall I tell ye of the descent of this man? Tell how he became in thought, in word, in deed, one of us? Aye! A descent it was, and in no way am I casting filth on my own people by so calling it.

Look ye. When the Great Spirit first made men, she made both white and black, and to each she gave certain attributes the other had not. Both are seemly in her sight; but when one seeks to become the other—that way lies confusion; it is an abomination.

And so it was with White Man. Aye! that was the name by which we knew him. At first it was a name of respect, but in after years, when we wanted to cast slur upon an enemy, we said: "Thou art even as White Man—a pig, a defiler of the food which is set before thee."

Aie! White Man committed that most grievous of all sins. He betrayed his own people; he cast them on one side, forgetting their speech and their customs; speaking only our tongue, and taking to wife one of our maidens—even Salele.

Ye have heard of such men? That does

not surprise me. I, too, in latter years, have met them. Ye call them White Kaffirs, is it not so? It must be that something is lacking in their souls.

As it is with them, so it was with White Man. Jeered at by the people of the kraal—aye, little children spat upon him unrebuked—he became even as the stray dogs which content themselves with bones left by others; the woman Selele, ever loud of tongue, lashed him unceasingly both by word and whip.

Anon other white men came to this district. The commissioner, the police, and men who came to trade with us.

At first White Man sought their company; then, seeing how they scorned him—he wore but a loin cloth, and was dirty, filthily dirty, his head unshaven, his beard long and tangled—he avoided them, keeping in the shelter of his hut when any visited my kraal.

Then again, in after years, he openly met their jeers; and begged, his body bent to the ground, for a gift of tobacco, for some of the strong waters to drink. When they cursed him and kicked him away, he crawled back, whimpering like the dog he was, nor would he leave them until they had granted his requests.

There came a time—some twenty years it was after the coming of White Man—that I was summoned to the place of the commissioner regarding payment of taxes.

When he had dealt with me, sternly but justly—the crops had been good, and I could well have paid the tax—the commissioner called in another white man, whom he greeted as one greets a great chief.

They spoke together for a while; then said the commissioner:

"Ekontse! There is a white man in thy kraal?"

"Aye, *inkosi*," I answered wonderingly.

He took a paper on which was a magic drawing and handed it to me.

"Knowest thou whose image this is?"

And I, who had never before seen such a thing, took it, fearing witchcraft. It was the image of a young man, not unlike the stranger who stood before me. I gave it back to the commissioner, shaking my head.

"Nay," I said; "never have I seen such an one."

But a strange doubt assailed me.

The commissioner bade me return to my own place, but first I sought out my nephew—he was in the service of the commissioner—and sought a reading to the riddle.

"The strange white man," said my nephew—ah! a wise man, my brother's son—"comes seeking his brother. Their father, a chief of sorts in the land of the English, has died, and the stranger comes seeking for the lost one who is now the rightful chief."

"And what," said I, "if his search is a vain one?"

"Then he returns and becomes chief."

"Strange are the ways of the white men! Why does this one seek an older brother, thus depriving himself of high position? Is he mad?"

"It is their way, my uncle. Yet small hope is there that the search will be of any avail. Much can happen in the passing of twenty years."

"And how then will the seeker recognize his brother, whom he hath not seen in so long a time? Evil white men, hearing of the search, may claim the kinship."

"There is no fear of that, my uncle. I heard the white men talking of it as I waited upon them this very morning. He who is the rightful one hath a curiously patterned scar on his arm."

Coming again to my own kraal, I commanded the presence of White Man in my hut and told him the story of the search.

Keeping back in the shadow of the hut, he heard me in silence to the end, then departed, muttering: "What is that to me? What is that to me?"

I followed him secretly to his hut and watched him heat the broad blade of an assegai in the fire. To a white heat he brought it, and then—the smoke of scorching flesh stung my nostrils.

On the morrow the stranger came to my kraal, and with him my nephew, Ekati, to make his speech understandable to us.

White Man, seeing the stranger, fawned on him, begging for tobacco.

The other, stooping, raised him to his

feet and gazed at him steadily. Then, taking his hand, he removed the filthy rags which hid an angry burn, newly made, on his arm.

"How camest thou by this?"

"Must I answer every question a fool puts to me? Give me tobacco and let me go."

"Nay, tell," I commanded, eager to see the thing through.

"I was drunk," he answered sullenly, "and, rolling into the fire, so burned myself."

Then it was on my lips to tell the stranger of the manner by which White Man had come by his burn, but the Great Spirit, it seemed to me, bade me keep silent. This was a thing beyond my understanding. But even so, methinks the stranger did not altogether believe the story.

"Don't you know me, John?" he spoke in English—Ekati gave me the words. "Don't you remember Harry—Brother Harry?"

"What says the stranger?" White Man asked dully.

Again the other spoke in English—spoke of the days of childhood; of the father who had died; of the mother who had suckled them both; of past sins forgiven, and—ah! he spoke of many things, hoping to awaken the soul of White Man; but he only replied: "I know not what he says."

Again the stranger spoke of these things—this time through the mouth of my nephew; and White Man replied wrathfully:

"Leave me in peace. This is my place. I know no other, nor know I of what ye speak."

Then the stranger must needs take White Man apart from us. By the hand he led him out of the village, talking continually in his own tongue.

In a little while we followed their spoor, Ekati and I.

When we came up to them, keeping well under cover, they were in a small clearing amidst the bush.

White Man was seated on a rock watching, with shaded eyes, the stranger pacing moodily up and down before him.

Suddenly a lion leaped from a near-by thicket straight at the unsuspecting stranger, sending him headlong, but unharmed, to the ground, and stood over him, snarling defiance.

"Wait," I said to Ekati, who, with spear upraised, was about to rush in. "This is not our *indaba*."

"Lie still; do not move!" cried White Man, rising swiftly to his feet. Then he called in English: "Don't move, Harry boy, don't move. Brother's coming."

With his long hunting-knife in his hand, he walked slowly toward the lion, reviling it—swearing many strange-sounding oaths that Ekati had not the meaning of.

We held our breath while the lion, in indecision, turned the prostrate man over with his paw; then with a mighty uproar he sprang open-mouthed at White Man.

The knife flashed in the sunlight and was plunged deep into the side of the lion as over and over the two rolled, struggling furiously.

The stranger had gotten to his feet and with his revolver was seeking a chance to shoot; but man and beast were so intermingled that that chance did not come.

Again and again we saw the red flash of the long blade; then we saw it no more. The struggles ceased.

The beast had made its last kill, and the man—of a truth he had gone to a good place in the Land of the Great Great.

That is all, white men. It is the skull of that lion which hangs up yonder.

Yes, that is all, save— Come this way a little; there is yet time.

Not far, a little over a stone's throw from the water-tanks, is a clearing in the bushveldt, and in the center of the clearing is a well-kept grave.

At the head of the grave is a marble tombstone bearing these words:

RESURGAM

Here lies the body of

JOHN, SIXTH EARL OF NORTON

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend."

HE DIED A WHITE MAN

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 XXV.

JANET PAYS A CALL.

JANET McWHORTER rose early upon the morning following her talk with the Texan. Dressing hurriedly, she blew out her candle and hastened to the door. Toward the east the coulée rim showed dimly against the first faint blush of dawn.

She wondered if the Texan still slept and whether she ought not to waken him and ask him to breakfast. As she stood in the doorway, man and horse emerged from the stable. She withdrew into the blackness of the room and in the dim light of the unborn day watched him mount. She saw the big roan try to sink his head; noted the ease with which the man foiled the attempt; heard the sound of his voice as he spoke to the unruly horse as one would speak to a mischievous child. Then horse and rider disappeared in the darkness of the valley. The girl stood there in the darkness until the sound of hoofbeats died away.

There was a certain rugged grimness in the scene. It was like the moving finger of fate—this silent horseman riding away into the dawn.

Her lips moved. "I wish you—luck!" she breathed. "Even if—even if—" She stepped from the cabin and glanced up at the paling stars. "Oh, I know!" she exclaimed bitterly. "I saw it in his eyes when I mentioned the reward. It isn't the reward he wants—it's *her!*" Hastening to the woodpile, she gathered kindlings and returned to the house and prepared her father's breakfast.

Neither by word nor look did McWhorter refer to the conversation of the evening before. The meal concluded, he betook himself to the lambing camp. Left alone, Janet washed and put away the dishes, tidied up the cabin, fed her orphan lambs, and looked after the little hospital band of sheep. Then she pitched a forkful of hay into the corral for the bay mare and returned to the cabin.

Picking up a magazine, she threw herself into a chair and vainly endeavored to interest herself in its contents. Ten minutes later she flung the magazine onto the table and, hastening into her own room, dressed for a ride. Stepping to the wall, she removed a six-gun and a belt of cartridges from a peg and buckled the belt about her waist. Drawing the gun from its holster, she examined it critically. Her thoughts were of Purdy now, and she shuddered.

"I must never be without this—after yesterday." She stepped to the door of the cabin and glanced about her. "He said the next time it will be his turn—well, we'll see."

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for November 6.

An empty tomato-can lay on its side, its red label flapping in the breeze. Leveling the gun, the girl fired, and the tomato-can went spinning over the short-cropped buffalo-grass. And without stopping it kept on spinning as she continued to shoot, until with the last shot it came to rest, a ripped and battered thing a hundred feet away.

"Maybe it will be his turn—and maybe not," she muttered grimly. "He's the one person in the world I could kill." She cleaned the gun, reloaded it, and, walking to the corral, saddled the bay mare.

Cinnabar Joe sat in the doorway of his unfinished stable and squinted down the barrel of a high-power rifle. A six-shooter lay beside him on the sill, cleaned and oiled and loaded.

"Shines like a lookin'-glass," he observed, and, throwing the gun to his shoulder, sighted at a rounded rock that protruded from a cutbank a quarter of a mile away.

"If that had of been Purdy's head, an' I'd of pulled the trigger—there wouldn't of been no more Purdy," he grinned. "He better not stick his nose in this here valley," he muttered. "But, at that, I'd ruther be out there huntin' him."

From beyond the stable came the sound of galloping hoofs. Dropping the rifle, Cinnabar reached for his six-gun and whirled to meet the laughing gaze of Janet McWhorter.

"Why, what's the matter? You look as though you wanted to kill me."

The man summoned a grin. "Nerves, I guess. Don't mind me. Been smokin' too much, maybe."

"What's all the artillery for? You look as though you were going to start a war."

"Maybe I am. But speakin' of artillery, you're pretty well heeled yourself. Coyotes been killin' yer lambs?"

"Yes, the worst coyote on the range killed one of them yesterday, and then offered to pay for it. I mean your friend Purdy."

"*My* friend Purdy!"

"Yes—your friend; and dad's friend, too. If you men wouldn't tolerate such characters around—if you'd try to clean them out of the country instead of doing everything in your power to make it easy for them—they would soon be wiped out."

"But we'd git wiped out first—an' besides they ain't all like Purdy."

"They're all criminals. They all ought to be in prison."

Cinnabar shook his head. "No; there's plenty of criminals that hadn't ought to be in prison; an' there's plenty of folks that ain't criminals that had ought to be in prison. Trouble is—the gage ain't right that they measure 'em with."

"All men talk alike," sniffed Janet. "Where's Jennie?"

"In the house, feedin' a woman the first square meal she's et in the Lord knows when."

"Woman! What woman?"

"I never seen her before. Jennie says she's the pilgrim's wife—fellow name of Henderson, or Kottmeyer, or some such a name. About a year back, in Wolf River, he took a shot at Purdy, an' come near gittin' him, 'cause Purdy had toled her out fer a ride an' then drug her off her horse. They wasn't married then."

"Is she—all right?"

"All right? Yes, I guess she's all right now. She slep' most of yesterday afternoon an' all night."

"What are you goin' to do with her?"

Cinnabar's lips tightened. "When she's able to travel, we're goin' to git her back to her folks."

"And claim the reward?"

"Reward?"

"Yes; didn't you know that there is a reward of a thousand dollars for information concerning her?"

Cinnabar shook his head. "No; I didn't know that. No; we won't be claimin' no reward. So that's his game, is it?"

Janet swung from the saddle. "That isn't his game," she said. "I thought it was, at first. But, do you know, I believe he really loves her."

Cinnabar stared, open-mouthed. "Loves her!" he roared when he could find his voice. "That damn snake couldn't love no one!"

The girl's face went a shade paler. "You know him?" she asked.

"Know him! You bet I know him! I know he's the orneriest livin' white man! They ain't nothin' he wouldn't do—onless it was somethin' decent!"

"And yet—I can hardly believe it. There's something about him so—wholesome—so clean—and he has fine eyes."

Cinnabar Joe placed his hands on his hips and stared at the girl in astonishment. "You ain't been into old Mac's bottle, have you?" he asked at length. "Wholesome! Clean! Fine eyes! Why, he's the slimiest dirtiest, evil-eyedest lookin' scoundrel that ever drawed breath!"

Janet winced at the words. "When did he bring her here?" she asked after a moment of silence.

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Yesterday afternoon! Why, he—told me last night that he hadn't found her."

"You ain't none surprised that he'd lie, be you?"

Janet nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I am," she answered. "He didn't look like he was lying. Oh, there must be some mistake! Did you know him before he worked on the Y Bar?"

"Y Bar!" Cinnabar laughed. "That bird never seen the Y Bar onless he's been tryin' to run off some Y Bar hosses."

"Run off horses. Is he a horse-thief, too?"

Cinnabar waved his arms in despair. "Oh, no," he asserted, emphasizing the ponderous sarcasm of his words with a dolorous shaking of the head, "he ain't no hoss-thief; he's a judge of the Supreme Court. An' the reason he lives in the bad lands is because all the judges of the Supreme Court lives in the bad lands."

The girl interrupted him. "Don't try to be facetious. You do it badly. But the fact is, he don't live in the bad lands; he don't look like a horse-thief; he don't act like a horse-thief; and I don't believe he *is* a horse-thief—so there! When he struck out this morning on Purdy's trail—"

"On Purdy's trail!" Cinnabar fairly shouted the words. "Who's on whose trail? What's all this mix-up about? Purdy ain't no hoss-thief! He's a wet-nurse in a orphan asylum! He's clean-lookin' an' wholesome! He wouldn't lie!"

"Purdy!" exclaimed Janet. "Have you been talking about Purdy all this time?"

A sudden gleam of comprehension shot from Cinnabar's eyes. "Who did you think I was talkin' about?" he grinned. "The Gazookus of Timbuctoo?"

The girl broke into a peal of silvery laughter. A weight seemed suddenly to have been lifted from her heart—a weight that had borne heavier and heavier with the words of Cinnabar Joe. There was a chance that her Texan would prove to be the man she wanted him to be—the man she had pictured him during the long hours of the previous afternoon when alone in the cabin her thoughts had reverted again and again to the parting at the edge of the bad lands—the touch of his hand on her arm, the strong, firm grip of his fingers, and the strange, rapturous something that had leaped from his eyes straight into her heart.

But, all that was before she had known of—the other woman. The laughter died from her lips and her eyes narrowed slightly.

Cinnabar Joe was speaking. "An' I suppose you've been talkin' about Tex Benton. She told Jennie he was on Purdy's trail."

"How did she know?"

"Search me. Jest naturally knowed that if he wasn't dead that's what he'd be doin', I guess. How'd Purdy git holt of her, anyway?"

"This woman and Tex were washed ashore when the ferry broke its cable, and while Tex was trying to get some horses Purdy came along and found her."

"Where's the pilgrim?"

Janet shrugged. "Oh, he don't count. He's merely the wronged husband."

Cinnabar looked straight into her eyes. "Know Tex?" he asked dryly.

"I've seen him. He borrowed Blue, and he spent last night at the ranch."

"Well, then, believe me, you've seen some man! An' don't you go makin' no more mistakes like you jest made. If them two was together they had a right to be. An' they'll come clean with a good reason. They's some things a *man* won't do—an'

runnin' off with another man's wife is one of 'em."

"Do you know him?" There was more than a trace of eagerness in the girl's voice.

"I'll say I know him! An' I'm tellin' it to you, sister, if he's on Purdy's trail, I'd ruther be in hell with my back broke than be in Purdy's shoes right now."

The girl turned abruptly and walked toward the house, and as Cinnabar followed her with his eyes he smiled. "If them two could only hit it out—she'd make a fine woman fer him. By Gosh! With a woman like that to kind of steady him down, Tex could be a big man in these parts—he's got the guts, an' he's got the aducation, an' so's she. I misdoubt he'd marry into no sheep outfit though, at that."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE OTHER WOMAN.

AT the door of the cabin Jennie greeted her caller effusively. Alice Endicott, who had insisted upon dressing, had finished her breakfast and was sitting propped up among the pillows on the bed.

"This is Janet McWhorter, our neighbor," introduced Jennie, taking the girl by the hand and leading her to the side of the bed. "An' this is Mrs.—Mrs.—Why, do you know, I can't call your married name to save me. I never seen yer husban'—an' he's always spoke of in these parts as 'the pilgrim.'"

"Endicott," smiled Alice, as her glance noted with swift approval the girl's riding-boots, her corduroy skirt, her gray-flannel shirt, the scarf of burnt orange, and the roll-brim hat—noted, too, the six-gun and the belt of yellow cartridges. Each well-appointed detail bespoke the girl of the open range. But the Eastern woman perceived instantly that the gliding grace of her walk was never acquired in the saddle, nor were the well-modulated tones of the full, throaty voice with which she acknowledged the introduction a product of the cattle range.

"I am very glad to meet you, Mrs. Endicott." Their hands met, and as Alice looked into the girl's eyes she wondered at the peculiar glance that flashed from their blue-black depths. It was not exactly a glance of hate, but of rather of veiled antagonism, of distrust—almost of contempt. Alice's own eyes had been frankly friendly, but as they encountered the look they fell before the blue-black eyes, and she turned appealingly toward Jennie. But the woman did not notice. She chattered on:

"Ontil yesterday, I ain't seen Mrs. Endicott sence that night, it's a year back, when Tex Benton brung you to the hotel in Wolf River an' wanted the room."

Janet McWhorter sat down abruptly in a chair beside the table and became suddenly interested in fingering the rim of the cartridges in her belt. Jennie continued:

"An' I jest give him a good blessin'—'cause I don't trust no cow-puncher; or didn't then, ontil he explained how it was. An' then he went away, an' Old Bat come an' tuck you off, an' we heard afterward how you an' Bat an' the pilgrim an' Tex hit down through the bad lands an' crossed the river, an' you an' the pilgrim was married in Timber City."

Alice gave a little cry. "Oh, and he's there now! Worrying his heart out! He don't know where I am or what's become of me! Oh, I've got to go to him! I've got to get word to him somehow!"

Janet McWhorter looked up quickly, the blue-black eyes resting in frank surprise on the woman's face. Her husband! Why should she be so concerned about her husband? Must get back to him! Was she tired of the Texan already? Had her experience with Purdy taken the romance out of her adventure? Or, was the concern assumed for the benefit of her hearers? No; the girl decided the concern was not assumed. It was a very real concern—and there were real tears in the woman's eyes.

Jennie sought to soothe her. "There you go again, deary. We'll git you back to him as soon as ever we can. But there ain't no way with the river where it's at. But, tell us how come Purdy to have you tied up, an' what's Tex Benton got to do with it—an' your man in Timber City?

I've been 'most bustin' to hear all about it."

"Oh, it all happened so suddenly—I hardly know myself. It seems like some horrid dream—some fantastic nightmare. We came to Timber City, Win and I, to be there on our anniversary. Win is going to buy a ranch, and while he was talking business I rode out the trail a little way, and when I returned it was dark, and there was a crowd of men in front of the saloon and they were shooting. And one of them told me there was a man inside—a Texan.

"Somehow I just knew it was Tex—our Tex—the one we came to know so well and to love a year ago. So I told them to stop shooting and I would go in and try to straighten things out. Tex had been drinking a little and he was obstinate. He had defied the marshal to arrest him, and he absolutely refused to submit to arrest. I don't blame him much. The marshal is a fool, and he thought, or pretended to think, that Tex was some terrible desperado, and he intended to hold him in jail indefinitely until he could look up his record.

"Tex managed to get out of the building and he jumped onto a horse and dashed through the crowd, sending them sprawling in all directions. As he started down the trail they began to shoot at him, and men began to mount horses to ride after him.

"I knew they would kill him—and what had he done? Nothing! Except shoot a few bottles and things and break some windows—and they would have killed him for that!

"I knew they wouldn't dare shoot me, so before they could get onto their horses I swung into the trail behind him so they would have to stop shooting. On and on I dashed through the darkness. At first I could hear the sound of pursuit, yells, and curses, and shots, but my horse was faster than theirs, and the sounds died away.

"He had almost reached the river when I overtook him. His horse had gone lame and we barely made the ferry boat ahead of the mob. He tried to send me back as he led his horse onto the ferry—but I knew that the moment he shoved off from shore those fiends would kill him—he wouldn't have a chance.

"So before he could prevent me, I followed him onto the boat and cut the rope that held it and we drifted out into the river—but the men on the bank didn't dare to shoot. He would have put back then if he could, but the current was too strong, and it carried us farther and farther from shore.

"Then a great tree drifted down against us, and to save the boat from being swamped Tex seized the ax and hacked the cable in two. The tree hit his head and knocked him senseless for a time. I bandaged it the best I could by the light of the lightnin' flashes, and we drifted on, fighting the flood and the trees.

"The boat sprang a leak, and we bailed and bailed, and the next thing I knew he was shaking me, and day was just breaking, and we were close to shore. And he tied the rope to the saddle of my horse and made him jump overboard, and we followed.

"That's the last I remember—jumping into the water—until I awoke, it must have been hours later, to find myself tied—and I got loose, and saw Long Bill Kearney beside the river, and I flew back to the horses, and just as I was about to escape there stood that unspeakable Purdy, grinning at me."

Alice paused and pressed her hands to her eyes, as if to keep out the sight. "And oh, the things he told me," she continued; "the awful things, the threats, the promises—that were worse than the threats. I must have lost consciousness again—for the next thing I remember I was here in this room, and you were bending tenderly over me."

The two listeners had sat spellbound by the narrative, and at its conclusion Janet McWhorter leaned forward and took one of Alice's hands in both of hers. And when Alice looked again into the girl's eyes lifted to her own she read something akin to adoration in their depths.

The girl's lips moved. "And you did that—risked your life, everything, to save his life; to keep him from being shot!"

"It wasn't anything," protested Alice. "It was the least I could do. He risked his life for ours—Win's and mine—last year—and, why, I love that boy, like a sister. I never had a brother, and—I need one."

"And maybe he needs—a sister," murmured Janet softly. And at the words Alice Endicott glanced swiftly into the girl's face, and her eyes glowed suddenly with the light of great understanding. Her own troubles were forgotten, and into her heart welled a mighty gladness. She pressed the hands that held her own.

"Do you know him?" she whispered.

The girl nodded. "Yes—a little. He borrowed one of our horses—and I rode with him when he went back to get you and bring you to the ranch. And I rode to the edge of the bad lands with him when he took Purdy's trail; and then he sent me back."

"Then, he *is* safe! Oh, I'm glad—glad! Purdy told me he had drowned, but I didn't believe him. I knew he would come to my rescue." She paused and her face clouded. "But now I am safe, and he is in danger. Purdy may kill him!"

"Don't you go frettin' about that, deary," broke in Jennie. "If they's any killin' to be done between them two, Tex 'll do it. Purdy's a gunman, all right, but he'll never get Tex. Tex is the best man—an' Purdy knows it, an' his kind ain't never no good when they're buffaloed."

"But he might shoot him from ambush."

"He better do it all to one shot, then. 'Cause, believe me, Tex 'll hit the ground a shootin'! An' now you two make yerselves to home while I run out an' tell Joe—I'm just a bustin' to tell him, an' he'll want to know."

As the woman hurried toward the stable, Alice patted the girl's hands.

"He's splendid!" she whispered. Janet's eyes did not meet hers, and she continued softly: "He's just a boy—impulsive, lovable. And yet, at times he's so very much a man. And there doesn't seem to be anything he can't do. Always, no matter what the emergency, he does the right thing at the right time. And he has another side—once when I ventured to say that Corot would have loved to paint a certain sunset we were watching, he quietly informed me that Corot could not have painted it—could not have got into the feel of it—and I knew that he was right."

"He gets drunk," said the girl, without raising her eyes. "I could hate a man that gets drunk."

"I didn't say he is a saint. But I happen to know that when he makes up his mind not to drink, no power on earth can make him take even a single drink."

"He wouldn't drink at the ranch—I offered him a drink because he needed one; but he refused it."

"Do you know why?"

The girl shook her head.

"Because he promised me he wouldn't take a drink until after he had talked with my husband. Win wants to see him on business. Wants to persuade him to keep the place he's held for a year as foreman of the Y Bar. Win is going to buy the Y Bar."

"The Y Bar!"

"Yes. Do you know the Y Bar?"

The girl nodded slowly. "I was born there, and lived there the most of my life. Dad moved over here onto Red Sand while I was away at school. The Y Bar is—is like home to me."

"Mr. Colston says he's the best foreman he ever had. You should hear him speak of him—of his taming a great wild stallion they call the Red King."

"The Red King!" cried Janet, her eyes wide with excitement. "I know the Red King—I've seen him often on the range. He's the most wonderful horse in the world. They said nobody could ride him. Once or twice men tried it—and the Red King killed them. And, did Tex ride Red King?"

Alice nodded. "Yes, he rode him—tamed him so the great wild horse would come when he whistled. But he wouldn't brand him. And then, one night, he leaped onto his back without saddle or bridle and rode him straight out into the open range and turned him loose!"

The girl's eyes were shining. "Oh, I'm glad—glad! Wait till you see the Red

King, and you will be glad too. He's the embodiment of everything that's wild and free and strong. I should hate to think of him—branded—laboring under the saddle like a common cow-horse."

"That's just what the Texan thought—so he turned him out onto the range again. It was a great big thing to do—and it was done in a great big way, by a man with a great big poetic soul." There was a long silence, during which the little clock ticked incessantly. Alice spoke again, more to herself than to the girl. "What Tex needs is some strong incentive, something worth while, something to work for, to direct his marvelous energy toward—he needs some one to love, and who will love him. What he needs is not a sister—it's a wife."

"Why didn't you marry him, then?" flashed the girl.

Alice smiled. "He never asked me," she answered. "And I couldn't have married him if he had. Because, really, I've always loved Win—for years and years."

"Maybe he won't ask—any one else, either. If he asks me, I won't marry him. I won't marry anybody!" she concluded with a defiant toss of the head.

"I certainly shouldn't either, if I felt that way. And if he should ask you, stick to it, or you will spoil my plans."

"Your—plans?" questioned the girl.

"Yes. I've got the grandest scheme. I haven't told a soul. When we get settled on the Y Bar I'm going to send for a friend of mine—she's a perfectly beautiful girl, and she's just as adorable as she is beautiful. I'm going to make her come and pay us a long visit. I'm a great believer in propinquity, and especially out here."

Janet sniffed audibly. "She'd probably get lost the first thing."

"That's it, exactly!" cried Alice enthusiastically. "That's just what I'm counting on. And who would find her? Why, Tex, of course! There you have it—all the ingredients of a first-class romance. Beautiful maiden lost on the range—forlorn, homesick, wretched, scared. Enter hero; rescues maiden. If I could only work in a villain of some kind—but maybe one will turn up. Anyway, even without a villain, it's almost sure to work—don't you think?"

Alice repressed a desire to smile as she noted the girl's flushed face. "I—I think it's perfectly horrid! It's a—what do they call it?—a regular frame-up! Suppose he don't love the girl? Suppose he don't want to marry her?"

Alice laughed. "Well, then, you may rest assured he won't marry her! He won't marry any one he don't want to, and as the Irish say, 'by the same token,' when he finds the girl he wants to marry, he'll marry her. If I were a girl, and he wanted to marry me, and I didn't want to marry him, I'd jump onto a horse and I'd ride and ride and ride till I got clear out of the cattle country."

Janet stood up and drew on her gloves. "Well, I must be going. It's nearly noon. Good-by. Glad to have met you, I'm sure."

"Good-by," called Alice, as the girl stepped from the door. "And when we get settled at the Y Bar, do come over and see us—make us a nice, long visit. Please!"

"Thank you so much! I certainly shall—come to see you at the Y Bar."

Alice Endicott smiled as she watched the girl stamp away toward the corral. Declining the pressing invitation of both Jennie and Cinnabar Joe to stay for dinner, Janet mounted and rode across the creek.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Jennie, as she watched her out of sight. "She acted like she's mad! An' here I thought them two would hit it off fine. Ain't that jest like women? I'm one myself, but—gee, they're funny!"

Out on the bench Janet spurred the bay mare into a run and headed straight for the bad lands. A jack-rabbit jumped from his bed almost under her horse's hoofs, and a half-dozen antelope raised their heads and gazed at her for a moment before scampering off, their white tails looking for all the world like great bunches of down bobbing over the prairie—but Janet saw none of these. In her mind's eye was the picture of a slenderly built cowboy who sat his horse close beside hers, whose gloved hand slipped from her sleeve and

gripped her fingers in a strong, firm clasp. His hat rested upon the edge of a bandage that was bound tightly about his head—a bandage bordered with tatting. His lips moved and he was speaking to her: "For God's sake, don't hinder—help!" His fine eyes, drawn with worry and pain, looked straight into hers—and in their depths she read:

"Oh, I'm coming, Tex!" she cried aloud. "I must find him—I must! If he knows she's safe—maybe he will—will stop hunting for Purdy! Oh, if anything should—happen to him—now!"

"Little fool of an Eastern girl!" she exploded a few miles farther on. "If she did come out here and get lost, and if he did find her, and if— She'd never make him happy, even if he did marry her! But that Mrs. Endicott—I like her."

She pulled up abruptly upon the very edge of the bad lands and gazed out over the pink and black and purple waste. Her brow drew into a puzzled frown.

"I wonder," she whispered, "if she *did* know I was just crazy about her Texan?" And, with the question unanswered, she touched the bay mare with her spurs and headed her down a long, black ridge that extended far into the bad lands.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SOME SHOOTING.

WHEN the Texan left Cass Grimshaw he headed due north. He rode leisurely, light-heartedly. The knowledge that Alice was safe at Cinnabar Joe's left his mind free to follow its own bent, and its bent carried it back to the little cabin on Red Sand, and the girl with the blue-black eyes. Most men would have concentrated upon the grim work in hand—but not so the Texan.

He was going to kill Purdy because Purdy needed killing. By his repeated acts Purdy had forfeited his right to live among men. He was a menace—a power for harm whose liberty endangered the lives and happiness of others. His course in hunting down and killing this enemy of society needed no elaboration nor justification. It was a thing to be done in the course of the day's work. The fact that Purdy knew the ground, and he did not, and that the numerical odds were four to one against him, bothered him not at all. If others of the same ilk had seen fit to throw in with Purdy, they must abide the consequences.

So his thoughts were of the girl, and his lips broke into a smile—not the twisted smile that had become almost habitual with him, but a boyish smile that caused a fan-like arrangement of little wrinkles to radiate from the corners of his eyes and the eyes themselves to twinkle with mirth.

As men of the open are prone to do, he voiced his thoughts as they came: "She sure give me to understand, last night, that runnin' off with other men's wives is an amusement that wouldn't never meet her popular approval. It's—what do the French call it?—a *faux pas* that's not only frowned on, but actually scowled at, an' made the excuse for numerous an' sundry barbed shafts of sarcasm an' caustic observations of a more or less personal application, all of which is supposed to make a man feel like he'd not only et the canary, but a whole damn buzzard—an' wish he hadn't lived to survive doin' it."

The man glanced up at the sun. "Time I was gettin' outside of this lunch she packed up for me—chances are I won't want to stop an' eat it after while." Dismounting, he seated himself with his back against a rock and unrolled the sandwiches.

"She made 'em," he observed to Blue. "Regular light bread, an' good, thick ham between." He devoured the sandwich slowly and reached for another. "Cass said to *make* her have me," he smiled. "Hell of a lot he knows about women, but—the dope's right, at that. Boy, those eyes! An' that hair, an'—an', oh, the whole *woman* of her! If a man had a girl like that to go home to—an' she loved him—an' he knew she was thinkin' about him—an' pullin' for him to—to make good! There wouldn't be nothin' to it—he'd just naturally have to make good. Janet McWhorter—Janet Benton—Mrs. Tex Benton—Mrs. Horatio Benton—hell!

I hope she don't go in for the Horatio part. It's almost as bad as Winthrop Adams Endicott! Tex is better—if she ever thinks to inquire about my other name I'll tell her it's Mike, or else I'll go plumb to the other extreme an' call it Percy or Reginald. I ain't got her yet—but believe me, she's goin' to have a war on her hands till I do get her!

"I'll just admit that she'll marry me—what then? It's time I was kind of takin' inventory. Here's what she gets: One cow-hand an' outfit, includin' one extra saddle-horse, a bed-roll, an' a war-bag full of odds an' ends of raiment, some dirty, some clean, some tore, an' some in a fair state of preservation. Eight hundred an' forty dollars in cash—minus what it 'll take to square me in Timber City. An'—an'—that's all! She ain't goin' to derive no hell of a material advantage from the union, that's sure. But, if I've still got my job, it ain't so bad to start off with.

"Other assets—what we used to call incorporeal hereditaments, back in law school—fair workin' knowledge of the cattle an' horse business; health, good; disposition, kind to murderous; habits, bad to worse. Let's see: smokin'—that's all right; chewin'—probably be allowable if indulged in outdoors only; swearin'—prob'ly won't be an issue till the kids get old enough to listen; gamblin'—prob'ly be limited to poker, friendly games an' pifflin' limit.

"Drinkin'—Let's see, the only year since I can remember I don't drink nothin' I quit better than eight hundred dollars to the good—first time I ever had eight hundred dollars all at once in my life. What happens? Get to drinkin' for a half a day, an' *bing!* off comes a hundred, maybe two hundred, to pay up for the hell I raised! Does it pay? Not for a married man! Not for me!

"An' besides, what was it she said when I turned down the drink she offered me? She said, 'I'm glad; I hate the stuff!'" He paused, smiling reminiscently. "Drinkin's a lot of fun—but a man's got to pay for his fun; more ways than one, he's got to pay. If it 'll make her happy to not drink, an' onhappy to drink—the way I look at it, it's a damned mean man that would pay for his own belly-wash with his wife's happiness!

"That about concludes the takin' stock, then. Drinkin'—once. Drinkin'—twice. Drinkin'—three times, and *out!* I'm a teetotaler, a pop-lapper, an' a grape-juice swizzler! At that, if I'd known that last drink I had back there in Timber City was goin' to be the very last dog-gone drink I was ever goin' to get, I'd kind of strung it along a little—sort of sipped it slow an' solemn as become an obsequy. Instead of which, I tossed it off light-hearted, casual, even what you might call flippant—an' it the last drink I was ever goin' to have!"

He rose, brushed a stray crumb or two from his shirt, and mounted. "Come on, Blue; let's get this stuff over with, an' wash our hands, an' hit for Red Sand. Cass says Cinnabar Joe's place ain't only about four miles above McWhorter's."

Thirty minutes later the Texan slowed his horse to a walk. Rock fragments appeared, dotting the surface of ridges and coulées. Small at first, these fragments increased in size and number as the man pushed northward. He knew from Cass Grimshaw's description that he was approaching the rendezvous of Purdy and his gang.

Far ahead he could see the upstanding walls of rock that marked the entrance to the gorge or crater which marked the spot where some titanic explosion of nature had shattered a mountain—shattered it and scattered its fragments over the surrounding plain.

But the Texan was not thinking of the shattered mountain, nor of the girl on Red Sand. He hitched his belt, glanced at the revolver in its holster, and, slipping his hand beneath his shirt, made sure that Long Bill's six-gun lay ready to his hand. He proceeded slowly, pausing at frequent intervals to scan the rock-dotted plain. The mouth of the gorge showed distinctly now.

He pulled up his horse and studied the ground. He decided to dismount and proceed on foot—to work his way from rock-fragment to rock-fragment. A slight sound caused him to glance swiftly to the left.

Not fifty feet away the malevolent face of Purdy stared at him above the barrels of two six-guns. Directly before him he saw another man, and to the right two more. And every man had him covered. His eyes returned to Purdy, and his lips twisted into their cynical grin.

"Well," said Tex, "why in hell don't you shoot?"

"Want to git it over with in a hurry, do you?" sneered the outlaw. "Well, I don't. I'm goin' to git you, all right, but I'm goin' to take my time to it. When you skipped out a year back fer fear of what I'd do to you, you'd ought to stayed away."

The Texan laughed. "Just as big a damned fool as ever, Purdy! Just as big a four-flusher, too. You better shoot while you've got the chance. 'Cause if you don't, I'll kill you, sure as hell."

Purdy sneered. "Gittin' in yer bluff right up to the last, eh? Thought you could sneak up an' git me when I wasn't lookin', eh? Thought— The sentence was never finished. The Texan's expression suddenly changed. His eyes fixed wildly upon a point directly behind Purdy, and he cried out in sudden alarm:

"Don't kill him, Cass! He's mine!"

Like a flash Purdy whirled, and like a flash the Texan was out of his saddle and behind a rock. And as Jennie had predicted, he "hit the ground a shootin'." His own horse had shielded him from the others, whose attention had been momentarily diverted to their leader. Instantly Purdy discovered the ruse—but too late. As he whirled again to face the Texan, the latter's gun roared, and one of Purdy's guns crashed against a rock-fragment as its owner, his wrist shattered, dived behind his rock with a scream of mingled rage and pain.

Three times more the Texan shot, beneath the belly of his horse, and the two outlaws to the right pitched forward in crumpled heaps and lay motionless. Frenzied by the noise, the big blue roan plunged blindly forward. The man in front made a frantic effort, to get out of his way, failed, and the next moment crashed backward against a rock-fragment from which he ricocheted from sight while the great blue roan galloped on, reins flying and stirrups wildly lashing his sides.

"That leaves just the two of us, Purdy," drawled the Texan from the shelter of his rock, as he reloaded his gun. A vicious snarl from the hiding-place of the outlaw was the only answer. Tex continued: "I told you you was a fool not to shoot while you had the chance. I'm goin' to get you now; but seein' you wasn't in no hurry about it, I won't be, either. There's quite a few things I want you to hear—things you ought to know for the good of your soul."

"You don't dast to git me!" came exultingly from behind Purdy's rock. "If you do, what 'll become of *her*—the pilgrim's woman? She's right now layin' tied an' gagged in a mud crack where you nor no one else won't ever find her. What 'll become of her, if you git me?"

The Texan grinned to himself, and, after a moment of silence, called unhesitatingly:

"Say, Purdy, you wouldn't do that! Wouldn't let a woman die like that without tellin' where she is?"

"The hell I won't!"

"Come on, Purdy; tell me where she is! You might as well. If I get you, what's the use of leavin' her there to die? An' if you get me, why, you'll have her anyway."

A sneering laugh answered him. "You don't dast to git me—an' leave her where she's at!"

The Texan's voice hardened. "Oh, yes, I do, Purdy; 'cause I know, an' you know, that she's safe an' sound at Cinnabar Joe's—an' she'll stay there till Cinnabar can get word to her husband."

A volley of oaths greeted the statement. "Cinnabar don't dast to open his yap! He'll go up fer the rest of his life if he does. I'll fix him!"

"You won't fix no one, Purdy. You're goin' to hell from here. An' whatever you've got on Cinnabar you'll take with you. When I told you to tell me where the girl was I was just givin' you a chance to do one decent thing before you cash in—but you couldn't do it, Purdy. There ain't a decent thing in you. Why, even

Long Bill Kearney was a man fer about a second before he died."

"What do you mean—Long Bill—died?"

"Ask him," answered the Texan grimly. "You an' him will be close neighbors—wherever you're goin'." Inadvertently the Texan leaned a little to one side as he shifted his position. There was a quick report, and a bullet tore through a loose fold of his shirt sleeve. "Pretty fair shootin', Purdy," he drawled. "Little bit wide—you'd have nicked me if you'd held in against the rock."

So intently did each man watch the other that neither noted the four men who approached stealthily from rock to rock and finally crouched behind an irregular buttress of rock only a short pistol-shot away. Their vantage-point did not permit any view of the man who had been knocked down by the galloping horse nor of the contestants themselves, but the exchange of shots could be followed with ease and accuracy.

Cass Grimshaw nudged Endicott and pointed to the bodies of the outlaws. "He got two," he whispered with grim approval. "An' he got 'em right out in the open. They must have seen him comin' an' laid for him before he got to their hang-out."

"Hey, Tex," called Purdy after a long interval. "We ain't goin' to git one another peckin' away like this behind these rocks."

"No—*we* ain't goin' to git *one another*, but *I'm* goin' to get *you*—like that!" He fired as he spoke, and his bullet chipped the rock and tore through Purdy's hat-brim. "Missed, by grab! But that pays up for puttin' a hole in my shirt. You was a fool for fallin' for that old gag I put over on you!"

"An' I wouldn't of fell fer it either, if it hadn't of been fer luck—you outlucked me—if you'd of said any one else except Cass I wouldn't of fell fer it."

"That wasn't luck, Purdy; that was brains. If I figured on murderin' a man to-night—an' he knew it—do you suppose I wouldn't jump quick if I thought he was sneakin' up behind me with a gun? You bet I would!"

"Murderin'!" Purdy's voice sounded shrill with a quavering note of fear. "What—what do you mean—murderin'?"

"Why, I run across Cass a while back. I told him I was huntin' you, an' he said I'd find you an' three more over here. Said you an' them had planned to bump him an' Bill Harlow off to-night, an' you was busy arrangin' the details. He wanted to come along—him an' Bill—but I told him they wasn't no use, if they was only you an' three more like you, I could handle you myself. Him an' Bill are goin' to ride over after while an' see if I need any help; but I don't, do I, Purdy?"

The Texan's words were drowned in a perfect tirade of curses. Purdy's voice was shrill with fear.

"I've been double-crossed! It's a lie! Every one's ag'in' me! I ain't never had no show!"

The voice trailed off in a whine. A few moments of silence followed, and then above the edge of Purdy's rock appeared a white handkerchief tied to the end of a gun-barrel. Taking careful aim, the Texan fired. The white flag disappeared and the gun struck the rocks with a ring of steel.

"You shot at a white flag!" screamed Purdy.

"You're damn right I did! An' I'll shoot at the low-lived pup that tried to hide behind it too. My God, Purdy! No head—no guts! The only things about you that's a man is your pants an' shirt an' hat!"

"Listen, Tex, listen!" The man's voice was frantic with appeal. "Let's take medicine. You c'n have the pilgrim's woman—I don't want her—I only wanted the reward. I was only kiddin' about bumpin' you off! Honest I was! Listen! Let me go, Tex! Let me git away! Cass has got me framed up! I aimed to quit him an' turn straight! Listen—they's a girl, Tex; over on Red Sand. I give her my word I'd quit the horse game an' start an outfit. Listen—I—"

"Who is she?" The voice of the Texan cut in like chilled steel.

"McWhorter's girl—"

"You're a damned liar!"

"D'you know her?" The words came haltingly.

"Some," answered the Texan dryly. "She an' I are goin' to be married tomorrow."

The words had been uttered with the deliberate intent of taunting Purdy, but even the Texan was not prepared for the manifestation of insane rage that followed.

"You lie, damn you! You've always beat me! Ye're beatin' me now! You son of a ——, take that!" With the words, he leaped from behind his rock and emptied his gun, the bullets thudding harmlessly against the Texan's barrier, and instantly he was behind his rock again.

Cass Grimshaw grinned at the others. "He's baitin' him—prob'ly been baitin' him fer an hour, till Purdy's gone plumb mad."

"De Injun she would stake um out an' build de leetle fire on hees belly. But Am t'ink dat hurt worse lak Tex do it."

Endicott gazed in white-lipped fascination upon the scene.

"Let's make him surrender and turn him over to the authorities," he whispered.

Grimshaw shook his head. "No—not him. If you knew him like I do, you wouldn't say that. By God, I turned one man over to the authorities—an' they give him a year! An' when he got out I give him what he had comin'. Think what he'd of done to your wife—"

The sentence was cut short by the sound of galloping hoofs. All four craned their necks for sight of the rider. Grimshaw and Bill Harlow drew their guns, expecting to see the fourth man of Purdy's gang come rushing to the aid of his leader. But not until the rider was within a hundred feet of the two combatants did they catch sight of her.

At the same instant they saw the Texan, hat in hand, frantically wave her back. Janet McWhorter saw him, too, and pulled the bay mare to her haunches at the same instant a shot rang out and Purdy's bullet ripped the Texan's hat from his hand. Almost before her horse came to a stop the girl's gun was in her hand and she sat—tense—expectant.

Purdy laughed a wild, shrill laugh that echoed among the rocks like a sound from hell. The words of the Texan burned like words of living fire. *"Goin' to be married to-morrow!"*

Deliberately he raised his gun and fired—just at the instant the bay mare threw up her head with a nervous jerk to rid her mouth of the feel of the cruel spade bit. The next second she reared high and crashed to the ground, carrying her rider with her. With a wild cry the Texan sprang to his feet and started for the girl, and at the same moment the horse-thief that the big blue roan had knocked senseless among the rocks rose to his feet and, leveling his gun at the running man, fired. At the sound of the report the Texan staggered, turned half-way round and fell sprawling among the rocks. Purdy leaped to his feet and, gun in hand, started for the prostrate Texan.

The rock-ribbed valley became a roar of noise. Janet, one leg pinned in the stirrup, fired across the body of her horse. Fired swiftly and accurately. The running Purdy staggered this way and that, drew himself stiffly erect, threw his hands high above his head, and spun around like a top, and as the sound of the girl's last shot died he pitched forward and lay very still.

From the rock buttress to the left Janet saw men running toward her. She could not tell whether they were friends or foes—it mattered not; her gun was empty. At thought of her gun, she gave vent to a pitiful little cry and covered her face with her hands. Then the men were at her side pulling at the body of her horse. Her leg was freed and some one stood her upon her feet. She lowered her hands and stared into the bearded face of Cass Grimshaw.

"Good shootin', sis!" He patted her shoulder gently. "Why, what's the matter? D'ye think you missed him—look!" He pointed to the body of Purdy.

"Oh—oh!" moaned the girl and covered her eyes again. "I've—I've killed a man!"

Grimshaw looked puzzled.

"No, sis—you ain't killed no *man!* Not by no stretch of imagination he ain't no man!"

"But—he's a human being—and—I killed him!"

As the horse-thief stood looking down upon her heaving shoulders the puzzled look in his eyes gave place to a decided twinkle, which an instant later changed to a look of mild reproach.

"Say, sis, who do you think you be? Claimin' *you* killed Purdy! Why, there ain't no more chance you killed him than there is that I didn't!"

He extended his hand, in which an automatic pistol of large caliber lay flat in the palm.

"This here gun shoots jest twice as swift as yours. Agin' your eight hundred feet of muzzle v'losity I've got almost two thousan'—an' I'd got in two shots before you begun. Then, too, if you'll take a look around, you'll see that some other folks has got pretty fair claim on him.

"Take Bill, here—his thirty-forty rifle shoots half agin as swift as my automatic—an' he begun shootin' when I did. An' look at the breed, yonder, stickin' fresh shells in his gun. I bet that bird never missed—an' he shot jest a hair before I did. An' the pilgrim, he shot too—but I wouldn't bet on him—he might of missed, but the rest of us didn't. An' I ain't sayin' you *missed,* mind you. 'Cause I think you got him every crack out of the box. But he was dead 'fore you started shootin'. Yup—what you done was to pump about a quart of lead into a dead man, 'fore he could hit the ground—an', b'lieve me, that's *shootin'!* But the killin' part—that goes to the fastest guns."

The girl's eyes lighted. "Oh, I—I'm glad I haven't got that on my conscience. I'd hate to think that I had killed—even him." The next instant she was gone, and they watched her as she bent low over the Texan, who had struggled to his elbow.

"Janet—darling," he whispered, "do you know—about *her?*"

The girl blushed furiously at the words, and the blue-black eyes shone like twin stars.

"Yes," she breathed, "I know. She's at Cinnabar Joe's—and she told me all about it. And, Tex, I think she's fine!"

The Texan nodded. "She is, an'"—he indicated Endicott with a nod of his head—"there's her husband over there shaking hands with Cass; an' he's just as fine as she is—they're real folks, girl—but, never mind them. What I want to know is—will you marry me to-morrow, dear?"

"To-morrow!"

"Might's well be to-morrow as next week—or next month! Come on—please! You can't get away from me, so you might as well. An' besides here I am, shot in the leg, an' if you don't give me my own way I'm likely to run a fever, an' have to get it cut off—so it's up to you, sweetheart—a one-legged man a month from now or a two-legged one to-morrow. Which?"

The girl bent very close. "I—I think I'd rather have a two-legged one—darling."

And the next instant the man's arms were about her, her lips crushing to his.

"Say, Cass," whispered Bill Harlow, with an eye on the girl who was bending over the wounded man, "I never shot at Purdy—I got that damned skunk down there in the rocks that shot Tex."

"Me too," chimed in Bat.

"I shot at him too," said Endicott.

"Hell!" answered Grimshaw, with a wink. "So did I—but, don't never let her know."

There was a moment of silence, which was broken by Endicott, who stepped forward and grasped the speaker's hand. "I am proud to be admitted to the friendship of Cass Grimshaw, horse-thief and—gentleman," he said, and turned away to see the Texan looking at him with a twinkle in his eye.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BACK ON RED SAND.

WHILE Cass Grimshaw and Bill Harlow rounded up the horses, and transferred the girl's saddle from the dead mare to one of the animals belonging to the outlaws, Endicott and Bat assisted Janet to bind up the Texan's wound.

When at last they were ready for the trail, Grimshaw called Endicott aside.

"You an' the breed come along with me," he whispered. "You must be middlin' anxious to see yer wife, an' I'll take you to Cinnabar Joe's. The girl, there, she knows the way, an' they can follow along slower." He paused and winked. "He won't be wantin' to ride no ways fast—on account of that leg."

Endicott's eyes lighted with sudden understanding as he glanced at the two figures who stood side by side near the horses.

"By George!" he exclaimed. "I wonder—"

"Wonder—hell! Give 'em a chance! Come on, we'll pull out. Bill, he'll h'ist him onto his horse, an' then he'll stay an' drop them corpses down some mud crack."

As Endicott leaped from his horse in front of Cinnabar Joe's cabin, his wife rushed from the door and threw herself into his arms.

"Oh, Win—Win—dear!" she sobbed. "Oh, can you ever forgive me? But—it was the only way—they'd have killed him!"

Endicott soothed her. "Forgive you! I have nothing to forgive, dearest. I know it's all right! At first I was a little—worried; but old Bat came along—and after that I knew it was all right. But, come on—let's go inside, and you can tell me all about it."

Cinnabar Joe greeted Grimshaw and Bat at the horse corral.

"Seen Tex?" he asked anxiously.

Grimshaw nodded. "Yeh—we seen him."

"Did he—git Purdy?"

Grimshaw shook his head. "No—he didn't git him. He almost, but he didn't quite."

Without a word Cinnabar turned, entered the corral, and stepped out a few moments later, leading a saddled horse.

"Where you goin'?" asked Grimshaw.

"To Wolf River."

"Wolf River! What's goin' on in Wolf River that you're so hell bent to take in?"

Cinnabar hesitated an instant, then he spoke:

"You might as well know it as the rest of 'em. I'm goin' to give myself up, an' I want to beat Purdy to it. He's got somethin' on me—a hold-up that I was partly mixed up in, 'way back when I was a kid. I never got none of the money, an' I've been on the level since. I figgered I'd paid fer that long ago. But if Purdy got away he'll tip me off. It's goin' to be hard as hell on her."

He nodded toward his wife, who stood at some distance talking with old Bat.

Grimshaw leaned over and laid a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Put up yer horse, boy," he said. "You've got a nice little outfit started here—you an' her. Stay right with it—an' stay on the level. Forgit anything that might of happened a long time ago. It's the things you do now, an' what ye're goin' to do, that counts. Tex didn't git Purdy—but they was five more of us there to back up his play.

"We was all of us more or less handy with our guns. An' between the whole of us we managed to git him. Purdy's dead, Cinnabar—dead as Julius Cæsar—an' all his pals is dead—an' whatever he had on you died with him."

"There comes Tex now!" cried Cinnabar, pointing to two riders who appeared outlined for a moment against the opposite valley rim, before beginning the descent of the slope. "He's ridin' McWhorter's blue roan. But who's that with him? Why—it's McWhorter's girl! But what horse has she got? She busted out of here two or three hours ago ridin' her bay mare."

As the two riders approached across the narrow valley Grimshaw fingered his stubby beard.

"There's a pair to draw to," he muttered.

"Do you mean—"

"Yes—that's just what I mean! But they rode a damn sight faster than I would, at that."

"Hey, Bat! You old reprobate!" cried the Texan, as his horse ascended the bank from the creek. "Take Cinnabar's cayuse an' beat it for Wolf River! An' you make him scratch gravel! Now's the chance to do me a good turn on account of them four bits I give you—'way back in Las Vegas—remember?"

The old half-breed grinned broadly.

"*Oui!* Am 'member dat fo' bit." Reaching into his shirt, he withdrew a half-dollar suspended from his neck by a greasy thong of rawhide. "See, Am ain't forgit. Dat fo' bit she give me chance to pay heem back 'bout seex-seven hondre tam. W'at you wan' in Wo'f Reevaire? Nodder pilgrim to hang, eh, *bien?*"

Joining in the laugh that followed the old half-breed's sally, the Texan rode to his side and handed him some yellow bills.

"You hit the trail now—an' hit it hard. An' you show up here to-morrow mornin' with a preacher an' a round yellow ring—savvy?"

"*Oui!* De pries' an' de ring! *Voila!*" The old man looked straight into the eyes of the girl who sat her horse close beside the Texan. "You gon' mar' heem to-mor'?"

Janet, blushing furiously, laughed an affirmative.

Bat nodded. "Dat good. You git de bes' man on de worl'! Dat Tex mebbe-so she git to be de Gov'—de w'at you call, de *President!* But som'tam he lak de bad boy, an' you got to knock hell out of heem to mak' heem good. Ol' Bat—he know. For ver' long tam Am know heem. You love heem lak hell. Een de eye Am see it—an' een de eye Am see you gon' to mak heem stay good—"

"Hey, you old leather image!" laughed the Texan. "What are you tryin' to do—scare me out?"

"Ba Goss! Am lak Am see you scare wan tam! You bet Am ride wan hondre mile to laff on you. You git de damn fine 'oman. Now you got to mak' her, w'at you call, de happiness. Bime-by Ol Bat, she git too ol' to ride de range—to cook. Den Am joos stay round an' look aftaire *les enfants.* Am show um how to ride an' shoot an' trow de rope—joos' so good lak de *pere* kin do, *ah voila!*"

Janet fled precipitously for the cabin, and as Bat mounted Cinnabar's horse and headed out onto the trail the Texan turned to Grimshaw.

"Slip over to McWhorter's to-morrow, Cass," he invited—"I'd like to have you there."

Grimshaw hesitated just a moment.

"You're sure you want me? You ain't askin' me just so I won't feel—left out? An' how about the others? How about yer—wife? She never has had no time for us horse-thieves."

The Texan smiled. "She's learnt a lot in the last couple of hours, Cass. If you ain't at the weddin' she'll be the most disappointed one of all."

"All right, boy—I'll come. I got to be goin' now." He ran his fingers over his stubby beard. "Sure is goin' to be hell to shave."

As the Texan swung from his horse, a feminine shriek of joy directed his attention toward the cabin, where in the doorway Alice and Janet stood locked in each other's embrace—laughing, crying, talking all at once, while Endicott smilingly beckoned to Tex.

"Oh, you darling!" Alice was saying. "I'm so glad! I picked you for him the moment I laid eyes on you—and then I nearly spoiled it all by my eulogy."

"But," stammered Janet—"what about the other girl—the one from the East—that you were going to invite out? You said she was beautiful—and—and adorable and—you were just going to *make* her marry him!"

"From the East!" Alice exclaimed. "I'm sure I didn't say anything about the East. I said there was a girl friend of mine—and I did say she was beautiful and adorable—and she is—and I said I was going to invite her to come and make me a long visit—and I *did* invite her—before she left the room in a huff—and went tearing off into the bad lands to find her lover—"

Janet smothered the rest of the sentence in kisses.

"Well, anyway—you didn't make her marry him," she said. "Because she intended to marry him anyway—if she could get him to ask her!"

A couple of hours later, while the three women were in the cabin preparing supper, Tex and Endicott and Cinnabar sat outside and talked and listened to the sounds of laughter that floated through the door.

"Look at old Whiskers comin'," said Tex, indicating a horseman who appeared around the corner of the barn.

Cinnabar chuckled. "Whiskers! Why, man, that's yer new dad! That's old Colin McWhorter—an' if you don't make a hit with him, believe me—he'll cut your head off!"

The huge Scotchman dismounted, nodded, and addressed Cinnabar Joe. "Ha' ye seen my daughter?" Before Cinnabar could answer the girl herself rushed from the door and threw herself into the big man's arms. "There, there, wee lass, ha' they hurt ye? Yer face is red like the fireweed! I—"

"No! No! Dad! I'm—so happy! I'm—I'm going to be married to-morrow! I want you to meet my—Mr. Benton—Tex! And oh, dad—you'll just love him! I knew it was all a mistake—about that horrid hand-bill. Here are Mr. and Mrs. Endicott—they know him well—and Cinnabar and his wife have known him for years."

McWhorter stood glaring at Tex, who returned him look for look. "Was it f'r thot I looked after her a' her life—educated her—thot she sh'ud marry a common cow-puncher!"

The Texan stepped directly before him and, reaching up a finger, tapped the irate man's breast.

"Look here, old-timer. I'm a common cow-puncher, just as you say—but, at that, I don't take off my hat to any sheepman! You an' I are goin' to be big friends, once we get strung out. I like you already. I've got you sized up for one of the biggest-hearted old specimens on the range. But, at that, you like to get your growl in—an' get it in first. Well—you've growled—an' you haven't fooled no one, nor scairt no one.

"If you want a little further dope on me, here goes. I'm from Texas—come from good enough folks down there so they haven't been able to beat the old man for Congress in twenty years. I've been somethin' of a black sheep—but the black's wearin' off in spots. I've got as good education, I reckon, as any one here—an' a damn sight better one than I need in my business. I walk on my hind legs an' eat with a fork. I've got a job—eighty bucks a month and found—foreman of the Y Bar outfit, over across the river. Some day I expect to own an outfit of my own."

He ceased suddenly, and, reaching out, drew the girl from her father's arms, and held her to his side. "An' last of all—an' as far as I can see, the only thing that really matters—I love this little girl—"

"Losh! Lad!" cried the old Scot, his eyes atwinkle. "Ye fair talk me off my feet! 'Tis na wonder she took ye—ye ne'er gi' her a chance to say no!"

"Supper's ready!" called Jennie from the interior of the cabin; and it was a merry company indeed that filed in and took their places at the table—extended for the occasion by means of planks carried in from Cinnabar's unfinished stable.

"I've just bought an outfit over on the other side," said Endicott, when the last vestige of Jennie's pies had disappeared from the plates, and the thick cups had been filled with black coffee. "And Cinnabar, do you know where I could find a foreman?"

"On the other side!" exclaimed the Texan. "You! Didn't know there was an outfit for sale over there! What is it, Win—sheep or cattle?"

"Cattle."

Cinnabar shook his head.

Endicott continued. "He must be capable, sober, understand the cattle business, and—married."

"Don't know no one that would quite fill the bill," grinned Cinnabar Joe.

"Hey, Win," cut in Tex, "how would I do? I'm capable of some things—some times. I've got Cinnabar, here, for a witness that upon certain occasions I've been sober. I understand the cow business or old Dad Colston wouldn't of made me foreman—an' to-morrow every one here's goin' to be witnesses that I'm married! How about it—don't that fill the bill?"

Endicott laughed. "I guess that fills the bill, Tex," he said. "You're hired!"

"But—what outfit did you buy, Win?"

"The Y Bar," answered Endicott. "And Colston told me that if I couldn't find you for foreman, I'd sure be out of luck."

"*The Y Bar!*" Tex reached over and grasped Endicott's hand. "Boss—you've got the best outfit in Montana!"

"Not—boss—Tex. What you meant was partner. You see, I forgot to mention that the man who accepted the position would have to accept a half-interest in the outfit—his time and his experience against my money."

A dead silence followed the words—a silence broken a moment later by the sound of Janet, sobbing softly against her father's shoulder—and by the big Scotchman's rumbling words: "There, there, wee lassie—there, there."

AN EPILOGUE.

THE ceremony that took place the following afternoon in the McWhorter cabin was impressive in its extreme simplicity.

At the conclusion of the wedding feast McWhorter arose, passed into his own room, and returned a moment later with a bottle of wine, which he held to the sunlight.

"'Tis auld," he said reverently, "an' of famous vintage. Its mate was drunk years ago at my ain weddin' in Sco'lan'. I ha' saved this—for *hers*." Very carefully he broke the seal and withdrew the cork, and poured a little of the precious liquid into each thick glass.

"We will drink," he said solemnly, "to the health an' prosperity of—my children."

They drank, the old Scotchman divided the remaining wine as before.

"An' now, Meester Endicott, can ye not propose us a toast?"

Endicott rose and allowed his eyes to travel about. He began to speak. "Here we are—we and our women—a cattle man and a sheep man; a minister of the Gospel, and a horse-thief; an ex-bartender, a half-breed, and a Harvard man, who until a year ago was of the strictest and most hidebound sect of the New Englanders—and, as Cass Grimshaw so aptly phrased it yesterday—'We are all friends together.' Let us drink—to the wonderful freemasonry of the cow country!"

(The end.)

Stranger by Rothvin Wallace

EVEN before he had quite reached the camp the stranger seemed predestined to the in-bad class at Hot Tamale. But as subsequent events proved, he was not the kind of a man to sidestep trouble, nor to go out of his way to bid for popularity.

The stranger approached Hot Tamale just at the time that the green snow was setting in. And up Nome way the old-timers still talk about that green snow; also, they continue to discuss the stranger, for the advent of the two was synchronous.

Coincidentally, Tamale Ben had loped down to the little wharf on the Koyukuk, in the vain hope that he might sight the

long-overdue supply boat. His pale-blue eyes, however, failed to envisage aught but the flow of yellow water, beneath a thin scum of ice—until it began to snow. Then Ben rubbed his eyes, beat his temples, tore off a huge chew of tobacco, swore to himself, and wondered if he were going plumb daffy or only color blind. For that snow was green!

"And we hadn't ought to be having snow for a month yet," he cogitated. "But here it is, and it's green—a month early, and green!"

If anybody should know about the snows of Hot Tamale, Ben was entitled to the laurel of oracle; for it was Ben who found the gold cache, who founded the town, who, inadvertently, gave it its name, and who, in turn, bore part of the town's name as part of his own picturesque sobriquet.

A dozen years before, Ben, fresh from the quartz diggings in Mexico, had led a crew of eager prospectors up a tiny tributary of the Koyukuk. Cold and half-starved they were, when Ben stubbed his toe on a pure nugget as big as his two fists, and plowed, face down, through as neat a placer pocket as one might wish to find. It was pretty tough on Ben's face, but the find netted a couple of thousand ounces of virgin metal. And then and there, Ben voiced his classic:

"Say, pards, I'd give ten thousand dollars, right now, for one hot tamale."

Ergo, the present camp of Hot Tamale, with the notable Tamale Ben as its foremost citizen. It was a pretty tight little clique that opened up the placer fields, and a stranger had to prove that he was of some real value to the community before he was encouraged to tarry long. As a consequence, the population had been held down to about a hundred persons, and each one of them could be accounted rich in his own right. Nor had this organized gold-getting been conducive to much excitement. In all its career, the camp had enjoyed only two shooting affairs and one robbery. But now, on this day, circumstances augured well for a shake-up.

"Green snow!" repeated old Ben.

It was coming fast now, driven by a north wind that had the aspects of a blizzard. Ben scattered a small drift with the toe of his boot, picked up a handful, examined it carefully, and even ventured to lick a snowball that he had moulded.

"Gosh!" he muttered; "it even tastes green!"

The longer Ben thought about the matter, the more uncanny it seemed; and being unable to solve the mystery of green snow, he quite naturally ascribed it to a manifestation of the supernatural.

"May be some kind of a warning from the Almighty," he opined.

Whereupon, old Tamale Ben, who had fought bad men and wildcats, became scared. It was no place for him, down there alone by the river, in the midst of a green snow-storm. The more he thought about it, the more frightened he grew. Presently, with a wild whoop that rivaled the wailing gale, he began to run.

For ten minutes the demon of fear gave speed to Ben's aging legs. Then he came up standing, just as he was about to round a small hill. Right ahead of him crouched a man. The back of the latter was toward Ben, whose curiosity was intensely aroused by the peculiar actions of the stranger. In a moment the green snow had lost its terror, and Ben was emboldened by the presence of a fellow human. He wasn't afraid of humans; no, sir. Only such phenomena as come from the Omnipotent bothered Ben.

The old fellow skirted the base of the hill, until he reached a point of vantage on the other man's flank. He assured himself, then, that the fellow was a stranger to Hot Tamale. But what was he doing? Had he gone loco; was he up to some devilish scheme, or did he merely have a stomach ache? For the stranger, Ben noted, had thrown himself prone upon the snow, and was gazing intently into a queer-looking brass tube.

"Looks like a telescope settin' down," remarked Ben to himself.

Ben took the precaution to draw his big, old-fashioned six-gun, which he held behind him, in readiness for service, as he advanced.

"Hi, stranger!" he greeted loudly. "What you doing thar?"

The stranger, much to Ben's surprise, did not appear nearly so startled as he was himself.

"Come here, you," responded the stranger in an authoritative tone, "and have a look at this."

"At what?"

"This," repeated the stranger enigmatically, with a wave of his hand toward the brass tube reposing in the snow. "Hurry up, now, before it vanishes; I want your testimony to prove a discovery."

"You mean for me to git down and take a look into that thing?"

"Certainly—and hurry! It may melt, or blow away."

"Stranger," said Ben slowly, "I take it you've gone clean crazy; but if you'll just trot off there forty paces, so you won't be too close to do damage behind my back, I'll take a squint at your machine. And if I don't like what I see—well, it's old Tamale Ben talking to you."

Whereupon Ben made a brave flourish with his gun, and the stranger, with a laugh, ran off the prescribed forty paces. Ben then fixed one eye suspiciously against a small, round hole in the top of "the telescope settin' down." In a moment he was on his feet again, beckoning and calling to the stranger.

"What did you see? Tell me what you saw?" demanded the latter excitedly.

"An angel, mister," replied Ben gravely; "leastways, I seen something mighty like pictures of angels they used to show me when I was a little boy."

"That's it!" cried the stranger. "That's what I expected you to see. And will you attest to it—will you sign a statement that you saw it?"

"Say, mister, what's it all about?" Ben suddenly remembered the green snow, and a creepy sensation again crawled down his spine at the reference to angels.

"Why, my friend," the stranger explained cheerily, "you merely saw a snowflake, under my microscope—a most marvelous form of a snowflake. You perhaps do not know it, but there are more than one thousand forms of snowflakes; and I, now, have discovered a new one—a most amazing one. Think, my friend, what this will mean to meteorological science—a snowflake in the form of an angel!"

Ben backed away a few paces, and took a firm grip on his six-gun. He was quite sure that somebody was crazy, himself included. And this business of a green snow, falling in flakes that took the form of angels—ugh! It was all too spooky to suit Ben's untutored mind.

"Tell me, stranger," he ventured with dry lips, "is this here snow green, actual green, or am I seeing things?"

"It's green, all right, my friend; but that is of little consequence, compared to the fact that I have discovered a new form of flake."

"Where you come from?" inquired Ben irrelevantly.

"Over yonder," with a wave of the hand.

"Where you going?"

"Nowhere in particular."

Ben gave the situation a moment's reflection. Could it be possible that this fellow had worked some hocus-pocus to make the snow green? And if he had, was it not likely that he was up to something that portended no good to Hot Tamale? As Ben thought, he acted.

"Yes, stranger, you *are* going somewhere in particular," he said severely. "You're coming right along with me to Hot Tamale, till I find out more about this snow business. Git along there."

Ben pointed the direction with the muzzle of his menacing revolver, while the stranger laughingly gathered up his microscope and swung a light pack to his shoulders. He was a fine specimen of manhood to look at, was this stranger—about thirty years old, tall, stalwart and agile; but old Ben reminded himself that appearances oft are deceptive, and determined to take no chances with a man who was indifferent to green snow, and who produced angel-flakes on a little square of glass, under a brass tube.

"What's your name?" asked Ben as they started.

"Stranger."

"I said, what's your name?" repeated Ben insistently.

"Stranger," was the imperturbable response.

Ben snorted angrily and lapsed into silence for the remainder of the thirty-minute hike to the edge of the camp.

"Got a hotel in these diggings?" inquired the stranger.

"One of the best in Alaska," was Ben's boast.

A few minutes later, when he glimpsed it, old Ben's cheerful captive stopped and laughed immoderately.

"'Dan's New York Hotel,'" he repeated, reading the crude weather-beaten sign that hung over the doorway. "I know what that means, old-timer," he added: "Dirty pine bar, bum food at high prices, faro game, and a few poker tables, creaky dance floor with a worn-out phonograph, and, up-stairs, a few rickety beds with straw mattresses. Eh?"

"That the kind they have in New York?" asked Ben dryly.

"About the same as to prices," smiled the stranger.

The stranger had occasion to smile again, when, on entering, he found Dan's New York Hotel to be only slightly better in appointments than he had pictured. But the accustomed activities of the place now were in abeyance. It seemed that the entire population of the little camp had assembled in the dance hall to hear the exhortations of an eccentric theologian who was known commonly as "Revrun."

"I call upon ye, sinners," he was shouting, "to prepare for the day of reckoning. Here, in this haunt of evil and intemperance, I come to tell ye that the Millennium is at hand. Look without, ye of little faith! Behold, in this snow, that which is as the handwriting on the wall! The snow flies green! It is the Great Spirit speaking in the voice of the vast silence! Heed ye the warning that ye see, but cannot hear!"

The Revrun paused and glowered, with blazing eyes, upon his awestricken auditors. So intent were they that Tamale Ben and his captive received no attention, except from one member of the assemblage.

It was after the stranger had cast aside his leather helmet that *she* approached them. Like a Viking queen she was, in her rugged, blonde loveliness. With a covert glance at the stranger—a quick appraisal of his bronzed, strong face—she addressed old Ben:

"What 're you doing with your gun loose?"

"Guarding a prisoner here," vouchsafed Ben rather sheepishly.

"This mild, nice-lookin' chap?" She ventured a more careful inspection of the stranger. "What's he done?"

"Now, Bee, don't you interfere with men's affairs," protested Ben.

The voice of the Revrun again sounded above the din:

"I tell ye, trial and trouble and pestilence are upon us in this land of wickedness. The supply boat is two weeks overdue, and, ere the winter is past, scurvy will eat our bones. The snows should be yet a month away, but the warning comes today—the green snow, flung from the outraged hand of the Mighty!"

The exhorter paused again, and the stranger chuckled softly.

"Ain't you scared?" Bee inquired wonderingly.

"Not a bit."

"What 'd you do to Ben to make him pull his gun on you?"

"I haven't the least idea," he smiled.

"Bee," interposed Ben nervously, "if you don't go 'tend to your own business I'll tell your daddy to—"

"I don't care," she retorted, with an imperious stamp of her booted foot. "I want to know what you've got against the stranger."

"Wa-all—" Ben hesitated, shifted his feet, shifted his quid, and slipped his gun back into its holster. "Wa-all, he's just durned mysterious, and I opine he knows more about this here green snow than he wants to admit."

"If you will be kind enough to introduce me," suggested the stranger, "I shall be glad to tell the young lady *all* I know about green snow."

"Introduce you!" growled Ben. "All right, what's your name?"

"Stranger."

Ben growled again. His hand began to move gunward, hesitated, and he said, with all the sarcasm he could command:

"*Mister* Stranger, shake hands with Miss Bee Danville, daughter of the landlord of this sheebang."

They clasped hands; their eyes met squarely, and, in that moment, a pact of friendship was sealed.

"The rest of my name is Robert Moore—Robert Moore Stranger," he said, and heard old Ben utter a mild anathema under his breath.

"You said you'd tell me about the green snow," she reminded.

"And so I will," he laughed.

Then, for the next ten minutes, Stranger talked earnestly to Bee and Ben—talked until the girl's face was radiant, and even old Tamale had cracked his leathery cheeks in a pleasant grin. Meanwhile a tall, dashing, swarthy fellow had been attracted by the conversation, and was casting malevolent looks in the direction of the trio.

"Buck de Fortesque is gettin' peeved over you," observed Ben.

"Let him be peeved, then," she replied, with a defiant toss of her regal, gold-crowned head.

Just then the Revrun, now at the far end of the room, began to spout again:

"I warn ye, sinners, the millennium—"

"Millennium nothing!" shouted Bee impulsively, springing to a chair. "There ain't anything specially queer about a green snow, and here's a stranger — Mr. Stranger—who can tell you all about it."

"He sure can," supplemented Tamale Ben loudly; "and he's got a machine what makes snowflakes look like angels, too. I seen it."

Stranger was quite unprepared for the sudden surge about him. A moment before he had been a nonentity. Now he was the center of attention.

"Go on—tell 'em about it," urged Bee.

He noted a sinister sneer on the face of Buck de Fortesque, as the girl and old Ben pushed him up on the chair that she had just vacated.

"Well," he began reluctantly, "I can understand how you feel about a green snow; but there is nothing alarming about it, nor is it any indication, as I can see, of a divine warning, as our friend, the Revrun, has declared. I—"

A murmur went up from the crowd. The Revrun attempted to protest, but was silenced. Buck, scowling portentously, drew nearer to the speaker.

"Go on and give 'em the straight of it," commanded old Ben. "And I'm here to back what the stranger says," he added belligerently.

"I can assure you," continued Stranger evenly, "that green snow is not uncommon in meteorological records. As long ago as the year 1838, there was a report by the eminent French scientists, Martin and Bravais, of a green snow that fell at Spitzbergen. The cause of a snow so colored is ascribed to vast numbers of microscopic plants afloat in the atmosphere. Each of these minute plants is from one one-thousandth to one three-thousandth of an inch in diameter, and contains a cell that harbors upward of eight animalcules. These minutiæ are caught and brought to earth by the weight of the falling snow.

"Red snows, due to the same cause, but from plants in a different state of development, have been frequent throughout the world; and New Hampshire, fifty years ago, even had a black snow—so black that, when melted, it served as the ink with which at least one account of its fall was recorded.

"I have given you now, my friends, an epitome of scientific knowledge on the subject, and I trust that your alarm will cease."

With which Stranger descended from the chair, amid the plaudits of the majority. Only the Revrun and Buck de Fortesque seemed displeased. The throng, relieved of the strain of fear, pressed to the bar.

"I wouldn't mind something myself," remarked Stranger.

"Nothing but tea served here," informed Bee with a laugh. "You know, mister, Alaska's dry territory now; but pop dishes out tea hot and cold, with or without a wink."

"I'll have mine hot, and *with* a wink," chuckled Ben expressively.

"Come on, then, I'll serve," she cried gaily, and took Stranger by an arm.

Ben, in turning, gave a glance from a window

"Look!" he cried, "the snow has turned white, like when it's natural. Mr. Stranger gave us the right argument, didn't he?"

A cheer proclaimed the sentiment of the crowd—only the Revrun had vanished, having lost his point of vantage, and Buck was surly. He edged close to the newcomer, as Bee, quite happily, was serving the promised tea. It was plain that the half-breed was jealous of the attention that she was giving to the visitor.

"What you say your name is?" he demanded truculently.

"Stranger," was the soft reply.

"What your business?"

"Examining snowflakes — and minding my own business."

"Where you come from?"

"Over yonder." Stranger made an indefinite motion with his right hand, which he brought back, in a natural manner, to his left shoulder.

"Where you go now—eh?"

"To get dinner—or supper—as soon as I can."

Stranger's twinkling gray eyes met a lowering scowl from Buck.

"I think you too fresh and one damn liar," hissed the half-breed, baring his even, white teeth.

In the history of Hot Tamale, quicker action never had been seen than that which followed Buck's challenge. Stranger's right hand, clasped carelessly over his left shoulder, closed and shot out, in a swift, swinging jaw chop. There was heard the smack of impact, as flesh met flesh—and Buck sprawled supinely on the floor.

For a moment, then, it seemed to look bad for Stranger. While he stood smiling, with hands buried in his coat pockets, Buck scrambled to his feet; and as he came up he snatched a big revolver from his belt.

"No you don't, Buck!" shouted Ben, springing between them with his old six-gun to the fore. "I ain't had no shootin' for fifteen years, but if there's any to be done, I'll carve another notch into the butt of this here trusty weapon. I said I was backin' the stranger—and I am."

Friends took hold of Buck, who shrugged nonchalantly and permitted himself to be led to a table.

"Much obliged, old-timer," said Stranger to Ben. "But you see"—he threw open his coat—"I had him beaten from the start."

"Gosh!" ejaculated Ben.

What he saw beneath the coat was a brace of army automatics, and the hands of Stranger, through slit pockets, caressing the butt of each pistol.

"Gosh!" muttered Ben again. "Reckon you could have potted me easy when I pulled my old six-gun on you this afternoon."

"Reckon I could," agreed Stranger smilingly; "but I knew you hadn't any notion of shooting, if I behaved right. That, however, should not interfere with our having another glass of Miss Danville's delicious tea—eh?"

Ben attested that there should be no interference with such a pleasure, and Bee, in her primitive insouciance, beamed with naive radiance on her new-found hero.

"But say," remarked the new-found hero, "I'm ravenously hungry. What is there on the bill of fare, Miss Danville?"

"Smoked salmon," she replied lugubriously.

"And—"

"Brown bread."

"That all?"

"Well, the supply boat's two weeks overdue, you know. Pop's got only two cans of peas and one of tomatoes left, and he's boosted the price up to fifty dollars a can."

"Serve 'em up," ordered Ben. "I'm buyin' the dinners for us three."

"Place seems more like a New York hotel every minute," remarked Stranger sententiously.

A little later, while they were seated at their plainly expensive—or expensively plain — meal, Bee laid a confident hand over one of Stranger's. Buck, meantime, had retired to the far end of the room, and, with some of his cronies, was imbibing freely of Dan's dry-territory tea.

"What *are* you doing in these parts, mister?" the girl asked appealingly.

And Stranger then opened up, as a real man on an honest mission would. For half an hour he talked, while old Ben's

head wagged sapiently with understanding, and the blue eyes of Bee grew large with wonderment and admiration.

While they were talking thus earnestly, the door was flung open, and two storm-beaten travelers plunged into the room.

"Red—Curly!" cried Ben in greeting. "The supply boat is in!"

The occupants of the room were on their feet in an instant. Buck de Fortesque ran forward with a joyous shout, for it was his cargo that was consigned to Hot Tamale, and these were his men.

"No, the supply boat ain't in, it's down," said Red, who elected to be spokesman.

"Down? What you mean?" demanded Buck.

"Down to the bottom of the Koyukuk," replied Red dramatically. "The boiler blowed up a hundred miles below. And boss, Curly and me was the only men aboard who wasn't sent to glory. That's 'cause we was out on the fore deck smokin' a pipe after supper."

Red continued with a long and graphic recital of the catastrophe. But the matter that concerned Hot Tamale most was that it had no winter supplies, except smoked fish. The winter had come prematurely, and only dog sleds now could bring the needed stores, over two hundred miles or more of snowy wastes.

"We've got to have vegetables," proclaimed old Ben firmly. "We've got to have vegetables, or we'll all be down with scurvy before the winter's past. Buck, it's your job to—"

"I'll fetch you all the vegetables you need," volunteered Stranger.

"You?" Buck turned on him with malignant scorn. "It is my contract to supply this camp. You can do nothing. You got no dogs; you—"

"Have you anything you would like to bet that I cannot bring supplies to this camp before you?" asked Stranger quietly.

"Me? Got anything for bet?" Buck laughed sneeringly. "I got plenty money. How much you got?"

Stranger had risen to his feet when Buck approached, and the other patrons were drawing a close circle about the two in expectation of a recurrence of the earlier trouble. Stranger, as usual, was smiling calmly, and had one hand buried deeply in the slit pocket of his coat. Old Ben was fidgeting, and had trouble to keep his nervous fingers from obvious proximity to the holster that held his six-gun.

"I have about five thousand dollars with me," said Stranger. "I will bet that sum that I can beat you in providing this town with provisions."

"How you goin' do it?" demanded Buck superciliously.

"That doesn't happen to be any of your business. Will you accept my wager of five thousand dollars?"

"You put him up; I cover, all right."

"And I- -I want to bet, too," cried Bee excitedly. "I'll bet ten thousand dollars."

"On me for to win?" beamed Buck.

"On Mr. Stranger to win," replied Bee frigidly.

Buck's face darkened.

"You got no money," he growled. "Besides, I make no gamble with women."

"Wa-all, say," interposed Tamale Ben, "you can't lay no such objections to me. I'm backin' Miss Bee, and I'm shoutin' for the stranger. I'll take ten thousand of this bet myself, makin' twenty-five thousand in all. I reckon my agreement is good for that amount, ain't it, Buck?"

Buck admitted that it was. Stranger, however, protested that he should place his own part of the pool in cash, but old Ben silenced him, and called on Bee to procure pen, paper, and ink.

"We'll make this regular like," he remarked, and, with his own hand, produced the following form of agreement:

> Me and Buck, the same as is hereunto undersigned, being of sound mind, bets twenty-five thousand dollars ag'in' each other on which gits vittles first to Hot Tamale. Buck bets he kin, while I lay my money on Mr. R. M. Stranger beating him. If Buck wins, I pay him twenty-five thousand dollars. If Mr. Stranger wins, Buck pays me the said and same like sum. And if either galloot refuses to pay on demand after the race is decided, he gits drummed outen this here camp forever after. Amen.

After the laborious drafting of the document, Ben leaned back in his chair, read

it aloud with modest pride, received general assurance that it could not have been done better, and handed it to Buck for his signature. Buck signed with alacrity, and Ben closed the agreement with the addition of his own scrawl.

"Signed and sealed," he proclaimed, thrusting the document into an envelope and presenting it to Bee. "Put that in your daddy's safe and keep it secure," he added.

The tension was over, and, in a moment, a babel was let loose. The wagering of fifty thousand dollars on a race to bring provisions into camp was even more exciting than a green snow, and the sporting blood of Hot Tamale was aroused to fever heat.

Buck departed immediately after signing the agreement, but Stranger resumed his seat and enjoyed the excitement that attended the placing of many small wagers. Buck, who had been the camp provisioner for years, had numerous friends and supporters; but old Ben was known as a man of sound judgment, and, while they knew nothing of Stranger, Ben's backing was sufficient to induce many to follow a blind lead. And gold clinked and jingled in Dan's New York Hotel that night in a thoroughly reckless manner, which reminded old-timers of the early rush to the placer fields.

Ben, meanwhile, went off to place spotters on Buck's preparations for the great race. And Bee and Stranger were quite eager for a tête-à-tête while the old fellow was so engaged, but the would-be sure-thing bettors would not permit it. One after another they went to Stranger. How was he going to win the race? Where was he going for his supplies? Others came with gratuitous advice, and some with dogs and sledges to sell.

Stranger, good-humoredly, declined to purchase, thanked his advisers, and gave the interrogators no information other than his assurance that he expected to be the victor. Then old Ben returned, and commanded the interlopers to retire and attend to their own affairs.

"Buck's makin' ready to git away in the morning," he announced. "He's got a crack team of huskies—the best in camp—and figures on gettin' supplies at Fort Gibbon. I hear he's goin' to strike down the Koyukuk on the ice till he hits the Yukon, then cut up to the fort. It's over two hundred miles each way, but the snow's stopped, now, and he ought to travel fast. He looks to pick up several dog teams for the trip back." Ben paused, then added anxiously: "Reckon you ought to git started to-night, pard?"

"I should say not. I'm going to have some sleep."

"Where d'you figure on gittin' your vittles?"

"I don't know," replied Stranger indifferently. "Probably at Nome, however. They'll be cheaper there. I'm going to Beaver City first, you know."

"Gosh, pard! Nome's five hundred miles off, and the same distance back. Reckon you had ought to hit out for Fort Gibbon, too? Goin' to Nome gives Buck about a six-hundred-mile advantage, figurin' the round trip."

"I don't know just what I'll do," repeated Stranger with a yawn.

At that moment one of Ben's spotters dashed in, breathless with excitement.

"What d'you think Buck's doin'?" he opened up. "He's buyin' all the dogs in town he can, and havin' Curly run 'em off, so's Mr. Stranger here can't git any. It's a dirty trick, I call it, and, if you'll say the word, I'll—"

"Well, just see that he leaves one pair of snow-shoes in camp," interrupted Stranger with a laugh. "Buck may have the dogs. All I want is one pair of snow-shoes, and Ben says he can supply me."

"Gee!" The miner's eyes popped with amazement. "You ain't goin' to walk, are you?"

"Part of the way, at least," smiled Stranger enigmatically.

News of Buck's feverish preparation for the race, and of Stranger's mysterious indifference, was not long in spreading about town. And there were many, indeed, who thought Stranger a bluffer, and pitied old Ben for having been deceived by him.

These scoffers were convinced further of their belief when, the following morning,

the town turned out, hoping to witness the start of a real old-time race between dog teams. It was disappointing, indeed, when only Buck, with his elegant string of huskies, mushed off alone. Eyes of misgiving then were turned on Stranger, who, with utter sang froid, watched the departure of his rival, after which he sauntered leisurely back to the hotel.

Two hours later, with scarcely a dozen persons to note his departure, Stranger hiked from camp at a brisk pace. Bee and Ben and a few others watched him until his form was lost in the dim distance of snow-crowned tundra.

"That's the last of that bird," remarked an old miner. "He's a faker."

"How much d'you want to bet?" challenged Ben; but the miner wasn't betting.

Within twenty-four hours Hot Tamale virtually had lost interest in the race, for it was determined generally that the farce that had been witnessed could not be dignified by such name. The people, however, had confidence in Buck's ability to bring back provisions with his dogs, and those who had been led to bet on the stranger were feeling exceedingly sore. To those on Buck's side old Ben had become a butt of ridicule, but he took their banter goodhumoredly, and even challenged them to increase their bets.

Toward evening of the third day after the departure of Buck and the stranger, just as the male population was repairing to Dan's New York Hotel for preprandial tea, Hot Tamale heard an amazing racket overhead. Then they saw a queer thing circling above their peaceful little camp.

The Revrun was quick to take advantage of the opportunity, and began to spout, while one miner, braver than the rest, came forth with his rifle and started to shoot at this huge, bird-like visitor. He had fired two shots before old Ben could reach him and snatch the gun from his hands.

"You fool!" cried Ben. "Don't you know you're tryin' to shoot holes through our winter vittles? Don't you know that there is one of them new-fangled airship-planes? Don't you know the fellow runnin' that machine is Mr. Stranger, what I've laid twenty-five thousand dollars on to win?" And in his righteous wrath old Ben buried the miner's rifle in a snow drift.

Tamale Ben, of course, knew what the miner did not know. But Ben, as you are aware, was the confidant of Robert Moore Stranger, and had heard something of the efficiency of airplanes. And when Stranger effected a graceful landing on the lot before Dan's New York Hotel, and gave Hot Tamale its first glimpse of a real airplane, the cheer that greeted him would have done credit to a band of Comanche Indians. Even the backers of Buck and his dog-team joined in that rousing acclaim.

"And just to show you folks that I've been to Nome," said the aviator, stepping forth, "here's a bundle of newspapers—the Nome *Nugget* and the *News*—less than a week old. Also, I've got one thousand pounds of canned provisions aboard."

Needless to remark, Hot Tamale went wild that night, and Stranger was called on to make half a dozen speeches. He told them, then, that he had been an aviator in the war; that he was engaged now in exploring the far north by means of an airplane; that he had had a minor mishap to his engine at Beaver City, twenty-five miles distant, when, after leaving the machine in the hands of his mechanician, he had wandered into Hot Tamale while making a little side expedition afoot.

He promised Hot Tamale that he would make as many trips between Nome and the camp as might be necessary to supply the people there with their winter provisions; and he assured Bee that, when he had finished his meteorological investigations, for which he was being paid, he would return to Hot Tamale, and whisper something in her ear that might be of interest to her. And Bee was mightily pleased, and Hot Tamale—figuratively, at least—burned its red fire and clashed its cymbals.

Twelve days later, Buck de Fortesque, at the head of a dog-train, dashed proudly and confidently into camp.

"Reckon you'd better go sell that stuff somewhere else," remarked old Ben dryly. "We've got all we need for the winter. But meantime, sonny, just pay me them twenty-five thousand dollars."