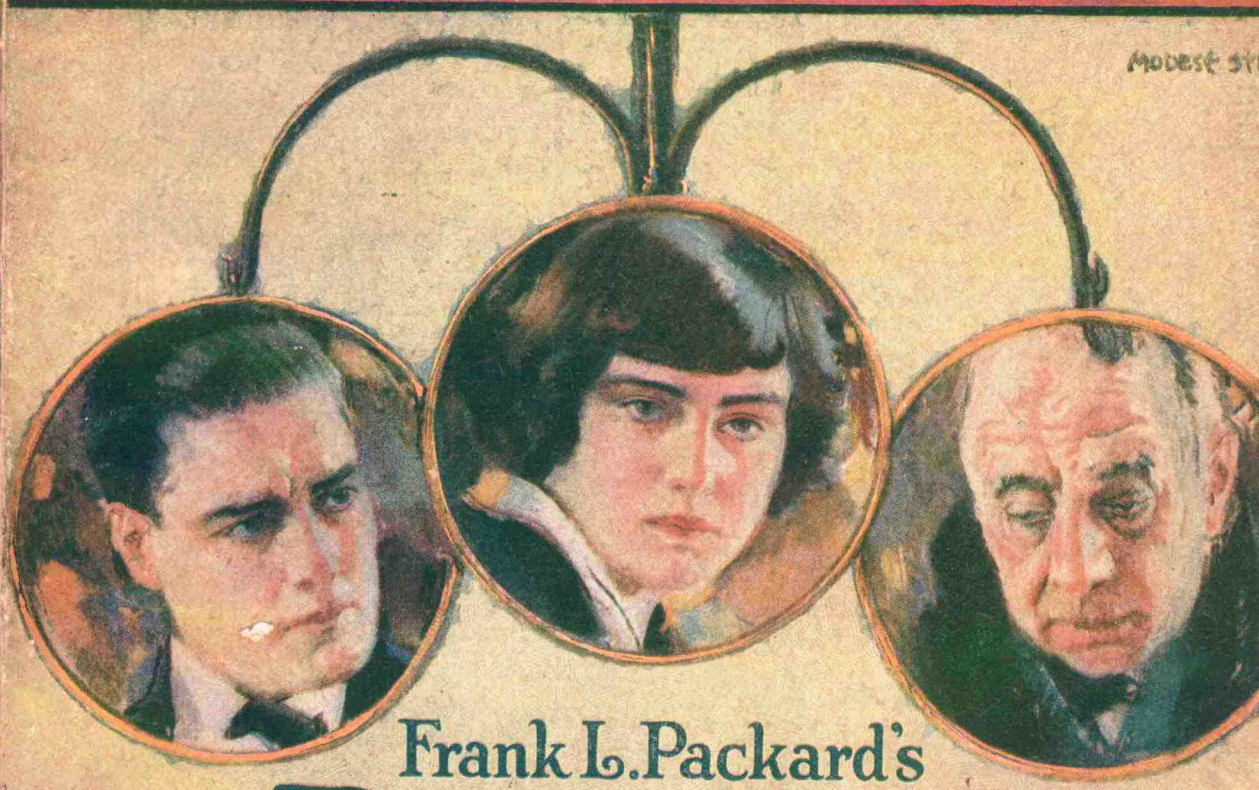
ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY



Frank L. Packard's

PAWNED

The Story of a Triple Regeneration
by the Author of "The Miracle Man".

10¢ PER FEBRUARY 5 BY THE $4.00

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CXXX SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 1921 NUMBER 3

Pawned*

by Frank L. Packard

Author of "From Now On," "The Sin That Was His," "The Miracle Man," etc.

FIRST PROLOGUE

Her Story

A HANSOM cab, somewhat wobegone in appearance, threaded its way in a curiously dejected manner through the heart of New York's East Side. A fine drizzle fell, through which the street lamps showed as through a mist; and, with the pavements slippery, the emaciated-looking horse, the shafts jerking and lifting up at intervals around its ears, appeared hard put to it to preserve its footing.

The cabman on his perch drove with his coat collar turned up, and his chin on his breast. He held the reins listlessly, permitting the horse to chose its own gait. At times he lifted the little trap door in the roof of the cab and peered into the interior; occasionally his hand, tentatively, hesitantly, edged toward a bulge in his coat pocket—only to be drawn back again in a sort of panic haste.

The cab turned into a street where, in spite of the drizzle, hawkers with their push-carts under flaring, spitting gasoline banjoes were doing a thriving business. The horse went more slowly. There was very little room. With the push-carts lining the curbs on both sides, and the overflow of pedestrians from the sidewalks into the street, it was perhaps over-taxing the horse's instinct to steer a safe course for the vehicle it dragged behind it. Halfway along the block a wheel of the hansom bumped none too gently into one of the push-carts, nearly upsetting the latter. The hawker, with a frantic grab, saved his wares from disaster by an uncomfortably narrow margin, and, this done, hurled an impassioned flood of lurid oratory at the two-wheeler.

The cabman lifted his chin from his breast, stared stonily at the hawker, slapped the reins mechanically on the roof of the cab as an intimation to the horse to proceed, and the cab wended its way along again.

At the end of the block, it turned the corner, and drew up before a small building that was nested in between two tenements. The cabman climbed down from

his perch, and stood for a moment surveying the three gilded balls that hung over the dingy doorway, and the lettering—"Paul Veniza. Pawnbroker"—that showed on the dully-lighted windows which confronted him.

He drew his hand across his eyes; then, reaching suddenly inside the cab, lifted a bundle in his arms, and entered the shop. A man behind the counter stared at him, and uttered a quick ejaculation. The cabman went on into a rear room. The man from behind the counter followed. Here, a woman rose from a table where she had been sewing, and took the bundle quickly from the cabman's arms, as it emitted a querulous little cry.

The cabman spoke for the first time.

"She's dead," he said heavily.

The woman, buxom, middle-aged, stared at him, white-faced, her eyes filling suddenly with tears.

"She died an hour ago," said the cabman, in the same monotonous voice. "I thought mabbe you'd look after the baby girl for a bit, Mrs. Veniza—you and Paul."

"Of course!" said the woman in a choked voice. "I wanted to before, but but your wife wouldn't let the wee mite out of her sight."

"She's dead now," said the cabman. "An hour ago."

Paul Veniza, the pawnbroker, crossed to the cabman's side, and, placing his hands on the other's shoulders, drew the man down into a chair.

"Hawkins," he said slowly, "we're getting on in years, fifty each of us, and we've known each other for a good many of those fifty." He cleared his throat. "You've made a mess of things, Hawkins."

The woman, holding the baby, started suddenly forward, a red flush dyeing her cheeks.

"Paul!" she cried out sharply. "How can you be so cruel at such an hour as this?"

The pawnbroker shook his head. He had moved to the back of the cabman's chair. Tall, slight, grave and kindly-faced, with high forehead and the dark hair beginning to silver at the temples, there seemed something almost esthetic about the man.

"It is *the* hour," he said deliberately; "the one hour in which I must speak plainly to my old friend, the one hour that has come into his life which may mean everything to him." His right hand slipped from the cabman's shoulder and started, tentatively, hesitantly, toward a bulge in the cabman's coat pocket—but was drawn back again, and found its place once more on the cabman's shoulder. "I was afraid, Hawkins, when you married the young wife. I was afraid of your curse."

The cabman's elbows were on the table; he had sunk his chin in his hands. His blue eyes, out of a wrinkled face of wind-beaten tan, roved around the little room, and rested finally on the bundle in the woman's arms.

"That's finished now," he said dully.

"I pray God it is," said Paul Veniza earnestly; "but you said that before—when you married the young wife."

"It's finished now—so help me, God!" The cabman's lips scarcely moved. He stared straight in front of him.

There was silence in the little, plainly furnished room for a moment; then the pawnbroker spoke again:

"I was born here in New York, you know, after my parents came from Italy. There was no money, nothing—only misery. I remember. It is like that, Hawkins, isn't it, where you have just come from, and where you have left the young wife?"

"Paul!" his wife cried out again. "How can you say such things? It—it is not like you!" Her lips quivered. She burst into tears, and buried her face in the little bundle she snuggled to her breast.

The cabman seemed curiously unmoved—as though dazed, almost detached from his immediate surroundings. He said nothing.

The pawnbroker's hands still rested on the cabman's shoulders, a strange gentleness in his touch that sought somehow, it seemed, to offer sympathy for his own merciless words.

"I have been thinking of this for a

long time, ever since we knew that Claire could not get better," he said. "We knew you would bring the little one here. There was no other place, except an institution. And so I have been thinking about it. What is the little one's name?"

The cabman shook his head.

"She has no name," he said.

"Shall it be Claire, then?" asked the pawnbroker gently.

The cabman's fingers, where they rested on his cheeks, gathered a fold of flesh and tightened until the blood fled, leaving little white spots. He nodded his head.

Again the pawnbroker was silent for a little while.

"My wife and I will take little Claire—on one condition," he said at last, gravely. "And that condition is that she is to grow up as our child, and that, though you may come here and see her as often as you like, she is not to know that you are her father."

The cabman turned about a haggard face.

"Not to know that I am her father—ever," he said huskily.

"I did not say that," said Paul Veniza quietly. He smiled now, leaning over the cabman. "I am a pawnbroker; this is a pawnshop. There is a way in which you may redeem her."

The cabman pressed a heavy hand over his eyes.

"What is that way?" He swallowed hard as he spoke.

"By redeeming yourself." The pawnbroker's voice was low and earnest. "What have you to offer her to-day, save a past that has brought only ruin and misery? And for the future, my old friend? There is no home. There was no home for the young wife. You said when you married Claire, as you have said to-night, that it was all finished. But it was not finished. And your curse was the stronger. Well, little Claire is only a baby, and there would be years, anyhow, before just a man could take care of her. Do you understand, my old friend? If, at the end of those years, enough of them to make sure that you are sure of yourself, you have changed your life and overcome your weakness, then you shall have little Claire back again, and she shall know you as her father, and be proud of you. But if you do not do this, then she remains with us, and we are her parents, and you pledge me your word that it shall be so."

There was no answer for a long time. The woman was still crying—but more softly now. The cabman's chin had sunk into his hands again. The minutes dragged along. Finally the cabman lifted his head, and, pushing back his chair, stumbled to his feet.

"God—God bless you both!" he whispered. "It's all finished now for good, as I told you, but you are right, Paul. I—I ain't fit to have her yet. I'll stand by the bargain." He moved blindly toward the door.

The pawnbroker interposed.

"Wait, Hawkins, old friend," he said. "I'll go with you. You'll need some help back there in the tenement, some one to look after the things that are to be done."

The cabman shook his head.

"Not to-night," he said in a choked way. "Leave me alone to-night."

He moved again toward the door, and this time Paul Veniza stepped aside, but, following, stood bare-headed in the doorway as the other clambered to his perch on the hansom cab.

Hawkins slapped his reins on the roof of the cab. The horse started slowly forward.

The drizzle had ceased; but the horse, left to his own initiative, was still wary of the wet pavements and moved at no greater pace than a walk. Hawkins drove with his coat collar still turned up, and his chin on his breast.

And horse and man went aimlessly from street to street—and the night grew late.

And the cabman's hand reached tentatively, hesitantly, a great many times, toward a bulge in his coat pocket, and for a great many times was withdrawn as empty as it had set forth. And then, once, his fingers touched a glass bottle neck—and then, not his fingers, but his lips—and for a great many times.

It had begun to rain again.

The horse, as if conscious of the futility of its own movements, had stopped, and,

with head hanging, seemed to cower down as though seeking even the slender protection of the shafts, whose ends now made half circles above his ears.

Something slipped from the cabman's fingers and fell with a crash to the pavement. The cabman leaned out from his perch and stared down at the shattered glass.

"Broken," said the cabman vacantly.

SECOND PROLOGUE—TWENTY YEARS LATER

His Story

IT was silver light. Inside the reefs the water lay placid and still, mirroring in a long, shimmering line the reflection of the full tropic moon; beyond, ever and anon, it splashed against its coral barriers in little crystal showers. It was a soundless night. No breeze stirred the palms that, fringing white stretches of beach around the bay, stood out in serene beauty, their irregular tops etched with divine artistry into the sky-line of the night.

Out from the shore, in that harbor which holds no sanctuary in storm, the mail boat, dark save for her riding lights, swung at her moorings; shoreward, the perspective altered in the moonlight until it seemed that Mount Vaea had lowered its sturdy head that it might hover in closer guardianship over the little town. Apia straggled in white patches along the road. And from these white patches, which were dwellings and stores, there issued no light.

From a point on the shore nearest the mail boat, a figure in cotton drawers and undershirt slipped silently into the water and disappeared. Thereafter, at intervals, a slight ripple disturbed the surface as the man, coming up to breathe, turned upon his back and lay with his face exposed; for the rest he swam under water. It was as though he were in his natural element. He swam superbly even where, there in the islands, all the natives were born to the sea; but his face, when visible on the few occasions that it floated above the surface, was the face, not of a native, but of a white man.

And now he came up in the shadow of the steamer's hull where, near the stern, a rope dangled over the side almost touching the water's edge. And for a moment he hung to the rope, motionless, listening. Then he began to swarm upward with fine agility, without a sound, his bare feet finding silent purchase against the iron plates of the hull.

Halfway up he paused, and listened intently again. Was that a sound as of some one astir, the soft movement of feet on the deck above? No, there was nothing now. Why should there be? It was very late, and Nanu, the man who lisped, was no fool. The rope had hung from exactly that place where, of all others, one might steal aboard without attracting the attention of the watch.

He went on again, and finally raised his head above the rail. The deck, flooded with moonlight, lay white and deserted below him. He swung himself over, dropped to the deck— and the next instant reeled back against the rail as a rope-end, swung with brutal force, lashed across his face, raising a welt from cheek to cheek. Half stunned, he was still conscious that a form had sprung suddenly at him from out of the darkness of the after alleyway, that the form was one of the vessel's mates, that the form still swung a short rope-end that was a murderous weapon because it was little more flexible than iron and was an inch in thickness, and that behind this form other forms, big forms, Tongans of the crew, pressed forward.

A voice roared out, hoarse, profane, the mate's voice:

"Thought you'd try it again, did you, you damned beachcomber? I'll teach you! And when I find the dog that left that rope for you, I'll give him a leaf out of the same book! You bloody waster! I'll teach you! I'll—"

The rope-end hissed as it cut through the air again, aiming for the swimmer's face. But it missed its mark. Perhaps it was an illusion of the white moonlight.

lending unreality to the scene, exciting the imagination to exaggerate the details, but the swimmer seemed to move with incredible speed, with the lithe, terrible swiftness of a panther in its spring. The rope-end swished through the air, missing a suddenly-lowered head by the barest fraction of an inch, and then, driven home with lightning-like rapidity, so quick that the blows seemed as one, the swimmer's fists swung, right and left, crashing with terrific impact to the point of the mate's jaw. And the mate's head jolted back, quivered grotesquely on his shoulders for an instant like a tuning fork, sagged, and the great bulk of the man collapsed and sprawled inertly on the deck.

There was a shuffle of feet from the alleyway, cries. The swimmer swung to face the expected rush, and it halted, hesitant. It gave him time to spring and stand erect upon the steamer's rail. On the upper deck faces and forms began to appear. A man in pajamas leaned far out and peered at the scene.

There was a shout from out of the dark, grouped throng in the alleyway; it was chorused. The rush came on again for the rail; and the dripping figure that stood there, with the first sound that he had made—a laugh, half bitter, half of cool contempt—turned, and with a clean dive took the water again and disappeared.

Presently he reached the shore. There were more than riding lights out there on the steamer now. He gave one glance in that direction, shrugged his shoulders, and started off along the road. At times he raised his hand to brush it across his face where the welt, raw and swollen now, was a dull red sear. He walked neither fast nor slow.

The moonlight caught the dripping figure now and then in the open spaces, and seemed to peer inquisitively at the great breadth of shoulder, and the rippling play of muscle under the thin cotton drawers and shirt, which, wet and clinging, almost transparent, scarce hid the man's nakedness; and at the face, that of a young man, whose square jaw was locked, whose gray eyes stared steadily along the road, and over whose forehead, from the drenched, untrimmed mass of fair hair, the brine trickled in little rivulets as though persistent in its effort to torture with its salt caress the raw, skin-broken flesh across the cheeks.

Then presently a point of land ran out, and, the road ignoring this, the bay behind was shut out from view. And presently again, farther on, the road came to a long white stretch of beach on the one hand, and foliage and trees on the other. And here the dripping figure halted and stood hesitant as though undecided between the moonlit stretch of sand, and the darkness of a native hut that was dimly outlined amongst the trees on the other side of the road.

At a moment he made his way to the hut, and groping around secured some matches and a box of cigarettes. He spoke into the empty blackness.

"You lose, Nanu," he muttered whimsically. "They wouldn't stand water and I left them for you. But now, you see, I'm back again, after all."

He lighted a cigarette, and in the flame of the match stared speculatively at the small, broken pieces of coral that made the floor of the hut, and equally, by the addition of a thin piece of native matting, his bed.

"The sand is softer," he said with a grim drawl.

He went out from the hut, crossed the road, flung himself upon his back on the beach, and clasped his hands behind his head. The smoke from his cigarette curled languidly upward in wavering spirals, and he stared for a long time at the moon.

"Moon madness," he said at last. "They say if you look long enough the old boy does you in."

The cigarette finished, he flung the stub away. After a time, he raised his head and listened. A moment later he lay back again full length on the sand. The sound of some one's footsteps coming rapidly along the road from the direction of the town was now unmistakably audible.

"The jug for mine, I guess," observed the young man to the moon, "Probably a file of native constabulary in bare feet that you can't hear bringing up the rear!"

The footsteps drew nearer, until, still some distance away, the white-clad figure of a man showed upon the tree-fringed road. The sprawled figure on the beach made no effort toward flight, and less toward concealment. With a sort of studied insolence injected into his challenge, he stuck another cigarette between his lips and deliberately allowed full play to the flare of the match.

The footsteps halted abruptly. Then, in another moment, they crunched upon the sand, and a tall man, with thin, swarthy face, a man of perhaps forty or forty-five, who picked assiduously at his teeth with a quill toothpick, stood over the recumbent figure.

"Found you, have I?" he grunted complacently.

"If you like to put it that way," said the young man indifferently. He raised himself on his elbow again, and stared toward the road. "Where's the army?" he inquired.

The tall man allowed the point of the quill toothpick to flex and strike back against his teeth. The sound was distinctive. *Tck!* He ignored the question.

"When the mate came out of dreamland," he said, "he lowered a boat and came ashore to lay a complaint against you."

"I can't say I'm surprised," admitted the young man. "I suppose I am to go with you quietly and make no trouble or it will be the worse for me—I believe that's the usual formula, isn't it?"

The man with the quill toothpick sat down on the sand. He appeared to be absorbed for a moment in a contemplation of his surroundings.

"These tropic nights are wonderful, aren't they? Kind of get you." He plied the quill toothpick industriously. "I'm a passenger on the steamer, and I came ashore with the mate. He's gone back—without laying the complaint. There's always a way of fixing things—even injured feelings. One of the native boat's crew said he knew where you were to be found. He's over there." He jerked his head in the direction of the road.

The young man sat bolt upright.

"I don't get you," he said slowly, "except that you are evidently not personifying the majesty of the law. What's the idea?"

"Well," said the other, "I had three reasons for coming. The first was that I thought I recognized you yesterday when they threw you off the steamer, and was sure of it to-night when—I am a light sleeper—I came out on the upper deck at the sound of the row and saw you take your departure from the vessel for the second time."

"I had no idea," said the young man, "that I was so well known. Are you quite sure you haven't made a mistake?"

"Quite!" asserted the other composedly. "Of course, I am not prepared to say what your present name is—you may have considered a change beneficial—so I will not presume in that respect. But you are, or were, a resident of San Francisco. You were very nice people there. I have no knowledge of your mother, except that I understand she died in your infancy. A few years ago your father died and left you, not a fortune, but quite a moderate amount of money. I believe the pulpits designate it as a 'besetting sin.' You had one—gambling. The result was that you traveled the road a great many other young men have traveled; the only difference being that, in so far as I am competent to speak, you hold the belt for speed and all-round proficiency. You went utterly, completely and whole-heartedly to hell." The tall man became absorbed again in his surroundings. "And I take it," he said presently, "that in spite of the wonders of a tropic night, you are still there."

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

"You have put it very delicately," he said, with a grim smile. "I'm sorry, but I am obliged to confess that the recognition isn't mutual. Would you mind telling me who you are?"

"We'll get to that in due course," said the other. "My second reason was that it appeared to me to be logical to suppose that, having once been the bona fide article, you could readily disguise yourself as a gentleman again, and your interpretation of the rôle would be beyond suspicion or "

"By God!" The welt across the young man's face grew suddenly white, as though the blood had fled from it to suffuse his temples. He half rose, staring levelly into the other's eyes.

The tall man was apparently quite undisturbed.

"And the third reason is that I have been looking for just such a--there really isn't any other word—gentleman, providing he was possessed of another and very essential characteristic. You possess that characteristic in a most marked degree. Your actions to-night are unmistakable evidence that you have nerve."

"It strikes me that you've got a little of it yourself," observed the young man evenly.

The quill toothpick under the adroit guidance of his tongue traveled from the left to the right-hand side of the other's mouth.

"It is equally as essential to me," he said dryly. "You appear to fill the bill; but there is always the possibility of a fly in the ointment; complications—or unpleasant complications, perhaps, you know, that might have arisen since you left San Francisco, and that might—er—complicate matters."

The young man relapsed into recumbent position upon the sand, his hands clasped under his head again, and in his turn appeared to be absorbed in the beauty of the night.

"Moon-madness!" he murmured pityingly.

"A myth!" said the tall man promptly. "Would you mind sketching in rough the details of your interesting career since you left the haunts of the aristocracy?"

"I don't see any reason why I should." The young man yawned.

"Do you see any reason why you shouldn't?" inquired the other composedly.

"None," said the young man, "except that the steamer sails at daybreak, and I should never forgive myself if you were left behind."

"Nor forgive yourself, perhaps, if you failed to sail on her as a first-class passenger," said the tall man quietly.

"What?" ejaculated the young man.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"It depends on the story," he said.

"I—I don't understand." The young man frowned. "There's a chance for me to get aboard the mail boat?"

"It depends on the story," said the other again.

"Moon-mad!" murmured the young man once more, after a moment's silence. "But it's cheap at the price, for it's not much of a story. Beginning where you left off in biography, I ducked when the crash came in San Francisco, and having arrived in hell, as you so delicately put it, I started out to explore. Mr. Dante had it right—there's no use stopping in the suburbs. I lived a while in his last circle. It's too bad he never knew the 'Frisco water-front; it would have fired his imagination! I'm not sure, though, but Honolulu's got a little on 'Frisco, at that! Luck was out. I was flat on my back when I got a chance to work my way out to Honolulu. One place was as good as another by then."

The young man lit a cigarette, and stared at the glowing tip reminiscently with his gray eyes.

"You said something about gambling," he went on; "but you didn't say enough. It's a disease, a fever that sets your blood on fire and makes your life kind of delirious, I guess—if you get it chronic. I guess I was born with it. I remember when I was a kid I—but I forgot, pardon me, the mail boat sails at daybreak."

"Go as far as you like," said the tall man, picking at his teeth with the quill toothpick.

The young man shook his head.

"Honolulu is the next stopping place," he said. "On the way out I picked up a few odd dollars from my fellow-members of the crew, and--"

"*Tck!*" It was the quill toothpick.

The young man's eyes narrowed, and his jaw set challengingly.

"Whatever else I've done," he stated in a significant monotone, "I've never played crooked. It was on the level."

"Of course," agreed the tall man hastily.

"I sat in with the only stakes I had," said the young man, still monotonously.

" A bit of tobacco, a rather good knife that I've got yet, and a belt that some one took a fancy to as being worth half a dollar.

" Certainly! Of course!" reiterated the tall man in haste.

The quill toothpick was silent.

" A pal of mine, one of the stokers, said he knew of a good place to play in Honolulu where there was a square deal," continued the young man; " so, a night or so after we reached there, we got shore leave and started off. Perhaps you know that part of Honolulu. I don't. I didn't see much of it. I know there's some queer dumps, and queer doings, and the scum of every nationality under the sun to run up against. And I know it was a queer place my mate steered me into. It was faro. The box was run by an old Chinaman who looked as though he were trying to impersonate one of his ancestors, he was so old. My mate and I formed the English-speaking community. There were a Jap or two, and a couple of pleasant-looking cutthroats who cursed in Spanish, and a Chink lying on a bunk rolling his pill. Oh, yes, the place stunk. Every once in a while the door opened and some other God-forsaken piece of refuse drifted in. By midnight we had a full house of pretty bad stuff.

" It ended in a row, of course. Some fool of a tout come in chaperoning a party of three men, who were out to see the sights; they were passengers, I found out later, from one of the ships in port. I don't know what started the rumpus; some private feud, I guess. The first thing I knew one of the Spaniards had a knife out and had jumped for the tout. It was a free-for-all in a minute. I saw the tout go down, and he didn't look good, and the place suddenly struck me as a mighty unhealthy place to be found in on that account. The stoker and I started to fight our way through the jam to the door. There was a row infernal. I guess you could have heard it a mile away. Anyway, before we could break from the clinches, as it were, the police were fighting their way in just as eagerly as we were fighting our way out.

" I didn't like the sight of that tout lying on the floor, or the thought of what might happen in the police court the next morning if I were one of the crowd to adorn the dock. And things weren't going very well. The police were streaming in through the doorway. And then I caught sight of something I hadn't seen before because it had previously been hidden by a big Chinese screen—one of these iron-shuttered windows they seem so fond of down there.

" Things weren't very rosy just at that moment because about the worst hell-cat scramble on record was being made a little worse by some cheerful maniac starting a bit of revolver practice, but I remember that I couldn't help laughing to save my soul. In the mêlée one of the folding wings of the screen had suddenly doubled up, and, beside the window, I saw hiding behind there for dear life, his face pasty-white with terror, a very courageous gentleman—one of the rubbernecks who had come in with the tout. He was too scared, I imagine, even to have the thought of tackling such formidable things as iron shutters enter his head. I yelled to the stoker to get them open, and tried to form a sort of rear guard for him while he did it.

" Then I heard them creak on their hinges, and heard him shout. I made a dash for it, but I wasn't quick enough. One of the policemen grabbed me, but I was playing in luck then. I got in a fortunate swing and he went down for the count. I remember toppling the screen and the man behind it over on the floor as I jumped sidewise for the window; and I remember a glimpse of his terrorized face, his eyes staring at me, his mouth wide open, as I took a headlong dive over the window sill. The stoker picked me up, and we started on the run.

" The police were scrambling through the window after us. I didn't need to be told that there wouldn't be a happy time ahead if I were caught. Apart from that tout who, though I had nothing to do with it, gave the affair a very serious aspect, I was good for the limit on the statute books for resisting arrest in the first place, and for knocking out an officer in the second. But the stoker knew his way about, we gave the

police the slip, and a little later on we landed up in a sailors' boarding-house run by a one-eyed cousin of Satan, known as Lascar Joe. We lay there hidden while the tout got better, and the Spanish hidalgo got sent up for a long term for murderous assault. Finally Lascar Joe slipped the stoker aboard some ship; and a week or so later he slipped me, the transfer being made in the night, aboard a frowsy tramp bound for New Zealand."

The young man paused, evidently inviting comment.

"Go on," prompted the man with the quill toothpick softly.

"There isn't very much more," said the young man. He laughed shortly. "As far as I know I'm the sole survivor from that tramp. She never got to New Zealand; and that's how I got here to Samoa. She went down in a hurricane. I was washed ashore on one of this group of islands about forty or fifty miles from here. I don't know much about the details; I was past knowing anything when the bit of wreckage on which I had lashed myself days before came to port. There weren't any—I was going to say white people on the island, but I'm wrong about that. The Samoans are about the whitest people on God's green earth. I found that out. There were only natives on that island. I lived with them for about two months, and I got to be pretty friendly with them, especially the old fellow who originally picked me up half drowned and unconscious on the beach, and who took me into the bosom of his family. Then the missionary boat came along, and I came back with it to Apia here."

The young man laughed again suddenly, a jarring note in his mirth.

"I don't suppose you've heard that original remark about the world being such a small place after all! I figured that back here in Apia a shipwrecked and destitute white man would get the glad hand and at least a chance to earn his stake. Maybe he would ordinarily; but I didn't. I hadn't said anything to the missionary about that Honolulu escapade, and I was keeping it dark when I got here and started to tell the shipwreck end of my story over again. Queer, isn't it? Lined up in about the first audience I had was the gentleman with the pasty face that I had toppled over with the screen in the old Chink's faro dump. He was one of the big guns here, and had been away on a pleasure trip, and Honolulu had been on his itinerary. That settled it. The missionary chap spoke up a bit for me, I'll give him credit for that, though I had a hunch he was going to use that play as an opening wedge in an effort to reform me later on. But I had my fingers crossed. The whites here turned their backs on me, and I turned my back on the missionary. That's about all there was to it. That was about two weeks ago, and for those two weeks I've lived in another of Mr. Dante's delightful circles."

He sat suddenly upright, a clenched fist swung outward.

"Not a cent! Not a damned *sou-marquee!* Nothing but this torn shirt, and what's left of these cotton pants! Hell!"

He lay back on the sand quite as suddenly again, and fell to laughing softly.

"*Tck!*" It was the quill toothpick.

"But at that," said the young man, "I'm not sure you could call me a cynic, though the more I see of my own breed as compared with the so-called heathen the less I think of—my own breed! I still had a card up my sleeve. I had a letter of introduction to a real gentleman and landed proprietor here. His name was Nanu, and he gave me his house to live in and made me free of his taro and his breadfruit and all his worldly possessions; and it was the old native who took care of me on the other island that gave me the letter. It was a queer sort of letter, too—but never mind that now.

"Splendid isolation! That's me for the last two weeks as a cross between a pariah and a mangy cur! What amazes me most is myself. The gentleman of the Chinese screen is still in the land of the living and walking blithely around. Funny, isn't it? That's one reason I was crazy to get away—before anything happened to him." The tanned fist closed fiercely over a handful of sand, then opened and allowed the grains to trickle slowly through the fingers, and its owner laughed softly again. "I've lived through hell here in those two weeks. I

guess we're only built to stand so much. I was about at the end of my rope when the mail steamer put in yesterday. I hope I haven't idealized my sojourn here in a way that would cause you to minimize my necessity for getting away, no matter to where or by what means! Nanu and I went out to the ship in his outrigger. Perhaps I would have had better luck if I had run into any other than the particular mate I did. I don't know. I offered to work my passage. Perhaps my fame had already gone abroad—or aboard. He invited me to make another excursion into Dante-land. But when he turned his back on me I slipped below, and tucked myself in behind some of the copra sacks they were loading. Once the steamer was away I was away with her, and I was willing to take what was coming. But I didn't get a chance. I guess the mate was sharper than I gave him credit for. After about four hours of heat and stink down there below decks that I had to grit my teeth to stand, he hauled me out as though he knew I had been there all the time. I was thrown off the steamer.

"But I wasn't through. Steamers do not call here every day. I wonder if you'll know what I mean when I say I was beginning to be afraid of myself and what might happen if I had to stick it out much longer? That mangy cur I spoke of had me lashed to the mast from a social standpoint. I tried it again—to-night. Nanu fixed it for me with one of the crew to hang that rope over the side, and—well, I believe you said you had seen what happened. I believe you said, too, that a chance still existed of my sailing with the mail boat, depending upon my story." He laughed a little raucously. "I hope it's been interesting enough to bail me out; anyway, that's all of it."

The tall man sat for a moment in silence.

"Yes," he said at last; "I am quite satisfied. Dressed as a gentleman, with money in your pockets, and such other details as go with the rôle, you would never be associated with that affair in Honolulu. As a matter of fact your share in it was not so serious that the police would dog you all over the world on account of it. In other words, and what really interests me, is that you are not what is commonly designated as a 'wanted' man. Yes, I may say I am thoroughly satisfied."

The young man yawned and stretched himself.

"I'm delighted to hear it. I haven't any packing to do. Shall we stroll back to the ship?"

"I hope so." The quill toothpick was busy again. "The decision rests with you. I am not a philanthropist. I am about to offer you a situation—to fill which I have been searching a good many years to find some one who had the necessary qualifications. I am satisfied you are that man. You do not know me; you do not know my name, and though you have already asked what it is, I shall still withhold that information until your decision has been given. If you agree, I will here and now sign a contract with you to which we will both affix our bona fide signatures; if you refuse we will shake hands and part as friends, and strangers who have been—shall we use your expression?—moon-mad under the influence of the wonders of a tropic night."

"Something tells me," said the young man softly, "that the situation is not an ordinary one."

"And you are right," replied the other quietly. "It is not only not ordinary, but is, I think I may safely say, absolutely unique and without its counterpart. I might mention in passing that I am not in particularly good health, and the sea voyage I was ordered to take explains my presence here. I am the sole owner of one of the largest, if not the largest, business enterprises in America; certainly its turnover, at least, is beyond question the biggest on the American continent. I have establishments in every city of any size in both the United States and Canada—and even in Mexico. The situation I offer you is that of my confidential representative. No connection whatever will be known to exist between us; your title will be that of a gentleman of leisure—but your duties will be more arduous. I regret to say that in many cases I fear my local managers are not—er—making accurate returns to me, and they are very hard to check up. I would require you to travel from place to

place as a sort of, say, secret inspector of branches, and furnish me with the inside information from the lack of which my business at present, I am afraid, is suffering severely."

"And that business?" The young man had raised himself to his elbow on the sand.

"The one that is nearest to your heart," said the tall man calmly. "Gambling."

The young man leaned slowly forward, staring at the other.

"I wonder if I quite get you?" he said.

"I am sure you do." The tall man smiled. "My business is a chain of select and exclusive gambling houses where only high play is indulged in, and whose clientele is the richest in the land."

The young man rose to his feet, walked a few steps away along the beach, and came back again.

"You're devilishly complimentary!" he flung out, with a short laugh. "As I understand it, then, the price I am to pay for getting away from here is the pawning of my soul?"

"Have you anything else to pawn?" inquired the other—and the quill toothpick punctuated the remark: "*Tck!*"

"No," said the young man, with a twisted smile. "And I'm not sure I've got that left! I am beginning to have a suspicion that it was in your 'branch' at San Francisco that I lost my money."

"You did," said the other coolly. "That is how I came to know you. Though not personally in evidence in the 'house' itself, San Francisco is my home, and my information as to what goes on there at least is fairly accurate."

The young man resumed his pacing up and down the sand.

"And I might add," said the tall man after a moment, "that from a point of ethics I see little difference in the moral status between one who comes to gamble and one who furnishes the other with the opportunity to do so. You are perhaps hesitating to take the hurdle on that account?"

"Moral status!" exclaimed the young man sharply. He halted abruptly before the other. "No—at least I am not a hypocrite! What right have I to quarrel with moral status?"

"Very well, then," said the other; "I will go further. I will give you everything in life that you desire. You will live as a gentleman of wealth surrounded by every luxury that money can procure, for that is your rôle. You may gamble to your heart's content, ten, twenty, fifty thousand a night—in my houses. You will travel the length and breadth of America. I will pay every expense. There is nothing that you may not have, nothing that you may not do."

The young man was silent for a full minute; then, with his hands dug in his pockets, he fell to whistling under his breath very softly—but very deliberately.

An almost sinister smile spread over the tall man's lips as he listened.

"If I am not mistaken," he observed dryly, "that is the aria from 'Faust.'"

"Yes," said the young man—and stared the other in the eye. "It is the aria from 'Faust.'"

The tall man nodded—but now his lips were straight.

"I accept the rôle of Mephistopheles, then," he said softly. "Doctor Faustus, you know, signed the bond."

The young man squatted on the sand again. His face was curiously white; only the ugly welt, dull red, across his cheeks, like the mark of some strange branding-iron, held color.

"Then draw it!" he said shortly. "And be damned to you!"

The tall man took a notebook and a fountain pen from his pocket. He wrote rapidly, tore out the leaf, and on a second leaf made a copy of the first. This, too, he tore out.

"I will read it," he said. "You will observe that no names are mentioned; that I have still reserved the privilege of keeping my identity in abeyance until the document is signed. This is what I have written: For good and valid consideration the second signatory to this contract hereby enters unreservedly into the employ of the first signatory for a period which shall include the lifetime of one or other of the undersigned, or until such time as this

agreement may be dissolved either by mutual consent or at the will of the first signatory alone. And the first signatory to this contract agrees to maintain the second signatory in a station in life commensurate with that of a gentleman of wealth irrespective of expense, and further to pay to the second signatory as a stated salary the sum of one thousand dollars a month." He looked up. "Shall I sign?"

"Body and soul," murmured the young man. He appeared to be fascinated with the restless movement of the quill toothpick in the other's mouth. "Have you another toothpick you could let me have?" he inquired casually.

The tall man mechanically thrust his fingers into his vest pocket; and then, as though but suddenly struck with the irrelevancy, and perhaps facetiousness of the request, frowned as he found himself handing over the article in question.

"Shall I sign?" His tone was sterner. "It is understood that the signatures are to be bona fide and—"

"Yes, sign it. It is quite understood." The young man spoke without looking up. He seemed to be engrossed in carefully slitting the point of the quill toothpick he had acquired with his knife.

The other signed both sheets from the notebook.

The young man accepted the two slips of paper, but refused the proffered fountain pen. In the moonlight he read the other's signature: Urlin P. Neyret. His lips tightened a little. It was a big name in San Francisco, a name of power. Few dreamed perhaps where the sinews of that power came from! He drew from his pocket a small bottle, uncorked it, dipped in the quill toothpick, and with his improvised pen wrote with a rasping, spluttering noise beneath the other's signature on each of the two slips of paper. One of these slips he returned to the other—but beneath the tall man's signature there was no mark of any kind whatever.

Through narrowing eyes the tall man had been watching, and now his face darkened ominously, and there was something of deadly coolness in his voice as he spoke.

"What tomfoolery is this?" he demanded evenly.

"No; it's quite all right," said the young man placidly. "Just a whim of mine. I can't seem to get that Doctor Faustus thing out of my head. According to the story, I think, he signed in a drop of blood—and I thought I'd carry a sort of analogy along a bit. That stuff's all right. I got it from my old native friend on that island I was telling you about. It's what my letter of introduction to Nanu was written with. And—well, at least, I guess it stands for the drop of blood, all right! Take it down there to the shore and dip that part of the paper in the salt water."

The tall man made no answer. For a moment he remained staring with grim-set features at the other, then he got up, walked sharply to the water's edge, and, bending down, moistened the lower portion of the paper. He held it up to the moonlight. Heavy black letters were slowly taking form just beneath his own signature. Presently he walked back up the beach to the young man, and held out his hand.

"Let us get back to the ship—John Bruce," he said.

Their Story

CHAPTER I.

ALADDIN'S LAMP.

JOHN BRUCE, stretched at full length on a luxurious divan in the most sumptuous apartment of the Bayne-Miloy, New York's newest and most pretentious hostelry, rose suddenly to his feet and switched off the lights. The same impulse carried him in a few strides to the window. The night was still, and the moon rode high and full. It was the same moon that, three months ago, he had stared at from the flat of his back on the beach at Apia. A smile, curiously tight, and yet curiously whimsical, touched his lips. If it had been "moon-madness" that had fallen upon the gambler king and himself that night, it had been a madness that was strangely free in its development from hallucination!

That diagnosis no longer held. It would be much more apposite to lay it to the door of—Mephistopheles! From the moment he had boarded the mail steamer he had lived as a man possessed of unlimited wealth, as a man with unlimited funds always in his possession or at his instant command.

He whistled softly. It was, though, if not moon-madness, perhaps the moon, serene and full up there as it had been that other night, which he had been watching from the divan a few moments before, that had sent his mind scurrying backward over those intervening months. And yet, perhaps not; for there would come often enough, as now, moments of mind groping, yes, even the sense of hallucination, when he was not quite sure but that a certain bubble, floating at one moment in dazzlingly iridescent beauty before his eyes, would dissolve the next into blank nothingness, and— Well, what would it be then? Another beach at some Apia, until another Mephistopheles, in some other guise, came to play up against his rôle of Doctor Faustus again?

He looked sharply behind him around the darkened room, whose darkness did not hide its luxury. His shoulder brushed the heavy silken portière at his side; his fingers touched a roll of banknotes in his pocket, a generous roll, whose individual units were of denominations more generous still. These were realities!

Mephistopheles at play! He had left Larmon at Suva, Fiji. Thereafter, their ways and their lives lay apart—outwardly. Actually, even here in New York with the continent between them, for Larmon had resumed his life in which he played the rôle of a benevolent and retired man of wealth in San Francisco, they were in constant and extremely intimate touch with each other.

A modern Mephistopheles! Two men only in the world knew Gilbert Larmon for what he was! One other besides himself! And that other man was named Maldeck, Peter Maldeck. But only one man knew him, John Bruce, in his new rôle, and that was Gilbert Larmon. Maldeck was the manager of the entire ring of gambling houses, and likewise the clearing house through which the profits flowed into Larmon's coffers; but to Maldeck, he, John Bruce, was exactly what he appeared to be to the world at large, and to the local managers of the gambling houses in particular —a millionaire plunger to whom gambling was as the breath of life.

The " inspector of branches " dealt with Gilbert Larmon alone, and dealt confidentially and secretively over Maldeck's head —even that invisible writing fluid supplied by the old Samoan Islander playing its part when found necessary, for it had been agreed between Larmon and himself that even the most innocent appearing document received from him, John Bruce, should be subjected to the salt water test; and he had, indeed, already used it in several of the especially confidential reports that he had sent Larmon on some of the branches.

He shrugged his shoulders. The whole scheme of his changed existence had all been artfully simple—and superbly efficient. He was under no necessity to explain the source of his wealth except in his native city, San Francisco, where he was known—and San Francisco was outside his jurisdiction. With both Larmon and Maldeck making that their headquarters, other supervision of the local " branch " was superfluous; elsewhere, his wealth was inherited—that was all. So, skipping San Francisco, he had come leisurely eastward, gambling for a week or two weeks, as the case might be, in the various cities, following as guidance apparently but the whim of his supposedly roué inclinations, and he had lost a lot of money—which would evidently find its way back to its original source in the pockets of Gilbert Larmon, via the clearing house conducted by Peter Maldeck.

It was extremely simple—but, equally, extremely systematic. The habitués of every branch were carefully catalogued. He had only—and casually—to make the acquaintance of one of these in each city, and, in turn, quite inevitably, would follow an introduction to the local " house "; and, once introduced, the entrée, then or on any subsequent visit to that city, was an established fact.

John Bruce laughed suddenly, softly, out into the night. It had been a good bargain

that he had made with Mephistopheles! Wealth, luxury, everything he desired in life was his. On the trail behind him in the cities he had already visited he had nightly lost or won huge sums of money until he had become known as the millionaire plunger. It was quite true that, in as much as the money, whether won or lost, but passed from his right to his left-hand pocket—the pockets being represented by one Gilbert Larmon—the gambler craving within him was but ill served, almost in a sense mocked; but that phase of it had sunk into insignificance.

The whole idea was a gigantic gamble—a gamble with life. The whole fabric was of texture most precarious. It exhilarated him. Excitement, adventure, yes, even peril, beckoned alluringly ahead. He stood against the police; he stood a very excellent chance of being discovered some morning minus his life if the men he was sent to watch, and who now fawned upon him and treated him with awe and an unholy admiration, should get an inkling of his real identity and his real purpose in their houses!

He yawned, and as though glorying in his own strength flexed his great shoulders, and stretched his arms to their full length above his head. God, it was life! It made of him a superman. He had no human ties to bind him; no restraint to know; no desire that could not be satiated. The past was wiped away. It was like some reincarnation in which he stood supreme above his fellow men, and they bowed to their god. And he was their god. And if he but nodded approval they would lie, and cheat, and steal, and commit murder in their greed of worship, they whose souls were in pawn to their god!

He turned suddenly from the window, switched on the lights, drew from his pocket a great sum of money in banknotes, and stood staring at it. There were thousands in his hand. Thousands and thousands! Money! The one universally orthodox god! But for one of these pieces of paper in his hand he could command what he would, play upon human passions at his whim, and like puppets on a stage of his own setting move the followers of the Great Creed, that were numbered in their millions, at his will! It was only over the few outcasts, the unbelievers, that he held no sway. But he could afford to ignore the minority! Was he not indeed a god?

And it had cost him nothing. Only the pawning of his soul; and, like Faustus, the day of settlement was afar off. Only the signing of a bond that postulated a denial of what he had already beforehand held in light esteem—a code of canting morals. It was well such things were out of the way! Life stretched the fuller, the rosier, the more red-blooded before him on that account. He was well content. The future lured him. Nor was it money alone. There was the spice of adventure, the battle of wits, hardly inaugurated yet, between himself and those whose underground methods were the *raison d'être* of his own magically enhanced circumstances.

John Bruce replaced the money in his pocket abruptly, and frowned. That was something, from still another standpoint, which he could not afford to lose sight of. He had to justify his job. Gilbert Larmon had stated that he was not a philanthropist, and it was written in the bond that Larmon could terminate the agreement at will. Yes, and that was queer, too! What kind of a man was Larmon? He knew Larmon, as Larmon superficially subjected himself to inspection; but he was fully aware that he did not know Larmon the man.

There seemed something almost sinister in its inconsistency that Larmon should at one and the same time reserve the right to terminate that bond at will while his very signature upon it furnished a weapon which, if he, John Bruce, chose to use it, placed the other at his mercy. What kind of a man was Larmon? No fool, no weakling—that was certain. And yet at a word he, John Bruce, could tear the other from the pseudo righteous pedestal upon which he posed, strip the other naked of the garments that clothed his criminal activities, and destroy utterly the carefully reared structure of respectability that Larmon had built up around himself. It might be very true that he, John Bruce, would never use such a weapon, even under provocation; but Larmon could not be sure of that.

How, then, did Larmon reconcile his reservation to terminate the contract at will and yet furnish his co-signatory with the means of blackmailing him into a continuance of it? What would Larmon be like with his back to the wall? What *other* reservation had been in his mind when he had drawn that bond?

And then a queer and bitter smile came to John Bruce's lips. The god of money! Was he so sure that he was the god and not the worshipper? Was that it? Was that what Larmon counted upon?—that only a fool would risk the sacrifice of the Aladdin's lamp that had been thrust into his hands, and that only a fool but would devote body and soul to Larmon's interests under the circumstances!

The smile grew whimsical. It was complimentary in a sense. It was based on the premise that he, John Bruce, was not a fool. He shrugged his shoulders. Well, therein Larmon was right. It would not be his, John Bruce's, fault if anything short of death terminated the bond which had originated that tropic night on the moon-lit beach in Samoa three months ago!

He looked at his watch. It was nine o'clock. It was still early for play; but it was not so early that his arrival in the New York "branch," where he had been a constant visitor for the last four nights, could possibly arouse any suspicion, and one's opportunities for inside observation were very much better.

"If I were in England now," said John Bruce, addressing the chandelier, as he put on a light coat over his evening clothes, "I couldn't get away with this without a man to valet me—and at times, though he might be useful, he might be awkward. Damned awkward! But in America you do, or you don't, as you please—and I don't!"

CHAPTER II.

THE MILLIONAIRE PLUNGER.

JOHN BRUCE left the hotel and entered a taxi. A little later, in that once most fashionable section of New York, in the neighborhood of Gramercy Square, he was admitted to a stately mansion by a white-haired negro butler, who bowed obsequiously.

Thereafter, for a little while, John Bruce wandered leisurely from room to room in the magnificently appointed house, where in the rich carpets the sound of footsteps were lost, where bronzes and paintings, exquisite in their art, charmed the eye, where soft-toned draperies and portières were eloquent of refinement and good taste; he paused for a moment at the threshold of the supper room, whose table was a profusion of every delicacy to tempt the palate, where wines of a vintage that was almost priceless were to be had at no greater cost than the effort required to lift a beckoning finger to the smiling ebony face of old Jake, the attendant. And here John Bruce extended a five dollar bill, but shook his head as the said Jake hastened toward him. Later, perhaps, he might revisit the room—when a few hours' play had dimmed the recollection of his recent dinner, and his appetite was again sharpened.

In the card rooms there were, as yet, scarcely any "guests." He chatted pleasantly with the "dealers"—John Bruce, the millionaire plunger was *persona grata,* almost effusively so, everywhere in the house. Lavergne, the manager, as Parisian as he was immaculate from the tips of his patent-leathers to the tips of his waxed mustache, joined him; and for ten minutes, until the other was called away, John Bruce proceeded to nourish the already extremely healthy germ of intimacy that, from the first meeting, he had planted between them.

With the manager's million apologies for the unpardonable act of tearing himself away still sounding in his ears, John Bruce placidly resumed his wanderings. The New York "branch," which being interpreted meant M. Henri de Lavergne, the exquisite little manager, was heavily underscored on Gilbert Larmon's black-list!

The faint, musical whir of the little ivory ball from the roulette table caught John Bruce's attention, and he strolled in that direction. Here a "guest" was already at play. The croupier smiled as John Bruce approached the table. John Bruce smiled pleasantly in return, and sat down. After a moment, he began to make

small five-dollar bets on the "red." His fellow-player was plunging heavily—and losing. Also, the man was slightly under the influence of liquor. The croupier's voice droned through half a dozen plays. John Bruce continued to make five-dollar bets. The little by-play interested him. He knew the signs.

His fellow-player descended to the supper room for another drink, it being against the rules of the house to serve anything in the gambling rooms. The croupier laughed as he glanced at the retreating figure and then at another five dollar bet that John Bruce pushed upon the "red."

"He'll rob you of your reputation, Mr. Bruce, if you don't look out!" the croupier smiled quizzically. "Are you finding a thrill in playing the minimum for a change?"

"Just feeling my way." John Bruce returned the smile. "It's a bit early yet, isn't it?"

The other player returned. He continued to bet heavily. He made another excursion below stairs. Other "guests" drifted into the room, and the play became more general.

John Bruce increased his stakes slightly, quite indifferent naturally as to whether he lost or won—since he could neither lose nor win. He was sitting beside the player he had originally joined at the table, and suddenly his interest in the other became still more enlivened. The man, after a series of disastrous plays, was palpably broke, for he snatched off a large diamond ring from his finger and held it out to the croupier.

"Give me—hic!—somethin' on that," he hiccuped. "Might as well make a clean-up, eh?"

The croupier took the ring, examined it critically for an instant, and handed it back.

"I'm sorry," he said; "but you know the rules of the house. I couldn't advance anything on it if it were worth a million. But the stone's valuable, all right. You'd better take a trip to Persia."

The man replaced the ring with some difficulty upon his finger, and stared owlishly at the croupier.

"T'hell with your—hic!—trip to Persia!" he said thickly. "Don't like Persia! Been—hic!—there before! Guess I'll go home!"

The man negotiated his way to the door; the game went on. John Bruce began to increase his stakes materially. A trip to Persia! What, exactly, did that mean? It both piqued his curiosity and stirred his suspicions. He smiled as he placed a heavy stake upon the table. It would probably be a much more expensive trip to this fanciful Persia than to the Persia of reality, for it seemed that one must go broke first! Well, he would go broke—though it would require some little finesse for John Bruce, the millionaire plunger, to attain the envious situation without exciting suspicion. He was very keenly interested in this personally conducted tour, obviously inaugurated by that exquisite little man, M. Henri de Lavergne!

John Bruce to his inward chagrin—won. He began to play now with a zest, eagerness and excitement which, heretofore, the juggling of Mephistopheles's money had deprived him of. Outwardly, however, the calm impassiveness that, in the few evenings he had been in the house, had already won him the reputation of being par excellence a cool and nervy plunger, remained unchanged.

He continued to win for a while; and then suddenly he began to lose. This was much better! He lost steadily now. He staked with lavish hand, playing numerous long chances for the limit at every voyage of the clicking little ivory ball. Finally, the last of his visible assets were on the table, and he leaned forward to watch the fall of the ball. He was already fingering the magnificent jeweled watch-fob that dangled from the pocket of his evening clothes.

"Zero!" announced the croupier.

The "zero" had been one of his selections. The "zero" paid 35 for 1.

A subdued ripple of excitement went up from around the table. The room was filling up. The still-early comers, mostly spectators for the time being, lured to the roulette table at the whisper that the millionaire plunger was out to-night to break the bank, were whetting their own appe-

tites in the play of Mr. John Bruce, who had obviously just escaped being broke himself by a very narrow margin.

John Bruce smiled. He was in funds again—more so than pleased him!

"It's a 'zero' night, Mr. Croupier," observed John Bruce pleasantly. "Roll her again!"

But now luck was with John Bruce. The "zero" and his other combinations were as shy and elusive as fawns. At the expiration of another half hour the net result of John Bruce's play consisted in his having transferred from his own keeping into the keeping of the New York branch thirty thousand dollars of Mephistopheles's money. He was to all appearances flagrantly broke as far as funds in his immediate possession were concerned.

"I guess," said John Bruce, with a whimsical smile, "that I didn't bring enough with me. I don't know where I can get any more to-night, and—oh, here!" He laughed with easy grace, as he suddenly tossed his jeweled watch-fob to the croupier. "One more fling anyhow—I've still unbounded faith in 'zero'! Let me have a thousand on that. It's worth about two."

The croupier, as on the previous occasion, examined the article, but, as before, shook his head.

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Bruce, but it's strictly against the rules of the house," he said apologetically. "I can fix it for you easily enough though, if you care to take a trip to Persia."

"A trip to Persia?" inquired John Bruce in a puzzled way. "I think I heard you suggest that before this evening. What's the idea?"

Some of those around the table were smiling.

"It's all right," volunteered a player opposite, with a laugh. "Only look out for the conductor!"

"Shoot!" said John Bruce nonchalantly. "That's good enough! You can book my passage, Mr. Croupier."

The croupier called an attendant, spoke to him, and the man left the room.

"It will take a few minutes, Mr. Bruce—while you are getting your hat and coat. The doorman will let you know," said the croupier, and with a bow to John Bruce resumed the interrupted game.

John Bruce strolled from the room, and descended to the lower floor. He entered the supper room, and while old Jake plied him with delicacies he saw the doorman emerge from the telephone booth out in the hall, hurry away, and presently return, talking earnestly with M. Henri de Lavergne. The manager, in turn, entered the booth.

M. Henri de Lavergne came into the supper room after a moment.

"In just a few minutes, Mr. Bruce—there will be a slight delay," he said effusively. "Too bad to keep you waiting."

"Not at all!" responded John Bruce. He held a wine glass up to the light. "This is very excellent, M. de Lavergne."

M. Henri de Lavergne accepted the compliment with a gratified bow.

"Mr. Bruce is very kind to say so," he said—and launched into an elaborate apology that Mr. Bruce should be put to any inconvenience to obtain the financial accommodation asked for. The security that Mr. Bruce offered was unquestioned. It was not that. It was the rule of the house. Mr. Bruce would understand.

Mr. Bruce understood perfectly.

"Quite so!" he said cordially.

M. Henri de Lavergne excused himself, and left the room.

"A fishy, clever little crook," confided John Bruce to himself. "I wonder what's the game?"

He continued to sip his wine in apparent indifference to the passing minutes, nor was his indifference altogether assumed. His mind was quite otherwise occupied. It was rather neat, that—a trip to Persia. The expression in itself held a lure which had probably not been overlooked as an asset. It suggested Bagdad, and the Arabian Nights, and a Caliph and a Grand Vizier who stalked about in disguise. On the other hand, the inebriated gentleman had evidently had his fill of it on one occasion, and would have no more of it. And the other gentleman who had, as it were, indorsed the proceeding, had, at the same time, taken the occasion to throw out a warning to beware of the conductor.

John Bruce smiled pleasantly into his wine glass. Not very difficult to fathom, perhaps, after all! It was probably some shrewd old reprobate with usurious rates in cahoots with the sleek M. Henri de Lavergne, who made a side-split on the said rates in return for the exclusive privilege accorded the other for acting as leech to the guests of the house when in extremity.

It had been perhaps twenty minutes since he had left the roulette table. He looked at his watch now as he saw the doorman coming toward the supper room with his hat and coat. The night was still early. It was quarter to eleven.

He went out into the hall.

"Yassuh," said the gray-haired and obsequious old darky, as he assisted John Bruce into his coat, "if yo'all will just come with me, Mistuh Bruce, yo'all will be 'commodated right prompt."

John Bruce followed his guide to the doorstep.

The darky pointed to a closed motor car at the curb by the corner, a few houses away.

"Yo'all just say 'Persia' to the shuffer, Mistuh Bruce, and—"

"All right!" John Bruce smiled his interruption, and went down the steps to the sidewalk.

John Bruce approached the waiting car leisurely, scrutinizing it the while; and as he approached, it seemed to take on more and more the aspect of a venerable and decrepit ark. The body of the car was entirely without light; the glass front, if there were one, behind the man whom he discerned sitting in the chauffeur's seat, was evidently closely curtained; and so, too, he now discovered as he drew nearer, were the windows and doors of the car as well.

"The parlor looks a little ominous," said John Bruce softly to himself. "I wonder how far it is to the spider's dining-room?"

He halted as he reached the vehicle.

"I'm bound for Persia, I believe," he suggested pleasantly to the chauffeur.

The chauffeur leaned out, and John Bruce was conscious that he was undergoing a critical inspection. In turn he looked at the chauffeur, but there was very little light. The car seemed to have chosen a spot as little disturbed by the rays of the street lamps as possible, and he gained but a vague impression of a red, weather-beaten face, clean-shaved, with shaggy brows under grizzled hair, the whole topped by an equally weather-beaten felt hat of nondescript shape and color.

The inspection, on the chauffeur's part at least, appeared to be satisfactory.

"Yes, sir," said the man. "Step in, sir, please."

The door swung open—just how, John Bruce could not have explained. He stepped briskly into the car—only to draw back instinctively as he found it already occupied. But the door had closed behind him. It was inky black in the interior now with the door shut. The car was jolting into motion.

"Pardon me!" said John Bruce a little grimly, and sat down on the back seat.

A woman! He had just been able to make out a woman's form as he had stepped in. It was clever—damned clever! Of both the exquisite M. Henri de Lavergne and the money-lending spider at the other end of this pleasant little jaunt into unexplored Persia! A woman in it—a luring, painted, fair and winsome damsel, no doubt—to make the usurious pill of illegal interest a little sweeter! Oh, yes, he quite understood now that warning to beware of the conductor!

"I did not anticipate such charming company," said John Bruce facetiously. "Have we far to go?"

There was no answer.

Something like a shadow, deeper than the surrounding blackness, seemed to pass before John Bruce's eyes, and then he sat bolt upright, startled and amazed. In front of him, let down from the roof of the car, was a small table covered with black velvet, and suspended some twelve inches above the table, throwing the glow downward in a round spot of light over the velvet surface, was a shaded electric lamp. A small white hand, bare of any ornament, palm upward, lay upon the velvet table-top under the play of the light.

A voice spoke now softly from beside him:

"You have something to pawn?"

John Bruce stared. He still could not see her face.

"Er—yes," he said. He frowned in perplexity. "When we get to Persia, alias the pawn shop."

"This is the pawn shop," she answered. "Let me see what you have, please."

"Well, I'm da—" John Bruce checked himself. There was a delicacy about that white hand resting there under the light that rebuked him. "Er—pardon me," said John Bruce.

He felt for his jewelled watch-fob, unfastened it, and laid it in the extended palm. He laughed a little to himself. On with the game! The lure was here, all right; the stage setting was masterly—and now the piper would be paid on a basis, probably, that would relegate Shylock himself to the kindergarten class of money lenders!

And then, suddenly, it seemed to John Bruce as though his blood whipping through his veins was afire. A face in profile bending forward to examine the diamonds and the setting of the fob-pendant, came under the light. He gazed at it fascinated. It was the most beautiful face he had ever seen. His eyes drank in the rich masses of brown, silken hair, the perfect throat, the chin and lips that, while modelled in sweet womanliness, were still eloquent of self-reliance and strength. He had thought to see a pretty face, a little brazen perhaps, and artfully powdered and rouged; what he saw was a vision of loveliness that seemed to personify the unsullied, God-given freshness and purity of youth.

He spoke involuntarily; no power of his could have kept back the words.

"My God, you are wonderful!" he exclaimed in a low voice.

He saw the color swiftly tinge the throat a coral pink, and mount upwards; but she did not look at him. Her eyes! He wanted to see her eyes—to look into them! But she did not turn her head.

"You probably paid two thousand dollars for this," she said quietly, "and—"

"Nineteen hundred," corrected John Bruce mechanically.

"I will allow you seventeen hundred on it, then," she said, still quietly. "The interest will be at seven per cent. Do you wish to accept the offer?"

"Seventeen hundred! Seven per cent! It was in consonance with the vision! His mind was topsy-turvy. He did not understand.

"It is very liberal," said John Bruce, trying to control his voice. "Of course, I accept."

The shapely head nodded.

He watched her spellbound. The watch-fob had vanished, and in its place now under the little conical shaft of light she was swiftly counting out a pile of crisp, new, fifty-dollar banknotes. To these she added a stamped and numbered ticket.

"You may redeem the pledge at any time by making application to the same person to whom you originally applied for a loan to-night," she said, as she handed him the money. "Please count it."

Her head was in shadow now. He could no longer even see her profile. She was sitting back in her corner of the car.

"I—I am quite satisfied," said John Bruce a little helplessly.

"Please count it," she insisted.

With a shrug of protest, John Bruce obeyed her. It was not at all the money that concerned him, nor the touch of it that was quickening his pulse.

"It is quite correct," he said, putting money and ticket in his pocket. He turned toward her. "And now—"

His words ended in a little gasp. The light was out. In the darkness that shadow passed again before his eyes, and he was conscious that the table had vanished—also that the car had stopped.

The door opened.

"If you please, sir!" It was the chauffeur, holding the door open.

John Bruce hesitated.

"I—er—look here!" he said. "I—"

"If you please, sir!" There was something of significant finality in the man's patient and respectful tones.

John Bruce smiled wryly.

"Well, at least, I may say good-night," he said, as he backed out of the car.

"Certainly, sir—good-night, sir," said the chauffeur calmly—and closed the door,

and touched his hat, and climbed back to his seat.

John Bruce glared at the man.

"Well, I'm damned!" said John Bruce fervently.

CHAPTER III.

SANCTUARY.

THE car started off. It turned the corner. John Bruce looked around him. He was standing on precisely the same spot from which he had entered the car. He had been driven around the block, that was all!

He caught his breath. Was it real? That wondrous face which, almost as though at the touch of some magician's wand, had risen before him out of the blackness! His blood afire was leaping through his veins again. That face!

He ran to the corner and peered down the street. The car was perhaps a hundred yards away—and suddenly John Bruce started to run again, following the car. Madness! His lips had set grim and hard. Who was she that prowled the night in that bizarre traveling pawn shop? Where did she live? Was it actually the Arabian Nights back again? He laughed at himself—not mirthfully. But still he ran on.

The car was outdistancing him. Fool! For a woman's face! Even though it were a divine symphony of beauty! Fool? Love-smitten idiot? Not at all! It was his job! Nice sound to that word in conjunction with that haunting memory of loveliness—job!

The traveling pawn shop turned into Fourth Avenue, and headed down town. John Bruce caught the sound of a street-car gong, spurted and swung breathlessly to the platform of a car traveling in the same direction.

Of course, it was his job! The exquisite M. Henri de Lavergne was mixed up in this.

"Hell!"

The street car conductor stared at him. John Bruce scowled. He swore again—but this time under his breath. It brought a sudden wild, unreasonable rage and rebellion, the thought that there should be anything, even of the remotest nature, between the glorious vision in that car and the mincing, silken-tongued manager of Larmon's gambling hell. But there was, for all that, wasn't there? How else had she come there? It was the usual thing, wasn't it? And—beware of the conductor! The warning now appeared to be very apt! And how well he had profited by it! A fool chasing a siren's beauty!

His face grew very white.

"John Bruce," he whispered to himself, "if I could get at you I'd pound your face to pulp for that!"

He leaned out from the platform. The traveling pawn shop had increased its speed and was steadily leaving the street car behind. He looked back in the opposite direction. The street was almost entirely deserted as far as traffic went. The only vehicle in sight was a taxi bowling along a block in the rear. He laughed out again harshly. The conductor eyed him suspiciously.

John Bruce dropped off the car, and planted himself in the path of the on-coming taxi. Call it his job, then, if it pleased him! He owed it to Larmon to get to the bottom of this. How extremely logical he was. The transaction in the traveling pawn shop had been so fair-minded as almost to exonerate M. Henri de Lavergne on the face of it, and if it had not been for a certain vision therein, and a fire in his own veins, and a fury at the thought that even her acquaintance with the gambling manager was profanity, he could have heartily applauded M. Henri de Lavergne for a unique and original—

The taxi bellowed at him, hoarsely indignant.

John Bruce stepped neatly to one side—and jumped on the footboard.

"Here, you! What the hell!" shouted the chauffeur. "You—"

"Push your foot on it a little," said John Bruce calmly. "And don't lose sight of that closed car ahead."

"Lose sight of nothin'!" yelled the chauffeur. "I've got a fare, an'—"

"I hear him," said John Bruce composedly. He edged in beside the chauffeur,

and one of the crisp, new, fifty-dollar bank-notes passed into the latter's possession. "Keep that car in sight, and don't make it hopelessly obvious that you are following it. I'll attend to your fare."

He screwed around in his seat. An elderly, gray-whiskered gentleman, a patently irate gentleman, was pounding furiously on the glass panel.

"We should be turnin' down this street we're just passin'," grinned the chauffeur.

John Bruce lowered the panel.

"What's the meaning of this?" thundered the fare.

"I'm very sorry, sir," said John Bruce respectfully. "A little detective business." He coughed. It was really quite true. His voice became confidential. "The occupants of that car ahead got away from me. I—I want to arrest one of them. I'm very sorry to put you to any inconvenience, but it couldn't be helped. There was no other way than to commandeer your taxi. It will be only for a matter of a few minutes."

"It's preposterous!" spluttered the fare. "Outrageous! I—I'll—"

"Yes, sir," said John Bruce. "But there was nothing else I could do. You can report it to headquarters, of course."

He closed the panel.

"Fly-cop — not!" said the chauffeur, with his tongue in his cheek. "Any fly-cop that ever got his mit on a whole fifty-dollar bill all at one time couldn't be pried loose from it with a crowbar!"

"It lets you out, doesn't it?" inquired John Bruce pleasantly. "Now let's see you earn it."

"I'll earn it!" said the chauffeur with unction. "You leave it to me, boss!"

The quarry, in the shape of the traveling pawn shop, directed its way into the heart of the East Side. Presently it turned into a hiving, narrow street, where hawkers with their push-carts in the light of flaring, spitting gasoline banjoes were doing a thriving business. The two cars went more slowly now. There was very little room. The taxi almost upset a fish vendor's wheeled emporium. The vendor was eloquent—fervently so. But the chauffeur's eyes, after an impersonal and indifferent glance at the other, returned to the car ahead. The taxi continued on its way, trailing fifty yards in the rear of the traveling pawn shop.

At the end of the block the car ahead turned the corner. As the taxi, in turn, rounded the corner, John Bruce saw that the traveling pawn shop was drawn up before a small building that was nested in between two tenements. The blood quickened in his pulse. The girl had alighted, and was entering the small building.

"Hit it up a little to the next corner, turn it, and let me off there," directed John Bruce.

"I get you!" said the chauffeur.

The taxi swept past the car at the curb. Another minute and it had swung the next corner, and was slowing down. John Bruce jumped to the ground before the taxi stopped.

"Good-night!" he called to the chauffeur.

He waved his hand debonairly at the scowling, whiskered visage that was watching him from the interior of the cab, and hurriedly retraced his way back around the corner.

The traveling pawn shop had turned and was driving away. John Bruce had moderated his pace, and sauntered on along the street. He smiled half grimly, half contentedly to himself. The "trip to Persia" had led him a little farther afield than M. Henri de Lavergne had perhaps counted on —or than he, John Bruce, himself had, either! But he knew now where the most glorious woman he had ever seen in his life lived, or, at least, was to be found again. No, it wasn't the *moon!* To him, she was exactly that. And he had not seen her for the last time, either! That was what he was here for, though he wasn't so mad as to risk, or, rather, invite an affront to begin with by so bald an act as to go to the front door, say, and ring the bell—which would be tantamount to informing her that he had—er—played the detective from the moment he had left her in the car. Tomorrow, perhaps, or the next day, or whenever fate saw fit to be in a kindly mood, a meeting that possessed all the hall-marks of being quite inadvertent offered him high hopes. Later, if fate still were kind, he

would tell her that he had followed her, and what she would be thoroughly justified in misconstruing now, she might then accept it as the tribute to her that he meant it to be—when she knew him better.

John Bruce was whistling softly to himself.

He was passing the house now, his scrutiny none the less exhaustive because it was apparently casual. It was a curious little two-story place tucked away between the two flanking tenements, the further one of which alone separated the house from the corner he was approaching. Not a light showed from the front of the house. Yes, it was quite a curious place. Although curtains were on the lower front windows, indicating that it was purely a dwelling, the windows themselves were of abnormal size, as though, originally perhaps, the ground floor had once been a shop of some kind.

John Bruce turned the corner, and from a comparatively deserted street found himself among the vendor's push-carts and the spluttering gasoline torches again. He skirted the side of the tenement that made the corner, discovered the fact that a lane cut in from the street and ran past the rear of the tenement, which he mentally noted must likewise run past the rear of the little house that was now so vitally interesting to him—and halted on the opposite side of the lane to survey his surroundings. Here a dirty and uninviting café attracted his attention, which, if its dingy sign were to be believed, was run by one Palasco Ratti, a gentleman of parts in the choice of wines which he offered to his patrons.

John Bruce surveyed Palasco Ratti's potential clientele—the street was full of it; the shawled women, the dark-visaged, earringed men. He smiled a little to himself. No—probably not the half naked children who sprawled in the gutter and crawled amongst the push-carts' wheels! How was it that *she* should ever have come to live in a neighborhood to which the designation "foreign," as far as she was concerned, must certainly apply in particularly full measure? It was strange that she—

John Bruce's mental soliloquy came to an abrupt end. Half humorously, half grimly his eyes were rivetted on the push-cart at the curb directly opposite to him, the proprietor of which dealt in that brand of confection so much in favor on the East Side—a great slab of candy from which as occasion required he cut slices with a large carving knife. A brown and grimy fist belonging to a tot of a girl of perhaps eight or nine years of age, who had crept in under the push-cart, was stealthily feeling its way upward behind the vendor's back, its objective being, obviously, a generous piece of candy that reposed on the edge of the push-cart. There was a certain fascination in watching developments. It was quite immoral, of course, but his sympathies were with the child. It was a gamble whether the grimy little hand would close on the coveted prize and disappear again victorious, or whether the vendor would turn in time to frustrate the raid.

The tot's hand crept nearer and nearer its goal. No one, save himself of the many about, appeared to notice the little cameo of primal instinct that was on exhibition before them. The small and dirty fingers touched the candy, closed on it, and were withdrawn—but were withdrawn too quickly. The child, at the psychological moment under stress of excitement, eagerness and probably a wildly thumping heart, had failed in finesse. Perhaps the paper that covered the surface of the push-cart and on which the wares were displayed rattled; perhaps the sudden movement in itself attracted the vendor's attention. The man whirled and made a vicious dive for the child as she darted out from between the wheels. And then she screamed. The man had hit her a brutal clout across the head.

John Bruce straightened suddenly, a dull red creeping from his set jaw to his cheeks. Still clutching the candy in her hand the child was running blindly and in terror straight toward him. The man struck again, and the child staggered, and, reeling, sought sanctuary behind John Bruce's legs. A bearded, snarling face in pursuit loomed up before him—and John Bruce struck, struck as he had once struck before on a white moon-flooded deck when a man, a brute beast, had gone down before him—and the vendor, screaming shrilly, lay kicking in pain on the sidewalk.

It had happened quickly. Not one, probably, of those on the street had caught the details of the little scene. And now the tiny thief had wriggled through his legs, and with the magnificent irresponsibility of childhood had darted away and was lost to sight. It had happened quickly—but not so quickly as the gathering together of an angry, surging crowd around John Bruce.

Some one in the crowd shrieked out above the clamor of voices:

"He kill-a Pietro! Kill-a da dude!"

It was a fire-brand.

John Bruce backed away a little—up against the door of Signor Palasco Ratti's wine shop. A glance showed him that with the blow he had struck his light overcoat had become loosened, and that he was flaunting an immaculate and gleaming shirt-front in the faces of the crowd. And between their Pietro with a broken jaw and an intruder far too well dressed to please their fancy, the psychology of the crowd became the psychology of a mob.

The fire-brand took.

"Kill-a da dude!" It was echoed in chorus—and then a rush.

It flung John Bruce heavily against the wine shop door, and the door crashed inward—and for a moment he was down, and the crowd, like a snarling wolf pack, was upon him. And then the massive shoulders heaved, and he shook them off and was on his feet; and all that was primal, elemental in the man was dominant, the mad glorying in strife upon him, and he struck right and left with blows before which, again and again, a man went down.

But the rush still bore him backward, and the doorway was black and jammed with reinforcements constantly pouring in. Tables crashed to the floor, chairs were overturned. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a white-mustached Italian leap upon the counter and alternately wave his arms and wring his hands together frantically.

"For the mercy of God!" the man screamed—and then his voice added to the din in a flood of impassioned Italian. It was Signor Palasco Ratti, probably.

John Bruce was panting now, his breath coming in short hard gasps. It was not easy to keep them in front of him, to keep his back free. He caught the glint of knife blades now.

He was borne back foot by foot, the space widening as he retreated from the door, giving room for more to come upon him at the same time. A knife blade lunged at him. He evaded it—but another glittering in the ceiling light at the same instant, flashing a murderous arc in its downward plunge, caught him, and, before he could turn, sank home.

A yell of triumph went up. He felt no pain. Only a sudden sickening of his brain, a sudden weakness that robbed his limbs of strength, and he reeled and staggered, fighting blindly now.

And then his brain cleared. He flung a quick glance over his shoulder. Yes, there was one chance. Only one! And in another minute, with another knife thrust, it would be too late. He whirled suddenly and raced down the length of the café. In the moment's grace earned through surprise at his sudden action, he gained a door he had seen there, and threw himself upon it. It was not fastened, though there was a key in the lock. He whipped out the key, plunged through, locked the door on the outside with the fraction of a second to spare before they came battering upon it—and stumbled and fell headlong out into the open.

It was as though he were lashing his brain into action and virility. It kept wabbling and fogging. Didn't the damned thing understand that his life was at stake! He lurched to his feet. He was in a lane. In front of him, like great looming shadows, shadows that wabbled too, he saw the shapes of two tenements, and like an inset between them, a small house with a light gleaming in the lower window.

That was where the vision lived. Only there was a fence between. Sanctuary! He lunged toward the fence. He had not meant to—to make a call to-night—she—she might have misunderstood. But in a second now *they* would come sweeping around into the lane after him.

He clawed his way to the top of the fence, and because his strength was almost gone, fell from the top of the fence to the ground on the other side.

And now he crawled, crawled with what frantic haste he could, because he heard the uproar from the street. And he laughed. The kid was probably munching her hunk of candy now. Queer things—kids! Got her candy—happy—

He reached up to the sill of an open window, clawed his way upward, as he had clawed his way up the fence, straddled the sill unsteadily, clutched at nothingness to save himself, and toppled inward to the floor of the room.

A yell from the head of the lane, a cry from the other end of the room, spurred him into final effort. He gained his feet, and swept his hand, wet with blood, across his eyes. That was the vision there running toward him, wasn't it?—the wonderful, glorious vision!

"Pardon me!" said John Bruce in a singsong voice, and with a desperate effort reached up and pulled down the window shade. He tried to smile. "Queer—queer things—kids—aren't they? She—she just ducked out from under."

The girl was staring at him wildly, her hands tightly clasped to her bosom.

"Pardon me!" whispered John Bruce thickly. He couldn't see her any more, just a multitude of objects whirling like a kaleidoscope before his eyes. "She—she got the candy," said John Bruce, attempting to smile again—and pitched unconscious to the floor.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

Luck!

by Charles Milham

BILLY LOZIER'S about the luckiest man in the world, and I can prove it. I'll bet that if he got caught between two raising fools and one of them had a straight flush and the other had a set of fours, while he had only a pair of kings, he could break his pair and draw to an ace, king, ten of hearts, and come out with a royal flush. I fix the suit as hearts, too, because—well, as I've already said, Billy's the luckiest man in the world.

You see, Bill and I have been friends for years. I've been watching for a long time the way Lady Luck's been holding him by the hand. I remember very well when the war started how Bill began putting a few dollars into drugs and chemicals, and I remember it was only a little while before a new sign joined the others on Platt Street—"William P. Lozier & Co., Drugs and Chemicals." That when we got into the war Bill had to leave somebody else in charge who ran the business to the wall in just a couple of months doesn't prove anything against what I'm telling you about Bill's luck. To my way of thinking Bill's luck went right along with him just as strong as ever, for he went all through the Argonne and came back home whole. I know right well Bill 'd rather have a whole body and no money than a bunged-up body and lots of coin.

At that, though, Bill's luck played him pretty strong even in the smashing of his business, for when all the accounts were paid and everything settled up there was $750 net left for Bill. If that had happened to me, I'm certain sure that there

wouldn't have been anything left but debts. And I'm thinking that $750 in cash to your credit on the day you're discharged from the army is just $750 better than any other doughboy—except the lucky crap-shooters. Anyway, Bill had that $750, and old Luck saw to it that it was even more than he needed.

Yes, Lady Luck just led him right by the hand up to Opportunity, made him right well acquainted with that lady all of a sudden, and let him cash in on the acquaintanceship inside of one day—and he only had to risk $500 of his $750. Luck? Why, I believe that if Bill was to drop from the edge of a cliff, a tree branch or something like that would catch him on the way down, and he'd find when he recovered from the shock that he'd landed at the entrance to a lost gold-mine. This last thing that happened to Bill is just about as lucky as that. I'm going to tell you about it, and I'll bet you'll say that Bill's the luckiest man in the world.

Bill's latest started with him looking at the figures in a brand-new bank-book, and sighing while he looked. The figures were most painfully limited as to number of items, and they disclosed that the Twentieth National Bank had on deposit to the credit of one William P. Lozier a total of $750. Billy sighed again as he read the solitary line once more for the fifty-first or fifty-second time.

"I'm not kicking about not having any more money left out of the wreck," he said. "I'm kicking because it means so many more months before I'll be able to come to your proud father and demand a show-down."

The person he addressed nodded her head sagely and pensively. I've known Lucy Clarke even longer than I've known Bill, and I know very well how she looked.

"But why do we let it mean months?" she asked, after a bit more of that pensive nodding. "I know father's unreasonable, but that seems to me all the more reason why we ought to show him he's wrong."

"I've been turning my mind inside out without finding a single idea," returned Bill.

"Well, now, let's see, Billy," said Lucy. "It was the war that got you started, and it was the war that took your money away. Why shouldn't it be the war that should give it back again?"

Talk about your lucky ones! Perhaps you see now why it was that I had Bill drawing to hearts in that imaginary poker hand a minute or two ago. When a man can draw a girl with a head on her shoulders like Lucy, a girl not only to love him, but to comfort and counsel him as well, it seems to me that hearts—well, you know what I mean.

"Why, I suppose it might," answered Bill, considering Lucy's question a minute or two before he spoke. "And yet I don't see how even that is going to permit any shorter period than the months that I mentioned."

"Father's been talking a lot about machinery lately," went on Lucy. "There's a shortage of many kinds of machines, father says, and prices have doubled and tripled and even more for second-hand machinery. I should think a man could go around and find valuable pieces of machinery now in just the same way that the collectors of antiques are still able to discover priceless old pieces in country farmhouses."

"Maybe one could, Lucy, but what do I know about machinery?"

From there the conversation turned off into more intimate grooves. Although Bill didn't know it at the time, old Mrs. Luck had planted the germ of an idea in his head so that when Opportunity came along, a few hours later, Bill didn't have any difficulty about recognizing her. This conversation with Lucy took place on the evening of the day that Bill was mustered out. Next morning Bill got up at the same time I did—which means early—and announced that he was going over to Long Island City after breakfast.

"Charley Edwards is over there," he explained, "in some sort of a plant where they make bakers' machinery. Maybe he can tell me something about this machinery stuff that Lucy was elucidating last night."

Just like that it was—no plan or anything like it.

"Hello, Charley," said Bill a little while later, over in that bakers' machinery plant in Long Island City.

"Hello, Bill."

"I've gone into the second-hand machinery business, Charley. Thought I'd come over and see if I couldn't make you one of my first clients."

"What are you doing—buying or selling?"

"Both, or either. Which 'll you take?"

Charley stood kind of thoughtful for maybe a minute. According to what he told me later, he was trying to think of some way in which he could help Bill—besides knowing that Bill had just got his discharge, he knew that Bill needed some real help to start him in business again—and it just came to him that maybe there might be something in an old piece of machinery they'd had kicking around unused for some time. Something, that is, both for him and for Bill.

You see, Charley knew a lot about machinery, but—I tell you this so you can understand how he happened to let this piece go as he did—he didn't know a blooming thing about the machinery market. I'll always believe that was another part of Bill's luck, but, after all, it wasn't so strange at that. Here they were, 'way over in Long Island City, in a section more or less out of the world; they hadn't bought any machinery for several years; they'd never sold any of it at all; and they'd never had occasion even to learn that second-hand machinery was bringing better prices than it had sold for when it was new, and that all machinery was as scarce—well, as scarce as those proverbial hen's teeth.

And, too, although they'd been considering getting rid of this particular piece for some time, they hadn't gone to it in any way until Bill happened to come along and just hit what they call the "psychological moment." I call it luck, but if they want to call it that, let 'em go to it, say I. Let's see—where was I? Oh, yes, I was telling you about Charley thinking how he was going to help Bill. He finally decided.

"I've got something, Bill, I bet will interest you."

He led the way over to one side of the plant and placed his hand on some kind of a contraption of polished steel. That's all Bill knew about it just then.

"What do you think of her, Bill?" he asks, patting one of the polished faces like it was some pet. "A1 condition, you see, and practically as good as new. We've outgrown it, and a good bid will let you take it right along."

"H-m," comes from Bill, with his eyes all squinted up and everything about him looking like genuine business. "H-m," comes another grunt as he spars for more time. You see, although I've got to hand it to Bill for having the best speaking acquaintance with Lady Luck of anybody I know, at the same time you've got to give Bill credit for one big thing—making the other fellow do the talking.

"Yes, of course, it's an unusual machine—a sixty-inch Miles Cement two-head boring mill with a taper attachment is, I guess, a novelty," is Charley's answer to Bill's "h-ms."

"A sixty-inch Miles Cement two-head boring mill with a taper attachment?" Bill repeats after him with the questioning inflection any one would have who was hearing a lot of Greek. Charley naturally misunderstood it. His thought is that Bill's questioning that part about the "taper attachment." As it happens, it makes the machine really unique.

"You see, it's been cleverly constructed on one cylinder so it could be used for a pump while the other cylinder was boring," Charley answers what he thinks is Bill's question, and he taps another part of the contraption.

"That's mighty interesting," Bill tells him, and he drops down on his knees and squints in at the works of the thing as if he and machinery had been brought up in the same cradle. When he straightens up finally he looks mighty thoughtful.

"How much do you want for it?" he asks then, as though he had come to a definite decision.

"Three thousand dollars as she stands," Charley returns promptly.

"H-m," says Bill, without batting an eyelash, but doing some tall thinking. It

was a cinch, he told me later, that when the price was named as promptly as that it meant they'd been considering selling the machine for some time and had fixed on $3,000 only as an asking price. And, too, he remembers that remark about the machine having been outgrown. Naturally, he didn't know of Charley helping him.

"It's a lot of money to ask for a machine you've had for some time," he states, after appearing to think some more, and taking a chance on what he'd ought to say.

"We've only had it six years," Charley protests. "And $3,000 isn't much for a machine like that."

"How much did it cost?" Bill comes back at him suddenly.

"Thirty-eight hundred," Charley tells him, probably surprised into spilling it by Bill's unexpected question.

"I'll give you twenty-five hundred for it," Bill shoots back at him without another word.

"Make it twenty-eight," says Charley.

"Twenty-five, flat, is my limit."

"All right then. Done!"

In another few minutes they had the papers drawn up by which it was agreed that Bill was to become the owner of the machine for $2,500, receipt of $500 of which was acknowledged in the form of Bill's check, the balance to be paid in thirty days. And in another few minutes Bill was on his way back to New York with $250 left to his credit and Lady Luck squeezing him so tight by the hand it's a wonder he didn't yell "Ouch!" As a matter of fact, though, he was saying something quite different, wondering if he'd made a fool of himself, thinking that his offer had been snapped up mighty quick, imagining that Center Street would give him the merry laugh.

Yes, of course, that's where he was headed for—Center Street. If you know New York at all, you know Center Street and its shop after shop filled with oddly assorted machines, many of them crowded out to the sidewalk—great, big blowers with gaping mouths a foot and a half or two feet wide blocking some doorways or standing in cigar-store Indian-sign fashion beside cellar stairways; pieces of shafting strewn along shop-fronts; motors and dynamos of assorted sizes looming like sentinels; lathes—all kinds of them—everywhere; presses, drills, pulleys, belting—everything known to machinery finding place somewhere, somehow, in shop or on sidewalk all the way from Leonard Street to Broome on either side of Center, and with some cross-streets, like Hester and Howard and Canal, taking care of the overflow.

Bill had had Center Street in mind from the minute Lucy spoke of machinery to him. Now, as the subway rushed him over from Long Island City to Grand Central and from there down to Brooklyn Bridge, he was thinking Center Street and saying over and over to himself in the back of his mind, "It's a sixty-inch Miles Cement two-head boring mill with a taper attachment; it's a sixty-inch Miles Cement two-head boring mill with a taper attachment."

That's what Bill knew he was the owner of—all that he knew he was the owner of—and he wanted to be sure he had it down right when it came to negotiating with those Center Street machinery sharps.

When he got out at Brooklyn Bridge and started to walk back, there was a cold wind blowing down from the north that chilled through and through. It got Bill so cold that I guess he lost some of his nerve. Anyway, he walked clear up Center Street to Broome and half a block past there before he saw there weren't any more machinery dealers above Broome. Then he walked on down again to Leonard Street.

It seemed to him, he said, as though all the machinery in all the world had been assembled right there in Center Street on those few blocks. And here he was coming to sell another piece, and he didn't know a darned thing about it except that it was a sixty-inch Miles Cement two-head boring mill with a taper attachment! He was just about making up his mind that he couldn't go through with it when he got to Leonard Street again, and then he stopped to look at the great granite bulk of the Tombs across the street.

"Nobody's ever gone to prison for it," he reflected.

He turned, and there, right in front of his eyes, was an open doorway and a couple of lathes blocking it partially and a sign over the door that said:

AUGER & CO.

MACHINERY EXCHANGE

Lathes	**Drills**
Shafting	**Power and**
Pulleys	**Foot Presses**
Belts	**Machine tools**
Shapers	**Millers**
Grinders	**Punches**

WE BUY AND SELL ENTIRE PLANTS

Quicker than the rise of a football crowd at a successful forward pass, Bill was inside the doorway and face to face with an individual whose general aspect indicated he was Auger & Co.

"How much 'll you give me for a sixty-inch Miles Cement two-head boring mill with a taper attachment?" Bill hurls at him without any preliminaries.

"With a taper attachment? A sixty-inch Miles Cement two-head boring mill with a taper attachment?" is the only answer he gets.

"Yes—a taper attachment," Bill repeats, choking the words out as though he was mad clear through. He must have been kind of mad, too, for ever since he read in some book how one chap said to the other, "I despise a man who answers one question with another," Bill has had that same view. "I said a taper attachment. How much 'll you give me?"

"How much do you want?" comes back the other fellow quick.

"Well, I might ask you a million dollars," says Bill.

"But you wouldn't get it."

"How much would I get, then? How much will you give me?"

"Is it what you've said?"

"Yes, it's a sixty-inch Miles Cement two-head boring mill with a taper attachment, and it's in A1 condition."

"Five thousand dollars," says this Auger fellow without another word, like he was ordering a loaf of bread.

"Ah, rats—you're kidding me!" Bill responds, hesitates for a minute, and then sort of turns as though he intends to walk out of the place.

He was pretty sore about the way this fellow was stringing him, Bill tells me later. Before he had more than made a sort of turn, however, and before he could say anything more, even if he had intended to, this fellow comes back at him.

"Isn't that good enough?" he asks in a voice whose tone made it seem he was dreadfully hurt.

"You know well enough it isn't," answers Bill, doing some tall thinking.

"Well, I might give you six thousand," says Auger.

"Not to-day," Bill answers, and walks out to the sidewalk. There he stops and gazes up at the Tombs and the Criminal Courts Building for as much as five minutes.

"I had to have something pretty solid to look at," he told me when he recounted this chronicle of his adventures, "so that I'd know I was really awake. Six thousand dollars for something I'd bought for only twenty-five hundred about an hour before! And if I hadn't been so darned ignorant about machinery and so darned afraid that I'd show I didn't know what I was talking about, I'd have fixed an asking price of about $3,500 and taken less. And then I wouldn't have insisted on knowing how much he'd give. And then—whew!"

While he looked at that grim granite pile and its adjacent monstrosity, Bill did some more of that tall thinking I told about a minute ago. The burden of it was that if this one fellow made a bid of $5,000 right off the reel and then raised it $1,000 a minute later, the Miles Cement machine must be worth a pretty fair amount more.

How much more? Well, Bill fixed in his mind that $10,000 would be about right. He walked on up the street a half block and stopped in another store that looked a counterpart of the first.

"I've got a sixty-inch Miles Cement

two-head boring mill with a taper attachment," is his salutation. "How much will you give me for it?"

"How much do you want?" comes back this chap, just the same as Auger had done.

This time Bill is ready, though.

"Ten thousand dollars," he answers casually.

"It's a Miles Cement machine? In good condition?" asks the dealer.

Bill nods his head.

"A sixty-inch two-head boring mill," the dealer says out loud, but as though talking to himself.

"With a taper attachment," Bill puts in.

"That's a dandy piece of machinery," the dealer assures him. "But it isn't worth that much money. Not to me, anyway. I'd like to buy it, though. I'll give you eight thousand."

"Nope—ten thousand, flat, is my price," says Bill.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I haven't got ten thousand," explains Mr. Dealer. "Eight thousand is about all I can give. How about it—eight thousand in cash?"

"Sorry," says Bill, "but it's ten thousand and not a cent less."

And he walked out of Store No. 2, doing even more of that same tall thinking. He was in pretty much of a daze by this time, and his feet carried him along a full block before he came to himself again. But who wouldn't have been in a daze, with such luck as that? Do you wonder that I said I could prove Bill was the luckiest man in the world? Buying for $2,500, ready to sell for a few hundred dollars profit, thinking only of that much, and then being swept along to a bid of $5,000—$6,000—$8,000! And beginning to realize that even $10,000 may be too little, and finding out that the real price was— But, listen, let's go ahead. Where Bill stopped looked like a good place, and he walked in there just as he had the others with the same salutation.

"You've got a real piece of machinery," says this fellow as soon as Bill had spilled his sentence about it. "A real piece of machinery," he repeated emphatically. "I can't make a bid for it, though, because I haven't got what the machine is worth, and that's somewhere around $10,000. Why don't you try Clarke?"

Pretty decent of him, wasn't it? But I guess you do find 'em that way sometimes. Bill was thinking that, of course, but he was thinking a lot more about the name mentioned—Clarke. Lucy's father!

Bill hadn't thought of going to old W. A., because the argument they'd had about Bill's $750 and the time Bill had to wait and the money he had to show if he was to have Lucy then had kind of stirred things up. But this seemed like a good suggestion. Why not? W. A. Clarke was one of the biggest of the dealers down there, as Bill could see easily when he got out onto the sidewalk and looked across the street at the rather imposing front. Why not? Bill walked on over.

"Good morning, Mr. Clarke. I've got a sixty-inch Miles Cement two-head boring mill with a taper attachment. I thought perhaps you'd like to have a chance to buy it."

"A sixty-inch Miles Cement two-head boring mill with a taper attachment?" the old boy comes back at him scornfully and with a mean laugh. "Say, Bill, if you want to sell me or anybody else, why don't you learn what you're talking about?"

"What do you mean, learn what I'm talking about?" Bill flings back at him.

"Why, this here taper attachment you're talking about," says W. A. "Don't you know there's no such thing on a Miles Cement two-head boring mill?"

There isn't, of course, ordinarily, and ordinarily the old man would have been right. But, you see, Charley Edwards had impressed on Bill that this particular machine was unique because the taper attachment had been rigged up for their use, and Bill had it down pat. It was because he did have it down so pat, I guess, that the other fellows to whom he had gone first had accepted it so naturally. But with old W. A. it was different. He knew—and he was right—that there wasn't any taper attachment on any Miles Cement machine like this ever turned out, and I guess he

kind of welcomed another chance to show Bill where he stood. But Bill—

"You haven't seen it," says Bill, feeling pretty cocky because Charley Edwards had explained so carefully that the machine was unique and had been adapted by them for their own use. "You don't know what I know. She's a sixty-inch Miles Cement two-head boring mill with a taper attachment, and she's in A1 shape, and she's worth a lot more than I paid for her."

"I'm sorry for you, Bill," says W. A. "You seem like a pretty decent chap, and I really thought that you might win Lucy in a year or two if you paid attention to business. But now—"

"Mr. Clarke," Bill comes back firmly and indignantly, "I was willing to let you in on this, but I'll tell you right now that you couldn't buy that machine from me for $15,000!"

"Hah! Rich!" says old W. A. "That is rich! Ha, ha! You couldn't get fifteen thousand, you know."

"No?" says Bill. "No? Well, I'll get fourteen thousand for the blooming thing. Just watch me!"

He hesitated just a minute.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he says then. "I'll make a bet with you that I can sell that machine in the next place I go into for fourteen thousand dollars. If I make it, you're to let me have Lucy to-morrow. If I don't, I'll sell you the machine for just what it cost me—$2,500. Are you game?"

W. A. just stared at him.

"Wait a minute—wait a minute," he coaxes as Bill starts to get out of the place. "You say you bought a sixty-inch Miles Cement two-head boring mill for $2,500?"

"With a taper attachment," Bill reminds him.

"Oh, damn the taper attachment!" the old man answers.

"It's there just the same," sulks Bill.

"Well, maybe it is," W. A. concedes. "But never mind it now. The point is, you've really got this machine? You really own it?"

Bill draws a copy of the bill of sale from his pocket.

"And you're proposing to sell it for $14,000?"

Bill nods.

"Well, Bill, all I can say to you is that if you were bright enough to buy that machine for $2,500, and if you can sell it for $14,000 in the next place you go, you won't have to wait until to-morrow for Lucy. You can have her to-day."

"Just watch my dust," Bill answers, and he runs out into the street. There he looks around for a minute or two. A block or so up—up above Grand Street—he sees a big building towering over all the rest, right opposite police headquarters. There's a sign on the side wall that reads: "Entire plants bought and sold for cash. All transactions guaranteed."

"That's me," says Bill, and he foots up and asks for the boss.

"I've got a sixty-inch Miles Cement two-head boring mill with a taper attachment," he sails right into it again. "Auger offered me $6,000 for it, Kiroffsky bid $8,000, Miller said it was worth $10,000, but he didn't have the money to buy it. I've just told Clarke I wouldn't sell it to him for $15,000. I'll sell it to you for $14,000."

Simon Landsturn peered out over his glasses.

"Say that again," he invites.

Bill repeats it.

"I'll take a look at it," says Landsturn.

"This is a rush order," Bill answers him. "You see—" And he proceeds to tell Landsturn about his bet, and about the need for quick action, and—well, there's something about Bill that sort of stirs people up.

"Where've you got it?" asks Landsturn finally.

"The machine? Over at Hickvall's baking machinery plant in Long Island City," says Bill.

"Hickvall's? Hickvall's?" Landsturn brushes his head thoughtfully. "Let me see—I've got a brother-in-law over there, and I think he's only about five or six blocks from Hickvall's. I'll see if I can get him on the phone."

In another minute or so he's got this

here brother-in-law at the other end of the wire, and they palaver for a while and then Landsturn comes back to talk some more to Bill. It's about fifteen or twenty minutes, and then the telephone bell rings. It's the brother-in-law out in Long Island City. He and Landsturn do some more chinning over the wire, and Landsturn asks a lot of questions, and then he comes back to Bill.

"You're a pretty decent sort of fellow," he concedes to Bill, "and I don't see any reason why I shouldn't help you out. I'll write you my check, and we'll go right around and have it certified," he continues. And that's what they do without any further delay.

Incidentally it may interest you to know that Landsturn sold the machine two weeks later for $18,000. You can find out about it any time you go over to Center Street.

It probably wasn't more than twenty minutes or a half-hour at the most before Bill was back with W. A. Clarke, waving his certified check for $14,000.

"Do I get her?" he asks.

"Do you get her? Why, Bill, I've been waiting for years for some one with brains enough to step in here and help me. The quicker you get into the family, the better I'll be satisfied."

And he heads Bill out to a taxi and shoots him up-town to where Lucy is waiting in utter plumb ignorance of all this. It's only early afternoon by the time Bill gets there.

"How much do you suppose I've made to-day?" is Bill's first word, after they'd had just one kiss.

"Enough to get married on?" Lucy responds.

"It ought to be enough for a starter. It totals just $11,500," says Bill.

"Oh, Bill, I knew you could do it!" Lucy shouts, and squeezes him to her, tight. "But what are we waiting for here? The marriage license bureau closes at four o'clock, doesn't it?"

Luck? Say—you ought to see Billy, Junior!

ʊ ʊ ʊ

MYSTERIES

TWENTY bad men in the bar one night,
Each one shoving his foot on the rail;
None of them sober and most of them tight,
Every one cussing to kick up a fight,
Each one a devil and swinging his tail;
Most of them dead when the scrap was done—
Nobody knew how the row begun!

A squally day and a celluloid boat,
Launched on a river of gasoline;
"As freaky a craft as was ever afloat,"
The captain swore in his husky throat,
"With her fire-box next to her magazine."
He lighted his pipe and tossed his match—
Now how could the conflagration catch?

Generals, admirals, emperors, kings,
And babes from the cradle trained to kill;
Davids swinging Goliath slings,
Navies filled with eagle wings,
Nations of armies, life a drill,
Courtiers cunning in wild excuse—
What a surprise when the war broke loose!

Edmund Vance Cooke.

The Greatest Gamble

by Elizabeth York Miller

Author of "Which of These Two?" etc.

WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

LETTY MARSH, the innocent tool of a gang of swindlers, headed by Rita Carlisle—in reality the divorced wife of Sir William Tavenor—met and fell in love with Derrick Tavenor, guarded him from the clique, married him, and came to live at Tavenor Court.

There, having met Julia and Maud, his cousins, she was reminded unpleasantly on seeing a photograph of Gerald Stansbury of the part she had played, though unwillingly, in his ruin and suicide. Also, fearing exposure by Roger Fitzgerald, a sort of neutral member of the gang, she wrote him, gaining a brief respite from this fear in his formally friendly answer.

But trouble was brewing; following a curious "trial" at which Letty heard Sir William "condemn" one Grace Howland, an employee, for unseemly conduct, Rita arrived, met Letty, and went in to see the ironmaster, with whom she had an appointment. And, indifferent as he was to her wiles, she brought him up standing with the statement that there existed a child—his and hers. Fumbling over the documents which she had presented, suddenly he gave a cry, followed by a terse exclamation:

"Grace Howland!"

Mrs. Carlisle turned sharply.

"Yes, that's her name—Howland was the name of her foster-parents. Do you happen to know her?"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STROKE.

DERRICK had been to London that day to see about his resignation from the army. He returned in the late afternoon to find Letty walking to and fro by herself under the trees which bordered the lawns running from the generous expanse of mansion to the reedy lake at the bottom.

Letty's position was such that she commanded a very good view of the driveway, but Derrick was only half right in assuming her to be on the watch for him. He got out of the car and went directly to meet her, thinking what a lovely and yet curiously pathetic little figure she made with her bunched-up curls and demure schoolgirl frock of soft gray. All about her drifted the gold of October leaves, and the last rays of the sun kissed the loose tendrils of hair into a halo.

"Oh, Derrick!" she cried, flying toward him breathlessly, her little feet making but a fairy impression upon the thick turf. "*Have you seen her?*"

He stooped and kissed her before replying, his good, blunt-featured face kindled into tenderness and—had she noticed—something more than that. It was a troubled tenderness that he bent upon her so earnestly.

"Seen whom?" he asked.

"Mrs. Carlisle. She came to the Works asking for Uncle Bill; pretended she had shares in Tavenors', and had to see him on business. Of course that wasn't true, but Julia believed her. Julia asked her to lunch, but she wouldn't come. She said she might come later, to tea—but not a sign of her. Oh, Derrick!"

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for January 29.

Half in sobs, Letty clung to him like a hysterical child, and he led her through a bypath to a summer-house where, in the old days, as children, the Tavenors and their cheery young companions often had tea. It was an interesting place, that summer-house; in a way it was a memorial. Letty had never discovered it by herself, and it was one of several things Julia had not shown her.

In the midst of tears she found herself staring at one of the thick posts which framed the entrance. Her glance had flown to it by some occult instinct, to the very spot where two sets of initials rudely carved, were enclosed in two fat hearts.

Derrick and Julia, Gerald and Maud!

Derrick had once thought enough of Julia to cut their initials together and frame them in a heart—such a fat heart, too. But a cruel shudder passed over her as she thought of the hand that had carved the other set. Because of that poor boy and his dreadful fate, she was afraid to meet her husband's eyes.

"I don't understand," Derrick was saying patiently as he drew her to a seat and kissed her wet face. "Why shouldn't Mrs. Carlisle have business with Uncle Bill?"

"But I know she's telling him—" Letty checked herself convulsively. "I mean she might be telling him things about father—things that would upset him or make him think there was something queer about me."

"My darling—Uncle Bill knows all there is to know about you. You poor little thing! Don't you suppose I realized that your father was a bit of a—well, I mean, not Uncle Bill's sort. And why on earth should Mrs. Carlisle want to make it unpleasant for you?"

Letty subsided weakly.

What more could she say without giving herself away entirely? As it was, she had very nearly done so. The confession had all but slipped from her lips, and the horror of the narrow escape gave her a thrill as of one who has just grazed sudden death.

"Oh, Derrick, love me—always!"

It was her eternal cry, and he could not understand why, in uttering it, there was such a desperate look in her eyes. The look had not been there during their sweet honeymoon week.

"Derrick, you swear, you promise, nothing will ever alter your love for me? *Nothing!*"

"How could it?"

He gathered her closely into his arms, pressing his lips to the halo of fair hair, his kind, honest features deeply troubled. He had something to tell her, and it was disturbing news. He wished she was in a better frame of mind to hear it.

"Letty," he said gently, "get this foolish notion about Mrs. Carlisle out of your head for the moment. It's really too silly of you, darling. Listen to me. I've something rather important to say."

She lay quietly against him, although apprehension throbbed in every pulse.

He knew about Gerald Stansbury, and was about to tell her that he knew. Roger had told him. Somebody had seen "Lucy Maitland." A dozen surmises chased themselves in as many seconds through her weary brain, but it happened that not one was correct.

"You know I went to town to see about my discharge," he continued. "Well, Letty, I could apply for it, and very likely get it, but I don't think I ought to. There's some fresh trouble in the East, and the old regiment may be ordered out in a fortnight or so. We—I—might have to go. Do you understand? It would be for six months at the very least—active service, of course—and I couldn't take you. You see, it means a possible separation for us."

Just for one brief instant, Letty was conscious of a vast sense of relief. She was so numbed by emotion that she could only take in one fact at a time. Again the respite—Derrick didn't know that she was connected with the fate of his friend, Gerald Stansbury.

She looked up at those heart-enclosed initials; shivered, and looked away again quickly.

"You'll be brave about it, won't you, Letty? I came through the war without a scratch. It isn't likely anything will happen, really. We're only going out to show 'em that old England is still on the job—"

"Then you *are* going? It's decided? I

mean—you're breaking it to me gently, Derrick?"

"Well, as things are—"

"The regiment's actually been ordered abroad?"

"Not the full strength. I could get out of it, if it were urgently necessary, but—well, I mean to say—"

"Yes, yes, dear, I understand. Of course you must go." Letty's voice broke, and she stroked his coat-sleeve tenderly.

"That's my brave girl! Thank you, darling, for not making it too hard for me."

"I'm dazed, I think. Perhaps I don't quite realize yet that we're to be separated so soon."

"I've got a full fortnight's leave," he said cheerfully. "And you can't tell, Letty. The War Office *has* been known to change its mind. Things may lighten up. Oh, a great deal can happen in a fortnight."

"I know it can," she murmured distressfully.

"But if we *do* go," he said, wishing her to know the very worst, "it will be for the whole of the six months. They won't shift us out by one boat and home by the next. It might even be for longer, Letty."

"Oh, I can't bear it!"

"You can try, dear. We must both try our very hardest."

"Yes—I'll do my best," she said with a quivering sigh.

Such a short while ago she had been so happy, ready to snap her fingers at any fate, and now it was changed in every way but one. There still remained the fact that Derrick loved her; that she was pretty well the whole of his life as he was all of hers. Dreadful as it would be to face this threatened separation—this apparently inevitable separation—she felt that if possible she loved him more for his determination to stick by the regiment, and not use her or Tavenors as an excuse to remain at home.

"I think we ought to go in," he said. "It's growing cold. There's quite a nip in the air, and you have no wrap."

Scarcely had he spoken when the piercing, clear voice of Julia smote the air:

"Derrick, Derrick—Letty—where are you? Derrick, please come!"

"Hello, that's Julia calling."

Derrick started forward, dragging his wife by the hand through the dimness of the wooded path.

"Derrick!"

Julia's voice rose on a note of combined fear and command.

Letty, panting and breathless, scarcely had time to frame a thought of hatred for her—yet why should Julia call like that?

"Rickey, where are you?"

"Here we are. For heaven's sake, Julia, what's the matter?"

Julia was racing down the lawn like a wind-blown specter. Ignoring Letty, she clung with both hands to Derrick, raising an ashen face convulsed with feeling.

"Rickey, father's had another stroke. Dr. Thomas said the next would be the last—do you remember? Nobody knows when it happened. He was alone in the office—for hours. He said he had something to do, and mustn't be disturbed, but finally Charles got anxious. Oh, Rickey, I know I ought to be prepared, but I'm not!"

"Where is he?" Derrick asked as they moved forward together in the fading light, Letty stumbling behind, forgotten.

"In the library. Dr. Thomas is here. They've telephoned for the specialist. It all happened so quickly that I scarcely know where I am."

"Something must have brought it on," Derrick muttered as much to himself as to Julia, but she replied:

"Not necessarily. You remember, the doctor said it could so easily happen. As far as we know, the last person to see him in his ordinary health was Letty's friend—Mrs. Carlisle."

CHAPTER XVII.

EXILED.

THE poorer quarter of Beltingham was down by the quays. Here even the stiff broom wielded by Sir William Tavenor had broken against the accumulation of moral and material rubbish. "The Keys"—locally nicknamed—simply would not be cleaned.

Many of Tavenors's employees lived at the Keys, for rents were cheap, and oppor-

tunities of picking up extra money plentiful. The seamen generally had wages to spend, and they were generous, provided the right sort of amusement was offered them.

It was in River Street, under the shadow of the Salvation Army hostel, that the Widow Howland set up her tobacco and sweet-shop with the Benevolent Society's insurance money when her husband died. For choice she would never have selected River Street or any other thoroughfare in the Keys, but lack of capital prevented her from being fanciful. The shop and its stock were offered her, together with the usual "good-will," and by borrowing on a mortgage from the same benevolent society, she was able, with the sum she had in hand, to engineer the transaction.

But it was hard, up-hill work. She had been used to a fair amount of comfort, for her husband had been a steady fellow, earning good wages, and she had never before attempted to run anything more ambitious than her own home.

In the past she had longed for children of her own, but, when the blow fell, and things became increasingly difficult, she was glad that there was only Grace. The girl went willingly into the place that was found for her at Tavenors' and lived at home with her mother in the three rooms, one at the back and two over the crazy little shop-building.

Mrs. Howland had more worries as time went on, and Grace developed a remarkable beauty, combined with a dainty appearance of refinement which in no way interfered with her enjoyment of the neighborhood's revelry.

She was a little thing, but somehow the shop and their cramped room grew too small for her. There were frequent scenes between the tired, worried widow and this lively young creature she had reared.

Miss Julia Tavenor, penetrating to the Keys and River Street, had warned Mrs. Howland to keep her girl in order. Irate wives and sweethearts were of common occurrence. They threatened, and once a glass show-case was smashed by the grandmother of a young man who had spent his week's wages on some finery for Grace instead of bringing it home where it belonged.

For that outrage and attending expense Mrs. Howland had no redress, since public opinion was dead against Grace, and a request for a summons would have brought down a hornet's nest.

From a comely, sweet-tempered woman of generous and kindly disposition, poor Mrs. Howland had gradually developed a sharp tongue and a perpetually angry manner. Secretly she nursed a bitter grudge.

This girl who gave so much trouble was not of her own flesh and blood. She was a charity child—nobody's daughter, really. The time might come when she would have to be told; but however harassed Mrs. Howland might be, that was one task from which she shrank.

Over and over again she told herself that if her husband had not died, all this trouble might not have happened, and secretly she blamed herself a little for having set up shop in the Keys. It was no place for any girl, and for Grace it promised to be peculiarly disastrous.

On the afternoon of the day that Rita Carlisle paid her visit to Sir William, Mrs. Howland—a bunched-up, faded figure, with streaked hair and pinched nostrils—sat behind the counter of her shop, nibbling a pencil as she figured out how much there yet remained to be paid of the mortgage after this month's savings were deposited. She collected the savings mostly penny by penny, and often Grace, in a burst of generosity, would present her with a whole half-crown toward them.

No, Grace wasn't stingy. One couldn't say that of her, at least. If anything, the generosity of her whole nature was at fault.

Mrs. Howland was no scholar, but figuring out her own accounts came as a sort of instinct, aided by the fact that the actual cash, concealed in a tin box under a loose portion of flooring, was available for checking purposes.

This month was rather glorious, and constituted a record. She had two pounds nineteen shillings sevenpence to set against the waning balance of the mortgage. If that average could be maintained, another six months would find her a free woman.

Never of late had she been so pleasantly

disposed as when the shop-bell clanged and she looked up at the unexpected spectacle of Grace arriving home in the middle of a working day.

Pushing aside the primitive ledger, she jumped up, aggressively anxious at once.

"You ain't sick, Grace? Don't tell me you're coming down with something!"

For, in spite of the bravado she had shown at the Works, Grace Howland did look undeniably "sick."

"No, mum, there's nothing the matter with me," she said quietly, her voice sounding a little hollow. "Only I guess I've got to leave Tavenors'. Come into the kitchen. I'll tell you about it."

She passed through to the room at the back, and Mrs. Howland, anxiety turned to anger by one of those swift transitions understood only by the maternal mind, clattered close upon her heels like the tread of doom.

"What've you done now? What's the latest? Out with it! Miss Tavenor said squire wouldn't give you more'n another chance. What've you done now? As though I hadn't worry enough—"

"Oh, mum, I know! Honest, I haven't done a thing. They raked up poor Sammy and made out 'twas me that drove him to hang hisself. Sir William had me on the carpet and says I must go. He offered two weeks' wages—but I wouldn't touch it. Not me! I told him to give it to Julia for a new hat."

"'Julia'! How dare you be so disrespectful to your betters! You—you minx!"

"Betters!" Grace laughed drearily, and bent over the stove, where a pot of tea was kept perpetually on the stew. She poured herself a cup of the midnight brew and stirred in some sugar.

"Mum, I do wish I could feel that Miss Tavenor was better than me. She's got such a hard heart. I hate 'good' women."

"So you're sacked! What you goin' to do now?"

Mrs. Howland was in no mood to discuss social problems.

"Sir William said Beltingham would be well rid of me—and I told him I'd be pleased to be rid of Beltingham."

"More of your sauce!"

"What else could I have said? Was I going to stand there and let him and that daughter of his put it over me? Not much! And there was another, Captain Derrick's wife—well, she didn't look as if she hated me, but I'll bet my socks Miss Julia doesn't love her, either. She was trembling all over, and once we looked at each other. I could've sworn she wanted to say: 'Keep it up.' Pretty young thing, mum, with yellow hair and a smile like Mary Pickford's."

"Yes, it's the 'pictures' that's done for you!" exclaimed Mrs. Howland. Her temper was under control now, but determined. "The pictures has made you romantic. No doubt you think you're as good as the queen. Well, God knows what you *are*, and all I can say is, I'm thankful you're no child of mine."

"Mum! You mean you don't care what happens to me?"

The girl's delicate face became ashy as though a soft gray film had settled upon it.

"No, I don't mean that. It's what I said. You're no child of mine. I always knew that some day you'd have to be told. Often I said so to Howland, but he was dead set against it. We took you out of a foundling home when you was just a mite of a baby—"

"*Mum!*"

The crashing cry of despair caused Mrs. Howland's flesh to prickle. She wished she hadn't said it, would have given a great deal to take back her words, but the thing was out now. No use pretending that she had only said it for fun, or to throw a scare into the unruly daughter.

"You aren't my mother at all. You—you took me out of a home—you and dad—and were good to me all these years. Mum, I can't understand; I—I'm feeling queer all over."

She put a hand to her forehead, and Mrs. Howland, rushing to the pot, shook up the tea and strained off another poisonous draft.

"'Ere, you drink this—it 'll help you. I didn't mean to tell you, Grace, honest, I didn't. But you've drove me to it. Sometimes I go crazy wondering what's going to happen to you an' 'ow I can stop it. If only you'd keep your eyes to yourself and walk modest, the way I've tried to teach you—"

"Who were my parents, mum?"

Grace set down the cup with a wry expression, and broke into the discourse to which she had scarcely been listening.

"I don't know."

"Didn't you ask?"

"Howland may 'ave. She was a widow woman, I think. Leastwise, I would have it that you were born in wedlock. When we talked about adopting a little one and bringing it up for our own, that was 'ow I stipulated, and I wanted a boy, but Howland wanted a girl and I give in to him, as I did in most things."

"It's rather a pity you didn't stick out for a boy," Grace said dryly.

At that moment the shop-bell rang, announcing a customer, and with a heavy sigh Mrs. Howland went out to attend to him, while Grace made her way up the ladderlike staircase that led to their rooms under the eaves.

She substituted her Sunday shoes for the clogs, and put on her best dress. Then she dragged a straw suit-case from under the bed, and packed her things into it. Her wardrobe was of modest dimensions, and the suit-case held it all, with the exception of the clogs and her grease-stained working clothes, which she did not care to take.

After that she counted over her money and sighed, thinking remorsefully of reckless expenditures in the past which would come in useful now.

In the midst of it, Mrs. Howland shuffled up, having locked the shop-door.

"Now, what do you think you're goin' to do?" she demanded, her poor, pinched face strained with anxiety.

"Mum, I've got to go. They'll never let me rest if I don't. Every blessed thing that goes wrong in Beltingham 'll be laid at my door. That Julia Tavenor 'll never be content till she gets me out of town. And, anyway, I'm sick of the place."

"Why don't you marry Craig? 'E wants you to."

"Because I don't love him, if you must know."

Mrs. Howland pressed the corner of her apron to a moist eye.

"Perhaps it's for the best. Where're you goin'?"

"To London."

"What 'll you do there?"

"Work. I'm a skilled packer. I ought to be, by this time."

"And get in more trouble."

"I hope not."

"So do I. 'Ere—you 'ave that now—and, mind you, let me hear from you. Perhaps I can sell up the shop and come to London, too. It's my old 'ome. 'Ere—you go to Aunt Minnie's; she'll take you in. She don't know's you aren't my own, and you needn't tell 'er. She 'ad five—and was always twitting me until—until you came. Now, mind you, do as I tell you."

"Oh, mum, I will—I will! I'm sorry for all the trouble I've been."

Grace mechanically filled her purse with the small coins that made up the two pounds nineteen shillings sevenpence savings which her foster-mother had poured into her lap.

"You are fond of me, mum?"

"You're all I've got," said the widow.

"And you're all *I've* got—and I don't want no more. Now I'd best be starting. Good-by, mum."

"Good-by, my poor pretty—mind you, do's I told you. Go straight to Aunt Minnie's. I've writ down the address for you on that piece of paper, and see you take care on it. Mind you, send a postal-card to-morrow. I sha'n't feel easy till I 'ear from you."

Ten minutes later Mrs. Howland unlocked the shop-door and, passing behind the counter, found her copy-book ledger and crossed off the last entry she had made against the mortgage. Her eyes were red, but not because of that small sacrifice.

Why—*why* had she told?

And Grace had taken it so queerly. The girl had looked downright broken-hearted when she dragged herself out with her straw suit-case.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

ANXIOUS days followed at Tavenor Court.

Maud helped the nurse who was taking care of Sir William, and Letty was

supposed to help Julia with the household affairs. But Julia had an innocent way of ignoring help of any sort from anybody. She was a giver of assistance, not a receiver. Derrick, temporarily installed in his uncle's place at the works, found Julia constantly at his elbow.

At first it was thought to be impossible that he could accompany his regiment to India. From the point of view of usefulness to the country, Tavenor's Limited was of greater importance. Not only could he have got his discharge, but if there were no one else to take command of the foundries and shipyards, it would have been forced upon him. Gradually, however, it was borne in upon Derrick that Julia knew ever so much more about the business than he could hope to learn in the next five years. She seemed to have the whole thing at her fingers' ends. Whenever he got into a muddle he sent for her, if she didn't happen to be there already, in preference to displaying his ignorance to the various managers and foremen.

Julia could run Tavenors' with one hand tied, and Derrick felt himself to be superfluous.

After all—why not?

The war had developed the business instinct in many women, and, in common with all sensible men, Derrick Tavenor saw no reason to resent it. Her father was a rich man, and responsible for a hundred separate enterprises. In the circumstances it was a lucky thing she had kept in touch with all of them.

She was the only member of the household who seemed to understand Sir William's confused articulations. This last stroke hadn't killed him, contrary to predictions, but it had marked a serious step in the progress of his malady.

The doctors feared a lesion of the brain. He must not be allowed to worry—so the old slogan went. Rest and quiet.

So he lay on his back in a semidarkened room, and worried himself to the verge of madness.

Julia, who pretended to understand everything else he said, and who really did carry out most of his instructions, could never be made to comprehend when he told her that the case of Grace Howland must be reconsidered immediately. He wanted to say much more than that—but not to Julia. However, there was little use in trying even to say that, for Julia always took it to mean something in connection with a Harland estate that was invested in Tavenors'.

As for Letty—those were very dark days for her. The shadow of discovery that had hung over her seemed temporarily dissipated. Because it obviously caused her pain, Derrick had put Gerald Stansbury's photograph away. There was so much sadness for her, anyway, with the uncertainty of his own immediate future and the great anxiety attending Uncle Bill's illness.

Somehow, all the happiness they had anticipated had resolved into a muddled state that resembled chaos. They saw so little of each other. Derrick was at the Works from early morning often until late at night. Julia flew back and forth in the car twenty times a day, holding the reins of government of both places in her frail hands. She never complained of fatigue, but she always looked so tired that Derrick wondered how she managed to stand it.

Then, one afternoon, about ten days after Sir William's stroke, Derrick and Julia had a very serious interview. She made it quite clear to him where his duty lay.

The next day he went up to London again, and when he returned it was very late and the household had settled down for the night.

He expected that Letty would be in bed, sound asleep, and had no intention of waking her, but she was waiting up for him.

From the expression of his face she knew what had happened, although he hadn't warned her.

"You're going, Derrick! You're going out to India, leaving everything like this—and Uncle Bill likely to die!"

"Letty—you promised you'd be brave—"

"But can't you see how everything's altered?"

"Julia can run the business. She says she will—and she can do it."

"Derrick, that's what she wants—to get you away. Then everything will be in her hands, including me. No—no—if you go, I go, too. I couldn't live under the same

roof with her unless you were here. It's bad enough as it is."

"Letty, how can you hurt me so? You say you love me—"

"It's because I do love you that I see so clearly," Letty cried brokenly. "I'm afraid of Julia. She wants to take you from me. If ever she gets the slightest inkling of—"

Again Letty had to clip her tongue. It was forever on the verge of betraying her.

But Derrick was too distressed to notice the threatened lapse.

"It hurts me, Letty, that you and Julia don't seem to hit it off. I can't believe it's entirely her fault. She tries. I know she does."

"Oh, so she's talked me over with you!"

Letty's breast rose and fell in tragic upheaval. Nothing could be more bitter than to be "talked over" by Julia. She could imagine the sort of things that had been said.

In vain did Derrick try to comfort her; she was too hurt and angry to pay attention to what he said.

"Nobody in this place has a word to say but Julia. She'll do anything to gain her own way, and when she dislikes anybody she's implacable. You ought to have seen her with that poor Howland girl the other day. She simply forced Uncle Bill to take sides with her against the girl, and now heaven knows what's become of the poor thing. If Julia makes up her mind that a person ought to be damned she jolly well sees that they *are* damned. That's how she feels about me—"

"Letty, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Derrick was angry, too. Toward him Julia had shown only her brightest and best side. He regarded her as a noble and thoroughly unselfish character.

The quarrel that night did not end in peace. They had had little squabbles before, but always made them up before going to sleep. That night Derrick slept in his dressing-room, and in the morning he was off to the Works with Julia before Letty was up. Nor did he come in to say good-by to her.

"She's taking him away from me," Letty moaned to herself all through that long day. Precious hours were passing, the last two days when Derrick and she could be together for many months, and he was spending them with Julia at the Works, or elsewhere. Also they had quarreled, and it seemed to Letty that they would probably go on quarreling until the very moment of their final parting.

How little people knew of life when they could end a story with: "And then they were married and lived happy ever after."

At tea time Letty established herself in the drawing-room with a bit of sewing. She chose a seat near a window that commanded a view of the drive, and her eyes were lifted frequently from the linen she was embroidering.

Perhaps Derrick would come home earlier to-day than usual, and she would coax him to have tea with her alone in their own room. Then they could have a really serious talk about last night and the danger of such quarrels becoming a matter of habit. This separation would be a nightmare to them both if they were to part without having full confidence in each other restored.

At last the sound of wheels rewarded her vigil. Sometimes when Derrick did return early he made use of a cab.

She jumped up, and parted the curtains eagerly.

Yes, it was a cab—a closed one from the station. But it was not Derrick who got out of it. The man spoke to the driver, obviously telling him to wait, and when he turned toward the entrance Letty recognized the tall form and suave, bearded face of Roger Fitzgerald.

CHAPTER XIX.

BLACK NEWS.

WHAT could Roger be coming here for, unless to threaten or betray her? What could he want of her?

Alas, alas, things were bad enough between her and Derrick, but they might be much worse, and Roger was the one person who could make them so. In such a moment, with Derrick already angry with her, and Julia to back him, how cruelly easy it would be for Roger Fitzgerald to demolish

any possible hope of future happiness she cherished.

Charles showed him into the drawing-room at once. There was never any ceremony of not being "at home" at Tavenor Court if one happened to be at home.

Letty was standing in the middle of the room when he entered, looking as though she had seen a whole graveyard full of ghosts.

He came toward her quickly, scarcely waiting for Charles to withdraw before he said:

"Oh, my poor child—so you've heard! But how could you—"

"Heard? What?" she cried. "I don't know what you mean, Roger. If I look queer, it's—it's just the surprise of seeing you. I don't quite know what I thought when the cab drove up, and I saw you get out. You see, I—I wasn't expecting you."

"I understand. And you thought I'd come to do you some harm. Put that quite out of your mind, Letty. I'd have stopped your marriage if I could, for purely selfish reasons. At least, I think I might have done so. But I'm not a ghoul. I'm honestly glad you're happy, and I wouldn't hurt a golden hair of your head."

"Oh, Roger!"

Her hands flew to her face, and tears of relief came.

Fitzgerald had been the only half-way decent person in her life before she met Derrick, and she now realized that she had done him a cruel injustice to think he might be blackguard enough to turn upon her.

"Sit down, Letty; I want to talk to you. Are we safe from interruption here?"

"What can it be! I don't know; sometimes Maud and nurse come down for tea. Julia might come back." She glanced about uneasily. "Perhaps it would be better in my sitting-room, only—"

She disliked to add that if either Julia or Derrick found her entertaining a man, however old a friend he might be, in the comparative seclusion of her own sitting-room, it would be held against her.

"Yes, I should like to be alone with you, quite free of possible interruption," he said quickly. "I won't keep you long, Letty."

He had roused her apprehensions to such an extent that she agreed without argument.

As they passed through the long corridor Charles, who was sorting the afternoon post, ventured a question as regarded tea, and Letty asked Fitzgerald if he would like some sent in.

"No, no, I don't want any, thanks," he replied. "I must be off in about fifteen minutes if I'm to make that train."

"And now, Roger, what is it?" she asked as they faced each other in the dainty pink-and-white boudoir-like apartment.

"Your father, Letty," he replied. "They've got him on a particularly atrocious charge of blackmail, and I may mention that he's as guilty as Satan. The gang has scattered. Rita got out, leaving the tail of her skirt behind, as it were. She managed to make the Channel boat about five minutes ahead of the detectives."

Letty sank down on the couch, and buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, what am I to do?" she cried. "Tell me, Roger—help me to think."

"Well, dear child, I've been thinking hard and fast for you all day, and that's why I'm here. I saw him in the police-court cell this morning and he threatens to make all sorts of trouble. He wants money, of course, and I've been able to satisfy him in that respect. But somehow he'd got wind of your husband's great friendship for Gerald Stansbury—I fancy Derrick must have mentioned it to him as he did to me—and now he says that unless you persuade Derrick to bring the whole weight and respectability of Tavenors to his aid, he'll tell him that you were the girl who ruined Stansbury and drove the lad to suicide. More blackmail, Letty. The old beast's incorrigible. I really don't think he realizes the difference between right and wrong."

"So he knows, too!" Letty moaned. "Oh, what I've suffered, Roger! But I suppose I deserve it. Neither did I know the difference between right and wrong, so how can I blame my father? But, Roger, is there no way of stopping him? Even if Derrick was to be asked to help him, what could Tavenors do?"

"Nothing. That's what I can't make

him see. The law has got him hard and fast this time. The wealth of the Indies, combined with the influence of princes, couldn't save him. He'll be tried, and he'll get a heavy sentence. The lawyers I've retained for his defence tell me that he hasn't got an earthly chance of escape. I feel a bit sorry for the wretch—or would, if he wasn't such an utter and ungrateful scoundrel. Everybody's run off and left him but me; his own lawyers despise him, and he hasn't a friend on earth."

Letty's lips quivered. She had small reason to love her father, but this plight he was in demanded some attention from her. Only, now she bore Derrick's name, and it was an honored one. Dared she risk smirching it? But the real question was: dared she do anything else?

"Roger, ought I to see him?" she asked.

"That's for you to say. Perhaps it would be wiser. You might be able to persuade him where I've failed, that neither your husband nor his family can be of the slightest assistance. If he has a spark of feeling for you, perhaps he'll be merciful."

"Then I'll come up to-morrow," she said with a little gasp. "Can you keep him quiet until then?"

"Yes, if I tell him you're coming. And now I must be off. Take courage, Letty. I've permission to see him again this evening, and I'll talk him deaf, dumb, and blind for your sake. I love you very much, my dear. Always remember that—and it's not a love that will ever harm you.

"My heart ached for you when I got your pitiful letter. Of course, you didn't understand what you were doing to that poor Stansbury boy. You were nothing but a child yourself, when it happened, and well do I remember how stricken you were. It was the first time we met, and I think I fell in love with you at once.

"Your grief was so sincere—so amazed, because you hadn't understood at all. It would have touched a heart of stone. Now send me a wire to say what train you are coming by to-morrow, and where I shall meet you. And keep up your courage."

He raised her hands and brushed them with his lips.

"Oh, Roger, how can I ever repay you!" she cried. "It's wonderful to have such a friend."

"If you're happy, that's all the pay I want," he replied.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CAT.

JULIA TAVENOR crept out of Derrick's study as quietly as she had entered it, her pale eyes glowing with the light of fanaticism.

She had made one of her hurried trips back from the works, arriving about thirty seconds after Letty had taken Roger Fitzgerald into the pink-and-white sitting-room.

From Charles she had inquired as to who had arrived by the station cab, and learned from him that it was a gentleman visitor for Mrs. Tavenor, who was entertaining him in her own rooms.

Julia did not hesitate. Very likely she sensed in this unusual incident another plain call to duty.

She passed through the side corridor to Derrick's study, which adjoined the sitting-room, and there she remained during the whole of Letty's interview with Fitzgerald, the door between the two rooms being conveniently ajar.

She had missed but a fraction of their conversation. Some sixth sense even told her when Roger kissed Letty's hands—only she was not so sure it was her hands. She knew there had been an embrace of some sort, and being what she was, feared the worst.

Poor Derrick! Tricked and betrayed by this scandalous girl of a scandalous father.

Julia's duty was more than clear, but she showed a distinctly catlike trait in the way she deferred going about it. Metaphorically, she licked her lips and purred at the mouse-hole. The creature would come out in time, and then pouncing upon it would be a passionate pleasure.

All the same, Julia was hypocritical enough to pretend to herself that she was sorry. Oh, yes, she was very, very sorry, particularly for the fatuous, trustful Der-

rick. It might not be necessary now to pack him off to India in order to separate him from Letty, but time was short in which to reconsider that problem.

No, Derrick must not go to India; distinctly his place was here, after all. To carry on the works without him was too much for her. After he learned about Letty, her day would be over.

There was scarcely any need for Julia to make up for the part of one who has been taxed to the end of her strength. With her frail body and thin, transparently clear face, she looked it already. Nevertheless, she put on a black dress which increased her ethereal qualities, and powdered her face almost too generously. She would have liked to smudge in dark circles under her eyes, but had no means or art of achieving such results.

She decided not to go back to the works again that day, although it was her habit to do so if Derrick remained. Let him come back and find her ill and tired. Indeed, it was easy enough for her to convince herself that she was on the verge of a breakdown, and that this news she had gained by eavesdropping had hastened it.

Having achieved the semblance of a woman with one foot already in the grave, Julia paid one of her periodical visits to her father.

Maud met her brightly with the information that he had gained wonderfully during the day. His speech, which had been the greatest worry, was almost normal.

"The specialist is coming again to-morrow," Maud whispered. "Dr. Thomas says he wouldn't be at all surprised if father isn't much the same as he was before, in less than a month. Only he can't go to the works again for much longer than that, of course."

Julia nodded absent-mindedly. At any other time this news would have thrilled her.

"What's the matter, Ju?" Maud said anxiously. "You don't look very well, dear."

"I'm feeling rotten," Julia murmured huskily. "I don't believe I can keep it up much longer."

"There! I said it was foolish of you to think you could handle everything alone," Maud exclaimed.

"Well, perhaps it was," Julia agreed. "I'll speak to Derrick to-night."

She passed on into her father's room, and sat down beside the great four-poster. Decidedly there was an improvement. He looked more alert; more deserving of his old title of the Iron Man. Rita Carlisle had not finished him yet.

"Maud says you're so much better," said as she bent over and kissed the wide-furrowed forehead. "I'm so glad, dear."

"Better, yes," he growled, and there was no mistaking the clearness of his speech. Anybody could have understood him. "You can catch what I say now, can't you, Julia?"

"But, father darling, I always did. I can't imagine why other people found it difficult—"

"There were times when you pretended not to," Sir William said with his old severity when things were not to his liking. "I've been watching you closely, Julia. You've been playing a game with me, although I haven't got to the bottom of the reason for it. What's this about your taking Rickey's place at the Works to begin with?"

Julia was astounded. Her father had always had full confidence in her. What on earth had she done to forfeit it? He was most unjust.

"Do you think I want to take anybody's place?" she gasped. "Rickey needed me—he said so himself. He felt he ought to go with his regiment."

"That's nonsense. There isn't a war on now. Dozens of men can fill his place, but there's no one else to take the burden of Tavenor's while I'm laid up. You're too officious, my girl."

Julia rightly surmised that this was not her father's main grievance. He had a way of leading up to one thing by way of another. She knew she ought to be glad that he was so much better, but if he was going to begin by expressing ingratitude for her tireless devotion both to his interests and Rickey's, then she, too, had a grievance.

Sir William shifted himself on his elbows to a half-sitting position. The strength of his arms was marvelous. It was as though

the entire energy of his helpless body had concentrated in those mighty forearms.

"What I want to know is," he demanded with a fair imitation of his old thunder, "why, whenever I told you something I wished done about that Howland girl, you pretended to misunderstand me? I've asked you every time you came in here, and after a while it was plain enough that you were pretending.

"Yesterday I wrote it out for you—'Howland'—as plain as could be, and even then you had the cheek to try to fool me that you thought I meant that Harland estate. You know, Julia, it's a mistake to take me for a fool when I'm on what well might be my death-bed."

Indeed, she saw her mistake now, and hastened to rectify it.

"Dear, you must forgive me. At first I honestly didn't understand. Then—I didn't want you to be worried—"

"Where is the girl?"

"She's gone to London. I saw her mother the very next day. She's gone to live with an aunt, and will get work. Mrs. Howland thinks it's all for the best. The Keys is really no place for a girl like that."

Sir William fell back upon his pillow.

"The Keys," he muttered. "That pest-hole! I should think not. Poor child—poor child! To think I drove her out—to think of it!"

He began muttering with a trace of the recent indistinctness; his eyes closed, and he seemed oblivious to Julia's presence. She bent over him, trying vainly to catch what he was saying, but it sounded so queer that she knew she must be wrong.

"Just the same—as Julia and Maud—turned out—foundling asylum—God forgive me—I didn't know. Curse that woman—"

Julia rose hastily. When all was said and done, she loved her father. She ran out, calling to the nurse in the next room:

"I'm afraid he's delirious. I don't know, but—"

The nurse hurried to her patient, and leaned over him. He opened his eyes and smiled at her.

"Hello, don't tell tell me it's temperature time again so soon," he said.

She looked back at the anxious Julia, shaking her head cheerfully. There was nothing now the matter with Sir William. He was not in the least delirious.

CHAPTER XXI.

A COMMISSION.

LETTY felt that her latest burden was too great to be borne. For his own sake as much as her own she had to go on deceiving Derrick.

It might not alter his love for her to be told that her father was on the verge of trial for the cowardly crime of blackmail, but it could not add to his happiness or peace of mind. Of course the papers would publish full details, but as Geoffrey Marsh was only one of many aliases the scoundrel had adopted during his long life of criminal adventure, it was unlikely he would stand trial under that name.

His real name, unfortunately, was Maitland, and if he acclaimed Letty as his daughter, Lucy Letitia, the coincidence would strike Derrick in an instant.

Between two fires, Letty, who had no love for Marsh, felt that she must show some feeling; at least, as much as Roger Fitzgerald. Of course, Roger was doing it for her. His kindness to Marsh from the very beginning had been solely on Letty's account. That fact she realized now, although before it had not been so apparent.

Often in the past she had felt a contempt for Roger, wondering how any man with pretences of decency and a good social position could allow himself to be connected even indirectly with the "gang." Now she knew that he must have done it for her; because in his curious, one might call it passionless way, he loved her.

When they had first met during that ill-fated Atlantic crossing, Letty Marsh had been nothing but a child, a really innocent decoy of unscrupulous people, one of whom was her father. And Roger Fitzgerald was a man whose own story had been told and lay buried in the grave of the wife he had adored.

He had seen in Letty the sweet freshness of a flower that by some mischance has reared itself in a miasmic swamp. There

was more of pity than of passion in his affection for her.

Time and again he had been on the verge of marrying her and taking her out of it all, but his distrust was more of himself than of her. When Derrick Tavenor appeared he was human enough to be resentful, but only for a moment, and he did not grudge Letty what he assumed to be her happiness. Indeed, he felt that it was his special mission to guard it.

Letty knew that to-morrow, by hook or by crook, she must devise some means to go to London—and alone.

It seemed altogether frivolous to say that she had some shopping to do. There were quite good shops in Beltingham, and neither Julia nor Maud ever fared further afield for their needs. If she mentioned her father at all it might excite suspicion when the affair came out in the papers. Yet she felt that he was the only rational excuse she could give for going off when everything was so topsyturvy at Tavenor Court.

Perhaps Derrick would have his dinner at the works, as he so often did. It would be easier to make up a little story of her father's illness—not a dangerous illness—when they were alone together. By now she had forgotten all about their quarrel of last night. There had been so much to put it out of her mind.

Charles, she was sure, was not likely to make mention of her having received a visitor that afternoon. He was a stolidly honest young man, and not given to harboring suspicions of anybody. So far she was in merciful ignorance of the fact that Julia had followed hard upon Roger's heels and asked questions about who had come in the station cab.

It was customary for Sir William to be settled early for the night and for the nurse to join those of the family who might be dining at home. Often both Julia and Derrick were absent.

Letty was in her bedroom changing for dinner when the housemaid came in and said that nurse wished to speak to her. She told her to let nurse come in, and turned from the mirror in the act of doing up her hair, wondering and apprehensive. Indeed, every nerve was on edge.

But this apparently was not a calamity. The nurse said merely that Sir William wanted her to run up to him for a moment before dinner: at once, if she could.

The woman's eyes shifted ever so slightly. She did not find it necessary to add that her patient had likewise directed her to see that Miss Julia did not interfere with his interview with Mrs. Tavenor.

Letty made short work of her toilette, and hurried up to the big bedroom, where she had been admitted but seldom during Uncle Bill's illness. She wondered if he thought she had kept away because she didn't care to come.

A night light illumined the room faintly, and the old man looked gaunt and grotesque as he hoisted himself up with an expectant air as she entered.

"Is that Letty?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, yes, Uncle Bill—I came just as quick as I could. I was changing my dress."

"It's you, Letty—all right. Shut the door. Lock it."

As she turned to obey he pulled something out from under his pillow—it was a thick wad of bank-notes.

"Letty, take this—there's a hundred pounds or so. I don't quite know. I want you to do something for me, and you're not even to tell Rickey; I'm so helpless, you see. Will you promise?"

She caught the glitter of his eyes even in the dimness, and the curious feeling gripped her that even Uncle Bill might have his secrets. What could it mean?

She dropped onto her knees by the bed, and whispered to him encouragingly as she took the wad of notes and gripped the hand that tendered them.

"I'll do anything you want me to, Uncle Bill. Tell me what it is."

"You felt sorry for that Howland girl, didn't you, Letty?" he whispered back. "I'm sure you did."

"Oh, yes, I did," she agreed, tears rushing to her eyes as the scene came back to her in memory.

"Well, so do I," he said, giving her hand a squeeze. "I wish I hadn't done it, Letty. I can't tell you all the reasons now, but some of these days you may have to know.

Julia doesn't feel the same about it as I do. Anyway, it's none of her business.

"Now, look here, listen sharp: I want you to go up to London for me to-morrow. Give any reason you like except the right one. I feel I can trust you, Letty. But first you're to go to Mrs. Howland's shop in River Street, the Keys, and find out where Grace is. I believe she's supposed to be staying with an aunt somewhere in London, but her mother will know.

"And then you're to get hold of Grace, give her this money—make her take it—and tell her I want her to come back to Beltingham, and as soon as I'm able I want to see her. She'll wish to know why, the baggage! Well, you can say that I've heard of some relative of hers who's died and left her a fortune. That 'll be enough to go on with. Am I making myself clear, Letty?"

"I think I understand what you want me to do," Letty replied, confused beyond expression.

"But do you understand that nobody else—not even Rickey—is to know?'

"Yes, Uncle Bill."

"Then that's all."

She got up, thrusting the notes into the bosom of her dress.

Whatever happened, she had a very good alibi when it came to her proposed trip to London.

As she descended the stairs the dinner-gong sounded; assembled with the others in the dining-room she found not only Julia, but Derrick. He had arrived late, and was apologizing for not having time to change when Letty came in.

CHAPTER XXII.

MAUD SPEAKS HER MIND.

LETTY'S perceptions were so keen that she had scarcely taken her seat at table before she realized a subtle difference in Julia's manner toward her.

Heretofore Julia's dislike had been veiled. She had pretended to defer to Letty, to be sweetly anxious to please her. But this evening her hostility was plain enough to the unfortunate girl involved. Perhaps the others didn't notice, but Letty did. There was an insolence in the pale eyes, a tightening of the thin lips whenever Julia looked in her direction.

Possibly, thought Letty, Julia knew that Uncle Bill had sent for her privately and resented it. She was very far from guessing that Julia was in the possession of her secret.

The talk at table was mostly between Julia and Derrick, and had to do with affairs at the Works. Julia pleaded her great fatigue, and the subject of Derrick's obtaining an eleventh-hour discharge was reopened. Apparently it had been under discussion earlier in the day, and Letty felt immensely hurt that she had not been informed of this possible change of plan.

Her feelings were of the least consideration, it seemed. It depended entirely upon Julia's whims whether Derrick was to continue at the Works or go out to India with his regiment. The War Office was complaisant about it. A head certainly was required at Tavenors, but until just now Julia had volunteered for that job, and had insisted almost hysterically that Rickey was to do his duty as a soldier.

And now she had changed again, almost at the very last moment.

"Father is quite cross about your going, Rickey," she said with a wan smile. "He told me this evening that I was 'officious.'"

"I think you've been most tremendously kind and helpful," Derrick replied. "I don't know what I should have done without you."

Julia gave him a tender look for the compliment. It was extraordinary how sweet her expression became whenever she was addressing Derrick.

"You know, Rickey, I'd do anything in the world to help you. I thought you wanted to go to India—"

"I don't a bit."

"Well, I mean you felt it to be your duty. But if I crock up, it will be an awful business here. Rickey, could you send them a telegram and accept the discharge they've offered you? Or is it too late?"

"No, it isn't too late," Derrick said slowly. "They've kindly left it open on account of the uncertainty."

"Then you'll stay, Rickey?"

Letty's heart thumped painfully and she

wanted to cry. How humiliating it was to sit there while Julia settled Derrick's future! Neither of them seemed to give a thought as to what it meant to her, Derrick's wife; whether she was to be parted from him for ages, or otherwise.

"Yes, I'll stay," Derrick replied.

Maud's round face beamed.

"Oh, I'm so glad! And Letty, too, I imagine," she exclaimed.

Julia turned cold eyes upon her sister.

"I don't see what difference it can make to Letty one way or another," she said, hugging her secret knowledge.

"Ask Letty," chuckled Maud.

"Really one would think that you had no conception of the serious things of life," Julia said rebukingly.

Maud turned up her nose at this. There were times when Julia's ideas about duty bored her.

After dinner the nurse went back to her patient, and Derrick joined the girls in the drawing-room immediately. Heretofore he hadn't appeared to pay much attention to his wife, but as they crossed the hall together he caught her quickly about the waist and bent down whispering: "Are you glad, old girl?"

"Oh, Derrick—yes!"

Tears rushed to her eyes, and her sweet mouth became tremulous.

"Sorry I was so beastly last night," he said.

"So was I—I mean, so am I," she whispered back.

In the drawing-room Julia began to rake up memories of Gerald Stansbury. It started because of some old tune Maud was struggling with at the piano, which reminded Julia of a round game at a Christmas party—though why, not even Maud could say.

Soon the tune ceased, and Maud was furtively groping for her handkerchief, while Derrick jumped up with that queer look he always had when Gerald was mentioned, and said he must go at once and see about his telegram. Letty flew after him.

Maud spoke resentfully to her sister.

"I wonder why you always manage to break up anything that has the faintest prospect of being pleasant or cheerful," she grumbled. "You know that any one has only to mention Gerald's name to give Rickey the hump."

Julia smiled like a priestess.

"I had a reason to-night. I wanted to make sure that he still feels the same way."

"But why?" Maud's resentment changed to perplexity.

Julia dallied with a great temptation, and fell. She was jealous of Maud's affection for Letty.

"Because Letty's the girl who ruined Gerald," she said.

If she had hurled a bomb-shell full in Maud's face the latter could not have been more astonished. She sank back weakly upon the piano-stool, her round, good-natured face turned a sickly white, her eyes popping ludicrously.

"You must be mad, Julia!"

"Unfortunately it is true. I've had my suspicions almost from the first that something was queer about her—but I didn't find out what it was until to-day."

"How did you find out?"

"I don't think I can tell you that—yet."

"It can't be true, Julia. Why, Letty couldn't have been more than fifteen or sixteen—"

"How do we know how old she is now?"

"But she looks so young! She's just a kid. You ought to see her with her hair down."

"I am not responsible for how she looks," Julia said acidly. "I have absolute proof that she is the girl who ruined Gerald—the girl that Rickey's vowed to find some day. He doesn't know, of course. The sly thing was careful enough not to tell him. And there's more to it than that, even. Her father's just been arrested for blackmail and she's going to make some excuse to go up to London to-morrow because he insists upon seeing her. They belonged to an organized gang of gamblers. That Mrs. Carlisle was one of them. Oh, I know the whole story."

Julia had certainly made an impression on her sister. Tears began to roll down Maud's fat cheeks, and Julia experienced a delightful thrill of triumph until she spoke:

"Oh, poor little Letty! Think what she's

been through! We mustn't let Rickey know this. It would kill him," Maud cried.

Julia stared at her aghast.

"You can't mean—you aren't actually suggesting that Rickey is to be kept in ignorance—"

"Y-yes, I am," sobbed Maud.

"You, of all persons! When you and Gerald were to have been married—"

"I c-can't help that. I'm thinking of Rickey. Yes, and Letty, too. I won't believe she's bad—"

"Any more than you believed Grace Howland was bad."

"I still think you went the wrong way about Grace, but that's nothing to do with this. How do you know that Letty deliberately did that to Gerald? If I can forgive her, I don't see what it's got to do with you. You never liked him very much, anyway. When you weren't jealous of his being fond of me, you were jealous of his friendship for Rickey.

"It was half your doings that he ever started on that trip. You wanted to get him away, just as you've been determined lately to get Rickey away. You're jealous of Letty, and everybody knows it—including Letty. Now I see why you've decided he isn't to go after all. You've found a better way to separate them. Oh, Julia, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Julia was not ashamed, but she was certainly very angry. That Maud should dare to say such things to her and, above all else, to take Letty's part! For the moment she was speechless with anger.

"You'll break Rickey's heart, and kill father," Maud said as a parting shot.

She got up and stumbled out of the room, sobbing noisily.

Julia thought how ugly and clumsy she was, and what a weak-minded fool.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN INCUBUS PASSES.

AFTER all, Letty did not find it at all difficult to get permission for her trip to London. When she said she wished to go up to see her father, Derrick readily agreed. In his own mind he thought it was better for her to do that than run the risk of the "old bounder's" suddenly deciding to pay a visit at Tavenor Court.

Derrick himself had a full day ahead of him in consequence of his altered plans. He breakfasted very early, and Letty was with him. Neither Julia nor Maud had appeared when they left, and Letty gave Charles a message for them. She expected to be back by the late afternoon train.

Derrick apologized for not coming to the station with her. He had an appointment which prevented it, and that was rather lucky, for otherwise—had he seen her off—she would have been hard put to execute Uncle Bill's secret commission.

The car dropped her at the station, and from there she took a cab to the Keys, where it was easy enough to find Mrs. Howland's little shop. Uncle Bill had said that Gracie's mother would give her the address in London where the girl was staying.

When the shop-bell rang Mrs. Howland clattered in from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron and staring in open-eyed amazement at the soft, golden-haired loveliness of Letty in brown furs and velvet. Almost without telling, she realized that this must be the young lady whom Grace had likened to Mary Pickford.

"I am Mrs. Derrick Tavenor," Letty said shyly. "Are you Mrs. Howland?"

The pinched-looking woman nodded.

"I met your daughter once," Letty went on, thinking how she was to keep Uncle Bill's name out of this. "I—I liked her very much. I mean—well, I'm going up to London to-day, and it occurred to me I might look her up and bring you back news of her. I believe you told Miss Tavenor she is staying with an aunt. Could you give me her address, Mrs. Howland?"

The widow shook her head slowly.

"I told her to go there—but she ain't with Aunt Minnie. She never went near the place. Leastwise I wrote after waiting until I fair thought I'd go off me 'ead—and the letter come back. Still, I can give you the address. Oh, miss—madam—if you only knew 'ow worried I am! Some days I think I'll just put on me bonnet and shawl and go straight up to London and find 'er, the poor pretty! And then I say to meself,

what's the good of that? She'd ought to've written. I can't some'ow think she 'asn't. Letters do miscarry, don't they, madam?"

Letty leaned across the counter and patted the work-worn hands. She was filled with a great rush of sympathy for this other woman in trouble, this poor, humble creature eating her heart out in worry, and all because of Julia's determination to make sure that the damned *were* damned.

"Give me the address, Mrs. Howland. I'll go and find out what has happened, and tell you everything. I'll come again to-morrow, and let you know. You must try not to worry—"

"I can't 'elp it," said the widow, with a distressful gulp. Then she coaxed a smile. "Grace said as 'ow you was so beautiful—just like Miss Mary Pickford. I used to scold 'er because she would go to the 'pictures.' But I don't know's there's really so much 'arm in 'em. And it's rare kind of you, madam, to care about what may 'ave 'appened to Grace.

"Now, if 'twas Miss Julia, I wouldn't dare give the address. Grace 'd be that angry— But I'll write it down, and, please God, you'll bring me some news of her. If it should be you see her, madam, tell her that if she's in trouble again to come 'ome. 'Ere, I'll give you some money in case—"

"No, please don't," Letty interrupted. "I'll attend to that."

How odd it seemed for the widow to be offering her hard-earned shillings when Letty had Uncle Bill's thick wad of bank-notes for Grace. That was very queer of Uncle Bill, yet he had seemed to know what he was about.

Aunt Minnie's name was Mrs. Trapp, and she lived in one of the long streets off the Commercial Road. Possessed of this information on a slip of paper, Letty left the little shop with Mrs. Howland's thanks ringing in her ears, entered the cab, and was driven back to the station in good time for a later train than the one she was supposed to have taken. Also she despatched a telegram to Roger, asking him to meet her. It was just possible he would get it in time. If not she meant to drive straight to his flat in Ryder Street.

Roger was not at the station, and a feeling of loneliness assailed Letty as she left the big Northern terminus and found a taxicab with difficulty.

It was nearly twelve when she reached his flat, and he was not in. The man-servant who admitted her and who knew her very well, said of course she could wait. Mr. Fitzgerald had been called out very early. Yes, a telegram had come for him. Letty saw it lying on the table in the hall.

It was strange for Roger not to be expecting her. He had asked her to wire. There was nothing she could do, really, except sit down and wait for him. It was nearly an hour before he appeared.

"Oh, you here, Letty?" he exclaimed, casting his hat aside and mopping his forehead. "I hoped you might be. I hadn't a moment to telephone—everything's so confused. Excuse me just a moment."

He rushed out again, said something to the servant, and then came back.

"Letty, it's all over. The old scoundrel's dead."

"You mean—my father!"

"Yes—Geoffrey Marsh, or whatever he was, He's dead. Whew, what a business! It was heart-failure. I was his only 'friend,' so they sent for me. But he didn't die at once. Personally, I believe he'd taken something, but the doctor didn't think so, and I didn't mention my suspicions. What was the use?"

Letty tried to feel sorry, and failed.

"Then—"

"You've nothing to worry about. Not a thing. You don't even have to mourn him, Letty. He wasn't your father. He told me about that before he died."

"Not—my father! Oh, Roger, what can you mean?"

She looked so stunned that he took her by the shoulders and shook her gently.

"Letty, aren't you rather glad? I don't know why he should have told me, but he did. He was your stepfather, and Rita Carlisle's dislike of you was based on the fact that at one time she fancied herself in love with Marsh, and hated your mother. It explains a lot to me. Poor Letty! You hadn't an earthly chance with those people. I wish to heaven I'd taken you out of it myself. Still—you're happier with your

Derrick. Now there isn't a single thing to worry about, my child. The past is buried. Forget it. Myself, I'd cut my throat sooner than dig up any portion of it where you are concerned."

"But—I shall have to tell Derrick—that he is dead," she said vaguely. It was so difficult to sort out these details in her mind.

"Lunch is ready, sir," announced the man-servant, appearing at that moment.

Fitzgerald helped her to her feet.

"I thought it would be better to have something here," he said. "It's only a scrap meal, but you must eat something.

The "scrap" meal turned out to be very appetizing. In spite of herself, Letty was considerably heartened. Roger had thought of everything. He said it was better, all things considered, that she should say nothing at Tavenor Court about Marsh's death. He had been indicted under the name of Maitland, and as such would be mentioned as having died of heart-failure in a police court cell. Roger would see him decently buried, and later on would announce his death from—say, the Italian Riviera.

A sudden buoyancy of feeling took possession of Letty. She was not *glad* that Geoffrey Marsh was dead, but she had had little for which to thank him in the past, and his death freed her from a burden that had promised to be too heavy to support.

However, she soon recollected her other mission—the promise she had made to Uncle Bill, and to Grace Howland's mother. Nor could she tell Roger about that. Uncle Bill had sworn her to secrecy.

Possibly Roger wondered why she would not let him go with her to the station, but as a matter of fact he had so much else to do in settling up the affairs of Geoffrey Marsh, that he was not disposed to question when Letty insisted upon going by herself.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BLOW FALLS.

THE street off the Commercial Road swerved away in a tremendous arc of small, soot-stained houses. Letty's taxicab was decidedly out of place. It dispersed children playing at their games. But the taxi was a new game to them, and they collected eagerly to watch Letty alight and tap the knocker at No. 42.

After an interval that was slightly prolonged, shuffling footsteps sounded in the passage, and the door was opened.

A beldame with whitened hair streaming about a shriveled face stared at her.

"Are you Mrs. Trapp?"

"No, m'm."

"Could I see Mrs. Trapp? She lives here, doesn't she? This is No. 42?"

"Never 'eard of her, until a girl came a fortnight ago asking the same. If there ever was anybody of that name, then they 'aven't lived 'ere for the past six years. That's all I can say."

The door was slammed in Letty's face.

In desperation she appealed to one of the next door neighbors.

Yes, once upon a time there had been a Mrs. Trapp, but she had gone no one knew whither. The point of it was, that she had gone, and consequently there vanished any hope of tracing Grace Howland through her.

What could have become of the girl?

It was dreadful to have to go back with no news at all, but futile to hope to gain any in this neighborhood from which Mrs. Trapp had departed six years ago. Evidently Grace had come seeking her here in obedience to her mother's wish, for the old woman had mentioned a girl who had called a fortnight ago.

That was the nearest approach to news Letty could take back. Curiously enough, she was more worried about its effect on Uncle Bill than on Mrs. Howland. He had seemed to be so very anxious that Grace should be found.

It was six o'clock when Letty finally got back to Tavenor Court, feeling very tired indeed. The day had been so full of emotional events as well as travel. She seemed to have lived a lifetime since that morning. But at least as regarded herself she had nothing now to worry about, and that load was off her mind.

As she entered the hall a great sense of home-coming stole into her heart and comforted it. This was her *home* and, despite

the affliction of Julia, she loved it. Moreover, it was Julia's home as well, and surely it behoved Letty to remember that fact. She hadn't behaved any too well toward Julia, and perhaps if she changed her attitude Julia would show a correspondingly good feeling.

With this high purpose in mind, she went straight through to her own delightful corner of the old house. There were cheerful fires and fragrant bowls of flowers from the hothouses, and Dorcas, the maid, ready to help her off with her things.

Letty had finished her bath, and arrayed daintily in a silk peignoir, was sitting before the dressing-table brushing her hair when the door behind her opened and Derrick came in.

She saw his face first in the mirror, and it was so drawn and ghastly that she wheeled about with a sharp exclamation.

"Derrick, what's happened!" she cried.

"The end of the world—if it's true," he replied quietly. "Letty, I want to ask you a question—did you ever know Gerald Stansbury?"

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

The Policy Sleuth

No. 7. The Big Four and the Bank

by Edgar Wallace

INSURANCE corporations take remarkable risks. Their business carries them into strange adventures, and many and weird are the policies which are issued by those particular companies whose pleasure it is to gamble with A. that B. will not rob him. We think of insurance companies as dreary corporations wherein, for a consideration paid monthly, quarterly, or yearly, our executors will receive, upon our demise, fabulous sums the like of which we have never been fated to touch or handle in our own lifetime.

But there are certain insurance companies which do not bother with the lives of men, or with the conflagrations in their houses. They will insure your pearls against the burglar, and your furs against the moth, thereby providing at least a semblance of protection for those who lay up their treasures on earth.

Bob Brewer was eating his solitary dinner in the Windsor Restaurant when to him came his employer and manager, Mr. Douglas Campbell.

"Bob," said he without preliminary, "I've been round to your flat and heard you were here. The fact is, I want your advice."

"My advice," rejoined Bob, with a magnificent wave of his hand, "is—marry the girl!"

The outraged Mr. Campbell spluttered his indignation.

"Why is it," he asked severely, "that you always introduce a ribald strain into the most serious business conversation? I've thought very often that maybe it is your mixing with society that brings you into this state of mind. There's something about society which—"

"There's nothing about society that you haven't already described," interrupted Bob hastily, "and I may remark, on the spur of the moment, that I have had a good dinner, and I do not wish my digestion to be disturbed by long dissertations upon the sins and follies of the upper classes. Leave them alone, Campbell; they have their troubles. Now, what is yours?"

"You were telling me a little while back that there were a great number of criminals in town."

Bob nodded.

"I think you mentioned the Big Four."

"The Big Three," corrected Bob. "Poor Bill Hoy is spending the season at his winter palace on Dartmoor. But I have observed that the other three are hanging loose. For example, I saw Reddy—you've heard of Reddy? He was in this restaurant about an hour ago. And with him was a young lady known to the profession as Pink Mirando."

"A queer name," said Mr. Campbell, adding thoughtfully: "Her complexion, I suppose—"

"Complexion nothing," cut in Bob brutally. "She is called 'Pink' because she has a penchant for pink underwear. I remember once—"

"Never mind," said Mr. Campbell hastily; "it is not about her or any of the gang that I want to speak. It is about the London, Devon & Cornwall Bank."

Bob produced his case of cigars and handed it across the table. Mr. Campbell chose the best and lit it before he disclosed his story.

"I had a visit to-day from McKay, the manager of the London, Devon & Cornwall," he proceeded. "He is an old friend of mine; we were born in the same town."

"That doesn't make you a friend of his," retorted Bob. "I suppose the truth of it is, you both got rich in the same swindle. Well, what about it?"

"He's worried, is poor McKay, desperately worried. About six months ago one of his best branch managers was found to be betting heavily and was in debt to a bookmaker. McKay ordered an immediate audit and an examination of all accounts. There seemed to be some irregularity, and the man was suspended. But when the bank auditors came to check over the books, they discovered that they balanced.

"There was more than a suspicion that money had been put in by the branch manager at the eleventh hour to cover his deficit; and so cleverly had it been done that it defied detection, with the result that McKay was letting the man off with a reprimand, when, to his surprise, Timmes resigned on the spot, forfeited his pension and other emoluments, and left the bank employ."

Bob nodded.

"I suppose the suggestion is that this man Timmes managed to get the money from some disreputable acquaintance on the strength of services to be rendered."

Campbell beamed at him.

"Bob, there are moments when you evince real intelligence," he said admiringly.

"Go on," commanded Bob, ignoring the flattery. "I've got an idea that there's some dirty work for me at the end of this yarn of yours, Campbell."

"That you will discover," continued Campbell. "As I say, the man disappeared, but he carried away in his head a great deal of information about the bank, its business and its methods, information which is only intrusted to a branch manager. Now, lately McKay has been noticing certain curious phenomena which leave him with the impression that Timmes—or somebody who is being advised by Timmes—is testing out the secret knowledge which only a bank manager should possess.

"For example, code messages notifying a transference of funds have been sent to several branches. Mind you, no attempt is being made to exploit this knowledge in the way of making money. The bank has not lost a penny."

"Anyway, they can change the code," suggested Bob.

"They have changed it," replied Campbell, "but there are some things they can't change. And so certain is McKay and his directors that a raid is being planned upon their funds that they have fallen into something like a panic, and held a board meeting yesterday at which it was decided to get into communication with me."

Bob raised his eyebrows.

"You don't mean to tell me the bank's going to insure themselves against loss?"

"That is their idea," nodded Campbell. "You see, it will take them the greater part of three months to close certain dangerous gaps through which the trickster might be able to crawl. They want us to cover their risk in that three months, and I have seen the Federated directors, and we have agreed to issue the policy."

"To any great extent?"

Campbell nodded.

"To a very large extent," he said. "Of course, every bank has to write off a certain amount annually as dead loss from frauds, forgeries, *et cetera*, and we do not touch what I would call the normal margin of loss sustained in trading. We have fixed that figure, and above that we are insuring them to the extent of £150,000; and in fact we are considering the advisability of doubling that risk."

Bob shook his head.

"And it is a risk, believe me!" he said. "Here is a man who is obviously broke to the world. He is in the hands of the bookmakers, and probably in the hands of money-lenders. Let us suppose that he has also defrauded the bank and is in mortal terror of being discovered. Then, for some reason and by some means, he is exposed. I suppose one of the bookmakers wrote to McKay?"

Mr. Campbell assented.

"Auditors are rushed down, the books are examined, and in the short period between the time he was warned and the time his accounts were examined by experts he is able to raise enough money to satisfy his liabilities, to make good his defalcations—that looks fishy!"

"I agree," said Campbell.

"It looks fishy because you cannot raise money, unless you can give some guarantee to the gentleman who puts up the cash, that you can and will repay him; and even then it is impossible to raise that money unless you have two or three days to negotiate—unless, of course, Mr. Timmes is negotiating with a bunch of crooks who have been waiting for this opportunity."

"That was my suggestion, too," said the triumphant Mr. Campbell.

"That doesn't make it any less likely," quoth Bob. "Now, I suggest to you that the man who lent the money is one of the three—most likely Reddy himself, because Reddy did not earn his nickname solely by reason of his fiery appearance, but because he always had ready cash to pay his dupes and tools. Therefore, knowing that the Big Three are behind this business, I think the policy you have issued is a bad one, and that you have taken a risk which, in the circumstances, may be described as uncommercial."

Mr. Campbell pinched his lips nervously. A shrewd and even brilliant insurance man, he was not a little influenced by the views of his chief sleuth.

"Anyway, I've taken the risk," he said. "What is more—and this will please you—the bank has agreed to pay all expenses you may incur while you are covering this policy."

"Poor bank!" muttered Bob ominously. "It may be cheaper for them in the end to be robbed."

Brewer made all his plans on the spur of the moment, and had decided his line of action before he rose from the table. Obviously, the first business was to discover the name of the bookmaker who had reported the defaulting manager.

A call upon Mr. McKay the next morning procured this information, together with a great deal of data. McKay, a little bald-headed man, with a twinkle of humor in his eyes, produced a thick batch of telegrams.

"These are copies," he said. "I have secured them from the post-office. They were sent at the time when our friend Timmes was betting like a millionaire. He had two thousand pounds on one horse!

Some young men in my office who know a great deal more about this sport than is good for them tell me that, checking the telegrams with the results of the races, Timmes was extraordinarily fortunate in not losing more."

"Who is the bookmaker?"

"A man named Parry, of Fleet Street," replied McKay.

"Seems a queer place for a bookmaker to operate," thought Bob, and strolled into the Street of Adventure.

Mr. Parry's office was on the fourth floor of an old building in one of the courts leading from the famous thoroughfare. It was an unpretentious headquarters for a man who had made his thousands, and moreover was prepared to accept bets to such extraordinary figures. It consisted of one room with the name painted on a panel of the door. He was not in his office, which was locked, and inquiries elicited the fact that he seldom came there, and if he did it was generally in the morning between eleven and twelve o'clock.

Bob had no difficulty in picking up a sporting man, and from him discovered that the name of Parry was unknown at any of the big sporting clubs. He then returned to the deserted office, took from his pocket a small, flat leather case containing a curious-looking key, the wards of which were adjustable, opened the office door, walked in, and closed it behind him. He found himself in a dingy room, which had not been swept or dusted for weeks. The furniture consisted of a chair and table and a large japanned tin cash-box. There was also a pad of dusty note-paper, carrying the name of this eminent sportsman, together with six telephone numbers —which proved to exist only in the fertile imagination of Mr. Parry—a telegraphic address which was as valueless as the telephone numbers, and the name of his banker, who knew a great many things but did not know Mr. Parry.

All this Bob was to discover. For the moment he sought documentary evidence, and the tin box, once opened, yielded sufficient. There were letters by the dozen from Mr. Timmes; letters vainglorious when he had received checks; letters depressed when he had received a bill; letters and telegrams frantic and urgent when he was on the verge of ruin.

Bob also found a large number of letters from somebody who signed herself "Alice Betherton." There was very little jubilance in these epistles. In the main they asked for time, pleaded in something like a frenzy that good Mr. Parry should not expose her. They spoke of a husband, and children at college, and of their position in the county, all of which were to be jeopardized if Mr. Parry pressed his claim.

Bob read the letters dispassionately, noted their address, folded them up, and put them into his pocket without shame or compunction, relocked the box, and emerged into Fleet Street after a very successful piece of burglary.

He had gained important information. In the first place, Parry was not a bookmaker at all. In the second place, he had only two clients apparently—Mrs. Betherton and Mr. Timmes. They both lived in Devonshire, they were both in the toils of Mr. Parry, and one at any rate had miraculously escaped for the time being. What of the other?

Somehow, Bob felt that the mystery of the contemplated coup would be revealed after he had had a heart-to-heart talk with Mrs. Betherton.

He left Paddington by the midnight sleeper, reached Newton Abbot in the gray dawn, and, entering the car that he had ordered, drove off to Merstham Bassett. It was a drive which took him across the wind-swept moor, and down into the folds of the hills which sheltered the little town of Merstham Bassett. He took breakfast at the Crown Inn, and found the landlord communicative, as most landlords are.

"Mrs. Betherton? Oh, yes, I know that lady very well. She has a property on the edge of the moor and one of the biggest houses around here."

A very nice lady, by all accounts. She rode to hounds and went to London racing at least once a week.

"They say," said the landlord confi-

dentially, "that she makes a lot of money that way."

Bob suppressed a smile.

Poor lady!

Her husband apparently was a colonel in India, commanding a cavalry regiment. Her two sons were at public schools, and Mrs. Betherton lived alone.

"By the way," said Bob, "have you any other strangers staying here?"

The landlord nodded.

"We have two gentlemen who have come down for the fishing—London gentlemen, too."

"Will you do me a favor?" proceeded Bob. "I am a detective officer, and I am particularly anxious that nobody should know that I have been making inquiries in the village."

The landlord was only too pleased to oblige.

"And especially," emphasized Bob, "I don't want you to tell anybody that I have discussed Mrs. Betherton, Mrs. Betherton's house, or her chance of being burgled, to a soul."

He had not, of course, discussed the chance of burglary at all, but he planted in the landlord's mind, by this very suggestion, just the impression he wished to create.

After breakfast he strolled into the village, not unconscious of the fact that he was being watched.

The little town consisted of one large and two subsidiary streets. In the main thoroughfare were the principal shops, and on a corner lot in the very center were the premises of the London, Devon & Cornwall Bank.

Into this he turned, showed his card to the manager, and passed through to that worthy's private office.

"I have a card of introduction from your general manager which you had better see. It is a general introduction to all your branches," said Bob, and showed his credentials.

The manager scrutinized it and nodded.

"What do you want me to do, Mr. Brewer?"

"In the first place, I want to know what is the state of Mrs. Betherton's account?"

The other stared at him in astonishment.

"It is overdrawn about two hundred pounds," he replied.

"In the second place— By the way, do you live on the bank premises?"

"I live up above," said the manager, with a smile. "I am a bachelor, and have very good quarters."

"Where do you feed?" asked Bob, to the other's surprise.

"As a rule, I have my dinner at the George, over the road; but my supper is sent into my room on a tray. There's a side entrance to the bank, as you probably noticed."

"I want you to do me a favor," continued Bob, after a few moments' thought. "Arrange to get some biscuits into your room from your grocer, eat no supper, clear the tray as best you can, and send it back empty. Drink no beer, or wine, or water, or any liquid whatever that you cannot draw from your own tap."

"But what is the idea?" asked the manager. "How long is this to go on? I am quite willing to do it," he added hastily.

Bob smiled.

"It won't be for more than a week, I think. I have one more request to make of you, and it is that you put a card"—he looked round the walls of the manager's office and saw hanging a calendar, a moderately sized red card—"that will do," he said, pointing to it. "Will you be good enough to put that calendar in one of your windows up-stairs where I can see it when—"

"When?" echoed the manager curiously.

"When Mrs. Betherton's account is well in credit."

"But that is an extraordinary request!" smiled the manager.

"Isn't it?" said Bob. "I am noted for making extraordinary requests."

"Are you staying in the village?"

Bob shook his head.

"No," he said. "I have to be back in town to-night."

"But what is the idea of the card?"

"I leave behind me my little guardian angel, a cherub who sits up aloft and take

care of the inquisitive young branch manager," explained Bob solemnly.

He lunched at the inn, and, with the assistance of the landlord, picked out a train back to town, handed in a telegram addressed to the general manager of the London, Devon & Cornwall Bank, to the effect that "All is satisfactory here," and that he would be back in London on the following morning; and at two o'clock in the afternoon his car breasted the hill out of Merstham Bassett and vanished across the wide moor.

Two interested gentlemen watched his car disappear. One of these interviewed the landlord; the other called at the post-office and demanded of the innocent postmistress whether "his friend" had signed his name to the telegram which he had just sent off; whereupon the unsuspecting postmistress produced Bob's telegram, and the caller expressed himself as relieved—having read it—that the name had been duly signed.

The following day was Friday and market day, and the town was filled with farmers and their wagons and gigs. They came from far afield, and one young horse dealer, a very talkative man, who came up from Torquay already slightly the worse for drink, provided the only real excitement of the day. For he it was who was almost run over by an elegant motor-car driven by a pale and pretty woman of thirty-five, and had to be dragged from death's door by the slack of his breeches.

The car drew up at the bank, and the hour was ten minutes to three, as was duly noted by two visitors watching the animated market scene from one of the upper windows of the Crown Inn. Just before three the lady came out of the bank, turned her car, and disappeared up the moor road.

At four o'clock the bank closed, and a quarter of an hour later the manager put a red calendar against one of the windows looking down into the street.

At nine o'clock that night occurred the second exciting incident of the day. The drunken gentleman from Torquay refused to leave the bar of the George, offering to fight all and sundry, which, as he was the only person in his condition, was a challenge which was not accepted. Since he refused to budge and threatened to bring disaster upon the bar, the landlord, and all that was within his gates, the two town policemen were summoned, and he was escorted to the lockup at the far end of the street, bellowing defiance at the top of his voice, to the scandal of Merstham Bassett.

Night had fallen upon the little town, the streets were cleared, and light after light which showed in the windows of the old Georgian houses were being extinguished, when a big touring-car came noiselessly over the crest of the hill and backed down the road till it reached the end of the main street.

This was at eleven o'clock. Simultaneously two men walked to the side entrance of the bank, opened the door with keys which had evidently been prepared, and shut the door noiselessly behind them. Facing them was the door leading into the bank premises proper. To the right was a flight of stairs going up to the branch manager's quarters.

They did not consult one another, for their plans were made. Without hesitation they mounted the stairs, making no sound, for their feet were covered with thick woolen stockings. They paused a moment on the landing to cover their faces, and then the foremost man, gripping a long-barreled revolver in his hand, threw open the door and sprang into the room.

"Hands up!" he said in a low voice.

The room was empty. Before he realized what had happened, a horsey-looking man stepped quietly from behind the door and plugged him.

Bob invariably used the butt-end of a *sjambok* for this dire purpose, and it was invariably effective. The masked man dropped without so much as a moan, and the man on the landing turned and leaped down the stairs into the arms of two policemen who had been waiting in the bank premises and who might have been reenforced by the young bank manager, had it been necessary.

It was not necessary. The policemen, who were not artists, used coarse truncheons, never so much as asking the

burglar to put up his hands or be a good boy, or making any of the demands which are usual in the circumstances.

"I can explain the whole *modus operandi* to you, Campbell, if you will be patient," said Bob the next evening. "The two men were, of course, only minor members of the gang. But the thing was planned by the Big Four. You can see Big Four sticking out all over it. First of all, they had to get the bank manager, and they got him in Mr. Timmes. Parry was, of course, merely a decoy duck, and he probably circularized many bank managers all over England, promising unlimited credit, before he found one fool who would fall.

"Once they had him worked up to a frenzy, so that they could slip in at the last moment to make good his deficit, they had him in their hands body and soul. Timmes was the man who gave them information as to the bank's methods.

"The next job was to find a possible client of the bank, and they were probably working for six months before they got Mrs. Betherton in their toils. I interviewed Mrs. Betherton before I came away, and she was a greatly scared lady. She owed Parry four thousand pounds. Parry had come down to see her in the afternoon, and had proved a most amiable young gentleman who was willing to oblige her. He had brought down sixty thousand pounds in bank-notes—genuine money, you understand. Would she very kindly put this to her account, as he did not want to carry it about the country, for fear of being robbed. He probably told some plausible story as to why he had that amount.

"Mrs. Betherton goes down to the bank and deposits the money just before the bank closes. The young manager has no place to keep it, except the very inadequate vaults which were provided for that little town. The two artists who are told off for the job arranged to dope the branch manager's food on its way over from the inn to his quarters—as a matter of fact, we found every bit of food that was sent over that night absolutely saturated with noxious drugs. The money was to be extracted and a few days later Mr. Parry was to arrange to draw out the cash he deposited—through Mrs. Betherton.

"I guessed that something like this was framed, but my difficulty was to get into touch with the police. I did my best to get pinched earlier in the day, so that I could have a heart-to-heart talk with the constabulary in their native lair; and when eventually I was carried off to the jug I was scared sick that they'd pull off the job before I got back. I must say this for the Devonshire police: that they listened to reason, jumped to my story, and we sneaked back to the bank by a back way, having previously called up the manager by phone to tell him we were coming."

"Did you get the man in the car?" asked Campbell; whereat a look of weariness spread over Bob's face.

"Campbell, Campbell," he said irritably, "you want a lot for your money."

The eighth and last adventure of the Policy Sleuth, "THE LUCKY DIP," will appear next week.

FORGIVENESS

YOUR love may forgive your offense,
You may think it is over and done.
But she'll never forget she forgave—
Your punishment's only begun!

E. G. Johnston.

The Knight of Lonely Land

by Evelyn Campbell

Author of "Spark of the Flame," etc.

CHAPTER XIV.

"THE WICKED FLEE."

ON the way back to Three Nines Billie made a detour that took him past the Weed Patch. The sheriff returned directly to Cat Fork disgusted at the apparent failure of his mission, for Billie had not shared with him the discovery of the roan horse among the Camberwell string. His heart misgave him for his silence on what might be a vital point in the evidence they were trying to piece together, but it was still his heart that rebelled at throwing suspicion on the girl who had been his friend.

He had more than one score to settle with her; there were points to be cleared up before they could resume their old careless, gay relations, but paramount was the necessity for knowing just how far she was implicated with Camberwell's outfit. He felt that he must be the one to hear this first; afterward if Cooper should know he would be the one to tell him.

It was late afternoon and smoke was coming from the crazy pipe that penetrated the roof of the lean-to of the Desmond shack. The place was as dreary and unkempt as usual and in the little corral behind it a lean pony snooped about in search of a stray tuft of hay. But the presence of this sorry animal proved nothing. It belonged to Desmond himself; the girl would have scorned to ride it.

Desmond came to the door in answer to Billie's shout. He was smoking his short pipe and returned his visitor's greeting with a sullen grunt. He was the same lazy, dirty, nondescript known to everybody in the valley, but at sight of him Billie was conscious of a warm feeling of relief. He did not attempt to analyze the reason for this; he had never known joy at seeing the old scoundrel before, but there was something in the sight of him that was reassuring.

If anything was wrong there must have been some sign about the girl's father to prove it so. Then his heart, which had moved with relief, fell to zero again. From the kitchen came the strong odor of coffee and cooking food, but there was no sign of Little Britches anywhere.

Desmond invited Billie to have supper by jerking his thumb toward the crazy stove where the food simmered, but his invitation was rejected.

"I got to be gettin' home. I reckon Jack'll be raisin' Cain all over th' place, me bein' gone all day. He keeps harpin' on a change comin' right soon. What do you make out?"

Old Desmond sent a shrewd eye toward the calm sky. Like most of his race he was accounted a weather prophet and was seldom wrong in his predictions. Now he shook his head ominously.

"Shouldn't be surprised if Jack was right. There's a haze over there to th'

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for January 15.

north—you can sorta taste th' snow a' comin'."

"Well, if you back him up I might as well cave— Look here, Desmond, I was wonderin' if your girl wouldn't come over an' ride with us early to-morrow. If there's a blow comin' we got to get our cattle bunched. They're scattered from here to th' State line, an' only Jack an' me to get 'em in."

Billie had been playing for this point, and he had time to read the signs in the other man's face — a slow withdrawing; shifty eyes turned on some pretext or other to avoid the answer his lips gave.

"Wa-al, Molly ain't here just now. I reckon you haven't heard I've decided to pull up an' move. Me an' th' girl have had enough of this onery country. We're goin' to light out right soon. We figure on goin' South."

"That so?" Billie's tone was cool and was a triumph over the excitement within. He was sure now that he was on the scent of the mystery which had enabled the rustlers to work with such safety and success in their experiment.

Somebody had helped them; had kept them in touch with the movements of the outfits of the various ranches. With a spy moving freely about, trusted everywhere, it was no wonder that they had been able to run off the choicest steers from the Circle O.

But there was no elation in his heart though he touched the rim of discovery. Instead he felt a sense of loss, deep and abiding. Something was leaving his life—something not valued over much, but with a mark of its passing clear and defined. He spoke casually.

"Th' girl never mentioned it to me. We'll miss th' kid like all Teck. Where'd you say she was?"

There was just the hint of menace in his voice, but the other man got it. Billie had not meant to startle him, and he was surprised at the result.

"How th'ell do I know where she is," the nester whined, stepping back into his own door for safety. "What are you asking me questions for, Billie Stranger—prying into what don't concern you."

"I asked you where Little Britches was," Billie said steadily. "There ain't any harm in askin' that, or there shouldn't be. The harm lays in what your answer may be."

Desmond's reply was to slam the crazy door violently; the next moment his face appeared at the window, and his fright and defiance would have been ludicrous if it had not been rooted in disaster. The barrel of a shotgun lay along the window ledge and behind its shelter the nester shrieked threats and recrimination.

"You think you're runnin' this range, you damn tramp! Who ever heard of you until you come along an' done Hoyt out of his place in a crooked game. What are you hangin' around my place after my girl for? What's it to you where she is? You get off my land right now an' keep off. I don't want to see you around here again."

Another time Billie might have laughed at the absurd scene, but now there was no laughter for him, for he had learned what he came there to know. His chin was sunk on his breast as he rode away without giving a thought to the shotgun leveled at his back. His mind was filled with the revelation the scene had brought with it.

Desmond had acted like a fool, and his crazy behavior left no doubt but that he had much to conceal and that its nature was serious enough to cause him to lose all prudence and commonsense at the hint of discovery.

If Billie had followed the course that duty laid out for him he would have turned about and gone in search of Jim Cooper then and there. He had little beside suspicion to work on in connecting the Desmonds with the rustlers, but in this case suspicion was enough. His mind, turning upon all the little unanswered mysteries, recalled the new possessions of Little Britches—her boots, her new saddle, the little signs of prosperity for which there was no cause. Last and most important, the presence of her horse among Camberwell's! From the moment of seeing it there he had a sick conviction that its owner was somewhere about that sinister place—freely of her own will.

For a long time Camberwell had borne

a bad reputation among other men. The sullenness of his riders, the atmosphere of secrecy that pervaded the house and its inmates; the brandless stock and that which had been branded far too often, all left a bad impression upon the public mind. No one openly accused Camberwell of evil doing, but the thought was uppermost in so many minds that it needed but a touch of fire to send it to a blinding flame.

Now it was in Billie's power to supply this tinder, but he could not bring his will to the act. Little Britches with her big black eyes, her curls, her brave, boyish manner! He could not hand her over to inquiry that would be merciless. If she was at Camberwell's there was a reason. Had she shown herself when he was at the ranch she might have made a dozen excuses, and he would have credited any of them in preference to what he now believed against his will.

He could not doubt that she knew of his visit; had perhaps watched him come and go from one of those high, secret windows that told nothing. He wanted to go back and choke the truth out of her father, but commonsense warned him of the foolishness of this course. Desmond might know of his daughter's actions, but he had never forced this course upon her. Billie knew too well the contempt the girl had for her parent, and how little his will prevailed with her.

He rode slowly on to the Three Nines turning these thoughts and conjectures over and over in his mind; wondering what was the best thing to do. Desmond, whether he had a knowledge of the rustlers or not plainly meant to leave the country; possibly taking his daughter with him, but his apprehension meant discovery for Little Britches' part in the systematic thievery and this sealed Billie's lips. There was no way to avoid bringing her into the disclosure, and he knew well that in the unwritten laws of the land the fact that she was a girl would carry small weight. Her treachery, if treachery it was, made her crime a darker one because she had been trusted and treated with kindness everywhere.

There was another phase to the drama—for Billie the most important phase of all, but it was a private matter and something the girl would never be called upon to answer for except before the tribunal of her own conscience and before himself. This was the matter of persuading Geraldine Hoyt to ride the outlaw horse. To do this thing she must have been in a desperate mood, ready to sacrifice her standing, even her safety, to gratify a fancied revenge. He had no doubt after seeing her horse at Camberwell's, that it was Little Britches herself who told of Geraldine's ride. It would be like her to boast of an act that might have made her a moral murderer.

Billie was puzzled by his own feeling toward her; by right he should have been angry, he should have loathed the girl who could be such a traitor and he was astonished to find his thoughts gentler, kinder to her than they had ever been. Heretofore he had scarcely thought of her at all, except as the boy she sometimes seemed to be, or as a child who had never grown up.

But now his pity for the lonely, passionate little pagan was too great for blame to become a part of it. He wanted to save Little Britches, to shelter her and start her feet on the way to better things. Billie knew nothing about Sir Launcelot or other gentle knights; he would have blushed to the ears had such qualities been attributed to him. His code of right and wrong was as stern as the granite hills he faced, but nowhere in the rulings of his honor could he find a place for Little Britches and her sins.

He had for the time forgotten Geraldine Hoyt, though until now she had occupied most of his thoughts, and when a little later they met at a turn in the trail, he was so plainly startled and brought back from some distant place that the English girl was unreasonably annoyed.

She was riding the new horse, and when she took in Billie's blank expression she would have passed on without a greeting, but his horse, wheeling, blocked the way. It was nearly night and the road he had come was lonely and deserted.

"It's pretty late, Miss Hoyt," he said. "I don't think you'd better ride this way except in daytime."

She shrugged her slim shoulders and her quick color rose.

"What nonsense! Why do you feel that I must be guarded and watched like this? I have been riding most of the day with—with—Jack, and I have a little errand of my own now."

Geraldine had no errand. She had grown tired of waiting for Billie to return and her woman's instinct drove her out to meet him. She wanted to be sure that he had come from the Desmond place, and now that she had met him on the way and her surmise was proven correct, she was angry and annoyed. He had been riding with the girl who yesterday would have seen her broken to pieces by a mad horse.

"Please let me pass," she said, trying to subdue the anger in her voice. "I am going to see your friend—who wished to teach me to ride yesterday. I have a question to ask her."

"You won't find her there," he answered gravely, but you can go on if you want to. I'll follow along."

"Of course if she isn't there"—she wheeled her horse pettishly; she felt ridiculous, yet strangely happy too. It was absurd that there should be a difference between this man and the other who had been her companion that day—but there was a difference, tremendous and unmistakable. For a few yards they were silent, trying to collect their natural forces—to appear indifferent to each other when the magnetism of their thought drew their eyes irresistibly together.

"These trails ain't any too safe after nightfall unless you know 'em well," Billie said quietly. "It's easy to get lost, and that's a strange horse you're ridin'. He might carry you off somewheres and you'd have trouble findin' th' way back."

"Oh, I shall soon find my way about," she returned lightly. "Your friend Jack has been teaching me things to-day. I can throw a rope quite nicely. He said so himself." She laughed; anger beginning to pass. And then added shyly: "It was very good of you to find this horse for me. She is a darling."

They could see the lights of the ranch house a mile or so away, blinking steadily through the gathering dusk. It gave Billie a comforted, happy feeling to see those lights waiting for them and to think of Jarrow and Jack and Mrs. Moffatt waiting, too. He could hardly remember the time when they had not been there, and it was impossible to picture what it would be like to return to the house, dark and empty as it used to be.

"Do you know," said Geraldine, as though she read his thoughts, "that little house is beginning to seem like home to me." She could not guess the happiness her words brought to him. "It seemed so lonely just at first, desolate and poor and barren, but now I am beginning to see that it is all full of life. Life is everywhere. Even these silent, gray old rocks could speak if they would." She smiled at her vagrant fancy.

"I like to hear you say that," he said simply. "I always knew you'd find it out if you stayed here long enough. God help the man or woman who can't hear the voice of the silent places, for if you once find it you don't need to be lonely again—never lonesome for anything or anybody again!"

"Is it true?" she questioned wistfully and fell to thinking. The face of the young officer of the photograph came to her lifelike and a little reproachful. The time had been when to think of him meant loneliness intolerable and acute. She found that passing and wondered at the change. Yet she thought of him as often and as tenderly as before, only now the poignancy of regret was no more. The young officer was a part of the old life, growing fainter each day; the life once so important but now miraculously dropping its small shams and pretenses one by one, as she came into contact with the fundamentals of this new existence.

She did not ask herself wherein the root of this reversal was hidden. She was content with the happiness that radiated the autumn night closing in about them. She was young; the world was good after all; presently there would be food and bed, for she was healthily hungry and tired. When sleep came they would all lie

within the sound of one another's voices. She felt strangely safe and cared for like someone very tired who has found a shoulder to lean upon.

And Billie, who had put other thoughts behind him with the passing day, was happy too.

CHAPTER XV.

SPITE WORK OR RUSTLERS?

A WEEK went by. The blue and gold days remained, but their beauty was like a jewel behind a gossamer veil. The languorous heat of midday persisted, but in the shadows even that hour held a whispering chill as though warning summer that the time for lingering was nearly done.

The faint greenness of valley and hills changed in a night to sombre grays and browns; the close mantle nature draws about its body when winter sends word of his coming.

The week passed swiftly at the Three Nines. There was plenty of work, and Billie and Jack spent few idle moments. Jarrow, dropping years as he dropped aitches, became brown and hearty under their eyes and took so many duties upon himself, quietly and unobtrusively, that the other two wondered how they had managed before he came.

Mrs. Moffatt did her share as well. She had rapidly acquired the "ways of the primitive," as she persisted in calling their simple housekeeping, and Jack was no longer called upon to solve culinary difficulties. She learned to handle the refractory stove with the ease of a veteran and evolved some triumphs that left her a proud woman. Geraldine was the only idler, and even she had begun to search about for something to do which would make her indispensable.

There were times when the girl was far from happy, but there were other times when she put doubts and fears resolutely behind her and determined to live solely in the present. Every night she looked at the young officer's picture and murmured over and over, vows that bound her heart to his. And every morning she wakened with the thought of another before her, radiant with the certainty that she would see him in a little while and be within reach of him all that day.

And between these periods of happiness and regret there were the hours when she faced the problem of the future, for Geraldine was gradually coming to feel that the strangeness of her position was underlaid by something far deeper than her uncle's chance absence. She could believe in that easily enough but she could not disregard other warnings, seemingly unimportant, which hinted that she did not know the whole truth.

Billie and Jack in the exigencies of their existence, forgot the fiction of Norman Hoyt's ownership, and twenty times a day betrayed the truth. If Geraldine had but possessed the key to the engima she must have guessed the whole story easily enough, but although she thought of every possible contingency, not once did the truth occur to her.

During one of their rides which had become of daily occurrence she asked Billie the question she had once put to Jack: "When is my uncle coming back?"

But Billie hardened his conscience and answered plausibly. He was determined she should not know the truth. He knew to a certainty that she had no money, and if he could keep her at the ranch until he had some of his own, he was determined to make restitution for at least a small portion of what she had lost. But this was not the present, or would it be possible for a time. He was worried about money to meet the ordinary expenses of the household; if a greater demand was put upon him he would have to sacrifice part of his cherished herd. Not once did he consider evading what he felt to be his responsibility to the strangers.

So he repeated the story of Norman Hoyt's trip to Arizona, predicted his early return and did what he could to lead her thoughts to different channels.

But there had been mail that day, and among the big bundle that belonged to Geraldine was one she read over and over before she went for her ride, and the contents of this letter was behind the question.

"You see," she went on, with the faintest quiver in her voice, "I am anxious for him to return, because—someone — someone — is coming out—soon—from home; an old friend—and uncle must be here then."

"I see," said Billie Stranger. But this was a mistake, for he did not see. If Jack had heard her he would have explained that when a woman speaks of an old friend with a tremble in her voice, she always means a lover.

But Billie only grasped the fact that the ranch family might be augmented by another member. The prospect was dismaying, but he answered politely.

"Some more of your folks want to learn ranchin'?"

"No—and yes." She hesitated, then looking straight between her horse's ears, "Captain Derwent is not a relation, but—he is coming out to live here, I think. He has been badly injured—he was in the fighting from the very first, and has only just been dismissed from the hospital. He is anxious to leave England. The surgeons think a change would be good for him."

"I—see." This time Billie did begin to see; the faintest glimmer of the meaning behind her words came to him. Someway he had never thought of another man in connection with her. She was too proud; too remote for such speculation, but when she spoke of this Captain Derwent who was so old a friend and who had been wounded when he, Billie, returned from the war without a scratch, the brightness began to go out of the day.

Billie had looked upon English officers from the ranks of the doughboys in France. He knew them, brave, cool, unconcerned in the face of danger. He had a swift mental picture of himself in contrast to the debonair figure her words conjured up——

"He is not able to ride—he will walk with a crutch for a long while, I am afraid," the soft voice continued, and he banished jealousy with shame.

And then she told him all about her young officer, and how he had been so full of plans for a big, active future; how he had wanted to be an explorer, a big game hunter, a pioneer into untried fields. Then when the war came on, how he had met it gayly, and being stricken down had fought against death again and again, conquered and gone back to the fight, refusing to take the freedom that might have been his.

She told the story simply, speaking of heroic things as though they were but passing events, not complaining of the misfortunes which had robbed her and her kind of what their hearts held most dear, but admitting them calmly as if speaking of a stronger enemy.

Billie was not jealous any more; he was unutterably blue and depressed. The recital made him feel his poverty, the lack of anything worth while to offer in lieu of what the other man had given. He had been to the wars but he had never fired a shot; had come back ridiculously well and strong, with money in his pocket and all his quota of arms and legs. He had no wounds to display or hero stories to tell; he was just plain Billie Stranger—nothing to brag about.

She noticed his abstraction, but was far from fathoming its cause.

"I'll race you to the willows," she cried gayly, and was off.

Billie pounded along, keeping Widow Green a yard or two behind the other horse. He would have considered it highly impolite to overtake or defeat a lady in any game of her own choosing, and Geraldine, panting and windblown, drew rein at the willows, an easy winner. But she was not deceived by her victory and turned a reproachful face to her contestant

"You didn't try to win," she accused him. "You held the Widow all the time."

But he had no answer for this. His horse stopped beside her own in the fringe of willows, but he had forgotten the horse race almost before it ended. He heard what she said, but the importance of their play was wiped out in something much bigger—a startling thing that drove all other thoughts from his mind.

The willow outlined a water hole that was located near the boundary line of the Three Nines; just beyond were the foothills, rising rugged and bare, soon to lose

themselves in the inhospitable mountains towering beyond. The fencing here was new, part of the job Billie and Desmond had worked on a short time before, so that his eye at once sought it out.

But he saw with a quick glance that there was no fence where the new bright wire had been a few days before. It had been cut in half a dozen places and its remnants lay along the ground half hidden in the brown stubble.

His first thought was for his precious whitefaces. The rustlers had been at work here without a doubt, and his heart sunk at the certainty that a portion at least of his stock would be missing—and he could not afford to lose a single hoof. His lips set in a grim narrow line as he wheeled his horse toward home, and signaled Geraldine to follow.

"What is it? What has happened?" she cried, fearfully, riding to his side.

Geraldine knew nothing of the depredations that had menaced the valley for weeks. Billie and Jack were careful to guard their speech when they were with her, but now that the evil had come so near, Billie knew that for her own safety she must be warned.

"There's rustlers—cattle thieves 'round," he explained grimly. "That's why I warned you so often not to ride far alone. Did you see that fence back there? Cut clean. They made sure we couldn't patch it up in a hurry. Somebody had a terrible spite when they cut that wire. Must've thought they were cuttin' into me."

"And are all the cattle gone?" cried Geraldine, pityingly. "Oh, dear, what will poor Jack say! He loves those whitefaces like they were his children."

"It may be they didn't get any," Billie returned. He was puzzled. Night was the time for cutting fences even in such remote places as this, and he knew that the wire had been out that day. There were cattle on the range in plain view, and if the fence had been down that morning when they watered, there would have been signs of stragglers on the other side.

There was something truly ominous about the procedure, and if Geraldine had not been with him, he would have searched for the intruders before leaving the place. But he did not know what dangers those low hills with their screening boulders and scrub concealed, and he dared not face it with the girl unguarded. She knew this instinctively and offered to return alone. She was not a coward and had an Englishwoman's disdain of retreat.

"I will ride back and send Jack to you," she said. "It is a shame to let them escape."

"They won't escape," Billie answered briefly. "And I've already said it ain't safe for you to ride alone."

"What could harm me?" she asked scornfully. "Why do you persist in treating me like an infant?"

"Folks that cut wire in a cow country don't let anything else stop 'em," he answered, and the gait of the horses brought an end to the subject.

Billie's heart was filled with trouble. A little while ago the world had seemed a fine place to be in. On the day he rode over the ridge with the whitefaces, life had seemed full and promising; that was the day he found Geraldine waiting for him at home.

Where had his happiness gone? His possessions were the same, and Geraldine was beside him, nearer than she had ever been; yet an insidious shadow, deepening as it came, had come between him and all the old gay, careless ways that had been his. The secret he was keeping from her lay heavy on his conscience; he was deceiving her, and no matter what the object of this deception might be, instinct warned that the day of explanation must come. And the thought of Little Britches was not a pleasant one to face. After that, the grave proof of the enemy at his own gate.

The ride back to the ranch was fast and silent. Geraldine glanced at the grim face beside her from time to time, but said nothing. She was one of those rare women who find in silence the strongest of weapons and unconsciously Billie was grateful that she forbore to question him.

Jack was at home and in the act of unsaddling Tomato Can, but at Billie's first words he threw the blanket on the pinto's back again. Without wasting a word he

understood the necessity for quick action. With the fences down at the willows a large proportion of their stock might easily stray into the foothills, and in the face of the weather sure to break very soon, and with the chances that the rustlers were watching for this to happen, the odds were against their recovery without a loss.

The two, supplied with pliers, returned to the break without waiting for supper. There were more important things on foot than food or sleep. They would have to be satisfied with a makeshift job, for there was no new wire, nor was there a chance of getting any without delay.

Jack surveyed the ruin with jaundiced eyes.

"Billie," he said solemnly, "it looks like somebody's shootin' hand was gettin' cured up like an' ready for business. How does it look tuh you?"

"Well, I was thinkin' something like that myself," Billie returned, equably. "He ain't in any hurry to take a pot shot at me though. He could have had it to-day if he'd chose. I reckon this sort of dirty work satisfies him, maybe."

"Then there was th' girl," Jack added soberly, twisting wire. "Even a rustler mightn't like tuh chance her gettin' in th' way."

When Billie made no reply, Jack went on, feeling his way over what he knew to be ticklish ground.

"This don't look exactly like no rustler job tuh me—*I* ain't never seen 'em come in broad daylight like this. It looks more like spite work. Might be something a woman was mixed up with." Glancing at his friend he changed the subject abruptly. "Guess I'll be ridin' over tuh Duncan's to-morrow about that alfalfa. Looks like we'd need more hay. After a long dry spell like this there's sure to be a hell freezin' winter, an' we've got to keep them whiteys growin'."

This was a plan and prediction that his friend made each day and Billie let it go by without comment. He was relieved to find the wire in better shape than he had expected and in a hour they were on their way home.

It was not a dark night, but over the high moon there was a faint haze that changed the outline of familiar things and shrouded distance with mystery. They rode to the east and a light wind blowing into their faces brought with it an imperceptible hint of change; a chill born on the far, snow-tipped mountains and living still with a faint menace on its breath after passage across the sun warmed valley.

The soft thudding of the horses' feet on the grassy trail, the faint creak of leather and subdued jingle of spurs and bitts were sounds that melted into the soft, wild mystery of the night and lonesome range. Suddenly Billie's horse, which was in the lead, swerved and plunged. Out of the shadows another horse, silent footed, was drawn for a moment across their path.

They caught a fleeting glimpse of a slim figure crouched upon the animal's withers —the thin features and luminous eyes; the tangled hair golden red, even in the half light.

"Little Britches!"

Her eyes, full of longing, scorn and unhappiness, devoured Billie's face. Her bitter mouth curled open mirthlessly. She threw herself forward until her face was close to his.

"I rode in to tell you I saw a bunch of your dogies over at Twin Rocks," she said. "I reckon it might make a nice ride for your lady friend over there an' back. I laid off to tell you to-day when I saw you at the willows, but I hated to interrupt. I wouldn't want to see you lose them dogies."

"Much obliged." Billie's eyes were as stern as hers were bitter. "I reckon it was me that did th' interruptin' when you was cuttin' th' wire, Britches. You might as well ride back with us an' tell us all about it, and where-all you've been stayin'."

He pulled his horse aside so that she might fall in between himself and Jack, but she flung herself back into the saddle with a quick oath, and she must have buried a cruel spur in the roan's flank, for he leaped forward with a squeal of pain, and an instant afterward horse and rider flashed past as suddenly as they had appeared. In a moment the rush of hoofs

through the swishing grass came to them, growing less and less; the vague shape of the galloping horse with her figure an indistinct blur against his neck passed into the shadows and she was gone.

"By Heck!" Jack swore softly under his breath. "What did you let them go for?"

"I don't fight women," Billie answered. "It's the man who's behind her that I'm after."

He would not follow her, but he listened, looking after her, until he could see and hear no more. Then he turned his face toward home once more.

Jack had gone on. His shape was a dim blur a hundred yards ahead. The night grew suddenly lonely like an empty room from which a familiar presence has passed to return no more. Presently through the indistinct distance a phantom light glimmered for a second and vanished, to appear again shining steadily like a faint yellow star fallen from the sky and lodging somewhere near enough to earth to send a friendly welcome out for those who were alone in the night.

It was only the lamp in the window of the ranch house.

CHAPTER XVI.

"UNCLE NORMAN."

WORD passed through the valley that the Desmonds had disappeared. The Weed Patch, deprived of its sole redeeming asset, human occupancy, became the center of desolation.

The heap of tin cans before the door were scattered by a prowling coyote; the crazy roof and makeshift windows became prey of the wind that, blowing steadily in from the northeast, pried finger holds where it could and rioting about the shack promised its early destruction. There was nothing alive left at the Weed Patch, not even a stray chicken; everything had gone in a night.

One of the Circle O men, returning from town with a mail sack, stopped at the Three Nines and told of the flitting of the nesters.

"First, Little Britches, she lit out, an' now the old man he's vamosed," he told Billie, who came out to get the mail. "I reckon if them folks told all they know the old man wouldn't be wanderin' around looking for his two-year-olds. He'd know where tuh put his finger on 'em."

Billie could not refute the insinuation. In his heart he was sure Little Britches had not played a square game with the ranchers who had been her friends, but whether she was entirely guilty or only the tool of her father he could not guess. The latter seemed unlikely, remembering the scant consideration paid old Barney at all times, but it was strange that this knowledge failed to anger him, but instead filled his soul with smothered pain and a sense of loss that nothing could fill.

Now that he saw her no longer the trails in the hills and across the valley seemed to be filled with the spirit of the wild, sweet passionate child, whose fury and caresses, repentances and rage, lay so closely akin. And he knew that others than himself shared this regret, for her name had almost ceased to be spoken among the men to whom she had a little while ago been a pet and plaything. If one, more than another, knew anything to her discredit, he said nothing, and Little Britches if condemned in secret was spared public calumny. The Circle O man was the first who had mentioned her name to Billie.

He answered with a curt word of thanks for the package of mail nearly all of which belonged to Geraldine. As he turned away he saw her waiting in the door with an eager smile for her letters.

Geraldine had changed almost overnight from the pale, troubled girl she had been when she came to the Three Nines. Her face had lost its faintly harassed look, and the winds of the open range had whipped color into her delicate cheeks. She walked with a freer, more assured air and her eyes glowed with a subdued happiness half veiled behind her natural reserve, but adding doubly to her loveliness.

She took the letters from Billie's hands and glanced over them eagerly. At sight of one envelope her expression changed. It

was a yellow envelope with black lettering, "Cablegram" across its face, and she tore it open hastily. When she had read it she looked up at Billie, pale and trembling.

"He is coming," she said in a low voice. "He is sailing in a boat that left England yesterday."

The life of the ranch was all around them, and yet they were alone as though the valley had been empty as the sky above. Their eyes went to meet each other's, and for a moment the veil between them dropped.

"Are you going to marry him?" Billie asked. "Is that what he is coming for?"

She returned his look, and her face quivered slightly.

"I—I—don't know. I have promised."

"You loved him—you love him now?"

"I did—yes—when I left England."

"You've changed—you don't see things as you did—maybe you'd like—somebody else if you'd let yourself—"

"Maybe I would—but I must not. You see, he believes in me—and he mustn't ever find out."

"And a man who never done anything—who hasn't been shot up like he was, hasn't any right—"

"Don't say that. One man may be as brave as another, but that doesn't make it right."

Mrs. Moffatt came to the door and called out to Billie.

"Mr. Jack asked me to tell you to follow him," she said. "He went away an hour ago and he predicted it would be snowing before night."

The revealing moment was gone. Life dropped back into its old grooves, and what might have been said was left unspoken.

"Shouldn't wonder if he was right," Billie acknowledged dully. "Well, I'll be ridin' after him, I guess."

He went off to the corral where Widow Green, already saddled, was tied to a post. From the doorway Geraldine watched him, forgetting the cablegram in her hand. She had often watched him ride away, but today there was something in the droop of his shoulders and the square set of his jaw that was different. He was nearer to her because of that second when they had looked into each other's eyes; but she too realized the moment was over, and life was drawing them apart for all time.

But in spite of this she turned back to the house with a warm glow in her heart that spread and spread until it permeated her whole body in a wave of glad abandon. The cablegram in her hand was a silent reminder that there would be hours to come which would not be filled with the destroying sweetness and uncertainty of this, but not even this thought could banish the knowledge that was now her own. There was no mistaking what she had seen in his eyes, and the woman who reads this lesson once does not forget.

The man, coming to her from half way across the world, had sent this same message to her; once his look had had power to thrill her, but now the thought of his coming, which a little while ago would have meant happiness, left her cold.

She put the cablegram in a little inlaid box with his letters. She would not admit that she had ceased to love him; it was as though love had gone to sleep, and its place was usurped by a strange, wild emotion that was like a storm in her quiet heart. She took up his photograph and looked at it long and silently, trying to bring back the old feeling, trying to visualize the happy hours they had spent together. But it was all unreal—a part of her life that was over and done with. The new had crowded the old into the background, and if he was to have a part of this the future must mold him to her fresher ideals.

Mrs. Moffatt came in from the lean-to kitchen and shut the windows. She was hugging a knit shawl around her shoulders.

"I am sure there is to be a change in the weather," she said. "I have my neuritis pain in my left shoulder, and you can almost smell the snow coming. Jarrow says the storms are fearful in this country and every year hundreds of poor animals are frozen to death. I wish I knew that all of ours were safe."

Geraldine roused herself from her abstraction and glanced from the window at the darkening sky.

"And the men. Sometimes the men are lost and frozen, too."

She went to the window to watch the approaching storm. Already, as a painter blurs his canvas, every vestige of summer had been swept away, and the cold desolation that is the preface of winter covered the world. The heavy clouds, sunk with their weight of storm lay close to the earth. A snowflake, fleeing before a million of its kind, fluttered zig-zag past the pane. She shuddered again.

"I wish they would come back," she said, half to herself.

Out of doors Jarrow was preparing for the storm by transporting the wood pile in a fair division between the bunk house and the lean-to. In the corral the horses huddled, tail to the wind, their heads across each other's neck. The wind came straight from the east, and its early warmth was fast turning to piercing cold. The first snowflake had a thousand followers now, and the air was thick with whirling particles.

As the day wore on the storm increased, though as yet the ground showed bare except in the low places, for the wind carried the snow before it with such velocity that from the first it promised to be a "drift" storm.

The three at the ranch knew nothing about blizzards. The word was merely a name to them, but if they knew little of the suffering and danger that lay in the wake of this dread scourge of the North, they soon enough felt the bite of its teeth.

The wind howling around the corners of the house found its way through chinks and crevices, bringing with it a thread of snow that quickly built itself a fairy mound until discovered and banished.

With every hour the world outside changed until it became a place of white mystery. The buildings blotted out by the thick mantle that clung to them with wet fingers, were blotches of raw black and white; unfamiliar things that rose specter-like from chaos. The haystacks and corral were lost in a veil that swirled about like the garments of a mad dancer. Somewhere out in that blind world there was life; men and horses and cattle, but here in the house it was silent, a place of suspense.

The hours passed endlessly for Geraldine. A sense of waiting events bore upon her spirit, and she could find no relief in ordinary occupations. Jarrow kept the fires roaring, but outside the radius of the stove it was bitterly cold. The two old people kept close to the fire, forbearing to complain, but it was easy to see the fear and dread and loneliness that was in their hearts.

In spite of the cold Geraldine spent most of the time near the window. She wrapped herself in a fur coat and ignored the desperate chill that crept beneath even its warmth. What must it be like out there? She wondered; her eyes searching restlessly that wind swept world.

It was early in the afternoon when she saw the vague outlines of two mounted figures approaching the house, traveling single file with the wind at their backs. For a moment her heart leaped, then paused in uncertainty. It was impossible to identify them even at the short distance which separated them from the house, for in the whirlwind horses and riders were only a blurred outline.

As they came nearer the tumult of her heart ceased. Neither of the horses belonged to Billie; she remembered that the Widow was gray; these were dark, showing black against the drifts.

She saw now that they were strangers, and wondered with a little thrill of concern who they were and what they wanted at the ranch. Perhaps they had been sent by Billie or Jack!

She called to Jarrow and he joined her at the window, but he could make nothing more from what he saw than she.

When they were in speaking distance he went out to meet them, closing the door after him, and Geraldine waited in keen impatience. She knew that whoever rode abroad that day must have a mission of importance, and she clung to the fear and expectation that they brought news of Billie. But all her surmise fell far short of the truth that was revealed when Jarrow, re-entering, was followed by Little Britches and a heavy featured man, at

sight of whom Geraldine gave a faint cry that was echoed by another from Mrs. Moffatt.

"Uncle Norman!"

The girl ran to him, instinctively putting out her arms, but they were never clasped around his neck. The call of kinship born suddenly, died as she came close to him, for there was something in his face, well remembered as it was, that brought a barrier between them. He was her father's brother and of her own blood, but she shrunk from him—the years that lay between held phases that separated them eternally. Her arms fell to her sides; she looked at him piteously, wondering what had chilled the welcome on her lips.

Norman Hoyt did not notice the repulsion of her attitude. His deep set eyes were busy taking in the room, its occupants and the changes brought about since he had seen it last. His nervous gaze moved from window to door as though expecting an interruption; his thoughts were upon other things, and he was not the sort of man to whom a woman's favor is of moment. The greetings of the two old family servants held his attention for a moment and then his mind turned to the girl whose attitude of stunned astonishment had not changed.

He assumed a hearty air, which was denied by his shifting eyes, and attempted to take her hand, which she refused him.

"What!" He pretended surprise, and finally she gave him her hand, but it was cold and limp, without response. He had removed the glove from his left hand, and they exchanged an awkward greeting. "What! You don't seem overjoyed to see me, my dear! It is only by a lucky chance that I learned of your being here. What possessed you to do such a thing? When I was told that you were here, living within a few miles of where I am staying, I was amazed. The word is hardly strong enough. I was shocked. I could not wait for the storm to pass, but came to you at once. Well, what have you to say to me?"

She looked at him helplessly; his words conveyed no definite meaning to her, but they had the effect of a disastrous puff of wind that suddenly demolishes a carefully built house of cards. All at once she knew that she was going to hear something that would strike her to the heart—the intangible intelligence that all along had lain just outside her reach. But what this was to her mind could not be gaged. She looked from the man to the girl who had brought him here and anger rose to a swift flame as she realized that Little Britches knew this secret, had known it all along and would be a witness to her humiliation. The two measured each other with cold defiance, and Geraldine threw up her head proudly, ready to take the blow, whatever it was, without flinching.

"Why shouldn't I be here?" she returned. "It is your house, and to whom should I come if not to you?"

Hoyt's dark face heavy with lines of dissipation deepened into an angry scowl; he hesitated as though the admission was a bitter one to make, but when it came it was sweeping in its humiliation for the girl.

"Because this is not my house," he said harshly. "You are living in the home of a stranger—you yourself are a stranger on his bounty. The story is all over the county. You have given people the right to say what they please of you, and there is mighty little I can do to defend you. It's too fantastic to claim that you never suspected this. If you—or your friends had made the slightest effort to communicate with me you could have reached me—"

Geraldine was as white as death.

"Not your house," she repeated in a whisper. "But he said—he said—"

"I suppose he lied to you," Hoyt admitted grudgingly. "I didn't know even a woman could be fool enough to believe such a story. But that will do to talk over another time. Your Billie Stranger has a reckoning coming with me. The question is, what's to be done with you?"

During this brief controversy Little Britches stood just within the door. There was a detached air about her as though she disdained a part in the argument; although the atmosphere was freezing where

she stood, she would not approach the fire. Her attitude said wordlessly that she was in the house of her enemies and would have none of their hospitality even to the degree of warmth.

She wore her usual rough clothing with the addition of a heavy mackinaw coat buttoned up to her chin, but the boyish defiance of her slim figure was belied by her face, haggard and wan, with dark circles around her somber eyes and other lines sharp and bitter, robbing her mouth of its sweetness. As her eyes read Geraldine's hidden distress she smiled faintly, a mere distortion of her mobile lips. There was a little contempt in the smile and a little pity, as though from some primitive wisdom she measured the weakness of the other girl's uncertainty.

"What is to be done with me?" Geraldine repeated faintly. "I—I—am very stupid. I don't understand."

Hoyt frowned. His choleric face turned a deeper purple. He was standing near the stove, and the heat seemed to strike in and smother him. With an impatient movement he ripped open his heavy coat and slipped his big shoulders half out of it. The action revealed a certain awkwardness, for it was accomplished with his left hand. The right one hung heavy and limp; it was swathed in bandages that showed white through his woollen glove.

"You'll understand fast enough if you remember that people have the same rules of conduct the world over," he answered. "Here you have been living, innocently or not, in a strange man's house for weeks—a rough, ignorant fellow who might have taken advantage of your position at any time. You say he lied to you, and no doubt he had his reasons if he did. You should have demanded that he find me under any circumstances, but from what I understand you tamely submit and settle down to live here with these two old fools, weakly accepting some fantastic story about me without a murmur. If this fellow's motives were good, why should he allow you to think me the owner of the ranch—why should he wish to keep you here?"

"I don't know," said Geraldine wearily. "Perhaps because he saw that I was friendless and alone—and he was sorry for me."

Her manner infuriated him.

"You are not alone or friendless, and as you are my niece, I refuse to allow you to remain under the roof of this gambler—this renegade—another hour. Get into your heavy clothes while I saddle a horse for you. These two old idiots may stay until I send for them, but you, Geraldine, must come with me."

The two old servants begun a protest, but they were silenced by Hoyt's imperious manner. Their lives had been spent in subjection to the family of which he was now the head, and they did not know how to rebel. But as Geraldine saw their distress she wavered.

"Let me think," she said.

"Of what?" he mocked her heavily. "Do you want to see him again, or continue to live on this doubtful charity?"

No, not that! Pride has proved a distorted mirror often enough in human lives. Geraldine saw herself in a humiliating light, as the recipient of benefits to which she had no right. With rising shame she remembered how she had taken possession of the house, ruthlessly ordering changes and threatening Norman Hoyt's displeasure. She could imagine him laughing at her in his queer Billie Stranger fashion. She had been a burden to him, she had even forced him to buy luxuries, barely acknowledging the trouble he took to please her.

Sudden anger shook her like a reed in wind; this was fed by the sight of Little Britches standing by with her inscrutable smile.

"Very well, I will go with you, if you will leave the price of the horse I ride," she said, and turned away to her own room.

When she reappeared Jarrow and Mrs. Moffatt were alone; the two servants hovered about, begging her to remain at least until Billie returned, but their fear of Hoyt was too great to bring a stronger protest.

"The Hoyts were always hasty tempered," Mrs. Moffatt quavered. She was

devoted to Billie and his arraignment had been a trial to her. "Oh, Miss Geraldine, to see you going off on such a day, even with your uncle. It's tempting Providence."

But the girl freed herself impatiently. She was suffering so poignantly that the mention of his name was more than she could bear. Through the window she saw Hoyt leading her saddled horse from the barn.

"Tell him—tell him, some day we will pay him back," she said, and went out of the door into the storm.

CHAPTER XVII.

AT THE WEED PATCH.

THE beginning of the storm found Billie Stranger a long way from home with the wind at his back.

He had not followed Jack after all, for when he saw the change coming he thought it best to go after a bunch of his two-year-olds which pastured in another part of the range. He knew just what foolishness a two-year-old is capable of, and decided it was best to bring them into the home pasture before the storm broke.

But when he reached the range there was no sign of them. Before the sweeping wind the plain was empty of life; sage brush and greasewood bent before the coming storm and the brown grass lay flat. The bunch was gone.

But he wasted no time in speculation. He knew they had sensed the storm and moved before it, so he followed.

He was worried, for it was in this direction that his fences were least trustworthy. If the cattle found a weak place, there was no saying where they might stop.

It was snowing lightly when he reached the boundary line, but he could see in all directions that there was still no sign of them, and his heart sank. He was prepared for misfortune when he found the wire down. The cattle were out, and he braced himself for a grilling search and tried not to curse a cow-puncher's luck too bitterly.

It was midday before he found them. They were drifting with the wind, getting further from home and safety every moment, and to turn them was a job that took every ounce of ambition out of his horse and himself, but he never thought of giving up. It was his job to get them going in the right direction, and Widow Green knew that it was her job, too. And at last it was done; home lay in front of them, and he had only to keep the stragglers with the herd.

But he was a long, long way from home, and the storm was swiftly developing into what seemed an impassable white wall that pierced through flesh and blood and blinded eyes and stopped breath. They could not go on much longer, and he began to think of a place where he might bunch them in safety until the wind dropped. In the bunch of runaways there was a large percentage of his precious whitefaces, and their loss would mean a sorry reckoning for the Three Nines.

The edged wind with its frozen tears bit into his body, and his horse shivered and shrunk between his knees. There was no fight left in Widow Green. She tucked her tail and carried her sullen head low. She knew they were in for a norther, and she wondered where she would shelter her shivering hide that night.

And Billie wondered too. He had only a vague idea of their location. The whirling snow, the sullen advance of the cattle, and their efforts to turn aside the moment his attention was relaxed for a second had clouded his sense of direction until he depended solely on the wind to guide him. He knew that as long as they went with it in their faces they must be approaching home, but as the day advanced he began to lose hope of reaching there that night.

He could make nothing of the prospect before him, only he knew he had not come to the line fence of his own property; it was too fantastic to imagine that chance had led them through the break. And as the day grew darker and he realized that slow as their travel had been, they must have long since passed this point, he abandoned hope of reaching the ranch and begun to cast about for a shelter for himself and the cattle, struggling unwillingly

against the storm and losing headway with every yard.

He knew where he was when Widow Green, stumbling over uneven frozen ground, told him by the tensing spring of her body that she was on familiar footing. There was little plowed ground in that section, and all of it was under fence except the Weed Patch. As soon as this came to him he knew where he was.

One winter long past, the nester, inspired by a passing ambition, had contracted to feed a bunch of cows for an overstocked rancher. He had built a hollow square of hay racks, and their remnants, which still contained some rotting straw, remained in the deserted pasture. It was the recollection of this that brought Billie's courage back to him. The bunch would be safe there until morning if he could find this refuge.

With the familiar topography of the Desmond place fixed in his mind this was not difficult, and presently the dim, stark shape of the feed racks appeared through the chaos of whirling whiteness.

With the cattle disposed of he had time to think of himself and his horse. He could have found his way home easily enough from this point, but he did not wish to leave the bunch in the open land with only the dismantled racks to hold them.

He knew that the nester's shack was empty, but he thought of it with a curious distaste. So many times he had stopped there to find Little Britches waiting for him or riding out to meet him, with her curious, ungirlish ways and her cold smile that belied the secret warmth of her eyes. To go there now and find it empty woke a strange, echoing call in his heart.

But there was nothing else to do if he was to spend the night close to the bunch, and he turned Widow Green's head in the direction so well known to her.

The shack stood suddenly in his path. The wind had spared the main room, but the lean-to lay flat upon the ground, and the stable showed only four uprights naked against the storm. Not much left for shelter, but such as it was he claimed it.

The door was ajar, and he entered leading the horse. Widow Green was averse to houses on principle, but her spirit had been subdued until she followed meekly enough.

When Billie struck a light he found the interior of the place much as it had been. In their flitting the Desmonds had left their household goods, such as it was, and it was possible to pass the night with some degree of comfort. There was a rusty stove, and the coffee pot left where it had last been used, and there were some blankets on the bunk that had belonged to Desmond, and on a shelf some half-filled paper bags that might contain food.

There was room in a corner for the horse and he secured her there with her head away from the fire and the light.

In spite of its ramshackle appearance the place was tight and warm, and in a short time the coffee pot was beginning to smoke over the fire that roared in the little stove. But there was no feed for Widow Green, and Billie commiserated with her as he went about preparations for his own comfort.

"Never you mind, ol' lady, you wait till we get back to th' ranch an' you'll lay up against that alfalfa stack until your old hide busts. You sure got a day of rest an' fillin' up in front of you, I promise."

Whether she understood or not the gray mare seemed contented enough with her corner, and presently Billie forgot her.

The fire was hot, and after long hours in the open the weariness induced by constant effort took possession of him. Outside the storm lashed the shack and beat upon the tin roof. The sting of the frozen snow was like the clash of a thousand tiny castanets tuned to some fierce, fairy music, and it lulled him to the borderland of sleep. So that when the horse lifted her head and gave a sharp neigh he was brought rudely back to consciousness.

In a second he was alert and on his feet. He had barred the door against the onslaught of the wind, and as he took down the barrier a muffled rap came in contact with the frame. He expected to discover some lost, belated rider like himself, asking for shelter, but when the door swung

back he saw Little Britches standing there.

She had dismounted and was standing close beside her horse, but she made no move to enter, though the rush of the wind had thrown her light form against the animal's neck. For a moment the two were silhouetted against the background of blackness like spirits of the tormented night. Then he seized the girl's arm and drew her inside.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded harshly. "Do you only ride these days when other people are indoors?"

She did not resist, but her slim body was stiff and unyielding as she followed him. A slow smile touched her lips; blue and cracked with the cold, but sweet in spite of everything. The door could not close because she still held the rein of her horse and outside they heard a faint, distressful neigh.

"I've got to shelter him," she said gravely, as though this were the most important question between them. "You reckon we might crowd both of them in here?"

For answer Billie led the horse inside and to a corner as far removed from Widow Green as the small space permitted. The coffee pot was still on the stove and he took it up and poured out a cup while she seated herself on a low stool before the fire and drew the thick gloves from her stiff fingers.

While she drank the hot coffee Billie sat opposite watching her and wondering what he was going to say to her presently. But she saved him from decision by opening the subject herself as she put the empty cup on the hearth.

"I followed you," she said. "I figured you'd make for this shack and I aimed to be here before you, but I sorta missed out in the snow."

In the light of the little oil lamp with the scarf pushed away from her face he could see that in the little time just passed a devastating change had taken place in her. There was not much left of the old defiant beauty, but the glow of her hair that stood out against the somber background like a flame. Her eyes were sunken and dull, and her face discolored and dark from the lash of the storm she had endured for so many hours. And beyond these signs of physical suffering there was something deeper, more obscure, that gave a poignant meaning to the lines of her face and form, and awakened pity in his heart instead of condemnation.

"What made you follow me?" he asked slowly.

Her dry lips twitched as though some unnamed pain brushed the shell of her soul. She said nothing, only looked at him out of her shadowy eyes with a sort of helplessness as though the story behind them was too great to tell.

Billie, who would not have hurt a dumb thing for any reason, went on remorselessly, not knowing that speech was beyond her.

"I been wantin' to talk to you for quite a spell, Britches. Seems like we've sorta got snarled up like a wet rope someways, you an' me an' things need stretchin' out an' dryin' in the sun." He paused, giving her a chance, but nothing came of it.

"I'm not goin' to beat around what I got to say," he went on with a man's impatience at finding himself in a difficult position. "You've got to know that the whole range is suspicionin' you of not bein' on the square. I hate to say it to a woman, an' much less to you, Britches, who've been one of the best hands I ever saw around cows, as well as a straight ridin' person; but it don't look right to me—none of it. I've tried hard to make out that somewheres in the deal there was a catch that snagged you an' started you off down hill so fast you couldn't stop, but I just can't lay my mind on the original thing that's to blame. I sorta figured out your old man was to blame somehow, but I can't remember you ever paid him much mind, an' it don't seem reasonable he could drive you into crooked work if you was all straight yourself—a person that's a regular hand and used to lookin' out for yourself—"

He waited, giving her another chance, but she stared somberly into the fire. The flickering light of the guttering lamp disguised any consistent expression on her

face, and changed it to tormented uncertainty. She might have been suffering or she might have been smiling cynically at his earnestness. When she would not speak he returned to the beginning.

"Why did you follow me to-night, Britches?"

She turned her face to him.

"Because I love you."

The words seemed to fill the room, drowning the noise of the storm outside and forever breaking the silence that had been between these two. Like an unfolding panorama all that had been mysterious became translucently clear while it remained incredible. She loved him, and because she loved him she had thrown everything away. He knew in a vague way that women do these things, but he could not understand why. After awhile he knew that he must say something to soften it all.

"I never thought that, Britches," he said in a choked voice. "I reckon you must be mistaken—you just sorta fancy you—you—feel that way."

"No, no," she said steadily. "I love you. It seems like I've always loved you, Billie, right from the very first."

In some fantastic reversal of their personalities she had become the elder, speaking of her heart dispassionately as though its emotions were one with her past. She smiled faintly, knowing that what she said might put him further from her, yet bound to say everything because the secret had grown too intolerable a burden for her slender breast.

"I reckon I've made a mess of it all," she went on. "When all the love's on one side it usually is a mess, isn't it? But I couldn't help doin' the crazy things I did do, any more than breathin'. Something was drivin' me all the time—half the time I was wantin' to tear at you with my fingers, while I'd have died to save you the least hurt from anyone else. There ain't any misery like the misery of lovin' somebody who doesn't know it—or wouldn't care if he did. That's why I come here to tell you about it to-night—maybe it'll help some,—sorta ease it off my heart onto yours. You can't help feelin' sorry a little, and understandin' why I turned out to be a quitter."

She was so plainly suffering that he leaned over and patted her hand awkwardly as if he were a little afraid of the contact. But she drew herself swiftly away.

"After all, I don't want you to pity me. I've had too much of that. It hurts. Why don't you pity that girl who lives at your place. She'd want it."

She spoke haltingly, the words coming against her will. She had not wanted to bring Geraldine's name into her hour with him, yet it was here; flaming out like a torch lighted by her furious jealousy. She knew by the faint start he gave and by the withdrawing of his eyes that her instinct had not been wrong. She longed to have the word back, but her tormented heart drove her on. She taunted him.

"She's one of the sort that takes everything. She'd even take pity."

He answered bruskly, his impulses to tenderness changed to another feeling.

"I've got no call to pity her. She's a good girl."

"And I'm a bad one." Her face changed and darkened with anger and pain. "You mean a lot of things by that, you won't ever speak in words." Suddenly she flung out her arms in a gesture of abnegation so piteous and complete that it was like opening a door upon a closed and secret room; then the confession that hung upon her lips came rushing from them and she laid her naked heart before him.

"Because I loved you I've made myself bad. I helped folks to steal, and I've made myself one of them. I couldn't have any peace livin' here so close to you an' as far as the stars from ever makin' you love me. Seemed like if I was to throw everything away an' let myself go to hell—you might care one way or the other. It'd be better to hate me than just not care! I want you to say it now, Billie, say it to-night—that you hate me—then maybe I can go off an' forget about you."

"But I don't hate you," he answered, considering his words. "There isn't any reason I can see why we shouldn't be

friends like we always was. I don't believe I could hate a woman, anyways. Don't flare up an' get mad, now. One part of this trouble is that you've got to thinkin' of yourself as havin' a right to wear them pants, an' fight an' cuss same as if you was a real person. Then the girl side of you takes a hand and you scratch like your natural sex. Between these two you've lost yourself somewheres, and I'm wantin' to help you find the way back. It's come time to lay your cards down, face up, Britches. My own hand's waitin'. We'll shuffle the old deck an' take a new deal—what say?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

REVELATIONS.

SHE listened with her face turned away, but to find kindness when she had expected blame touched her, and presently she answered in a voice that was husky enough to threaten tears not far away.

"All right, Billie, I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"How long since you mixed in with cattle rustlers, Britches?"

"I—I—it sounds pretty bad when somebody else says it—but you got a right to know. I—it's been since that first bunch was run off from the Circle O—"

"You begun to wear them fancy new boots about that time," said Billie thoughtfully. "Who give 'em to you, Britches?"

"Not any man," she cried with sudden passion. "I never took nothin' from a man, I'll swear! Every one of 'em knows I'd put lead through him if he looked crossways at me. It was a woman, Billie— Oh, hell, to make myself right with you, I've got to put the old man in wrong—but I know you'll understand it ain't because I'm yellow. If he was here where the law could put a finger on him you could tear me to pieces an' I wouldn't tell. But he's on his way to the Border by this time. They'll never catch him, an' maybe they won't try. He'll never come back—he likes the greasers, so it can't be much harm— You won't think I'm a squealer, Billie?"

He shook his head gravely. "I won't think any ill of you I don't have to, Britches."

"The old man—we didn't have any way to live when he wouldn't work. When the State went dry he got to peddlin' booze—it was an easy way to make money. He always had a bottle stowed away somewheres, and a few folks knew about it. He was mighty careful— Most of the boys who stopped in here of nights came from the other side of the range—"

"Camberwell's!"

"You said it—and a few from the Circle O. That's how we knew where their bunch was pasturin', and what the boys planned on doing from day to day. It was easy. I wasn't around the house much when they was here. I always took Dude an' went off on the range. Lots of nights I slept out there without a blanket. Then one day poppy sent me over the other side to Camberwell's with some word he was passin' on to the old man. It didn't amount to much, an' after I talked to Camberwell, he took me in the house where some folks was settin' around enjoyin' themselves like there wasn't no work in the world, but only good times. It's a different kind of house an' a different way of livin' from the kind we know, Billie, an' it sort of knocked me out. There was a woman there. She was smilin' an' kind to me, and she wore pretty clothes—the wimmin sort of clothes. We talked about 'em, Billie. It seemed awful queer. I never talked to a woman about clothes in my life before, an' I didn't know what to say. I felt like a fool.

"She must've noticed it, for presently she started in sayin' I looked all right in what I had on an' wishin' she could look the same an' a lot of that sort of stuff. Then she went an' got the boots an' showed 'em to me, actin' all the time like she wanted me to have 'em, but somethin' held her back—

"Pretty soon I found out what it was. Old Camberwell wanted some wire cut on the range of the Circle O, and he thought I could do it better than any of the

hands. It was when you was gone after them whitefaces, an' it just seemed like you couldn't help noticin' me if I had on them boots when you came back. I cut the wire, Billie."

One of the horses gave a low whinny and moved uneasily in its corner. The storm had quieted somewhat and settled to a steady drive, and by this time the real night had come. It had been cold, but it was colder now. Billie added wood to the fire which, burning bravely as it might, could not conquer the freezing temperature. When this was done he said slowly:

"You got men stacked up wrong, like most women. It never made any difference to me what sort of clothes you wore, Britches, but I can see how that female could work on you an' I guess I understand."

"Then when I got the boots you didn't see 'em, except to kid me about 'em 'til I couldn't bear to have 'em on when you was around. It sort of went on that way. They kept showin' me things I didn't know I wanted until I saw 'em, and then I'd do just what they asked me to. I must have been clean crazy. I even figured you'd like me if I had a new saddle on Dude. But presently I found it wasn't any use, and then I sort of turned loose of everything."

"What made you think that?"

For answer she took something from her pocket, and when it was unfolded he saw the remnant of a pink cardboard box tied with a gilt string. Two memories flashed before him — the box lying in the trail where she herself had thrown it, and the bullet-riddled target nailed to a tree stump. There was a small round hole in the piece she held in her hand.

"This," she said.

Other memories came to him. Jack had said that some day he would hear of the candy box again and here it was; the most inconsequential object imaginable, yet fraught with a tremendous importance. He could not follow the intricacies of her mind, but he felt dimly that she must be soothed and reassured of a wrong he had not meant, a hurt so keen and vital that only a woman's soul, trivial and great, could encompass it.

"You've got a wrong notion about that darned box. It ain't worth talkin' about," he begun, but saw that she was not listening.

"It was what proved to me I lost out for good," she said mournfully. "You give it to me, it was *mine;* the first thing you ever gave me, and then you gave it over to her. Oh, I know you can't see it like a woman can, but it made me wild. I—I—wanted to kill her, and—I tried, that day with I B Dam, but you came and that was another step down for me. I knew I couldn't stay here after that, meetin' you an' bein' questioned, so I told the old man I was goin' an' lit out. He was just about through here, an' he thought I'd gone on to the Border and he'd find me when he got there. But I went to Camberwell's, an' I been there ever since."

"And Camberwell sent you after my cows."

"Yes. I cut your fence, but I turned your cows back before they could get 'em bunched. I couldn't see Camberwell ruin you and that was what he wanted. You shot up one of his men and he aims to drive you out of the country."

"Milt Holley was goin' to inform on him, was he, and Camberwell sent somebody to plug him before he could talk? Was that it?"

She nodded wearily. That phase of the affair scarcely seemed to hold her attention.

"Milt Holley worked for Camberwell a few days. He found out about the Circle O stock. All of Camberwell's men aren't rustlers; he keeps enough regular hands to make his place seem sorta square; but Milt found out. He quit, and they knew he'd squeal, so the old man sent a crowd over to stop him from talkin' an' they sure did. They cut the horses loose and was just as innocent as anybody in town. It was you that spilled the beans." She changed the subject abruptly. "You wouldn't have got your cows back if it hadn't been for me, Billie."

Their talk wandered far afield of the vital point which had inspired it. She

turned her eyes to him wistfully. She had showed her cards face upward when he asked and she waited now for his commendation. Her untrained heart had lifted hopefully to his words, she read a promise where none was made. When he said nothing she put out her hand and touched him timidly.

"I can see how wrong I was, Billie. I didn't know how to make you love me. I guess it was because I loved you too much. Can't you forget her? What if she's made you think she cared! There's a hundred men in the world for her, but there's only you—for me."

But he shook his head.

"She doesn't care for me. It wouldn't make any difference in my feelin' for you. I never thought about you, that way. Why do you make me say these things, Britches? A man can't tell a woman that he don't love her. I feel like I ought to lie, an' say I do, but I couldn't fool you. An' I don't want to. You've got to promise me you'll break away from the Camberwell outfit for good. Move along with your old man down to the Border. It's bad enough but it's better than this. I'll help you all I can, but for God's sake get out of this. The boys suspicion you. It wouldn't take much to start trouble and you'd fare hard. They take it bad that you've turned yellow, Britches. You see, everybody trusted you."

He was urging her to go away—to leave the range they both loved and where they had been happy. She looked for anything but this—distance placed between them at his desire.

"But I can't go," she stammered. "It is because I love you—I love you!"

He saw tears in her eyes—the slow bitter tears that come from the heart. Her mouth twitched. Suddenly her youth and beauty was eclipsed and she was old. Centuries of women spoke through her, pleading for love that was denied them.

"I love you," she repeated monotonously, then she added in despair, "Is it because I ain't played square, Billie? You think you can't trust me any more?"

"It ain't that," he answered gently. After a long pause he said: "I'm goin' to explain if I can, Britches, lettin' you see my cards like I said I would. Maybe it'll all come plain to you like it does to me. The way I look at love is somethin' like this. You're not made complete in the beginnin'—there's an empty place in all of us, that is cryin' out to be filled—and it wants somethin' different from the rest, some offset to the nature you started out with. Folks like you an' me are too much alike, Britches; we've got nothin' to offer each other, no surprises. You can rope in a steer and break in a bronco as good an' better than I can, an' I'll swear I can beat you cookin'. Love wouldn't mean any surprises between us. We jog along like any ordinary cow-punchers, both lackin' the same thing till we died. What you've done or not done ain't the question. I'm no angel myself. I've done a lot of things that wouldn't make good readin' in the Sunday School books, so you needn't hang your head so when you're talkin' to me, Britches."

She said with a woman's faith: "I don't believe you ever did anybody wrong, Billie."

"Maybe nothin' to be jailed for, but there's a lot of things the law don't take notice of but that's chalked up against you just the same. It was goin' across that made me see, Britches. I was just an ordinary, ramblin' sort of a cuss. I didn't want to settle down anywheres. I didn't want any responsibility—like them whitefaces that ain't paid for yet. I wanted to draw my money once a month and blow it in at a settin'. I thought that was big time stuff, but it was just dern foolishness. I ranged from Texas to Montana full of them ideas; I didn't know any straight women and mighty few men that wasn't crooked.

"After awhile I got to thinkin' of myself on one side of the fence with this sort, and the rest of the world on the other side, sort of givin' us the once over. That was gettin' me, Britches. Then along come the fight, and I jammed in, naturally. At first it was just for the fun of the thing—the target shootin' and a white man's desire to be in the ring. Then I begun to get somethin' else out of it. Girl, I can't tell you just how the difference was. I'd been outlaw

stock and sudden-like I found the fences down and we was all rangin' together, side by side.

"Them folks I'd thought was on the other side of things was just plain men like myself, some of 'em better an' some of 'em worse, but none of us as bad or as good as we thought we was. An' the women I found out there was a new kind of women—even the pretty ones was different. And the way folks lived—givin' up everything an' never makin' a kick. I got no notion of preachin' to you, Britches, I just want to show you what come to me—maybe you'll get it too.

"I got a longin' after fineness over there, Britches; not fine clothes, or money or good times—the things we used to think was great—but the other kind. I couldn't love any woman who wasn't white clean through—who wasn't a lot better than I ever was—or am. She'd have to be fine, Britches, the sort of fineness that goes through hell without losin' her smile—"

She understood. "Like the Hoyt girl. She was one of them. She told me about it once—they give up everything they had and she never kicked."

He nodded.

A long time had passed since Little Britches entered the shack. The night had worn into its young hours. From time to time the fire had been replenished and now the stock of fuel was growing low. A stick of wood crumbled and fell; the slight sound was like a shock in the silence, and they realized that the storm had ceased. The wind, tired of its madness, had abandoned the shack at last and left it to its desolation. The lamp burning its dregs of oil made only a faint illumination in the pervading darkness and the girl's face, touched by this pale light, was etched dully against the blurred background. Even her hair lost some of its brightness and became drab and sadly colored, as her face was robbed of its beauty.

They sat in silence on either side of the stove. The revelation of their hearts left them silent and constrained, now that there remained no further thing to say. And as morning came nearer, it was more difficult still to break the bond of silence.

Once Billie found himself yielding to sleep and forced himself to wakefulness. He saw Little Britches leaning forward slightly in a listening attitude. When she saw him watching her she returned to her dejected attitude and pretended weariness herself, but it was so plainly pretense that in a little while they found themselves speaking once more, but in a desultory way of meaningless trifles, as people talk together after the tragedy of death.

Grayness came across the window and the lamp guttered and went out. Moment by moment the light grew stronger and the horses moved restlessly. Billie made a movement toward the coffee pot and the girl stood up.

"I won't stay to breakfast," she said dryly. "I reckon I've had too much coffee out of that old pot to want any now." She went over to her horse, untied him and turned to the door. Her lips wore their faint inscrutable smile. "I guess you an' me ain't likely to meet soon again. After all I spilled to-night I'll be puttin' dirt between me an' the Camberwell outfit. I guess I must be yellow clean through, an' no good to anybody, any way you take me. Them folks has been pretty decent to me, an' now I've squealed on 'em."

"I'll give you plenty of time to get away, Britches," he promised.

"You'll be wantin' to get home, so I'll say good-by, now."

He returned her farewell, troubled. There was something beyond her smile that he did not grasp—triumph and self scorn, and the wistfulness that follows a break too great for bridging. Now that they were parting and he knew that the old comradeship between them was gone and would never come again, a queer sense of loneliness came upon him. For a moment he sensed the desolation that lay upon her like a garment. He took an impulsive step toward her.

"Don't go like this, little pard," he said. "We've been together a lot; we mustn't get clean away from each other."

Hope flamed in her face.

"You want me to stay—because I love you?" she asked.

But he had not meant that. "No,

Britches; because I care for you like a friend—my little pal. I want you to be a good woman."

She thrust her shoulder against the door, and it fell open to the fast coming day. The horse, startled, plunged after her, and she swung herself into the saddle. Then she leaned over and laughed in his face, mocking, ugly laughter that shook her like a storm.

"I'm a hell of a good woman, I am!" she cried. "You left one at the ranch-house—go home and see what she's done! Decamped, left you flat without sayin' good-by. An' you made yourself a door-mat for her fancy feet. She called you a liar an' went off in the norther, rather than stay another night under your roof when she found out you lied to her. She understands an' prizes you as much as that! Now she's at Camberwell's, an' when you see her again maybe she won't be so good or so white as you think right now. I reckon this 'll be a right busy day for you, ol' dear."

The words poured from her like a flame; she caught her breath, biting her lips to hold back her tortured fury. The roan lashed forward under the spurs she set into his sides.

"And that ain't all," she screamed. "Look for your cows—while we was talkin' last night other hands was workin'. You'll find 'em, maybe, if a bullet don't find you first."

She was gone; a flash of life across a somber, dead, gray world. He stood in the door trying to understand what she had said.

It was like a causeless blow in the face—the sting was slow to waken. He knew that something had happened to Geraldine, some nameless danger threatened when he believed her safe under his roof. His mind was numb, dreading to face conjecture.

Then, habit being as strong as fear, he walked to the corner of the shack and looked to the shelter where he had left the cattle. It was empty. The bunch had been driven away in the night.

(To be concluded NEXT WEEK.)

THE AWAKENING

AROUND my neck her arms she laid,
And through the glory of her hair,
Although her eyes in shadow stayed,
I saw a new light there.

Against mine own her heart did rest;
I felt in all my body flow
The flame her bosom then expressed,
The touch of fire and snow.

Till suddenly from out the south
The breath of all God's gardens blew;
Her lips were trembling on my mouth,
And thrilled me through and through.

And then—ah! then, she raised her eyes;
One sweet impassioned word she spoke;
For, in a rapture of surprise,
Her slumbering soul awoke.

Alan Sullivan.

Tiger

by Max Brand

Author of "The Night Horseman," etc.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE HURDY-GURDY.

AND that was what brought Jack to the dinner-dance which Mrs. Thomas Harding gave to bring out Sylvia Lester that night. Mrs. Harding was very glad to get Jack Lodge at the last moment, for half a dozen other guests had disappointed her at the eleventh hour and the affair promised to lack a great portion of that éclat which was really necessary to bring out a girl like Sylvia Lester.

She was one of those betwixt-and-between girls, with very good family behind her, but very little tradition; with sufficient money, but not a great fortune; with her share of good looks, but an unfortunate thin neck, in which the cords were apt to stand out when she turned her head hastily. When she laughed, too, her mouth became distressingly large. All of these things her mother knew perfectly well, and she knew as well as if a prophet had told her that the only way her daughter would get on in the social world was to start her with a great impetus.

Mrs. Harding undertook the task of setting the ball rolling with a proper sense of the difficulty of the task; and she had been in despair when half a dozen people were forced to send in regrets at the last moment. But Jack Lodge saved the evening for her. He had been away so long, he appeared so seldom, that he was really the prize of the moment; and that explained the exceedingly cordial smile with which Mrs. Harding received him.

She was a little woman with the eye of a general of the line, and she had risen from nothing through sheer ability. She took Sylvia Lester aside at the first possible moment.

"I'm going to put Jack Lodge beside you," she said. "I suppose you don't know him?"

Sylvia did not; but she had heard a great deal about him.

"Forget everything you've heard," said Mrs. Harding. "Jack is big and stern-looking, but he's as simple as a child. And he hates a fuss. For heaven's sake don't try to make him talk about his hunting. As far as I know, it's the only thing he does well, and like every other man he hates to feel that he's valued for the thing he does best."

"That's odd," said Sylvia, opening her eyes. "Why is that?"

"I don't know," sighed Mrs. Harding, and, seeing two people she wished to speak with, she added hastily: "God made men; I didn't!" and she was gone.

As for Sylvia, she was a little shocked, a little puzzled, and not a little delighted. It was the first sign she had beheld that the celebrated Mrs. Harding was humanly fallible; and presently she was sitting at the side of Jack Lodge himself at the table.

The dinner went swimmingly. It was in a long, lofty room with the orchestra in a balcony at the end farthest from the table, obscured by a cloud of greenery. And along the table Jack Lodge looked up and down, delighted. It was one great flare of light of varying qualities, pure and mild upon the faces of the women, gathered in drops of diamond brilliance in the glasses, and

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for January 8.

glittering in green, yellow, crimson fires on the jewels. He closed his eyes and thought of the Tangle; he opened them and found Sylvia Lester smiling up at him.

She was quiet, timidly eager to be entertaining, and yet held back by a charming reserve, and above all she danced with the grace of an enchanted creature. The evening wore on; there was more dancing: there was nothing left visible except youth, gaiety, and sometimes from the background the keen eyes of Mrs. Harding or the amused eyes of Mrs. William Lodge. They found each other and sat together, held by a mutual respect, a mutual dread, which is often a great deal more binding than real friendship: moreover, it was nearly midnight and the duties of the hostess lessened as every one found his or her peculiarly fitting niche. They talked of nothing, cleverly, until Mrs. Harding suddenly touched her guest's arm.

"What in the world," she said, "has happened to Jack?"

"Because he's dancing about like any other boy?"

"Look at him now!" They could overlook the entire room from their chairs. "He's either an astonishing actor or else he's having a bully good time."

"At least," murmured Mrs. Lodge, "he is not an astonishing actor."

"He hasn't that reputation," said Mrs. Harding, and they smiled at each other, for Jack Lodge was occasionally accused of almost boorish frankness, and his yawns were the terror of every hostess in the town.

"But I thought he was planning another trip to Zanzibar, or some such place?"

"Hush, my dear!" said Mrs. Lodge. "That is something we don't mention to Jack. He thinks he's about to leave; every day is almost his last."

Mrs. Harding smiled. Her own two sons had been of a different metal, but she had wide powers of sympathy.

"In time," she murmured, "they all come around."

And indeed, Jack Lodge felt that he had never before seen girls as they really are; he had never known that music and dancing can bring much the same thrill as African buffalo caught squarely in the sights; the touch of a girl's hand may be very much like the pressure of the trigger on the fingertip, with a certain sense of explosiveness to be expected. Whatever he was when he went into the Tangle he was a new man now.

The orchestra finished a piece; the dancing ceased, but there was a tumultuous encoring, and eventually the orchestra struck into an old piece of ragtime; there was a murmur of applause and the dancers swung away once more. But Jack Lodge was troubled. It was an old tune with which he was vaguely familiar, and he danced with his head canted to one side, trying to remember what it was that the music recalled to him. And at length it came clearly. The humming of the stringed instruments grew harsher, the volume of the piano increased, dominated the rest, and finally it became the rattle of a hurdy-gurdy, clattering this same tune not in the room, but in the street below.

He looked down, and the face of the girl close to his shoulder was the face of Mary Dover.

Then it rushed on him, the little office at the Chuck-a-Luck, and the thrumming of the hurdy-gurdy in the street.

"What is it?" asked Sylvia Lester.

"Nothing! Nothing!"

He looked away from her.

"You seemed positively — fierce — just then!" she was saying.

But he made no answer. With all his soul he prayed for the end of that dance and the cessation of that music, and to clear his vision from the ghost he looked at the nearest of the dancing couples. It was the blond hair of Ruth Angley that caught his eye, Ruth Angley, with her bright, happy eyes darting here and there, but at the very moment when he was blessing her silently for banishing the illusion, the brilliant hair faded, tarnished, became a cloud, and then out of the cloud there grew a mass of lustrous black, and beneath it two great, dark eyes, and grave lips; and the hand on the shoulder of Ruth Angley's partner was formed with the most exquisite care, with dimples over the knuckles. Mary Dover!

"I beg your pardon!" cried some one.

He had shamefully wrecked a couple and,

muttering his excuses, he began to dance again, with Sylvia Lester looking up to him with a frown of wonder. At least, that collision had banished the vision once more, and he would pay thrice as great a price for that.

Turning in the dance, he found himself looking straight into the eyes of the man who danced behind him. It was Billy Phipps, with a face as rosy as a girl's, but instantly the face of Billy went out, and in its place grew a sinister countenance, with the sallow skin like old parchment, drawn tight over the cheek-bones, the nose aquiline, the chin cruelly strong, the mouth sneering, and keen eyes. The Baboon!

He closed his eyes hard, and when he opened them again the mist was gone; but once more only for an instant. Sylvia Lester was speaking; and the high, small voice changed to a lower pitch, velvet soft, caressing, a quality that plucked at his heart—Mary Dover!

It was the hurdy-gurdy, still rattling in the street, pouring out the music. A fiend turned it. A fiend transformed the face of Sylvia to the loveliness of Mary Dover. A fiend changed the face of every man to the grin of the Baboon. What were all these girls? False notes, a little sharp, a little flat. They jangled on the ear; they had not that rounded perfection, that flawless tone of Mary Dover.

He stopped at the corner of the room.

"Miss Lester," he said, "will you forgive me? I am ill."

"Let me get something for you. It's your heart," said the girl, terrified. "I saw it come over you, the change."

"Yes, yes. It's my heart."

"How awful! Let me—"

"Never mind. I'll leave you here and get home."

At the sight of him coming both his mother and Mrs. Harding rose. A muttering of excuses, regrets, and then they were outside in the street. On the way home his mother took his hand and looked steadily into his face.

"Jack," she said, "you aren't ill. What is it?"

"I'm not ill," he answered. "But there's mania that has hold on me."

"What is it?"

"A horrible thing I'm ashamed of. I am going to face it out to-night—this mania."

CHAPTER XXIII.

BLINKIE LIZ.

NOT a night since his service with Jack Lodge began had Sanford closed his eyes before the master was soundly asleep, and therefore on his return, Jack found his body-servant waiting, and since the night was grown chilly there was a pleasant fire snapping on the hearth. The hardest thing he had before him was to tell Sanford of his resolution, so he stood in front of the blaze jerking at his gloves and scowling at the valet.

As for the latter, he went about swiftly making the last preparations for the master's comfort, setting out slippers, dressing-robe, a glass of sherry wine, and an apple on a tray; until at length this prolonged silence made him turn sharply about. What he found in the eyes of Jack made his own widen.

"You look more as if you were about to start on a party than as if you'd just come back from one, sir," and he laughed uneasily.

"You're always right in a pinch. Sanford, I'm about to make a trip."

"Good!" nodded Sanford eagerly. "Do we get a night train, sir?"

"I'm traveling alone to-night. And there's no train."

"The Tangle!" breathed Sanford.

"Right. Hurry out those old rags. I'll be away in ten minutes."

The terror in the face of Sanford partially gave place to a gleam of cunning.

"Sorry, sir. I thought you were done with the old things, you know, and I had them burned."

"The devil!"

"But perhaps the morning will be soon enough?"

For he had known many of Jack's impulses to burn out overnight. "I can get a new outfit then, sir." He turned away.

"One minute," called Jack.

"Well, sir?"

"Sanford, get out those clothes!"

The valet cast aside deception. He came a step closer to Jack.

"Sir," he said, "may I speak two words?"

"Twenty."

"My name is Vaudrain. You know that. Ten years ago that name was known in the Tangle. It isn't quite forgotten there now; and I haven't forgotten the Tangle. Sir, you have been there once and you've come away scot-free. God knows how. But the second time it will be different. Sir, upon my word of honor, if you go back again there'll be bloodshed. I know the Tangle and I know this."

"Are you through?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then get the clothes." He tore off his overcoat and flung it across the room. His coat and waistcoat followed. And Sanford went without a word to obey orders. He laid out the old clothes carefully, as though they had been evening dress from an exclusive tailor's shop, and then disappeared into his own adjoining chamber.

When Jack was dressed he tapped lightly on the door, and then pushed it ajar.

"In the morning, Sanford," he began "tell Mrs. Lodge—"

"Sir?" queried Sanford, and appeared at the door huddling himself into his coat; his own outfit for the Tangle was complete. The master measured him silently.

"Man to man, Sanford," he said suddenly, "I want to tell you one thing: you're the cleanest fellow alive, bar none!"

And as if ashamed of this outburst of emotion, he turned on his heel and led the way down the stairs and out of the house by a rear entrance.

But the moment they stepped out onto the street they came within the range of eyes to which the glow of the street lamps was as clear as sunshine; before they had gone two blocks they were followed by a slender fellow in a derby hat who whistled as he walked, and whose gait was amusingly uncertain. They wound straight across the city, and down-town, until Sanford, as they turned a corner, touched Jack's arm.

"Sir," he said, "they're on us already."

"Impossible!"

"Sounds that way, but for eight blocks a fellow in a derby hat has kept after us."

Jack looked back along the empty street.

"Then he's given up the chase?"

"He's found out our direction and he's phoned the alarm ahead."

He looked curiously at Sanford, for the man was trembling with panic and fighting to keep his voice level.

"Sanford," he said, "for the last time: will you go back to the house and wait for my return?"

"Sir," said the other, "for the last time: I will not!"

They spoke not a word after that, but cut across the town at a rapid gait until they came to Malvern Alley, which runs a dark, crooked streak out of the heart of the better residential section and comes out in the center of the Tangle. It was quite without light, and the big buildings which fenced it kept the alley dark as a throat, except where streets cut across it at irregular intervals and marred that perfect shadow with a more or less dim light.

It was at one of these crossings as they neared the night noises of the Tangle itself that they came across a huddled figure, who crouched in a corner of the wall, wrapped in a vast shawl. Of her face they could make out only her eyes, a glimmer in the the darkness; and for the rest, a meager, clawlike hand stretched out before them. Jack avoided the hand with a shudder, but in so doing he dropped a small handful of silver into the upturned palm. They had not gone on six paces when they were stopped short and whirled about by a low hissing behind them.

It is the one sound which everything that flies or walks dreads, that sibilant, piercing noise, the primitive signal of warning, and when they turned they saw the claw-hand of the crone beckoning them back.

"Whist!" she whispered, and craned her neck to look up and down the street, and then bent her face up with an effort so as to look straight into the face of Jack. "It's Tiger, right enough," she muttered to herself. "Whist, Tiger!"

He conquered his repulsion and leaned closer to the wrinkled face.

"Down the alley—don't go!"

"I told you," said Sanford. "He's already barring the way!"

"Why not go down the alley?"

"The street," she said. "It ain't good for walkin'."

And she winked with evil meaning.

"Can't a man go where he pleases here?"

"Sure, a man can. But not a tiger. Whist!" She beckoned him still closer. "Boynton and six more!"

"The hound!" He fumbled in his pocket and drew out a bill whose denomination set her crooning with joy.

"Now tell me what made you warn me."

But she shook her head.

"Who posted you here?"

She shook her head again.

"Look!"

He held out a still larger bill, and heard her breath drawn with shuddering force.

"Quick! Who put you here!"

"No one put me here; unless hunger and the chill, Tiger."

"No more than that?" he asked shrewdly.

Her hand reached automatically toward the bill, and gathered one end of it into her clutch.

"Hist again, Tiger!"

"I hear you, my friend."

"Me best friend is gone if she knows I've told."

"I'll keep your secret."

"Who but Mary Dover told me to watch over ye, Tiger? But she'll have me hide if she knows I told!"

He left the bill in her hands, tossed another after it, and then turned and strode hurriedly down the street to the left, so that Sanford had a hard time keeping pace with his shorter legs.

All the old torment was burning hotter and hotter in the mind of Jack. All those girls at Mrs. Thomas Harding's dinner, with all their courage and their clean, clear eyes—what could they have done to save the life of a man, as Mary Dover had saved his life that night? And what one among them all would have done her good work, even if she had the power, so secretly, claiming no reward? It made his heart thunder to think of her.

And the beat of his heels drummed one fierce conviction into his thoughts: "Whatever may have happened to her body, her mind is clean—her mind is clean!"

And then the picture of the Baboon stormed across his eyes and blinded him. To have sinned with any man—but to have sinned above all with this incarnate devil! He tried with both hands to pluck the thought of her out of his mind, to turn back from the Tangle, but now the force which led him on was a magnet. Every step he took made it more impossible for him to turn back. And with every step, reason kept speaking: "No matter what she may have done, she is clean now; she loves you with a strength which other women cannot dream of." But for every syllable of reason there was a great revolting instinct in him which cried out against her.

And so he came once more beneath the black form of the Chuck-a-Luck, and went up the dark stairway toward his room.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE ACID.

"SHE may have rented the rooms again, since we left," suggested Sanford.

And the Tiger made a silent, foolish resolution that if she had he would turn and leave the place again, never to return; and all the while that they climbed the stairs he knew that he would not have the strength to keep his resolve. Yet that did not keep his breath from coming fast when he put his hand at last on the knob of the door. But it yielded to his key, the lock turned, and a moment later he had turned on the light and was again definitely placed in the Tangle.

Up to that moment it had seemed that he could withdraw, turn back, but when that light flooded the room, retreat became impossible. Of one accord his eyes touched on the chairs, and then he turned and met the glance of Sanford; they had the same thought, but they left it unspoken. The valet began to unpack the suit-cases, but the eye of Jack caught on a pale streak of light on the rug.

He picked it up and examined it covertly

—a number of small pearls across the back of a pin—he had seen one very like it at the throat of Mary Dover, and with a word to Sanford he left the room and went straight to Mary's door. She was in bed, undoubtedly, but until he saw her now, he could neither sleep nor rest; and the pin might pass for an excuse. At his second knock she called.

He placed his lips close to the door.

"Tiger."

He caught a muffled exclamation, there was a series of faint rustlings, and then the clicking of the lock. The door opened on her wrapped to the throat in a loose-sleeved dressing-gown of blue stuff, very pale, and over it there was worked a Chinese pattern in dull rose. Her hair had been caught in a loose knot at the base of her neck; there were white bedroom slippers on her feet. Ordinarily, he would not have noticed one of these things, but now he searched her with a bitter interest; whatever flaw there was within, there was none without. It was a ghastly mockery.

It was only a breathless part of a second that he stood there.

"Tiger!" she gasped. "In with you!" And she drew him swiftly into the room, and then leaned at the door to peer up and down the hall before she closed it. She was quite white when she turned on him at length.

"Has any one seen you?"

"Come in here? No."

"Not that. Has any one seen you come to the Tangle?"

"They have."

She struck her fists together.

"You fool! You fool!" she whispered. "Of course they've seen you, and d'you know what they'll do now?"

"I might guess."

"You'd guess wrong. They'll croak you, Tiger! D'you hear me? They'll get you! Why didn't you stay away? What brought you back?"

He held out the pin.

"I found this. It's yours, isn't it?"

Her eyes went slowly from the pin to his face and lingered there suspiciously, but he made his expression a mask. Would she know when she had lost it?

"It must have slipped into my pocket. I don't know how. I found it and brought it back."

She stood with her head bent, clasping and unclasping the pin, and without raising her face she said: "You found it on the floor of your room. You came back for something else."

"I did."

She turned silently and fitted the bolt of the door into its slot.

Then: "You're in. No matter why. The thing is, to get you out safe. Sit down!"

He obeyed; he could tell by the trembling of her hand as she sat down opposite him how terribly she was excited, but she kept her voice perfectly even.

"First," he said, "you're sure that I don't embarrass you by being here? At this hour?"

"Embarrass? Me?" She laughed. "Listen, Tiger, no matter what they *think* about Mary Dover, they don't talk about her in the Tangle, and as long as they don't *talk* I don't care a rap for their thoughts. Here's what comes first: Who saw you on the way. Things are dead in the streets to-night. Maybe you got by."

"An old woman saw me."

"That all?"

"Yes."

"What was she like?"

"Bent as a bow, wrapped up in a big shawl."

"Blinkie Liz! Is that all?"

"She told me there were others waiting for me."

"Ah?"

Boynton and six more."

"And you didn't turn around then? You didn't turn around?" In her anger her voice shook. "I suppose you think you're too fast with a gat to be beat, eh?"

"I haven't a gun with me."

She could only stare for a moment, and then her wrath burst over him: "No gat! Tiger, d'you think you can jimmy a door with a paper-knife? Can you snuff a drum without soup? Well, it's easier to do that than to buck the Tangle without a gun! Brains? A microscope couldn't find 'em! A door-rapper is a paperhanger compared to you! What d'you mean by it?"

"Mary, believe me when I say that I didn't want to come back here. I simply had to."

"And why?"

"To see you again."

She had prepared herself for another outburst, but it remained unspoken, and her lips parted slowly.

"Tiger," she whispered, "you're chiefly man, I'll tell the world. Speak quick! What is it you want?"

"Why hurry?"

"Why?" She threw herself back into her chair as though his obtuseness stunned her. "Go on," she said weakly. "You win. If the Baboon and Larry Boynton aren't reason enough to hurry, go ahead, take your time! But wait."

She slipped from her chair and went to the bed. From beneath the pillow she extracted a blunt-nosed revolver and brought it to him.

"Take this. It's short, but it shoots straight, and it works like an automatic. It's got a slug that knocks 'em down, and a balance that makes you want to sing. Try it!"

He shook his head.

"If I have a weapon like that," he said, "the chances are that I'll be tempted to use it."

She stood agape.

"And what do you think it's for if it isn't for use? Toy, maybe? Now get this straight," she added sternly. "If one of those birds tries to croak you, you get out your gat and shoot"—she leaned close to him—"and shoot to kill!"

He merely smiled at her.

"That," he said, "is not my way. I don't like the feel of a man in the sights."

"Oh," she nodded. "Gunshy?"

He chuckled. "Not exactly that, but that's not my game."

She put the gun away gloomily, and again sat down, and this time she was studying him with a sad interest.

"I don't get you, Tiger. You're straight, and I like you, but even if you had a million-dollar life insurance you'd be a fool to play the game this way. Well, go on, get what's on your chest off again."

"I spoke to you about it yesterday."

The color flamed in her cheeks. It seemed to rise like crimson under glass, so transparent was her skin.

"Forget it, Tiger," she answered. "It was—it must have been the funny music old Sparchi was getting out of his hurdy-gurdy. It sort of got me the same way. Honest, I'm not simple like that most of the time!"

"Do you think that was all?"

"Tiger," she said huskily, "keep hold of yourself. You're bigger than I am—and—don't look at me like that!"

She struck her hand across her eyes and then stared at him as if she hoped that her vision would clear. He caught himself with a great effort and strained his eyes away from hers, for while he looked into them he forgot the grace of her hands, the white triangle at the base of her throat; she became a bodiless loveliness, and he knew that this was love. From his heart of hearts he despised himself for it, and to drive away that power which lifted him and carried him toward her he conjured up the picture of the Baboon. For a moment, at least, his mind was clear.

"First," he said, "I have to tell you why I left the Tangle. There was only one thing that kept me here—you."

"Don't," whispered the girl. "Please!"

"And then I heard something that shriveled up the heart in me."

"It was about me?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"Yes."

He probed her mercilessly, but though her eyelids flickered for an instant, her glance became steady at once. She shook her head in wonder.

"It's true," groaned the Tiger inwardly. "It's all true, and she's like the worst of them, only cleverer—she knows how to lie."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TEST.

"YOU lamp me as if I were on the wire, Tiger," she protested, laughing uncertainly, and when he stared at her, sick at heart, she rose and went to him, dropping her hands upon his shoulders

with such an air of almost manly frankness that he looked up into her face with wonder. If this were acting, it was great acting indeed!

"Somebody," she said gravely, "has tipped you to a bum steer." Fire flecked her eyes. "Some low-life has been knocking me! Hand it to me straight. What's up?"

He lost the sense of the words, he lost the sense of her anger, except that it made her marvelously lovely, and a great impulse to take her in his arms became so strong that restraining it, his hands trembled.

"Sit down," he suggested.

She obeyed, but she caught her chair up and placed it close to his, so that her knees almost touched his knees. Then she leaned forward and frowned combatively at him.

"Now we'll have this out," said her whole attitude.

"She's going to try to convince me once for all," thought the Tiger, and if he hated her for thinking him gullible, he could not but admire the fine temper of her bluff. It had a ring like true metal. He would have to begin with caution.

"We are friends, Mary?"

"We are," said the girl, "pals."

And her smile snapped the chain of his thoughts and his suspicions. For always when he was hardening himself for some accusation there was a turn of the head, a waving of that exquisite hand, a flash of white as the sleeve rippled back from her arm, or a play of light in her eyes that disarmed him. She seemed possessed of inexhaustible powers; the very quality of her voice was a weapon and, listening to it, he forgot the slang and heard only the sound.

"We are pals," she had said, and her eyes were so wide and looked so straight into his that surely if there were an unclean secret in her life he could have read it. He thought of those girls at Mrs. Thomas Harding's dinner. What one of them could admit him into her rooms at midnight and later, and bolt the door, and sit down opposite him in nightgown and dressing-robe, and yet keep him perfectly at arm's length? Only the pure of mind and heart could do this thing.

He began to argue with himself, eagerly: "It was long ago—she was only a child—she had no precepts and no preceptors—and she hardly knew what she did. After all," he said, in that swift, silent summing-up, "the only sins are the conscious ones."

But when he lifted his eyes from those thoughts it seemed to him that a shadowy head leered at him over the girl's shoulder—the Baboon!

And in his agony he caught at her hands and held them and cried: "Mary, for God's sake tell me the truth! If you'll confess to me, it 'll take the sting away, I think. Haven't I a right to ask?"

Her hands slipped out of his.

"You've been talking with Wagner," she accused him. "Come clean, Tiger! You've been talking with Wagner!"

His first impulse was to ask: "Who is Wagner?" but he checked that impulse hastily.

"What of that?" he queried.

"What of that?" she echoed bitterly. "D'you think it's a clean thing to get behind my back and pump a cheap elbow for what he knows about me?"

He folded his arms and studied her face, calmly as he could. Still acting, he decided, and he could not help admiring her, but at the same time that admiration was killing the old passion; it was simply a critical esteem. She seemed to weaken under that quiet look and she made a little gesture of appeal.

"He told you that old yarn, I know," she said. "He accused me of shoving the queer."

It was Greek to the Tiger, but he decided to say nothing; to wait, and let her own tongue unwind the secret. But she grew suddenly fierce.

"If you're that kind," she said, "I'm through with you. Absolutely!"

He turned slowly toward the door; he was almost at it when she ran quickly in front of him and pushed him back with her eyes.

"Tiger, I'll tell you. I oughtn't to. I ought to let you go. But it—it makes me sick to know that that cur Wagner blabbed!"

There was no shame about her as she

came to the confession, he noted sadly. She talked as if she were telling any unfortunate slip.

"It was like this. Old Tony Marvel has been around for a long time and he'd been setting up the drinks for the crowd every day and paying for it mostly with nice crisp new bills."

He wondered how the Baboon would work into this story. But it was probably some way through money that he had established a hold over the girl. So he listened quietly with the same sick heart.

"And he kept it up for about ten days before he left the Tangle. And the day after he left Wagner came to see me and accused me of pushing the queer. Of course I knew that Tony was an old hand at making the stuff, but I never dreamed that he'd double-cross me. I told that to Wagner, but he laughed and showed me a lot of the queer that he'd picked up from the Chuck-a-Luck. It was a pretty article, at that—all tens and fifties—nothing cheap about Tony!

"Wagner laughed at me when I tried to explain that I hadn't noticed the phoney markings. He thinks that I notice everything. But I sent for Marvel and two of the boys picked him up for me in Philie and brought him back. He didn't want to come; they had a job bringing him, but when he showed I put it up to him straight and he admitted that he'd pushed the counterfeit on me and I made him make good for it all—"

The whole truth rushed in on the Tiger. It was simply a story of counterfeiting. Did she think to pass him off like this—so cheaply?

"I turned over the cask to Wagner, but he still has a hunch that I was in on the game and trying to work it from the inside. That's the straight of it, Tiger. Give you my word."

In the midst of his anger there was a real relief, so great that he pushed his hand across a damp forehead.

"Wasn't that what you wanted to know?" she cried suddenly.

He shook his head.

"I have never spoken two words with Wagner."

He found her staring at him, bewildered.

"Mary, will you be open with me?"

"What do you know?" she whispered, shrinking.

"Don't do that. Sit up and look me in the eye, and tell me."

"What?"

"Mary, I have the proof of it ringing in my head. I only want you to tell me with your own lips. When I learned it I went away and tried to forget you, but I couldn't. Only tell me the truth, the whole truth, and I'll only remember that I love you!"

He left his chair as she rose, but though her eyes were wide with fear the hand she raised to ward him off crumpled weakly against his breast; she was trembling in his arms and the warmth of her body crept subtly out to him.

"Tell me—now!" he pleaded to that upturned face. But she shook her head.

"Mary, for God's sake don't try to hoodwink me. Speak! I tell you, I know already. If you won't trust me now, how can I ever trust you, hereafter?"

"What do you think? Tell me that. Tiger, I know of nothing."

He groaned. "Mary, you love me!"

"With all my might."

"For the sake of your love, tell me."

"Tiger, there is nothing in the world to tell."

She flung his arms suddenly away.

"Did I bring you here?" she cried. "Have I begged you to stay? Have I brought you back? What right have you to ask me about something I've forgotten, or that never happened? Let me alone, then. I don't want you. I'll tear out the thought of you if it kills me." Her voice broke to a moan. "You've come to hurt me, not to tell me you love me. And—I'm through with you, Tiger—through with you!"

He said sadly: "It's the finest bit of acting I've ever seen, and I'm a fool for staying. But I can't help it. I'm weak, and I despise myself for it, but I'm going to stay here in the Tangle until you clear up the whole thing and tell it to me from the first syllable to the last. Good-by."

When he turned his back she was standing like one stunned, and as he opened the

door she threw out her arms after him and tried to speak, but the sound choked in her throat, and at the soft clicking of the door as it shut she slipped back into her chair.

"What is it?" she muttered to herself. "God knows what I've done; but he looked happy when I told him about the queer. What is it?"

Something hot and wet splashed on her hand, and she looked down at it in amazement.

"A leak?" she murmured, but even as she spoke another hot drop fell.

She ran to the mirror and there a suffused face looked out at her, and great drops trickled from beneath the wet eyelids. Since her very infancy she could not remember a time when she had wept, and the sight terrified her.

"Tears!" she gasped. "Where did they come from?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

CASTE.

IT was known that old Whitey could not see people before ten in the morning, for as Lew McGuire explained to the reverent Tangle, the old fellow needed a long night of quiet rest. Usually by six every evening he was left alone, undisturbed even by Lew, for his door was latched, and after that hour there was rarely a sound in old Whitey's chamber.

For that matter, the partition was so thick and the door so closely fitted that only a loud voice could be heard from Whitey's room through the wall, but for fully sixteen hours every evening, night, and morning, he remained there alone recruiting his strength for the labors of the day. And those labors were of a trying nature.

Sharply at ten the room which Lew McGuire occupied began to fill up with women and old men and luckless youths out of work, with cripples, invalids, cheats, and impostors all seeking to gain a few coins from the liberal hand of Whitey. To be sure, few of the impostors deluded him, for the keen eyes peered out from beneath that brush of white eyebrows and pierced deception to the heart.

For the others there was always help given wisely, and sometimes the agile hands of the old man spelled out advice more precious than gold. Mary Dover went upstairs a few minutes before ten, this morning, and already she found Lew's room crowded. But they gave way to her by right of precedence. There was some doubt as to whether the invalid would see even Mary before the accustomed hour, but after Lew had communicated with him through a system of knocks at the door, the latch clicked, and Mary was admitted.

She found him in his unvarying position, propped up a little by pillows, his carefully combed beard streaming across his breast in a tide of silver, and the semicircle of cards arranged before him on the coverlet. It always gave her the impression that he spent every moment of the night in this same occupation. She took the chair by the bed and peered into the shadow which always partially obscured his face, and as usual there was a glitter in his eyes as he recognized her, and the strangely youthful hand reached out and touched the back of hers.

She forgot her own troubles as she looked at that ancient face, and the length of the man in the bed; once he must have been a giant of strength, and even now an imposing breadth of shoulders pressed upon the pillows. Perhaps he had memories of long years of activity to make this present helplessness more terrible, and yet he was never known to make a sign of weariness or discontent. It seemed to Mary that a saint lay there before her in the flesh, and her eyes misted. Discontent? No, there was even an habitual smile to be guessed at under the cloud of white beard and mustache!

"Whitey," she said as her trouble poured back upon her mind. "He's back—the Tiger!"

A gesture of assent.

"You knew? Well, he's back, and I'm in trouble—terrible trouble, Whitey. I don't know what it all means, but I'll tell you word for word what happened."

And she described faithfully every syllable that had passed between her and the Tiger the night before. He heard her to the end, his hands calmly folded together,

but then he raised one and the agile fingers spelled: "Has he asked you to marry him?"

"To marry him? Yes—no, he only said that he loved me, Whitey; but I know the rest was behind his lips, ready to come out if I told him the secret—what is the secret he wants to know?"

And the hand spelled "He will never marry you."

"Do you think," she cried hotly, "that I'm not good enough for him?" She added more humbly: "I know he talks without any slips; and I know he's clean and not a crook, Whitey. But there's nothing he does that I couldn't learn."

"There is," said the fingers.

"Nothing!" she insisted.

There were several newspapers piled at the head of the invalid's bed, and now he sorted them, and produced one, yellow at the edges with age. He folded it and passed it to the girl, and the first thing upon which her eyes fell was a large photograph of the Tiger.

The face of the Tiger, but what a difference! Even in the photograph her accurate eye noted the fit of the coat about the shoulders, a fit which only tailors of a certain class can produce and which only men of a certain standing can be at ease in. It was the Tiger, but the Tiger translated to another sphere. "Jack Lodge," said the caption, "back from hunting big game." And beneath it, running through the article, her eye caught on significant phrases: "Son of millionaire," "home on the park," "returning with his suite"—and she crushed the paper together as her hands fell into her lap. The hand of old Whitey reached out and tapped hers reassuringly, but Mary raised her head and managed to laugh.

"I thought it was a toy balloon I was holding onto," she said rather hoarsely, "but it turns out to be an airship. Whitey, thanks for getting me back to solid ground." She drew a long breath. "I thought I was about to bust away from the Tangle and start a new game; but I guess"—she looked swiftly around her—"I guess I was cut out to live with chipped glasses and crazy furniture. This is home!"

She turned to the invalid.

"Well," she said quietly, "that ends it with me. Nobody 'll see me yip when I lose. That ends it for me, but what about the Tiger? What about Mr. Jack Lodge and his millions?"

Whitey looked at her inquiringly.

"I mean," she said, "that no matter what he may be, he means business down here; and he's been talking straight to me. How am I going to get him out?"

The hand of the invalid framed the characters quickly. "See his father."

"Right," muttered Mary Dover. "You're always right, Whitey. Go to his old man, rake up all the gutter talk I can think of, and say: 'This is what you son is trying to get tangled with. Will you take him away?' Oh, he'll take him away, right enough."

She laughed again, mirthlessly, and then with sudden gravity she said: "Was the Tiger trying to string me? Was he?" Her voice raised fiercely, but she answered herself: "No, he's straight. He thought he could take me with him into his crowd. He wouldn't think about their smiles the minute his back was turned."

She stood up and went slowly from the room, through the crowd in Lew's apartment without a word of answer to their greetings, and so down to the old barroom of the Chuck-a-Luck. It had never seemed so squalid as this morning. There lingered in its atmosphere nameless scents of cigarette-smoke turned stale and an aroma of ancient spilled beer which all the air in the world could never blow away. The floor had been swept, and its surface was now being sprinkled with sawdust. She noted the worn, hollowed boards; how many worthless feet had helped to grind them down, she thought.

The long mirror behind the bar was of a glass so cheap and full of flaws that now it distorted her image with a sneer and she felt that she, like the rest of the Chuck-a-Luck, like the wire-strengthened chairs and the wobbly tables, for instance, was useless out of her place. It was all cheap, hopelessly, sickeningly cheap. Her cook came through the door with a great green stone glimmering on his finger—imitation; Glencoe, the confidence man, lounged in a corner sipping a morning eye-opener,

dressed with smug respectability—imitation! The whole Tangle was a shell, a pretense that crumbled to dust when she thought of the Tiger, and those carefully fitted clothes.

She decided to wait until five in the afternoon, for that was the hour at which such a man as William Lodge would probably get to his house from his office, she thought. That interim was the longest suspense she had ever passed through, and she was comparatively at ease when she finally stepped out onto the street, an ease which lasted, indeed, until she came, some half-hour later, in front of the address on the park. She crossed the street to consider the big brown front from a distance.

"Nothing fancy," said Mary Dover to herself. "Just the straight stuff, and probably full of junk worth a thousand dollars a square inch. That's the sort of people he'd have; thoroughbred, hard-hitters. I'd rather that there were a little scroll stuff along the cornice; if they were boobs I could talk to them easy. But these plain fifty-million-dollar fronts—"

She shrugged her shoulders, took a long breath, and marched straight across the street with a face as determined as that of one about to dive into a December lake.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BARRIERS FALL.

THE door was opened to her by a somber-faced man with an important stomach and impressive bald head; his eyes looked just six inches above her head.

"I want to see Mr. William Lodge," said Mary, eying this guardian of the door with some concern.

His glance lowered by jerks to her hat, where his eyes widened, to her face, where they lingered, to her coat, to her skirt, to her shoes, where they dwelt longest of all. Then he looked her straight in the face.

"You have a letter, perhaps?" suggested he.

"I have not," said Mary, at ease.

"Ah, yes," nodded the guardian. "Your name, please, madam?"

"You can leave that out," she said. "He doesn't know my name. Tell him that a lady wants to see him."

"H-m!" he remarked, and looked at her shoes again, judicially.

"Shined yesterday," she advised him calmly. And she advanced one foot to make his inspection easier.

"H-m!" repeated he. "I think Mr. Lodge is not in."

"Thoughts," said Mary Dover, "come hard with you, don't they?"

"Eh?"

"Brush along, friend. The hospitals are full of quick thinkers like you. Trot away and tell Mr. Lodge I'm waiting for him."

He seemed to hesitate, not quite sure whether or not he had been insulted.

"Wait here," he said stiffly, and began to close the door, but its motion was neatly blocked by the foot of Mary Dover, and when he turned around in surprise he found her standing beside him.

"Never keep them standing while they wait," she informed him. "It spoils business in no time."

"Ma'am," he said coldly, but his fingers were twitching at his side, "may I inquire again if you have sufficient means of introduction to Mr. Lodge?"

"I have," said Mary, "a tongue, and I'll introduce myself."

He shook his head decidedly.

"It is never done, you know."

"No?"

"But if you will go to the side entrance I will see if Mr. Lodge's secretary—"

"Don't bother. I can't waste my time. I'll find him."

"One minute—"

"Easy, easy!" said Mary, and the hand he had stretched toward her shoulder drew back. "That's better."

And while he still gasped she walked out of the hall into a room that unrolled itself before her as vast as a street. The ceiling plunged up a dizzy distance, making the big chairs and the heavy table look too small for use, and even as she entered a tall, gray man walked into the room from the opposite side.

"Hello!" called Mary Dover.

He stopped and turned toward her.

"Where's the chief?" she asked.

"Sir," cried the man of the door, appearing at Mary's side and panting with distress, "this person—"

"Sit down," said Mary calmly, "and think it over. You tongue trips. Where"—she repeated to the tall man—"where is the main squeeze?"

He seemed not the least perturbed by this breezy greeting. Probably one of the lower servants, thought Mary.

"Who?" he inquired.

"Lead me to Mr. Lodge, will you?" she asked.

"I am he," said the tall man.

"I got you wrong," said Mary. "What do you know about that?"

She walked slowly across the room, examining him at every step, and when she drew closer, perhaps because he was standing in a dim light, it seemed to her that she found something of the Tiger in this man's hushed reserve.

"My name," she said, "is Mary Dover."

He bowed.

"And I wish to see you alone."

If there was any hesitation as he glanced at her, it was so brief that only such an eye as Mary Dover's could possibly note it.

"We'll go in here, if you please, Miss Dover," he said, and stood aside so that she might enter first.

It was a smaller apartment, and she was glad of that, for so much eye-room troubled her and was apt to make her glances and her mind wander. The ceiling was lower, which made the chairs in turn seem more imposing, and when he asked her to sit down she sank among pleasant cushions. William Lodge took a seat opposite, and she began at once: "I've come to see you about your son."

His face remained as blank as ever; she might have spoken about the weather with as much effect, it seemed, but it did not discourage her. Instead, there was something about this manly gravity which gave her a sense of sureness and balance.

"He's in trouble," she added. Still there was no response from William Lodge.

"In fact," she said, "he's in the Tangle!"

The eyes of her host lifted past her.

"Does smoking bother you?" he asked.

"I should say not," smiled Mary.

He produced a cigar-case, clipped the end from a Habana deliberately, and lighted it.

"In the Tangle," he nodded.

"And in Dutch," explained Mary.

Again he nodded. She began to doubt if he were indeed the father of a son. It might be a matter of adoption, perhaps.

"He's messed up in ten ways, got a dozen yeggs on his trail, and in danger of being stuck in the back, or sapped on the head."

"Sapped?"

"Timbered," she interpreted, "rapped with pipe; beaten up."

"I see. And what has he done to bring all this enmity on himself?"

"What has he done?" sighed Mary Dover. "Say, Mr. Lodge, will you tell me straight? Is he generally peaceable?"

"He has that reputation, I believe—among men!"

"He has? And what other rep has he?"

"He's done a good deal of hunting."

"Well," said Mary Dover, "the trail he's on now is trouble. Has he ever had any pet names?"

"I believe he has been generally called nothing but Jack."

"He has? Do you know what they call him in the Tangle?"

"Eh?"

"Tiger!"

"Really," said Mr. Lodge without enthusiasm. "And you say he has made many enemies? How?"

"With his fists," said Mary Dover.

He removed his cigar expectantly, but said nothing.

"He stepped in there out of nowhere," she explained, "in a bum rig-up like a yegg out of jack, or something like that."

"What is that?"

"Like a crook without money. I tumbled to him in a second and took him for an elbow trying to make a plant. So I tipped off my bouncer and he started to throw your son out of the joint."

"Actually!" And Mr. William Lodge sat up in his chair.

"Wait. I say, he *started* to throw him out, and that started one of the prettiest mixes I've ever seen. And I've seen *some!*

Say, Mr. Lodge, who taught your son how to box?"

"I didn't know he boxed."

"You didn't? Well, I've seen a neater left than his, but he has the prettiest little right-cross that ever rocked a pug to sleep. Painless, that's what he is. One jolt and they tell the world good night!"

Her eyes were brilliant with enthusiasm, and as though they kindled a corresponding spark in the man, the beginning of a smile touched his lips.

"He hit Larry with everything from a straight left to an overhand swing, and then in the middle of things he just sort of went wild. Got a glare in his eyes that made you want to run, and Larry did run. There was a crowd of Larry's pals in the room, and they tried to cut in, and then Tiger went after 'em. He busted a chair on some of 'em and when that gave out he let 'em have his fists again. Riot? It was a scream, Mr. Lodge, and in two minutes he had the place to himself."

"I wish," murmured Mr. Lodge, "that I had seen it."

"You're right. It was a nice bit of clean scrapping, but it got him in wrong with the boys. He made twenty enemies in that crowd and now they're out to get him. If he'd been one of them they wouldn't have cared, but now they're going to get him." She paused, but Mr. Lodge was again puffing at his cigar.

"That's why I say send for him and get him out of that mess!"

The cigar was not removed.

"Listen!" said Mary Dover. "You don't understand. It won't be any wallop with a fist. It means—murder!"

At that significant lowering of her voice he took out his cigar and poised it, watched the smoke curl slowly toward the ceiling.

"In my youth," he said quietly, at length, "there was a saying among men that no one should make a situation of which he is not master. It is my opinion that that saying is full of significance. My only concern is this: Does he know the nature of the danger he has incurred?"

"Does he know it? I'll tell the staring world he does! Gonzales and Hagen came in to go gunning for him two days ago!"

"However, he is not yet a casualty?"

"He got them both; it was a pretty play he made. But they aren't all. There are twenty more and every one worse than that pair. Mr. Lodge, I know a good scrapper when I see one, and your son is good, but he can't get by with that crowd. I *know!*"

To her astonishment, there was no answer.

"I said it before," she added, "and I say it again—and I know. It means murder! He hasn't a chance."

"Miss Dover," he answered, "my son is thirty years old. He has wasted those thirty years on getting the skins of animals. I am only glad that he has turned his attention to men! For the rest, I acknowledge your kindness in taking an interest in him, but he has made his own situation and he will have to take the chances. How many men did you say he fought with on that first day?"

"Twenty, maybe."

"I think," said Mr. Lodge, "that I shall not worry about Jack. He is of age. And"—he added this half aloud—"he has cut his teeth—thank God!—the surface has been scratched at last!"

She waited a moment; there was only one card left for her to play and very bitterly she decided to play it.

"There's still another reason why you have to take him away."

"Yes?"

"You take his danger in the Tangle as a joke. He doesn't. He knows his life hangs by a thread and he stays there because of—a girl!"

It brought his head sharply around toward her.

"A girl," murmured he, "of the Tangle?"

"A girl of the Tangle," said Mary Dover slowly.

"He is in love?"

"He thinks he is."

"Ah?"

"He doesn't know. He stepped out of his crowd and went to a place he doesn't know. It's new and that's why he likes it. He sees a girl who talks—differently. He likes it. He wants to marry her, take her up here among his own people—" She

laughed shortly. "Think of it! Think of the smiles, think of the side glances!"

"She can talk," said Mr. Lodge to himself, "something besides slang." He said aloud: "Those are things he might endure, I believe."

"Do you know what she is?"

"Well?"

"She's the daughter of a saloon-keeper; and now that her father is dead, she runs the saloon herself. A saloon! And there's a rooming-house along with it; she runs that, too."

Not a muscle of his face changed.

"She lives with crooks around her—heels, yeggs, basters, knucklers. Talks their lingo; knows their work. Do you want him to marry a girl like that? Mr. Lodge, take him away!"

She wanted for him to show horror, but instead, he sat back in his chair, studying her; and what he noted was the eagerness of her face as she leaned toward him, and the grace of the swift gesture of appeal, and the crystal clarity of her eyes. He half closed his own and his thoughts raced back across a gap of thirty-five years to a fresh, bright day when he had taken his hopes in his hand and— He winked hard and looked at the girl and the present again.

"You aren't even surprised!" she breathed.

"I am not."

"But, Mr. Lodge, is that the sort of a wife you've chosen for your son?"

"As a matter of fact," he chuckled, "I've never dared to do any choosing of that sort for Jack; but I've a very good idea of the sort of girl who would attract him."

"You have?"

"He never liked girls either very tall or very short. A happy medium for Jack; and he was never interested in blondes. I should imagine he would be very much excited about a girl say five feet five or six, with blue-black hair—you know the kind which has the shimmer in it?"

"Yes?" she said dubiously, and yet she hung on his words with intense interest.

"And with exceedingly clear, dark eyes—changeable eyes, you see, with an ability to go quickly about a room and see through things—including men."

"Oh," said Mary Dover.

"Is the girl anything like that?"

"I think not," she said gravely. "I'm sure not."

"Then I'm at fault. In character, I think he would like a girl full of directness and vigor. A person—how shall I say?—who is apt to go where she likes, and see whom she pleases. A girl, in short, who is able to surmount barriers."

Mary Dover frowned quizzically.

"One," continued William Lodge, staring up to the ceiling, "who could possibly break conventions, you know, but do it so gracefully that people would be grateful to her."

She canted her head to one side and nodded, very serious.

"One," he went on, looking her in the face again, "who is as frank as a child and as wary as a man; a certain straight from the shoulder quality; a certain fine bravery; and I can imagine her going without introduction to a house surrounded by barriers, and clearing them away from before her—such barriers as stupid butlers, Miss Dover—and calling for a glum, stiff-starched business man—"

Mary Dover sat on the edge of her chair, her color coming and going.

"Who would first be totally astonished by her; and would wind up by being totally charmed by her, my dear."

And he smiled with perfect frankness at the girl.

It took her with such a sudden surprise that the flush swept from her throat to her face and made it burn; she pressed one hand against her breast.

"I have only one question to ask you—no, I don't need to ask even one question. Mary, you love Jack!"

"I—"

"My dear, don't you see that I'm delighted? It couldn't be otherwise. And do you know why? They call him the Tiger, in the Tangle. A very good name for him; and I've an idea, Mary Dover, that there's a bit of the tiger in you as well. I see no problem. You are fond of him; he's wildly in love with you."

"Mr. Lodge," she cried softly, "you make me feel that happiness is just around

the corner from me." But she grew serious. Her head bowed.

"But I'm thinking about myself as much as I am about him. We might be happy for a while, but I've seen girls and men who marry on the spur of the moment and go through torture afterward. What could I do with the people he knows?"

"You've handled me very well!"

"Ah, that's because the tiger is in you, too, Mr. Lodge! But the others would laugh, and I'd want to kill them. We're different caste. But more than that, he has to be got out of the Tangle now!" Her voice grew shrill. "Will you understand? He's got to leave. It's his life!"

"I think you're right."

"You do?" She sighed in her relief. "I thought you looked at it as a joke—a game. Then send for him before dark!"

"There's a difficulty about that. I couldn't make him come."

Her eyes opened. "Aren't you his father?"

"If he obeyed me in this I'd disown him."

She could only stare at him.

"But there's no danger of that. He wouldn't obey me."

"What will you do? Something has to be done."

"Exactly, and since I can't do it, there remains only your influence."

"Mine? Mr. Lodge, I have begged him to go; he would not take a step."

"I am glad he is not a fool."

"How can I make him come then?"

"Marry him," said William Lodge.

It brought her slowly up from her chair as if she moved under the control of a hypnotist, and he rose at the same time and stepped closer.

"Why do you say that?" said the girl sadly. "Don't you see he's in one world and I'm in another?"

"Will you let me quote from Jack himself? He says that women belong in only two categories: those who are ladies and those who are not. I agree with him."

She waited, wondering.

"And in matters of personal taste," said he, "I have found Jack quite infallible." There was sudden melting of bonds in his voice, in his eyes. "My dear girl," he said, "you have nothing to fear."

"Would it be possible?" she whispered.

He thought of his wife and his smile went out, but he answered quietly.

"I have always respected Jack's judgment, and the only fault I find in him is that usually there are so very few things he particularly cares to judge. Tiger skins, and the heads of jaguars, and so forth; but now that he has a human interest in life I hope to see him go on to do fine and significant things, with your help."

"Mr. Lodge," she said with a sudden timidity, "do you know that you're just like the Tiger?"

"There was a time," he answered with a touch of grim meaning, "when a good many people thought so."

"And you've made me so happy that I have to go away and think about it."

"I'll call the car for you and run you down-town."

"Thank you. I'd rather go alone."

He took her to the door past the astonished face of the dignitary of the bald head, and when he was alone he walked back to his study slowly, and stopped in the very midst of a stride.

"How the devil," said he, "did he ever do it!"

(To be concluded NEXT WEEK.)

A MARINER

LOVE is a sea that has no chart;
Remote and veiled the haven lies;
Yet am I ever high of heart,
Led by the pharos of Love's eyes!

Sennett Stephens.

A Night's Work

by Lucy March Royer

THE heat was intense. The July evening was settling down over the dry, parched streets of the manufacturing town, bringing with it a slight stirring of the sultry air. On the steps and on the dry ground before the one-storied shanties where the foreigners lived the children sprawled half-naked and dirty.

Some of the men who had finished their day's work were smoking and some had already gone to bed on the floors. Here and there a few of the more inventive had laid boards on the limbs of the scraggly trees and were lying on them in the hope of catching a passing breath. From this vantage-point they yelled to the boys and men of the night shift who came hurrying from the open doors to join their comrades on their way to the bridge shop.

Michael Sullivan, a rivet heater, came straggling along with Nat Douglas and several other Americans who worked with him. They smoked their pipes and took their time as befitted men who were sure of their jobs. They quickened their steps for a few paces as Tim Brown, the head riveter, strode by them, but dropped back again when his huge figure disappeared around the corner.

"Big Tim's sure to get there on time. He's the very devil for work and other things, too. Bet he'll show the new superintendent where to get off." Nat turned to Sullivan, whose brutal face got very red.

"I tell you I don't like it," he burst out, "havin' a kid for a boss. What 'd they mean, puttin' a boy over us? We was working here before he was born. One of your Sunday-school boys at that. Too nice to even curse."

"Guess he won't be long learning if he stays around you." Nat gave Sullivan a friendly poke in the ribs. "Don't see anyway why you hold that ag'in' him. Why, he's got nice yellow curls."

"Yellow curls be damned," Sullivan answered. "I'll get him, I tell you, if he tries any funny business around me. Let them white-collared guys stay in the office, where they belong, and not come around telling men what's worked in a shop all their lives what to do."

"Never mind, Big Tim 'll get rid of him without any help from you. Do you remember how he chased that last kid out? Went after him with both fists when he discharged one of the men. The manager didn't fire Tim, either."

"This fellow 'd better look out, that's all I got to say," Sullivan answered. "Why, he's Sam White's boy—Sam White that went to school with us. Sam thinks he's smart because he went on and got more learning while we went to the mill, but I tell you they'll not put this kid over me."

"Well, I'm waiting to see the fun," said Nat. "It 'll be with Big Tim when it comes, for you blow too much. The new

superintendent won't bother about you. But he's afraid of Big Tim, I can tell that. I don't wonder, for he knows already that Tim's the real boss. I know I'd hate to have him get anything on me."

"Gets the work out of all of us," Will Brady spoke up. "That's why they keep him. Talk about your slave-drivers! But I got an idea he's sort of soft on this new boss. Ain't cussed him out yet."

"Big Tim soft on him! Why, you must be crazy! Don't believe he has a soft spot in him."

"I know you'd never think it. Well, cool off. We're going to have a night of it in this heat. Don't try any funny business with the new superintendent, or you may lose your job."

"Never you mind. I'll fix him and keep my job, too. Big Tim 'll stand by me any day."

Sullivan straightened boastfully and swaggered into the shop.

Within the office Billy White, the new superintendent, was getting ready for his night's work. He was a tall, slender fellow with kindly, blue eyes, and yellow hair which waved in coarse, thick curls. He was smooth-faced, and although he was twenty-five years old he looked twenty.

The time spent in the office over a drafting-board had given him a stoop which concealed the fact that his shoulders were strong and muscular. He was standing by the window, watching the men come into the yard. The manager was sitting at his desk.

"Well, how goes it, Billy?" he asked. His face was hard, but his voice and manner not unkindly. "There's a long, hot night ahead of you. Been having any trouble with the men?"

"No, not exactly trouble, but things don't go as I should like."

"It's not an easy job, I know, but you've only been in the shop two weeks. Foreigners seem to like you. Not so many left since you've been here at night."

"Oh, the foreigners are all right. They will stay if you treat them like human beings. But it's the town men—the ones who know me—who make the trouble. They sneer when I give them orders and laugh when I turn my back. They don't exactly disobey, but they're just ugly."

"Get rid of one, for an example, then the rest 'll come around."

"There's just one I'd like to get rid of, and that's Big Tim, the rivet boss. I can't stand him. He's a great brute—scarcely even human. Curses and drives the men from morning to night."

The manager's face hardened. "That may be, but remember we want some one to drive the men," he said. "He may not show human qualities, but he's the best rivet boss we ever had. I wouldn't lose him for any ten men in the shop. What did he do to you?"

"Oh, nothing in particular; but I can't stand him. He watches every move I make, and he's got my nerve with his brutality. He's the leader, and while the men fear and hate him, they'll do as he says."

"You've got to learn to drive the men, too. Swear at them once in a while. They're used to it and don't understand anything else."

"There's too much cursing around the shop now. I believe that's what makes the men so ugly. I hate it."

"They all feel like that at first. This is a regular man's job, and you'll learn. Take a few lessons from Tim. He's a brute, but he gets work done."

"Queer, but dad wants me to make friends with him. Says he went to school with him, although Tim never speaks to him now."

"Oh, yes, I went to school with him, too. He was a queer sort, ugly to look at and sullen and backward. The boys were always quarreling with him. Your father never did, though. Used to take his part, and I remember that once he beat a boy for teasing Tim."

"Dad says he always pitied him because he never had a chance. Went into the mill at twelve. He certainly doesn't need any pity now, for he isn't afraid of anyone."

The manager got his hat. "Well, I'm going. Wish we could lay off, but this rush job must be finished. Try to smooth Big Tim down if he gets ugly. I can't afford to lose him. Look out for trouble a night like this."

Billy left the office and started on his rounds. His two weeks as night superintendent in the shop had left him more discouraged than he cared to own. His eager friendliness had been met on all sides by an antagonism which he found harder to bear than the physical strain of the work.

Try as he would, he could make no headway in winning the men, and he was beginning to doubt his ability to find any open door in the wall with which they had surrounded him. His own resentment was settled in Big Tim, whose whole appearance was so brutal and forbidding that he dreaded to speak to him.

Within the shop the mouths of the riveting furnaces glowed white hot and sent out shimmering waves of warmth to add to the heavy air. The men were rushing the work, with the sweat running down their shoulders and dripping from their arms.

Their faces were smeared and streaked and the skin showed dead white in spots. The figure of Big Tim, the rivet boss, towered over them all, and Billy could hear him roaring his orders above the noise of the clanging chains and grinding cranes. The men listened to him with sidelong glances and sullen faces—but they worked. He was a giant of a man, with bristling black hair and eyes that glowed like polished coals. He had hairy arms and chest, and great swelling muscles. He never smiled and seldom spoke, except to issue orders and curse at the men. As he strode in and out among the furnaces he looked the demon of the place and as hard as the iron he worked with.

Early in the evening a young and very scared-looking foreigner presented himself at the big gate with his two English words, "Me—job." He had on clean overalls, the sure sign of the newly arrived emigrant.

Billy noted the big, muscular hands and broad shoulders, and took him to Tim.

"Where do you need him?" he asked.

Tim answered without looking up.

"Put him in Sullivan's gang. He's the best heater we got, and he'll soon teach him to stick rivets."

They approached Sullivan, who looked up with a lowering face.

"Don't want any damn foreigner in this gang!" he growled. "Too rushed to-night to start any one new."

"You put him to work at once," Billy began, but before he had time to finish Big Tim came striding toward them.

"Put that fellow to work, and be quick about it," he yelled at Sullivan. Then followed a volley of oaths.

Sullivan gave one glance at Tim, and hurriedly thrust a pair of rivet tongs into the boy's hands and shoved him to his place by the girder.

Billy thought he saw a sneer on Tim's face as he turned away.

"Wants to show that the men won't obey me without him," he thought bitterly. "How I wish I could fire him!"

Half an hour later Billy was passing an open door about twenty feet away from Sullivan's furnace, when a red-hot rivet came whizzing through the air and struck him glancingly on the shoulder. He turned quickly. Sullivan was bending over his furnace, intent on his tongs. Apparently he had not seen Billy; but the latter noticed that several of his men were smiling.

Billy's impulse was to discharge him on the spot, but on second thought he hesitated. If he did there would be no one to take his furnace, and it would interfere seriously with the work. Besides there was Big Tim to reckon with. Billy knew that he would brook no interference, and to get into a fuss with him might mean the loss of his own job. He finally decided to forget the insult and ignore Sullivan's ill-temper for the time being at least.

He put on his coat to hide the hole in his shirt and the burn on his arm, and went to direct the fixing of some machinery. He worked for half an hour, and was just walking away when he heard one of the men say to another:

"Sullivan's after the new boy. Watch out for some fun."

He looked toward the furnace, but it was several minutes before he realized just what was happening.

Evidently Sullivan's ugly mood had not

been satisfied by his revenge on Billy, and the young foreigner was the victim of his rage. The boy was working with the usual intentness of a beginner when a rivet struck the trough and hit him on the ankle. He jumped and looked at Sullivan, who did not glance up but went on throwing the rivets with lightning speed. The next half-dozen landed squarely in the trough, and the boy had again bent over his work when a second one struck him. He screamed and dropped his tongs, and then three or four came in quick succession, striking him on the legs, scorching the new overalls, and bruising the flesh.

"Dance, you lazy bones!" Sullivan yelled. "I'll teach you to work fast."

But the words were not spoken before Billy was upon him.

"You brute!" he said. "Get out of here, and don't you ever show your face again."

He seized him by the back of the neck, before Sullivan had time to straighten up, and pushed him struggling and cursing across the shop.

"Big Tim 'll pay you for this!" Sullivan screamed as Billy closed the gate upon him.

He hurried back to the boy, who was crying and pointing to his ankles. Billy took him to the office, dressed the bruises, and then went back to the shop to settle with Big Tim.

"I'll have to have it out with him," he thought. "If I lose my job, I'll lose it, but I'll not stand for such brutality to an employee."

He could not find Big Tim at first, and the thought came to him that he might have gone after the discharged rivet heater to bring him back. In a few minutes, however, he saw him at Sullivan's furnace, bending his huge back and handling the tongs with a dexterity which surpassed Sullivan's.

Billy's knees trembled. He knew that all the men were watching. He felt himself no match for the giant, but he went over and stood by him.

"Sorry," he said, "but it had to be."

Tim raised his head, and for a minute Billy felt the blaze of his great, black eyes. Then without a word Tim turned back to the furnace.

The men looked surprised and disappointed. Billy breathed a sigh of relief. "That was strange," he thought. "His eyes weren't angry although they blazed so. He takes the nerve out of me."

The long night wore on. Not a breath of air stirred in the shop, and by four o'clock many of the men had played out and gone home. Besides, there had been several minor accidents, with little injury but much blood. Billy was tired and discouraged.

Walking over the iron had caused the skin on his feet to crack, and every step was painful. His head ached and wherever he looked he saw the air dancing with black specks. He watched Big Tim with wondering eyes. He was working like mad, keeping Sullivan's furnace going and driving the men with tireless energy. He seemed to be everywhere, and the men obeyed him in weary silence.

"I can't be like that," Billy thought bitterly. "He's not human. He's a great, brutal spirit come out of the iron and steel. He'll get work done if it kills us all, but he'll never die."

Just then the terrible screams of men in danger rang out. Billy looked around. The workmen were running in all directions. Big Tim alone remained where he was standing. The muscles of his face were working grotesquely, and he was glaring at Billy with an expression which filled the latter with terror.

Again the screams rang out, drowning all other noises. Billy saw Big Tim looking up and pointing, and his eyes followed.

There, directly over him, was a huge girder teeting in the hooks. Billy watched it, fascinated by its gyrations. He wanted to run, too, but his legs refused to move.

"Jump!" screamed the steadier.

"Jump!" screamed a dozen voices.

The girder hung poised for a moment, and then started to fall just as Big Tim hurled himself at Billy and knocked from him his remaining senses.

He came to a few minutes later and

slowly got to his feet. The huge girder was lying on the ground not two feet from him. Big Tim was sitting beside it with his left hand crushed and bleeding. His face was strangely white, but his eyes blazed more fiercely than ever. He was screaming at the men who at his command were going reluctantly back to their furnaces.

Billy could not shake off his terrible fear and antagonism, but he dragged himself slowly toward the man. He opened his lips to speak, but as he caught Tim's glance his words faltered. For as he looked the blaze in Tim's eyes faded, and Billy found himself looking straight into the man's soul, grim and naked. It was not the soul of a brute, as he had thought, but a human soul struggling to break through the rocklike walls of its environment and find companionship with its kind. There was such hunger and longing and unutterable loneliness that the tears came to Billy's eyes.

He laid his hand on the giant's shoulder.

"You're hurt, Tim," he said, "and you saved my life."

Tim shrugged awkwardly as he struggled for words.

"'Twas nothin'," he said, "for Sam White's boy."

ʊ ʊ ʊ ʊ

SIX POETS GAZED UPON THE MOON

SIX poets gazed upon the moon,
And each one saw a different thing;
One saw a monarch's wrinkled face,
And one a perfect silver ring.

And one beheld a castled land,
Where everything was Arctic white,
And one a tattered beggar man,
Who wandered by a lantern's light.

Another limned a laughing girl,
Who danced on whirling clouds of snow;
Another traced a treasure ship,
That rode with jeweled sails aglow.

Six poets gazed upon the moon,
And each one saw a different thing;
Six poets made six different songs,
And each one soared on magic wing.

Now what I want to know is this,
When six good poets disagree,
How can we common mortals tell
If things are what they seem to be?

Or is it best that each one sees
As poets, things are not the same,
For if the moon were just the moon,
Then life would be a dreary game!

Morris Abel Beer.

Listening Eyes

by Bertram Lebhar

Author of "Thumbs Down," "A Nurse Named Allenby," etc.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A CLUE.

IN the small hours of the morning the auburn-haired young lady who attended to the *Mercury's* switchboard beckoned to Hemment. "I've got it," she announced. "The number you're interested in is listed under the name of Eastment—Gordon Eastment, North Lincoln Road, Fairview." She looked at him expectantly. "Does that mean anything at all to you?"

"It may mean a great deal. Much obliged for all your trouble, Miss Reilly. I sha'n't forget it. Would you mind putting in one more call before you go home? I'd like you to get the Pennsylvania terminal and inquire when the next train leaves for Harrisburg. I believe there's one at 7 A.M., but it may be possible to make an earlier connection."

"You're going out there to look up the party?" the operator guessed, as she thrust a plug into a socket. "The very next train, eh? Well, you certainly aren't losing any time! Ain't you going to get any sleep?"

"I can sleep on the train. It's a five-hour trip. By the way, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention anything about this matter to any one—where I've gone, and —er—the long-distance call I received tonight. Just forget all about it, will you, Miss Reilly?"

"It's forgotten already," she assured him. "I always did have a wretched memory. When do you expect to be back?"

"Depends on what I find at the other end." The reporter hesitated. "Perhaps, on second thought, I'd better modify the request I just made of you. I want you to keep my trip a secret for a reasonable time, but in case—if forty-eight hours should elapse without your hearing from me, you might whisper that name and address to the day city editor, and give him this."

He handed the young woman a long, sealed envelope. It contained the story he had written that night. He was willing to oblige Miss Cecilie Harvey by keeping it out of the paper for a while, but in case he was walking into a trap it would be just as well to make sure beforehand that the information he had been at such pains to glean concerning the secrets of Lestrade, Underwood and company would not be permanently suppressed.

He knew that he could trust Miss Reilly. She had been employed by the *Mercury* for some years, and he had known her long enough to discover that she was possessed of more than an average amount of horse sense, and that she was a living refutation of the supposition that no member of her sex can keep a secret.

"You understand?" he said. "Bailey isn't to get this envelope, or know anything about my trip, until the forty-eight hours are up. And not even then, if you get word from me in the mean time. Just hold it carefully for me, and don't let a soul see it—unless you fail to hear from me."

"I get you," the auburn-haired young lady assured him. She regarded him cu-

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for January 1.

riously, and a bit apprehensively. "From the way you talk, Mr. Hemment, I'd—are you going into danger?"

"I hope not. But it is possible that I may be scalped by the Indians; and in that event—"

"The Indians?"

"Are you not aware that the streets of Harrisburg are overrun with red Indians, Miss Reilly—and lions and tigers, too? Really, your ignorance astounds me!"

The switchboard buzzed, and the operator gave her attention to it. "That was the Pennsylvania Station," she told Hemment presently. "They say you won't be able to get a train to Harrisburg before ten minutes past nine. It 'll bring you out there at half past one—if an elephant or a giraffe don't get on the railroad track."

It was not either of those animals which prevented the newspaperman from arriving at his destination at that hour. His plans were upset by a thick-necked, square-jawed man named Dolan, who accosted him on the street at half past eight that morning, just as he was leaving his bachelor apartment en route for the railway station.

"Good morning, Mr. Hemment. You are up early to-day. I wasn't expecting to see you abroad before noon, knowing what hours you night-owls keep. 'Tis glad I am, though, that you're such an early riser, for it saves me a long and tiresome wait. The boss gave me orders to camp on your door-step until you showed your face. I was not to disturb your slumbers, said he, but as soon as you was ready to go down-town I was to nail you."

"Nail me! What do you mean, Dolan?" the reporter demanded. "You're not placing me under arrest?"

"Not if I can help it, sir. I've known you too long to be willing to do that—except as a last resort. But my orders are to bring you down to headquarters without fail. The boss wants to see you immediately."

Hemment frowned. Deputy Police Commissioner Oglivie was one of the last persons he desired to meet at that moment. Besides, he had only just time to catch his train.

"Tell him I'll see him later," he began. "I've got a very pressing engagement, and—"

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that won't do. My orders were to bring you right down-town, Mr. Hemment, as soon as you showed yourself. The chief is so anxious to have a talk with you that he told me not to hesitate to make a pinch if you wouldn't come willingly."

Much to the Central Office man's relief, he was not obliged to go to that unpleasant extreme. The reporter decided that he had better not decline Oglivie's rather peremptory invitation. He would have to take a later train to Harrisburg. The delay was exasperating, and might even prove disastrous to his expectations, but it could not be avoided.

If he were to stand on his legal rights and challenge his friend Dolan's authority to arrest him without a warrant, he might finally gain his point, but by the time the controversy was settled the train that he had been expecting to catch would be well on its way to the Pennsylvania city. Besides, disinclined though he was to have any intercourse with the chief of the Central Office at this particular time, he was rather curious to know what was behind the latter's insistent demand for his presence at police headquarters. Evidently something startling had happened, and his companion professed to be unable to give him any information as to its nature.

The deputy police commissioner was in his office when they arrived at headquarters.

He greeted the newspaperman pleasantly enough.

"Ah! Good morning, Mr. Hemment. I'm glad you dropped in. I understand you were looking for me last night. I called you up at your office as soon as I received your message, but they told me you had gone home."

"I waited for you until one o'clock," the reporter responded, wondering what on earth was coming.

"Quite so. All my fault. It was too bad that I was unable to get in touch

with you earlier." Oglivie paused. "However, perhaps it isn't too late now. What was the nature of this business you wished to take up with me? They told me that you left word that it was a matter of great importance."

"It did appear so—at the time. But since then—er—something has occurred which has caused me to change my mind." Hemment hesitated. "Later on I may have some important information to communicate to you, commissioner, but just at present there is nothing to tell."

The police official regarded him searchingly for a moment, then shrugged.

"Very well; we will await your pleasure, Mr. Hemment. Sorry if we have inconvenienced you by bringing you down here for nothing."

"That's all right. But, of course, that wasn't all you wanted of me. You haven't dragged me here, under the threat of arrest, merely to inquire why I called you up last night?"

"I was rather curious about it," Oglivie rejoined dryly. "However, as you have suggested, Mr. Hemment, that wasn't my only reason for wishing to see you. There *is* something else. To get to the point, I have some information to impart to you which I believe you will find quite interesting.

"There is a new development in the Interborough Building murder case," he went on. "You may be pleased to learn that we have at last succeeded in unearthing a clue regarding the missing deaf girl who was employed in Wrigley's office."

"A clue!" the newspaperman echoed, somewhat uneasily.

The chief of the Central Office nodded. "We have learned some very interesting things concerning that mysterious young woman," he declared. "Perhaps, Mr. Hemment, you will be astonished to hear that we have come to the conclusion that she wasn't really deaf at all. And another discovery of ours, which may further surprise you, is the fact that she seems to have a namesake who bears a very close resemblance to in looks as well as in name, and who until recently was employed as a reporter on a New York newspaper."

Hemment braced himself to receive the blow that he knew was coming.

"What—how did you learn all this?" he asked, a slight note of defiance in his tone.

"Candidly, in a purely accidental manner," the deputy police commissioner informed him. "A couple of days ago I received a totally unexpected visit from a Mrs. Bleckinsop, a very estimable lady who keeps a boarding-house up-town. She was somewhat worried about one of her boarders—a young woman named Miss Cecilie Harvey—who had not shown up there for some days.

"Mrs. Bleckinsop had read in the newspapers an item about a young woman of the same name who was being sought by the police in connection with a murder case. She hardly thought it possible that the two Miss Harveys could have anything in common, for, according to what she read in the papers, one of them was a deaf young lady who had been employed as a stenographer in a real-estate office, while the Cecilie Harvey with whom she was acquainted was a person of normal hearing and was engaged in the profession of journalism; still she considered the coincidence that both young women were missing as rather peculiar, and had finally come to the conclusion that she had better see me about it.

"At all events, she had decided that the disappearance of her boarder ought to be reported to the police without further delay."

"I see," the newspaperman muttered thoughtfully. "And I suppose Mrs. Bleckinsop mentioned the name of the paper on which her boarder had been employed?"

"She did. If my memory does not fail me, Mr. Hemment, it was the New York *Mercury*."

Oglivie leaned forward in his chair, his manner suddenly changing.

"Now, then, young man," he continued sharply, "you have the floor. These confidences ought not to be entirely one-sided. Suppose you do a little explaining yourself?"

"What do you wish me to tell you?"

"Everything that you have been concealing from us since the day that poor beggar was found dead in his office in the Interborough Building, with a knotted cord around his throat. Or you might go back a little further than that, and begin by enlightening us as to why your little girl reporter friend was masquerading in that office, before the murder, as a deaf stenographer who could read lips."

The newspaperman remained silent for a moment, his brow furrowed and his eyes deliberative.

"Commissioner," he said suddenly, "I am willing to tell you everything. I have a tale to unfold which will probably astonish you not a little; but—I am not quite ready to unfold it yet. I must have a little more time."

"Time for what?"

"To communicate with Miss Harvey. I must have a talk with her before I can tell you what I know about the case."

"You know where she is, then?"

"Frankly, I believe I do. But—frankly again—I have no intention of sharing the information with you. Moreover, I shall make no attempt to communicate with her unless I have your positive promise that I shall not be shadowed or interfered with in any way when I step out of here."

The police official frowned. "Why should I make you that promise?"

"Because I believe it will be decidedly to your interest to do so. I am going to try to persuade Miss Harvey to come forward voluntarily and tell what she knows about the murders of Wrigley and Gilder."

"And if you are not successful? If she refuses to follow your advice?"

"I don't believe she will refuse—after I have opened her eyes to—er—certain startling facts of which she is probably in ignorance at present. But, anyway, it will be greatly to your advantage to accept my terms, commissioner. I can't tell you a word of what I know about the case until I've had a chance to talk with her. You won't get anything out of me now, even though you put me through the third degree. That's final."

The Central Office man considered for a moment, then shrugged.

"All right," he said; "it's a bargain. Impatient though I am to hear this remarkable story of yours, Mr. Hemment, I shall endeavor to restrain my curiosity until you have communicated with the young woman. And I give you my word that you won't be shadowed by us when you leave here."

If it had been anybody else at police headquarters but Oglivie, this assurance might have been received by Hemment with a certain amount of suspicion. But even among criminals the deputy police commissioner enjoyed the enviable reputation of being a man who never "welched" on an agreement. Therefore, an hour later, the *Mercury* reporter stepped aboard a train at the Pennsylvania Station, confident that he was not under espionage.

Perhaps it would have been just as well if he had not exacted that promise, was his rather sardonic reflection as the train drew him nearer to the unknown fate which awaited him at the journey's end. It was conceivable to him that there might come a time presently when he would have occasion to regret the absence of the Central Office sleuths who otherwise would surely have been close behind him.

True, Cecilie's attitude on the telephone had not seemed to support the suspicion that he was being lured into an ambush. On the contrary, she had apparently done everything she could to discourage him from trying to find her hiding-place. But that might have been merely a crafty move on the part of the enemy. They might have been subtle enough to foresee that he would trace that long-distance call and set out immediately to run down the clue, rushing the more eagerly to his fate because he had been beguiled into the belief that he was putting something over on them.

Possibly he would have shown more sense, so far as his own welfare was concerned, if he had taken Oglivie into his confidence and set out on this expedition in the company of a squad of Central Office men, prepared to swoop down on the hiding-place of Mrs. Ethan Underwood, *née*

Cecilie Harvey, and capture all hands found on the premises. But that would not have been playing quite fair with the girl. He was not sure as yet that a trap was being set for him, and, until he knew, he had no right to put the police on her track. Better to face alone whatever peril might await him at the other end of his trip than to break faith with her!

It was 3 P.M. when he alighted from the train at Harrisburg and stepped into a real-estate broker's office in the vicinity of the railway station.

"I see from the sign in your window that you deal in suburban property," he remarked to the broker. "Do you happen to know anything about the Fairview section?"

"There isn't much about it that I don't know, sir," the real-estate man replied eagerly, scenting a prospective customer. "Fairview property is our specialty. At the present moment we have some choice lots which we are offering at prices which—"

"Are you acquainted with a man named Eastment, who lives out that way?" his visitor interrupted. "Gordon Eastment, I believe the name is."

"Certainly I know him," the broker declared somewhat disappointedly. "He runs a chicken farm. His place is 'way out on the North Lincoln Road. I sold him the property myself, six years ago."

He volunteered the additional information that the house was the last bit of developed property one encountered on the North Lincoln Road, and that it could be further identified by its green, shingled roof. Mr. Eastment, he said, lived there with his wife and three grown daughters. The family bore an excellent reputation in the neighborhood, and the chicken farm was doing a prosperous business.

Greatly reassured, and somewhat puzzled by these details, Hemment rode out to Fairview in a street-car which took him to a point within a mile of his destination. He covered the rest of the distance on foot, and, as he came in sight of the farm and observed its trim, well-kept appearance, he was almost ready to laugh at his recent misgivings.

Surely there could be nothing sinister about a place as respectable-looking and attractive as this!

Nevertheless, he took the precaution of keeping his hand on the automatic in his pocket as he approached the house with the bright-green roof. After all, one never could tell! If Mr. Alton Lestrade and his confrères wished to lure him into an ambuscade, they could hardly have selected a more secluded spot for their purpose.

Not another habitation within sight. Not a single person, apparently, within range of his voice, except the inmates of the house. The long stretch of dusty, country road was as barren of vehicles and pedestrians as if it had been part of the Sahara. Even on the farm itself there was no sign of a human being. There was something almost uncanny about the depressing stillness of the place.

And then suddenly he saw the green door of the farmhouse open, and a slim, blond-haired, blue-eyed young woman emerge therefrom and come slowly down the gravel path toward the road. His pulses leaped as his eyes hungrily took in that familiar figure.

The young woman was Cecilie Harvey, and she was alone.

CHAPTER XXVII.

NOT SATISFACTORY.

CECILIE was about to mail a letter. She was submitting it to a last reading before she inserted it in the stamped and addressed envelope she held in her other hand. Her eyes were glued on the written page as she walked slowly along the gravel pathway. That was why she did not notice Hemment until she had reached the rural free delivery box clamped to a telephone pole in front of the Eastment property.

A gasp, a half exclamation escaped her as she looked up suddenly and saw him standing before her.

"You!" she cried. "What—how did you manage to find me?"

"That wasn't very difficult—with the clue your long-distance call gave me," the

newspaperman answered. "I felt that I must have that explanation from you immediately. I couldn't wait until you were ready to give it. So I took the liberty of doing a little detective work, and—here I am."

The girl frowned.

"You ought not to have come," she protested. "It wasn't very—very nice of you, Mr. Hemment. I didn't dream that you would take such an unfair advantage by tracing that telephone ca.., when you knew that I—that there were reasons why I did not wish to be found. Do you call that honorable?"

"Honorable!" Hemment laughed bitterly. "Am I dealing with honorable people? Are you in a position to complain of 'unfair advantages,' Mrs. Ethan Underwood, when you—"

"Ah!" Cecilie interrupted him, surprise in her tone. "So you know that, too?"

"Yes; I know that you are married to Underwood—that you became his wife on the very day that poor Wrigley was murdered."

She was obviously a bit startled, but not as much so as might have been expected in the circumstances. The significance of the latter part of his remark seemed to escape her entirely. Her manner was that of a blushing, runaway bride who has just made the discovery that the details of her romance have become known to the press. In fact, Hemment had interviewed more than one heroine of an elopement who had manifested a much greater degree of perturbation over the news that her comparatively harmless secret had leaked out.

"How on earth did you find me?" Cecilie asked. "We supposed that we—that our secret was well preserved. You really are perfectly wonderful, as a reporter, Mr. Hemment. There is no keeping anything from you once you have made up your mind to know about it."

The recipient of this compliment regarded its maker dubiously for a moment; then his face lighted up. He was satisfied that there was neither irony in her tone nor defiance in her manner. Either she was the greatest actress in the world, or else it was clear that she was not in the confidence of the men who had persuaded her to take refuge in this secluded spot.

And Hemment, sounding the depths of her frank, guileless, blue eyes, lost his last doubt as to her status in the conspiracy in which her husband and his friend Moncrief were involved. She did not know the truth; he was quite sure of that. As he had hoped all along, but hardly dared to believe, she was the innocent dupe of those adroit scoundrels.

"How I learned about your marriage is rather a long story, little woman," he said gently. "And one that I am afraid is going to shock you not a little." He paused and glanced in the direction of the farmhouse. "Is it quite safe for us to talk here? I have a great deal to say to you, and I don't want to be—er—interrupted. Are we being observed now?"

"I hardly think so. Not by anybody in the house, anyway," Cecilie responded. "I am all alone here this afternoon. Mr. and Mrs. Eastment went to town at noon, and won't be back until late this evening, and the girls have gone to Philadelphia to attend the wedding of a friend. I don't think you need be afraid of being interrupted, Mr. Hemment. Would you care to come inside and sit down?" She smiled and blushed. "I am a married woman now, you know, and I sha'n't need a chaperon."

Her visitor hesitated for just a second. The opening line of "'Will you walk into my parlor?' said the spider to the fly," came to his mind, but he promptly dismissed the thought. If there was a spider lying in wait for him on the premises Cecilie could hardly have been unaware of the fact, and he was determined now to take her good faith for granted.

"Perhaps we should be more comfortable in there," he acquiesced. "By the way, who are the Eastments? How do you happen to be stopping here in this place with them?"

"Mr. Eastment is a cousin of my husband's," the young woman explained as they moved along the gravel path toward the house. "They are lovely people. When it became necessary for me to—er—to go into retirement for a while, Ethan

thought this would be just the place for me."

"You have been here ever since you—since your wedding day?"

Cecilie nodded.

"It was an awful pity that we had to be separated so early in our married life," she said with a sigh. "We didn't even have a honeymoon. But it could not be helped, and of course I am not complaining. I would be a poor sort of wife if I were not willing to make sacrifices—especially for a man like Ethan."

"You are very fond of him?"

A glow of tenderness shone in her eyes. "What a question!" she exclaimed. "He is the salt of the earth—the dearest, truest fellow that ever lived. I hope you are going to find that out for yourself before very long, Mr. Hemment. I have made up my mind that you and Ethan are going to be friends." She paused and smiled. "I have already told him all about you—how very kind you have been to me. I have painted you to him in such glowing colors that if he were made of commoner clay I am afraid he would be inclined to be jealous."

They entered the house, and she ushered him into an old-fashioned but cozily furnished parlor.

"Now let me hear this startling story of yours," she said a little anxiously, as soon as they were seated. "I must confess that I am very curious to know how you managed to find out about my marriage."

Her visitor hesitated.

"Perhaps I had better hear your version first," he suggested. "It may make what I have to say easier to tell. You have twice assured me, Miss—Mrs. Underwood, that your husband had a perfectly justifiable and worthy reason for persuading you to drop out of sight immediately after—er—what happened in the office of the Gotham Development Company.

"You don't know how anxious I am to believe that such is the case, how very hard I have tried to convince myself that Underwood—that certain conclusions I have arrived at might be unwarranted by the real facts, but—" He hesitated again. "Well, suppose you let me have the explanation right away. I feel that I am entitled to it. And, no matter what your reasons for keeping me in the dark, I don't intend to be put off any longer."

Cecilie's lips had started to frame a refusal, but her resolution melted under the sudden peremptoriness of his manner. Stronger wills than hers had been forced to bend when the *Mercury's* star reporter saw fit to resort to this method of interviewing.

Besides, she was really rather glad to be bullied into sharing her secret with him. She was quite confident that he could be trusted.

"I promised Ethan that I would not tell anything until the danger to him was past," she said, after a short interval of deliberation, "but I suppose, now that you have succeeded in running me to earth, it won't do any harm to take you into our confidence, Mr. Hemment. As you say, you deserve to be enlightened. Shall I begin by telling you everything that happened on—on that eventful afternoon?"

"I wish you would," Hemment responded eagerly.

She proceeded to give him a detailed account of her experience in Wrigley's private office on the last day of her employment there, describing how the showdown had come at last, and how she had made the startling discovery that one of the men whose lips her employer had wished her to read was the man to whom she had promised herself in marriage.

"You can imagine how shocked I was by this entirely unforeseen development," she went on. "Of course I had known all along that Ethan's office was in the building opposite, but the thought that there might be anything in common between him and those men had never entered my mind. Not even when I put the field-glasses to my eyes, and started to look out through the little peep-holes cut in the shade, did I dream that it was his office window that Wrigley was interested in.

"Naturally, as soon as I had succeeded in making my escape, my first act was to run over to Ethan and tell him what I had just found out. I guessed that it was

some business secret of his they were trying to pry into. I knew that accountants were often entrusted with important secrets by their clients which men of the caliber of Wrigley and Gilder might be able to turn into money if they could get hold of them. I decided that no time was to be lost in putting Ethan on his guard.

"When I arrived in his office I found him in conference with one of his clients—a Mr. Moncrief. They were both greatly interested in my story, and I could see that they were more upset than they were willing to admit at first. Ethan began by trying to make me think that he was inclined to regard the incident as a joke, but when I told him that it was my intention to write up my adventure and publish the facts about that queer help-wanted advertisement in the *Mercury*, he changed his tone.

"Both he and Mr. Moncrief became very grave at that, and insisted that the story must not be printed. In fact, they were unwilling even to let me go back to the *Mercury* office and tell Mr. Bailey and you what I had discovered."

"That was why you wrote out your resignation and sent it to Bailey through the mail," Hemment suggested.

Cecilie nodded. "It was the only way out of my predicament. I had either to report on my assignment or quit the paper. And when Ethan had explained to me just what it would mean to him if anything were published at this time about the matter, I did not hesitate to choose the latter course."

"Ah!" the newspaperman ejaculated. "That brings us to the big question. Just what did he tell you?"

The girl faltered, and he caught the shadow that momentarily flitted across her face.

"I know that you are an honorable man, Mr. Hemment," she said, "but I hope you will forgive me for reminding you that the secret I am about to divulge is told to you in the strictest confidence. We—it would ruin my husband if it were to become known." She paused. "Ethan has been in jail."

"In jail! He told you that?" Hemment exclaimed, with an inflection of astonishment that was not feigned.

"Yes. He broke the terrible news to me that afternoon in his office. He had meant to reveal the truth to me before, he said, but his courage had always failed him. It happened years ago, when he was a very young man. He was assistant cashier of a bank, and they accused him of stealing a lot of money and making false entries on the books to cover his offense. He was not guilty.

"It was another employee of the bank who was really to blame. But he couldn't prove his innocence, and the circumstantial evidence was against him. So they sent him to prison for five years." She paused again. "Now do you begin to understand why he couldn't afford to have the facts about my assignment come out?"

"Not quite. I am afraid I am very dense. What had that lip-reading stunt of Wrigley's to do with the hidden chapter in your husband's past?"

"It had nothing to do with it. Neither Ethan nor Mr. Moncrief had ever heard of those men across the street, and had no idea why they were spying on them. But—don't you see? If the story had been printed it would have attracted attention to my husband. The fact that he was—that he had once been in jail, might have come out as a result of the publicity. Although innocent, he has always lived in constant fear of his secret becoming known. That would be a fatal blow to his professional standing. Even business men are narrow when it comes to employing an expert accountant who has a prison record.

"But, thank Heaven, he will not have to worry much longer," Cecilie went on, her face lighting up. "Ethan is soon to be vindicated. The man who was really responsible for the crime for which my poor martyr was convicted is dying of tuberculosis in Colorado. He has sent word to Ethan that before he breathes his last he is going to make a full confession. He won't do it until he is quite positive that there is no chance of his recovering, but he is very low now, and if he keeps his promise very soon we shall be able to face

the world without fear. Then, of course, it won't make any difference whether or not your story is printed."

"I see," Hemment muttered musingly. "But how did you come to marry him that evening? I suppose it was Underwood's suggestion that the wedding be hastened?"

"No, it wasn't. It was entirely my own idea," the girl declared. "I wished to prove my faith in him. I told him that I was fully satisfied that he was innocent, and to show how little I cared what the rest of the world might think about it I wanted to marry him right away—before he succeeded in vindicating himself. He demurred at first—protested, with that fine sense of honor of his, that it wasn't fair to permit me to share his name until the stain on it was removed—but I insisted, and after a while he was won over. We were married that evening by the parson of a small church in Westchester County."

"I see," her companion said again. "You poor little child!" he added commiseratingly.

"Why do you say that?" she demanded, an angry glint in her eyes. "I fail to see, Mr. Hemment, why you should consider me an object of pity. I assure you that I don't—don't feel that way about it. On the contrary, I consider myself the most fortunate girl in the world—and certainly the happiest."

Hemment winced. "Tell me about the —er—the tragedy in the Interborough Building," he said gently. "When did you first hear that your late employer had been murdered?"

"Not until the next morning. I saw it in the newspapers. Ethan was very upset about it, and so was his friend Mr. Moncrief. They regarded it as a most unfortunate coincidence—happening at this time."

"A coincidence, eh!" her visitor could not help remarking with a grim smile on his face.

"Of course," said Cecilie, frowning. "If you are insinuating, Mr. Hemment, that Ethan had anything to do with that awful crime, or knew anything about it, you are making a very big mistake, and are going to be ashamed of your unjust suspicions later on.

"The fate of that unhappy man and his partner is as much a mystery to us as it is to the rest of the world. But, just the same, Ethan couldn't afford to have the police learn that it was he whom Wrigley had been spying upon only a few hours before his dreadful end. You must realize that this startling development made it more important than ever, from our standpoint, that the facts about my assignment must not become known.

"Just think of the undesirable publicity it would have brought on my husband if the authorities had learned that not only was it his office window which the victim of the murder had been watching, but that he was married to the young woman who had obtained employment in that room across the street by masquerading as a deaf stenographer who could read lips! Why, even though he really knew nothing about the crime, he would have become a prominent figure in the case. His picture would have been published in all the papers, and his secret would have been almost sure to come out."

"I can see that he had considerable reason for being worried," Hemment put in dryly. "In the circumstances it is not surprising that he decided he had better postpone his honeymoon and get his bride out of reach of the police. I suppose it was his idea to have you efface yourself until the trouble had blown over? Or did the suggestion come from his friend Mr. Moncrief?"

"It was Mr. Moncrief who suggested it," the young woman replied. "Ethan was opposed at first to my running away. He was afraid that such a step might place me in a compromising position, and he protested that he would rather a hundred times face the consequences himself than have me suffer any embarrassment on his account. But Mr. Moncrief insisted that it was the only way out of our dilemma. He argued that it would be only for a short time. As soon as the man in Colorado made the confession which would set Ethan right in the eyes of the

world I could come forward and explain my behavior.

"But, in the mean time, it would be a fatal mistake to let me fall into the hands of the police and be bullied into telling of my experience in that horrid office.

"I could see that he was right," Cecilie continued. "And between the two of us we at length managed to persuade Ethan that it was my duty to drop out of sight for a while. So I came out here, and have been enjoying the hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. Eastment ever since. Of course they are not aware of the real situation, but they are very fond of my husband and were quite willing to take his word for it that he had good reasons for keeping our marriage a secret for the present."

"Has Underwood been out here to see you?" Hemment asked.

"Not yet. Some important business has kept him in New York. But he talks to me over the long-distance telephone every day."

"It was over the telephone, then, that he suggested that you call me up last night?"

Cecilie made an affirmative gesture. "He had heard in some way that the *Mercury* was about to use the story, and he was greatly worried about it," she explained. "He thought that perhaps I might have enough influence with you to get you to do what you could to have the yarn suppressed." She smiled at her visitor reproachfully. "Needless to say, neither of us foresaw that by calling you up I would be supplying you with a clue which would enable you to track me down."

"I am rather surprised that such a possibility did not occur to your husband or to his friend Moncrief," Hemment said. "By the way, speaking of Mr. Moncrief, I would like to hear a little more about him. He seems to have made a very favorable impression on you, Mrs. Underwood."

Cecilie hesitated. "He didn't—at first," she confided. "He is a very polished gentleman, and as genial as he is courteous, but just the same I am ashamed to say I took an instinctive dislike to him when I was first introduced to him in my husband's office. I can't say what it was exactly, but there was something about him that made me feel—made me afraid of him. Since then, however, Ethan has convinced me of my mistake. He has told me what a devoted friend Mr. Moncrief has been—how he stood by him at the time of his great trouble and has helped him to keep the secret ever since. I realize now, of course, how foolish my unreasonable prejudice was."

"Perhaps not so foolish as you have been led to believe," her visitor remarked. "After all, a woman's intuition is a wonderful thing."

"What do you mean?" she demanded anxiously. "Do you—are you hinting that you know anything to his disadvantage?" She frowned. "Please do not forget, Mr. Hemment, that you are talking about my husband's dearest friend, and unless—"

"I am not overlooking that fact," Hemment cut in. He paused for a moment and his face became a mirror of changing emotions. "I warned you, little woman," he went on presently, "that I had some things to tell you which were going to shock you. My task is an unpleasant one, but I have got to go through with it. I would gladly spare you this blow, if I could, but the truth must come out sooner or later, and—it is best that you should hear it now."

He got up from his chair and paced the room twice before he spoke again. On more than one occasion it had been his disagreeable duty as a newspaperman to be the personal bearer of bad news. There was the venerable clergyman, for instance, to whom he had been obliged to communicate the startling details of his wife's arrest for shoplifting in a Fifth Avenue department store; and the haggard, hollow-faced parents who had first learned from him that the long searched-for missing daughter had just been brought to an end by the finding of a grim, sodden bit of flotsam in the East River. Such painful missions as these had made him wince, but they seemed easy in comparison to what was now before him.

"The story you have just told me is an interesting one," he began, "but I am

sorry to say that it is not quite satisfactory."

"Not satisfactory! Why not?" the little, blue-eyed wife of the man in the Bannister Building demanded. "In what way does it fail to—"

She broke off abruptly to glance out of the window. A big, maroon touring-car, with a New York license plate, had just drawn up in front of the house. Her face lighted up as she caught sight of the two men who were alighting therefrom.

"If you have anything unpleasant to say about Mr. Moncrief or Ethan," she remarked to Hemment, "you can say it to their faces. They have arrived just in time."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

VISITORS.

FOR a second the suspicions which he had supposed were forever downed flared up again in the *Mercury* reporter's mind. His keen eyes turned from the two men coming down the gravel path to Cecilie's flushed countenance.

"Were you expecting them?" he asked sharply.

"No, indeed. This is a pleasant surprise. But—"

Mrs. Ethan Underwood interrupted herself to rush out to the front door. A moment later Hemment heard her greeting her visitors in the hall—heard the accountant laugh and say tenderly:

"Are you really glad to see me, little sweetheart? Well, I can assure you it is not one-sided. I have been fairly famished for a glimpse of you. Seems an eternity since I saw you last. But, thank goodness, we're not going to be kept apart any longer. I have some good news for you, girly. Moncrief and I have got to go abroad—on business. We are sailing to-morrow, and you are going with us. Our passages are already booked on the—"

He did not finish the sentence.

Moncrief cut him short with an ejaculation of warning. The latter had just glanced through the space between the portières which draped the entrance to the parlor, and had caught sight of the solitary occupant of that room.

"I see that Mrs. Underwood has company," he said.

"Company!" Underwood echoed, and stepped quickly to his friend's side. The smile that illumined his handsome features dissolved into a scowl as his gaze fell on the tall, lithe, rather pale-faced young man who stood leaning against the parlor mantelpiece, one hand thrust into his coat-pocket.

"What—how did this chap get here, Cecilie?" he demanded unsteadily.

"He traced me through the long-distance call I made last night. This is Mr. Hemment of the New York *Mercury*, Ethan, who has been so very—"

"No need to introduce us, Mrs. Underwood," the newspaperman put in. "Your husband, I perceive, remembers me. We have met before."

His hand came swiftly out of his coat-pocket, and with it the navy automatic which his fingers had been gripping ever since the arrival of these visitors.

"Won't you step in, gentlemen?" he invited, leveling the weapon at the group in the doorway. Please keep your hands in front of you, Mr. Moncrief. I have been in the service and was considered rather good at target practise. I must request both of you to be good enough to refrain from making any move which might be misconstrued. Better come right in and sit down, with your hands folded in your laps. Then there will be no danger of a misunderstanding."

Moncrief was the first to enter the room.

"So this is Mr. Gordon Hemment of the *Mercury!*" he said, with a half sneer, as he seated himself on the red plush sofa, meticulously drawing his well-creased trousers up at the knees. "I have heard of you, sir!"

"I have no doubt that you have. And been very anxious to meet me, too, I have good reason to believe." Hemment grinned. "I quite understand, Mr. Moncrief, that it is not your fault that this is our first opportunity to get together."

He addressed himself to Cecilie's hus-

band who was moving over to another part of the room.

"No; not that chair, Mr. Underwood, if you please. Kindly sit on the sofa beside your friend. That will be a much better arrangement. And you take the armchair in the corner, Miss Harvey—beg your pardon, I mean Mrs. Underwood. There might be some misunderstanding presently, and I want to make quite sure that you are out of range.

"You bully!" the girl cried, facing him with flashing eyes. "I shall stay just where I am. I would like to know what justification you can possibly have for this—this dime-novel behavior. I thought you were a gentleman, Mr. Hemment. I have never—never been so mistaken in anybody in my life."

"I am facing odds of two to one," Hemment remarked. "And I haven't any doubt that both these gentlemen are armed. I assure you that I keenly regret having to resort to these melodramatic tactics in your presence, Mrs. Underwood, but in the circumstances I consider them justified."

He paused. "Now, if you will kindly be seated, I will go on with the story I was about to tell you when these visitors so opportunely arrived. When you have heard it I am confident you will not blame me much for the precautions I am taking."

Cecilie glanced uncertainly at the two sullen-faced men seated on the sofa, then obediently moved over to the armchair in the corner.

"Nothing you can tell me could make me believe that there is any excuse for threatening my husband with a gun," she declared loyally. "However, if listening to your story will be the quickest way of putting an end to this farcical situation, Mr. Hemment, I suppose we shall have to let you have your say. If you have the slightest consideration for my feelings, though, you will be as brief as possible."

"Oh, let him take his time," Moncrief put in coolly. "We are rather curious to hear all that he has to tell, eh, Underwood?"

The accountant made no response. His gaze was riveted on his wife's face. From the troubled expression on his own features, the light of apprehension in his fine eyes, it was evident that to him the situation was anything but farcical.

"Perhaps I had better begin by making it clear to you, Mrs. Underwood, why your late employer, who called himself Howard Parsons Wrigley, was murdered in his office, and why his partner, Gilder, soon after came to an equally violent end in a cheap hotel on the water-front," Hemment said.

His words were addressed to the woman seated on his left, but he faced the male portion of his unfriendly audience. Not for an instant did he allow his gaze to wander from the two men who sat meekly on the sofa, with their hands folded in their laps. While for the moment he held the whip-hand over them, as he stood with his back to the mantelpiece, threatening them with his automatic, he realized that these were desperate men who, despite their present apparently submissive attitude, would be quick as panthers to seize upon the slightest chance to turn the tables on him.

The thought flashed through his mind now as he met the look of murderous hate that smoldered in Moncrief's eyes, that he had been negligent in not backing his captives up against the wall and searching them for concealed weapons before he began his recital. But he did not go to the trouble of correcting that tactical error. He felt fairly confident of his ability to match his vigilance against their sleight-of-hand. Besides, that scornful remark of his little girl reporter friend about "dime novel behavior" had rather got under his skin.

"Those unfortunate men were put to death," he went on, "because they were trying to pry into the secrets of a gang of forgers whose leader was an old enemy of theirs—a gentleman named Alton Lestrade, sometimes referred to as 'Duke' Lestrade, because of his charming manners and aristocratic mien, who—I beg your pardon, Mr. Moncrief; did you speak?"

"I didn't say anything," denied the gray-haired man on the sofa, who had muttered an ejaculation under his breath. "Go on with your story. It is becoming interesting."

"I think I can promise you that it will

become even more interesting presently," the *Mercury* reporter assured him. "As I was about to say, Mrs. Underwood, this man Lestrade had saved himself from going to jail, many years ago, by turning State's evidence against Wrigley and Gilder with whom he was then associated in a scheme for the promotion of fake oil stock. As a result of his testimony they were both convicted and sentenced to the Atlanta Penitentiary. Naturally they were inclined to hold a grudge against him for that. During their sojourn in prison they meditated schemes of vengeance against him, no doubt. But when they came out into the world again they learned that their enemy had escaped beyond their vengeance—that he had been drowned at sea."

"Drowned at sea!" Moncrief put in. "I beg your pardon, but I understood you to say that he was the leader of the band of forgers whose secrets those fellows were trying to pry into at the time of their demise. There appears to be a slight discrepancy there."

"There is no discrepancy, Mr. Moncrief. Those men were led to believe that Lestrade was dead. They shared that belief with the rest of the world for several years. But a few weeks ago they made a rather interesting discovery. It came in some way to their attention that an aristocratic looking gentleman, who bore a close enough resemblance to their old enemy to have been his ghost, was transacting business of a confidential nature with an accountant on the twentieth floor of a Nassau Street office building. And, not believing in ghosts, they decided that it might be worth their while to try to find out the nature of the business which took Mr. Alton Lestrade to that office so frequently. They had a suspicion that something crooked was going on there, and if they could get possession of the secret they might be able to tip off the police and thereby settle their score against the man who had double-crossed them."

He was interrupted again—this time by a cry of mingled alarm and indignation from Underwood's wife.

"Ethan, what does he mean?" she demanded. "How does he dare—what is he trying to make me believe?"

"The fellow is raving," the accountant declared, but his face had gone chalky-white to the roots of his hair. "Yellow journalism must have its fling, I suppose," he added with a sneer. "But until—unless he is able to offer some proof to substantiate his preposterous insinuations, I don't see why you should attach any importance to them, girly."

Hemment hesitated for a moment, deeply moved by the girl's distress. Then he steeled himself, and went right on with his story.

"The fact that the office of the accountant was directly across the street from their own, so that their window commanded a view of his, suggested to them the rather novel scheme of advertising for an expert lip-reader, with the idea of catching what passed between Lestrade and the man he visited so often. They were successful in engaging the services of a young lady who professed to be able to read lips; but, unfortunately for them, she happened to be a very dear friend of one of the men they were trying to spy on, and as soon as she found out what their game was, she rushed over and put him and Lestrade wise to what was going on."

The reporter smiled sardonically at the two scowling men on the red plush sofa. "And a few hours later," he exclaimed with dramatic emphasis, "poor Wrigley was found dead in his office, with a cord tied tightly around his neck. He had been drugged into insensibility with the fumes of *netrite d'amyle*, contained in a little hollow glass globe which was crushed beneath his nostrils, and then he was strangled with the knotted cord.

"The knot in that cord was a peculiar one, gentlemen—so much out of the ordinary that Deputy Police Commissioner Oglivie, when he came to investigate that first murder, was inclined to regard it as a very promising clue. And, having a great respect for his judgment in such matters, I naturally was very much interested when, the following day I paid a visit to the office of an accountant on the twentieth floor of the Bannister Building, and observed a package on his desk, the cord around which was tied with exactly the same kind of a knot.

In fact, it was that accidental discovery which first put me on the right track. Taken by itself, it was not conclusive evidence, I must admit, but it encouraged me to believe that I was very close to the slayer of Wrigley."

Another cry came from Cecilie.

"Good heavens!" she gasped. "Are you accusing Ethan, my husband, of that horrible crime?"

"I hope not," Hemment said fervently. "I am glad to be able to assure you, Mrs. Underwood, that we have nothing on your husband, so far as either of those murders is concerned, beyond the fact that he is so closely associated with Lestrade.

"It was Alton Lestrade—alias the Duke—alias Mr. Moncrief, who left that telltale package on your husband's desk. It was Lestrade, alias Moncrief, who was responsible for the violent deaths of both those ill-fated men. Of that there is not the slightest doubt. But I am hoping for your sake—and for his, too—that Underwood will be able to clear himself of complicity in those major crimes."

"Much obliged, Mr. Hemment," said the accountant with an ironical laugh. "It is good news, indeed, to hear that you have nothing on me, personally; but—"

"Nothing on you so far as the murders are concerned," the newspaperman corrected him sternly. But there will be plenty of evidence to convict you of being the author of all those skilfully executed forgeries which have been giving police headquarters so much trouble recently. I am sorry to say that I can hold out no hope of your being able to clear yourself on that charge. I wish to heaven I could, for the sake of this unfortunate girl, your innocent dupe, whose life you have so ruthlessly wrecked."

Cecilie sprang to her feet, her face tense with anxiety, but the light of faith still burning in her eyes.

"I don't believe it!" she said, starting to cross over to her husband. "I have too much confidence in you, Ethan, to credit the terrible things this man has dared to—"

But her husband's friend, Mr. Moncrief, did not give her a chance to get any further. Unintentionally she had given him the opportunity his alert, cunning brain had been desperately seeking ever since he had found himself in his present disagreeable predicament. She had stepped between him and the weapon the *Mercury* man was pointing in his direction, and, with the spring of a tiger, Moncrief was on his feet and holding her close to him.

Hemment sensed instantly what was about to happen. But he was powerless to prevent it. With fascinated gaze he watched the ugly, snub-nosed barrel of the gun that was suddenly thrust out past the body of the girl Lestrade was using as a shield. There followed two seconds of inactivity that seemed like a thousand years to the white-faced, helpless young man standing in front of the mantelpiece. Then Lestrade laughed coolly and fired three times, aiming straight for his target.

The *Mercury's* star reporter did not hear the two last shots, nor the scream of a terrified girl which mingled with them. The first bullet had sent him crashing to the floor in a senseless heap.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ONE MISSING.

WHEN Hemment regained consciousness he did not ask himself where he was or what had happened to him. The odor of disinfectants, and as much of his immediate surroundings as he could see without moving his head made him instantly aware that he was in a hospital. And with equal celerity came to him realization of why he was there. That active brain of his began to function immediately, even though there was a queer buzzing in his head and a strange numbness about his body which rather worried him.

Evidently Lestrade and Cecilie's husband had hurried away without waiting to make sure that the former's bullets had quite finished him, he decided with grim humor. They must have been under the impression that he was dead, though. Having learned how much he knew about their affairs they would hardly have been so careless as to leave a spark of life in him intentionally.

Had the girl gone away with them, he wondered? Of course. That was a foolish

question. What would she remain behind for? She must have been a bit shocked at Mr. Moncrief's rather startling display of violence, but probably they had succeeded in making her believe that it was quite according to Hoyle. She loved that plausible scamp of an accountant so much that he seemed to be able to make her believe almost anything.

It was rather surprising, though, that a nice little girl like her should have been willing to run off and leave a chap lying there on the floor, in his condition, without attention! It would have taken a pretty heartless woman to abandon even a stray cat in the circumstances. Pshaw! That was easily explained. She, too, had believed he was dead. And it would be unreasonable to expect her to remain behind to minister to a dead man when she had a live husband insisting that no time must be lost in making a getaway.

Somebody must have picked him up and had him removed to this hospital. The chicken farmer and his wife, most likely. They had come home and found him there, and had rushed out in panic to give the alarm.

How surprised they all must have been to find a strange young man stretched out on their parlor floor! Probably he would be in the headlines of all the Harrisburg papers to-morrow. "Mystery surrounds unidentified man felled by bullets in farmhouse." The local scribes ought fairly to eat that up!

Presently a more serious thought came to him. Perhaps it might still be possible to do something in the way of heading off the fugitives. Underwood had told his wife that they were planning to go abroad. They were to sail to-morrow, and their passage was already booked. Too bad the fellow had not mentioned what part of the world they were bound for, or what steamer they were sailing on! However, even with this vague information to work on something might be done. It would be rather a shock to his little girl reporter friend to have her precious husband nabbed just as they were about to make their getaway. But it would be best for her in the end. Besides, it was his duty. That scoundrel Lestrade certainly must not be allowed to escape if it could be prevented.

A nurse was approaching his cot. He greeted her eagerly. "Could you arrange to have a telegram sent off for me immediately, sister? It's to Deputy Police Commissioner Oglivie, of the New York police department and it's of the greatest importance that he receive it right away."

The nurse smiled at him. "Commissioner Oglivie, did you say? Why send him a telegram? He's down-stairs right now, waiting to see you as soon as the doctor says it's all right."

"Oglivie here!" Hemment exclaimed in astonishment. "What a rare piece of luck! When did he arrive in Harrisburg, nurse?"

"He got back this morning. But he was here a week ago—at the time you were brought in. It was he who brought you here, you know."

The patient stared at her dazedly.

"Ye gods and little fishes! You mean to tell me I've been here a week?" he gasped. "And Oglivie brought me! Hanged if I can make head or tail of that! You say he's down-stairs now, nurse? Then let me see him at once. Never mind bothering the doctor. Bring Oglivie right up."

But hospital rules and regulations are not to be so lightly set aside. The young woman insisted on summoning the house surgeon who, frowningly, informed the New York *Mercury's* star reporter that a patient who within the past seven days had gone through the strain of having two bullets removed from his body must not be in too much of a hurry to receive visitors who might unduly excite him. However, after feeling Hemment's pulse, taking his temperature, and doing various other things to him, the autocrat in the white linen suit finally relented, and permitted the chief of the New York Central Office to make a brief call.

What Oglivie told the patient when he arrived at his bedside certainly did excite the latter not a little.

Oglivie began with an apology. "I almost feel that it is my fault that you are lying here, banged up like this, old man," he said regretfully. "If only we had horned in a couple of minutes earlier! But, of

course we didn't dream that Lestrade was going to get the drop on you. From our position under the parlor window we could only *hear* what was going on. We couldn't see a thing, not wanting to show our faces, and, from what we heard, we imagined that you had the situation well in hand. It was only when we heard the shots that we became aware that something had gone wrong, and butted into the party."

Hemment regarded the speaker with astonishment. "So you were under the window, taking in everything!" he exclaimed. "You shadowed me from New York, in spite of your promise, and—"

"Not at all," Oglivie cut in, frowning. "Nobody has ever caught me going back on my word, Mr. Hemment. We didn't shadow you. It wasn't necessary. We were on the scene ahead of you—at least, two of my men were."

"Ahead of me?"

"Let me explain. You recall that night when you left word for me at headquarters to call you up at the *Mercury* office as soon as I came in? Well, when I did call up—the first time—I had rather an interesting experience. Central got me hitched up to a busy wire, and when I heard the conversation that was going on, for once I wasn't peeved at the poor service. For you were one of the parties on that line, old man, and the lady at the other end was Miss Cecilie Harvey.

"As soon as I became aware of that fact I took the liberty of listening in. Such liberties are justified in our business. And I got enough to cause me to congratulate myself on my good luck."

"I see," said Hemment. "And you followed the same course that I did—traced the girl through that long-distance call?"

The other nodded. "It was the obvious thing to do, wasn't it? We located her hiding-place, and I chased a couple of my men out there the following morning, with instructions to keep a shadow on her." He grinned. "That was why I had Dolan pick you up that same morning, and drag you down to headquarters—at least, it was one of my reasons. I had an idea that you might go out there, and I wanted to make sure that my men got on the job first. By making you lose your train, that was cinched."

"And when did you get out there, commissioner?"

"About the same time that you did. At least, I arrived in Harrisburg on the same train. O course I wasn't shadowing you, though. My men had telephoned in, reporting that the girl was there all right, and asking for further instructions. I decided that it might be worth my while to run out there myself and interview her. The boys were on the job, watching the farmhouse, when you arrived, but I didn't get on the scene, myself, until Lestrade and Underwood paid their visit.

"Frankly, we didn't have the slightest idea who those fellows were at first," Oglivie admitted. "But we saw that the car had a New York license tag. That looked as though there might be something doing. So we crouched under the parlor window, and heard your little spiel—right up to the moment that Lestrade winged you."

"And then?" the newspaperman asked quickly.

"And then we horned right in, of course, and interfered with their plans for making a quick getaway," the detective told him with a grin. "Don't worry, old chap. That bunch is all accounted for. Lestrade is in the Tombs now, awaiting trial for murder in the first degree, to say nothing of the forgery charges and his attack on you. He'll go to the chair, sure. And we've got most of the members of the forgers' gang rounded up, too—including your old friend, Mrs. Kitty Walters. We've had rather a busy week in New York since you've been loafing here."

There followed a long pause. The stricken reporter's eyes had closed, and his visitor thought at first that he had fallen asleep. The latter was about to withdraw softly when Hemment stopped him.

"Don't go yet, commissioner," he urged hastily. "There are a few more details I've got to hear. What about Underwood? What sort of a case have you got against him?"

Oglivie hesitated for a moment, and his expression became grim.

"A pretty good case," he answered.

"But he'll never plead to it—here. There was some more gun-play when we rushed in, after you'd been shot. Both Lestrade and his pal started to blaze away at us until they'd used up every bullet, and naturally we retorted in kind. Frankly, it was pretty wild shooting on both sides, but Underwood was unfortunate enough to get in the way of one of my shots. He got it clean through the head, and he died instantly.

"It's too bad," the detective went on. "I'd have liked to bring that fellow to trial. He was a wonderfully clever forger—a veritable genius. He could do things with checks that almost seemed like magic. And after all the trouble he's given us, he goes and slips through our hands just when we've got a chance to land him.

"However, from the standpoint of that little widow of his, it's probably just as well that he got in front of that bullet. It's the best way out for her, of course."

"Perhaps it is," said Hemment thoughtfully. "How does she take it, Oglivie?"

"Pretty hard. Queer, isn't it, that no matter how much of a scamp a chap may be there's always some one to mourn for him when he cashes in. I guess she'll get over it, though. She's young—not much more than a kid, and she's got the whole world before her."

"Where is she now?" the newspaperman asked.

"I've got her hidden away in a New York hotel. She shrinks from meeting people just now, and she made me promise that I wouldn't divulge her hiding-place to anybody."

Deputy Police Commissioner Oglivie smiled whimsically. "She made one exception, though, Mr. Hemment. I don't know exactly what her idea was, but she told me that I might whisper her address to you when you're ready to leave here."

(The end.)

UNDERSTUDY

WHEN David begged me to become his wife,
Because his children needed mothering so,
'Twas like God's sunshine to my lonely life—
Long years I'd loved him—though he did not know.

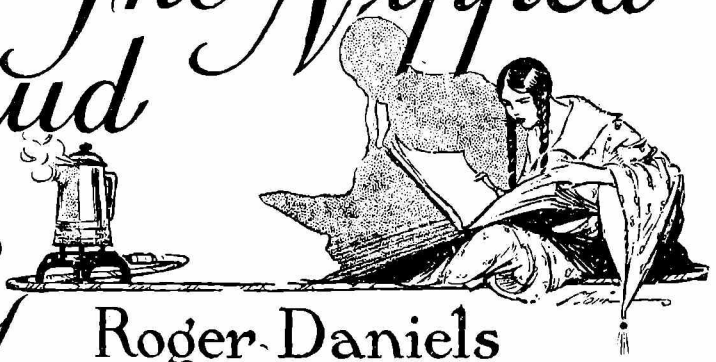
His little ones adored me from the start,
As without stint I spent myself to make
Them happy, hoping humbly in my heart,
David might come to love me for their sake.

Even the surly house-dog hovered near,
Beating his stubby tail upon the floor
In welcome. Everybody held me dear,
Except the silent man whose name I bore.

True—he was thoughtful, ever kind—but yet,
O'nights, when dreams set soul and body free,
For *her* he'd call—the dead wife Margaret,
Who in the grave still triumphed over me!

Mazie V. Caruthers.

The Nipped Bud



by Roger Daniels

DESPITE the fact that she knew by heart every word on the page before her, Mary Regan must con over the daily matin: "How Worth Brent Picks His Stars."

Since the magazine gave forth the authentic interview some weeks before, Mary had never missed an opportunity to satisfy herself, over and over, that her own well-modeled features furnished the ideal for which Worth Brent pursued the eternal quest. Her fervent prayer was that some day he would find her. Everything would be limousines and villas forever after. More than once she had resolved to see him and would have done so were it not for the warning in the article, which stated:

> Thousands of beautiful young women come to the Brent studios annually, to no avail. Worth Brent tells them all that the ideal camera face must be of his own seeking.
>
> Somewhere in this broad land of ours she lives all unaware of the fame and fortune which await her. Some day Brent, or one of his numerous agents, will find her, demure and unsuspecting. It will be a lasting event in the pages of Moviedom.

Mary Regan knew the personal ins and outs of every star on the screen as a hermit monk knows the lives of the saints. How each one of them was discovered was as clearly focused on her mind as the lens' image on the ground glass. To her the movies were Alpha and Omega. Life was one—

"Thank heaven that cawfee's perked!"

To those who murmur about the length of time it takes the deadlier sex to dress, Mary should stand apart as *ne plus ultra*. No matter what stage her morning toilet might have reached when the coffee-pot went on the single gas-burner, the moment the coffee was done, Mary was ready.

A few minutes later she grabbed a morning paper from the stand at the foot of the steps as she made a wild scramble up to the Sixth Avenue Elevated. Fortunately she found a seat and was soon head-deep in the news. But it wasn't news at all she read. Her eyes were devouring that little feature at the top of the eighth column, Ann Bickers's Daily Chat with the Girl Who Works. The title of the day's instalment was "The Movie Masher."

As she finished reading it Mary subconsciously brought her lips together in a straight, hard line. Deep furrows cut into her forehead. She looked through the smiling young man on the opposite seat in a way that made the youngster—who had been admiring her—turn a guilty red. Mary did not see that. She was in another world. Her elbow gave the man next to her a violent dig in the ribs.

"You tell 'em, Ann old girl!" she muttered. "Would I like to see one of them get fresh with this little girl who works? You just bet I would!"

From One Hundred and Tenth Street to Thirty-Third, her facial expression was

nothing short of malicious. Wo to any movie masher who had met her then.

Arrived at the novelty counter in the great store, Mary went through the customary formality of dusting things off. In the course of this operation she paused to hail the girl across the aisle.

"Oh, Myrt! Say, girly, didja read Ann Bickers's colyum this mornin'?"

"Uh-huh, lotta bunk," appraised Myrtle. "That Bickers Jane must belong in a old ladies' home. What she think a girl's goin' do after grinnin' like a Chessie cat all day tryin' to be pleasant to a wild, bargain-huntin' bunch of hyenas? Go to the libr'y or the Ev'ry Night Sewin' Circle? If old lady Bickers had this job one day she'd be laid out the next in the Funeral Church! Just because a fella wants to show a girl a good time why—"

"Tell it to Freddie, Myrt, next time he comes around. Y'know just as well as I do a girl's gotta keep both eyes wide open!"

"Uh-huh, but she don't have to wear blinkers! I gave a good lookin' Johnnie the once-over at the movies last night and, say, Mary, y'ought to hear Freddie rave! But I smoothed deary over, and to-night we're goin' to Palisades Park. Wanta come along?"

"Thanks, awfully, girly. Y'know I'd love to go over there with you and Freddie. But, honest injun, I gotta date."

The opening gong sounded somewhere in the depths of the great store. The doors swung open and a black stream poured in. There was a bargain sale on.

For Mary it was one of those days which never seem to come to an end. She watched the swaying surge around Myrtle's counter and as the hours crawled slowly by wished there had been a bargain offering in novelties as well as in hosiery. The general tendency of those who came to the novelty counter seemed to be: "I'm just looking, thank you!"

The afternoon was a repetition of the morning with only an occasional sale to relieve the monotony. One of the attributes of a sale is that it completes a transaction. Something has been accomplished. Bargain day may be hard on the nerves, but at least it makes the hours fly.

It was nearly closing time when a middle-aged woman in a sober and rather old-fashioned tailored suit stepped up to the novelty counter. She timidly picked up an eight-by-ten picture-frame and appeared to be measuring it with a photograph she held in her hand, glancing furtively about her as if in great fear of being discovered, when Mary leaned over the counter.

"Was you wantin' anything?"

The little woman started back.

"Why, I—I was just looking—that is—I—I was looking for a frame. I—I want a frame."

"That one you got in your hand?" asked Mary coldly. "Is that the kind you want?"

The little woman looked down, seeming to have forgotten that she had it. The sight of the frame apparently restored her courage.

"To be sure," she said. "Now I have a picture here that seems to go well with this frame, but—" She was hesitant still and as she stood irresolute she inadvertently placed the picture, face up, on the counter.

Mary saw it.

"Worth Brent! A real photograph! Say, ma'am, do you know Worth Brent?"

Once again the little woman was startled, but this time Mary was quick to reassure her.

"Say, ain't that just swell? Y'know, ma'am, I got that same picture on my bureau. Only mine ain't a real photograph. Gee, but I'd like to have one like this! Do you know Director Brent?"

The little woman did not and maybe it was foolish to have his photograph, but a friend who reviewed photoplays had given it to her and she did so admire his pictures and there wasn't any harm in wanting to have his photograph, was there?

"Say, ma'am, I'd go to bed without supper for a month to own that picture. Autographed, too! Would y'mind if I took it just a second?"

The little woman would not mind. She was still a little dazed.

Mary slipped out at the end of the counter and crossed over to where Myrtle was answering seven women at once.

"Pst! Hey, Myrt!" she whispered.

At the call Myrtle left the bargain-hunters.

"Lookit, Myrt! Worth Brent, autographed 'n everything!"

Myrtle took the proffered photo and held it approvingly at arm's length.

"Swell, I'll say so! Where'd y' get it?"

"Belongs to that lady with the gray bonnet. She's a friend of his an' I'm pickin' her a frame for it. Thought y'd like to see it. Quick, here comes old Smithers!"

Mary was back behind her counter and busily engaged with the little woman when Smithers, the floorwalker, strolled by.

"Now what y'need for this picture is a nice oval like this one. Them eight-by-tens only ought to be used on views of the "Old Homestead" and groups. There! Just look at that! Swell? An' that frame only costs you two dollars!"

"Yes," said the little woman. "I believe that is much better than the large one. Can you have the picture framed and send it?"

"That ain't usually done in the novelty, ma'am, but I'll get it fixed up all right!"

"Thank you very much. Here is just the right change and my address is on this card. I'm really in a great hurry. Thank you, good day!"

"Say, ain't that what you call nice!" Mary said to her fast-disappearing back. "If they was all like you this job 'd be a dream!"

Then she picked up the card the little woman had left.

"Ann Bickers!"

II.

JUST as the closing gong sounded, Mary sauntered over to her chum's counter.

"Well, girly, hope you and Freddie have a good time. Sorry I can't go along. Y'know these dates. An' take my advice and don't go vampin' too many of 'em. Freddie's a pretty nice reg'lar."

She turned as if to leave and then came back.

"Oh, Myrt! Guess who the nice little lady was?"

"Give up."

"Ann Bickers!"

"Go on!"

"Herself! Gimme her card, see?"

"Well now! Why didn't y'tell me it was her? She didn't look half bad. Stuff she writes is kinda good, too, but she put it on thick about them movie mashers. But us girls gotta be careful. Guess she means well. C'mon, let's beat it, I gotta get fixed up for Freddie!"

They parted at the corner, Myrtle making a dive into the subway while Mary turned up Broadway. The "date" that had made it impossible for her to go with Freddie and Myrtle was Worth Brent's latest picture, "The Lotus Isle." For two long months it had been showing at a legitimate theater at top prices, so Mary had bided her time until the superfeature should come to a popular-priced movie-house. The suspense of the past two months had been terrible and nothing under the sun was going to stop her from seeing the first lower-priced showing.

There was a young man in a green cap standing at the corner of Thirty-Sixth Street as she passed. It was the bright hue of the headgear that attracted her attention. As she was swallowed up in the whirling maelstrom at Times Square she caught sight of the green cap again. This time she deliberately looked at the wearer. He smiled as if in recognition, and Mary coldly tossed her head in the other direction.

The traffic whistle shrieked its clarion order and she was swept on. She was breathless when she reached the theater, not only from the exertion of boring a way through the milling crowd, but also from that elation which is attendant upon all events close to the heart-strings. Some experience it at a horse-race or when the mighty Ruth hits a home-run. To Mary it was the chance to see a Worth Brent movies coupled with that ever-present hope that some day she herself would be a Worth Brent star.

Once inside the theater she found a comedy on the screen, so she picked out a good seat and settled down for the treat that was to come. Her hand sought her powder-puff.

It was then she noticed some one coming in to take the vacant seat beside her.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw that it was he of the green cap.

"Well, of all the nerve! Here's where one movie masher gets all that's comin' to him if he tries to get fresh with me!"

She gave the powder-puff a decisive shove into her hand-bag, and as she did so her hand touched Miss Bickers's card. A brilliant idea was born with the contact. The young man had just sidled into the next seat. Mary patted the card reassuringly and waited for the expected to happen.

As she surmised the young man at once paid more attention to her than he did to the slap-stick antics on the screen. Mary's attitude was decidedly encouraging and presently he attempted that age-old opener:

"My, but it's warm!"

"Since y'mentioned it, it *is* kinda warm," Mary answered.

Having put the weather to rest it was natural the next topic in order should be the movies.

Apparently the young man was well versed in film lore. He even vouchsafed the information that he was connected with the movies.

"Is that so? Mebbe you might work for Worth Brent himself?" Mary asked him.

The young man admitted it. "I'm sort of assistant to Worth, help him with some of the little scenes."

"So you're a real director?"

"Oh, I'd hardly say that."

"Did y' do any of the scenes in 'The Lotus Isle'?"

"No, most of them were made down South."

"Is that so? Y'know I read in a movie magazine all the beautiful outdoor scenes were taken down there."

"Yes, I heard there was an article, but I haven't seen it."

"It was a pretty good story. But I didn't think y'could believe all the movie magazines said. I read one once that said Worth Brent was always lookin' for a ideal type and that y' didn't have to have experience or anything if y' had the features." Mary eyed the young man narrowly. "Is that true?"

"Absolutely. If you'll pardon me for taking liberties I'd like to ask you if you'd let me take a few shots of you?"

"Aw, quit kiddin' me!"

"No, I mean it. We can go out somewhere, say next Sunday, and have a day of it. When the film is developed I'll show it to Worth. I think you're just the girl he wants for his next picture, 'The Heart of Joan.' He's casting it now."

Mary kept a firm grip on Ann Bickers's card. Things were moving faster than she had anticipated.

"Y'really mean it?"

"Sure, why not? You know, kiddo, you've got—"

"Nothin' doin' on that kiddo business! Not with me!"

"I beg your pardon, Miss—Miss—"

"Bickers, Ann Bickers."

"I did not intend to be rude, Miss Bickers."

"Well, I'll forgive y' this time. Where's Mr. Brent now?"

The young man hesitated. "I'm not quite positive. You see, I've been away on my vacation, but I think he may be up Westchester way."

Mary remembered she had read several times in the daily papers about gay parties at Westchester roadhouses. So that was it?

"Would we have to go up where Mr. Brent is?" she asked.

"We wouldn't have to, but it would be better to go up there if you'll go. You might meet Worth."

"Oh, I'd love to meet him, Mr—what's your name?"

"Burton, Jimmy Burton."

"Don't think I'm rushin' things, Mr. Burton, but you've got me all excited like. Why couldn't we motor up to-morrow? Of course, we might not be able to find Mr. Brent, but y' could take my pictures anyway, and we could have a reg'lar picnic. If I do say it myself I kinda like you, Mr. Burton."

"That's just fine, Miss Bickers! I'll see you home and then I'll come around to-morrow."

To have him see her home would disrupt all Mary's plans. For a moment she was nonplused, but only for a moment.

"Sorry, Mr. Burton. Y'can't see me

home to-night. I gotta date to meet a girl friend after the show over to the Claridge."

"Well, to-morrow then. Tell me where you live and I'll be around early. We ought to start betimes and have a day of it."

A glance at the screen showed Mary that the Brent picture was just coming on. She must bring the affair to an end.

"Here, Mr. Burton," she said, handing the young man Miss Bickers's card. "My address is there. I'll be ready for you at eight o'clock sharp.

"That's fine. I'll have the car around on the dot."

"Gee, here's the picture! But I guess you've seen it, Mr. Burton. You must get tired looking at Brent's pictures?"

"Yes, I've seen this one until I know it by heart. And as long as you won't let me see you home, Miss Bickers, I'll run along and make plans for to-morrow, if you'll excuse me?"

"Why, certainly, Mr. Burton. An' don't you forget an' oversleep or anything."

"You bet, I won't! Well, so-long until to-morrow, Miss Bickers!"

He shook hands with Mary and then went out. As he passed through the lobby he chuckled to himself: "Oh, boy! They sure fall for little James W.!"

III.

MARY REGAN experienced more real ecstasy as she sat through the picture than her young life had ever known before. It was not hard to imagine the reception the so-called Mr. Burton would receive at the hands of the real Miss Bickers. But what if Miss Bickers should come down to the store? The thought startled Mary. But Miss Bickers was such an old dear and, anyway, she would not know where the card had come from.

Fears left Mary and it was in high glee that she walked across Forty-Second Street after the performance to get the Elevated home. All night long she dreamed of a wild chase across Westchester fields, in and out of Westchester roadhouses. Mr. Burton was in the lead and behind him brandishing an umbrella hurried Miss Bickers. Mary sat on a fence beside Worth Brent and watched the sport until she laughed so hard she lost her balance. The jar of the fall woke her up and one hurried glance at the clock told her she had overslept.

By a superhuman burst of speed, also by going without breakfast, she broke all records and dashed through the employees' entrance to the great store just as the opening gong sounded. Before the reverberating echo of it had died she was at her place behind the novelty counter.

"Thank the Lord old Smither's didn't see me," she gasped.

There was no time for her to catch her breath, however, for with the opening of the doors, Miss Bickers came flying down the aisle, her old-fashioned skirt spread like a cup-challenger's sail. Straight for the novelty counter she headed and began talking the moment she was in range.

"Young woman! Where is my card? What do you mean by sending a disreputable villain to my apartment at half past seven in the morning? You come with me to the manager at once! The very idea!"

It was Mary's turn to tremble. "Honest, Miss Bickers, it was only a joke, I—I—"

"A joke, young woman! Are you in your proper senses? A joke? To have a man ring my bell and then when I went to the speaking-tube to ask me to go joy-riding with him? A joke? To be told I was a piker and a bum sport when I informed him he had made a mistake? A joke? For him to tell me I had given him my card at a theater and that I had cold feet? Young woman, is that a joke?"

"Oh—oh, please, Miss Bickers. Don't g-get me f-fired! I—I didn't m-mean no harm, honest, I d-didn't. I r-read your colyum about the movie m-m-mashers and I w-w-wanted to—"

At the mention of her column Miss Bickers's mien grew less belligerent.

"Does reading my advice to girls who work give you the right, young woman, to take liberties with me?"

"N-no, Miss Bickers. I—I didn't mean no h-harm. I—I just thought y' could handle that m-masher b-better than I could. He—he followed me to a theater and I—I

g-got scared stiff. An' I saved your card because I l-liked you an' when he got me s-so nervous I told him I would m-meet him and g-go ridin' an' I g-give him your card!"

"Do you mean to tell me that insolent wretch followed you to a theater, poor child?"

"Honest, he did, Miss Bickers. An' d-don't get me f-fired; this is the only job I g-got!"

"Why, you poor darling. Of course I won't cause you to lose your position, now that I understand. You see, I had my new cards from the engravers only yesterday and as the one I had left with you was the only one I had used I knew you must have given it to that brute. There, there, poor girl, don't worry. That scoundrel will never bother you again after what I said to him!"

"An' y' won't get me fired, Miss Bickers?"

"Certainly not! My purpose is to help girls who work!"

"S-say, Miss Bickers, you're a peach! An' ever since I first read your colyum I just knew you was!"

"I'm glad you appreciate my work. They say everything turns out for the best. I must go now. I'm so sorry I misjudged you, little girl."

As Mary Regan watched Miss Bickers disappear down the long aisle she smiled knowingly. "I'll just bet she made it hot for that masher!"

Then her thoughts wandered on to dream of the day when in real earnest Worth Brent, or one of his agents, would discover her and she would come into her own.

Mary was no mental telepathist. So how was she to know that at that precise moment a very crestfallen young gentleman in a green cap, who went by the name of Burton, was delivering a tale of wo to his chief up Westchester way.

"And I'm telling you, Worth," Burton was saying, "she was the very girl to play the daughter in 'The Heart of Joan'!"

ʊ ʊ ʊ ʊ

THE CITY

OH, the gray eyes of the city, they are laughing on her throng,
Where the toilers raise their turrets with a lusty, strident song;
And she's musing on the future, with its rainbow dreams unborn,
When the world shall praise her glory as the sparrows praise the dawn.

Oh, the gray eyes of the city, they are scornful, proud and vain!
For her commerce leads all others in accumulated gain;
And her shipping spans the ocean with its manufactured store,
While her engines stand all panting on the threshold of her door.

Oh, the gray eyes of the city, they are weeping bitter tears
For her weak and puny offspring and her gamins old in years;
For the leering, painted women and the youngsters worldly-wise
That she mothered in her anguish with her shame before her eyes.

Oh, the gray eyes of the city, they are blind and blurred and black!
She is waiting for the Savior to come treading His way back;
She is praying for those life-crumbs that shall gladden you and me
Which the dogs licked 'neath His table on the shores of Galilee!

Gordon Johnstone.

The Buster

by William Patterson White

Author of "The Owner of the Lazy D," "The Brass Elephant," etc.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHAT CONNIE SAW.

TOM JONES and Bud Thompson entered the Engle House by way of a side window in the dining-room. They entered the kitchen to find Bill Coryell peering past the door-jamb at the fortuitous stove that meant so much to Rebel Stanley.

Coryell was reloading his six-shooter and swearing, but he took time out to greet pleasantly the two men.

At this juncture the rifle behind the rusty stove cracked, and a forty-five-ninety buzzed past Thompson's ear and tucked into the wall at his back.

"He thinks yo're me, I guess," observed Coryell, withdrawing himself a little farther behind the sheltering wall. "It's lighter over there where you are."

Bud Thompson did not remain "over there" an appreciable length of time. He joined Tom Jones under a window-sill before the words were out of Coryell's mouth.

Crack! A spurt of gray smoke between the stove and a whisky-keg. Sput-t! Plink! Tinkle! And the largest water-pitcher the Engle House possessed flew in pieces. Crack! A high pile of stoneware was struck at the bottom and fell all ways with clinkings and crashings.

"If this keeps up," remarked Coryell, cocking a humorous eye at the two under the window-sill, "I dunno what Buff will do for supper."

Buff was the hotel proprietor. Tom and Bud grinned. They did not sympathize with Buff. For the previous week he had raised the price of Sunday dinner from six bits to a dollar, and they considered that a bit of misfortune would do him good.

Entered then Buff from the dining-room crying:

"Here! Here! What are you celebratin'?"

Crack! The rifle at the stove answered Buff's question and bored the lintel of the dining-room door. The two under the window-sill became three in a breath.

"Welcome, Buff," Coryell intoned gravely, "welcome to the Promised Land. If I was you I'd move that there table. She's right in range, an' the gent behind the stove has already put a crimp in the water-pitcher an' a stack o' plates. No, no, not this here stove—the one out yonder."

Crack! Buff flattened himself on the floor with a grunt. A bullet had grooved the window-sill and sprinkled splinters down the back of his neck. Coryell laughed.

"Who is it out there?" demanded Buff. "Who? Rebel Stanley! Hell's bells. Bill, couldn't you 'a' picked s'm'other place besides my kitchen for a fort?"

"I done the best I could," Coryell protested mildly. "I had to hunt through nigh every room in yore old shack before I was able to throw down on Stanley, an' then he was leggin' it for Tom Jones's barn fast as he could."

"I heard you had a fracas with him in the Mint," Buff grumbled on. "Whyn't you settle it there, instead o' draggin' it all over other folks' property an' causin'

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for December 18.

damage to the same. Oh, damitall! There goes a butter-dish!"

"You can scrape the butter off the floor after we get through," said Coryell. "I wish I had my rifle. Lookit, Buffy, will you watch he don't run away while I get my rifle off the saddle? My hoss is tied over at the back o' the Mint corral. Will yuh?"

"No, I won't!" Buff squawked, while Tom Jones and Bud Thompson whooped with merriment. "G' on outside, for Gawd's sake, Bill! He'll ruin my kitchen! Y' oughta settled this at the Mint, I tell yuh!"

"Couldn't be did," denied Coryell. "I never wanted to down him—just muss him up, thassall."

A bullet from Rebel Stanley's rifle chipped a top panel of the dining-room door. The door opened, and the sheriff entered with caution.

"Is anybody shootin' out here?" he asked, staring in amazement at the three gentlemen crouching under the window-sill.

An empty coffee-pot on a shelf leaped and jiggled. The trio became a quartet.

"Move over, can'tcha, Buff? Wanna hog all the room?" Thus the sheriff, elbowing.

"Yes, I do," replied Buff, elbowing back. "I can't have too much room, an' she's my kitchen, anyway."

Wat Pickett made himself small as possible, and demanded explanations. He got them.

"I don't mind a ordinary gun-play," said the sheriff, when Buff, the most vociferous of the explainers, paused for breath, "but this here promiscuous shootin' has gotta stop. First thing you know, Bill, some innocent bystander will get beefed."

"I know four innocent bystanders that won't if they can help it," chuckled Coryell.

"Tha's all right," said the sheriff, reddening. "It's gotta stop."

"S'pose you go an' tell Stanley that, an' see what he says. Maybe we can get together. So far I ain't been able to do a thing with him."

"He shore is takin' root behind that stove," said Tom Jones.

"Guess he knows what a valuable man he is to Swing Kyler," suggested Coryell.

"You got no business stirrin' up more trouble thisaway with the Slash K," said the sheriff. "Now—" He hesitated.

"Now the town's liable to be dragged in, huh?" Coryell completed the sentence for him. "That 'll shore be tough, Wat, most damnly tough. But if the Slash K gets to rough-housin' you an' yore deputies too much, call on me, Wat, call on me. Always glad to oblige, always."

"You know what I mean, Bill!" snorted the sheriff. "I—" He floundered.

"Shore, I know what you mean. The Slash K is liable to do a lil promiscuous shootin' themselves, huh?"

"I mean—"

"You mean Swing will think you'd somehow ought 'a' kept Slow Baker an' his other pet out of harm's way. Shore, I knowed you meant that all along."

"What the Slash K thinks don't bother me none," lied the sheriff, vexed that Coryell had divined the truth so easily. "I guess I know my business an' can handle anythin' that comes *when* it comes."

"Correct, an' speakin' of business, Wat, was it business took yuh out to the Slash K two-three hours after I dropped in to see you couple o' weeks ago?"

"What are you talkin' about?"

"Nothin', only I happened, just happened, to be eatin' my breakfast down in them cottonwoods along the river when you come lopin' down the Hatchet trail an' swung into the trail to the Slash K. I was wonderin' whether you told Swing or any of 'em I was aimin' to scout round the Slash K, Rising Creek, an' the Kettle."

The sheriff blinked at Coryell.

"It would certainly be a shame," went on the latter, "if you've done made Swing waste any of his valuable time a lookin' for me in the wrong places."

"You think yo're pretty smart," the sheriff sneered feebly.

"Common-sensical, thassall," corrected Coryell. "Nemmind, Wat, you'll know more a year from now than you do to-day. Say, Buff, s'pose you go outside an' un-

hook the kitchen door an' close it. Then I won't need you any more. Take the rest o' the day off, if you like. No, Buffy, not even to oblige you. I'm hot enough awready. Did them Buck Snorters ever try to swear out a warrant for me, Wat?"

"No!" snapped the sheriff.

"Anybody arrested yet for the Coombs murder?"

"No!" Another snap.

"I dunno how them teeth of yores stand the strain," said Coryell, "battin' 'em. together thataway. I think I'll be leavin' you now."

He knelt, steadied his gun against the door-jamb, and fired four times at the stove. Then with the broom handle he pried down the latch of the dining-room door, and levered the door open. There was no shot from the Stanley rifle. He opened the door wide.

Crack! A bullet sped through the kitchen and passed through the dining-room to find lodgment in the front wall. On the heels of the shot Coryell whipped into the dining-room, being narrowly missed as he sprang by a second bullet that split the oilcloth of Buff's dining-room table.

Coryell went on into the barroom. Here were Grover Dawson, his brother Dave, Connie's father, and several other Hatchet citizens. They were all crowded together at a side window that gave a cat-a-cornered view of Rebel Stanley's stove. They were so absorbed that they did not see Coryell as he ran through.

He heard Grover Dawson offer to bet the blacksmith that Coryell would succeed in "getting" Rebel Stanley before sundown. He sped into the street, crossed it, slipped between two false-fronted buildings, turned and raced for the Mint corral. Flipping the dropped reins over his horse's head, he topped the animal without touching the stirrup. Spurring viciously, he sent his mount on the keen jump diagonally across Main Street toward a large corral situate at the left and rear of Dave Dawson's residence and corral. From a corner of the large corral it was Coryell's laudable expectation and desire to take Rebel Stanley and his breastwork in flank.

Behind the sheltering posts of the large corral he dismounted, dragged out his rifle and ran to the corner. He poked a cautious head into the clear. To his intense chagrin, no chapped-and-booted form encumbered the earth behind the stove, but a spurred heel was just vanishing into the gloom of the Jones stable. The stable door closed with a slam. Coryell drove a futile bullet into that stable door.

"Ow! My ear! Leggo!" It was the voice of a child remonstrating to the skies. Coryell looked over his shoulder. He saw Connie Dawson holding Bub Dawson by the ear and collar and expertly "boosting" him homeward. To the uninitiated be it known that boosting is done with the knee. The efficient booster can lift the boostee six inches off the ground at a boost. Connie was an efficient booster.

"I wanna see Bill shoot that other man!" yowled the unfortunate Bub. "Aw, why can'tcha lemme? I never have any fun! I—"

"Shut up!" ordered Connie, and shook him severely. "Just because ma ain't home you needn't think you can run out and get yourself shot. I told you to stay in the house, and I'll see you stay there if I have to lock you in the wood-shed."

"The wood-shed ain't the house!" squealed Bub, struck by the solecism.

"Never mind! Slide right along!"

The two disappeared behind the corral. A moment later a door banged. A muffled voice spoke passionately of smarties, injustice, hatred, and other matters.

Came then Tom Jones to beg that Coryell would not shoot any more bullets through the stable door.

"You see, I got a buckboard inside that stable," explained Tom Jones, "an' from where yo're standin' yore lead oughta sift through it the longest way. I don't like to horn in on any gent's business, Bill, but that buckboard o' mine is brand new."

"'Nough said," Coryell told him promptly "I'll drag it."

"Oh, I wouldn't wanna ask yuh to do that. Just wait till he comes out, if yuh don't mind, an' beef him in the open."

"I can't wait that long. This is one o' my busy days, Tom. I was gonna pull my freight pretty quick anyway after I seen

him go in yore stable. He might stick in there a day—even without water. They's no tellin'."

He jammed the Winchester into the scabbard under the near fender and swung up.

"So-long, Tom," he said, and was off toward Main Street.

As he passed the Dawson premises Connie arose from a dismounted wagon-seat and called to him. He pulled up and took off his hat.

"I got somethin' on my mind, Bill," she told him, standing beside his stirrups, a worried look in her dark-blue eyes.

"Yeah?"

Her tanned hand was slowly smoothing down the horse's mane. "Yeah. You might be interested in knowin' after you and Lottie rode away from Aunt Ella's I —I rode to town—that is, I started to go to town, but I didn't get there soon's I expected.

"I met Swing Kyler at the Sally's Creek ford. Swing had quite a lot to say, one thing and another. Accordin' to him you and Light and Smoky are doin' all the brand blottin'."

"Sayin' it right out in the open now, huh?"

She nodded. "From what I gathered he's fixin' to dump you pretty quick and sudden now."

"I expected he would."

"Which don't matter much now you've started the ball a rollin'." She jerked her head in the general direction of the hotel into which Slow Baker had been taken.

"I hadda get the jump on him," he justified himself. "Only wagon-track out."

"You oughta done it long ago. I ain't through tellin' about my meetin' with Swing, though. He talked quite some, and I got tired finally and cut his chatter short, and he went away. About ten minutes later I thought it might be a good thing to follow Swing.

"I did that, and luckily I met Tommy Barnes, or I'd 'a' lost him. He'd seen Swing, and put me on the right trail. Poor Tommy! He couldn't imagine why I was ridin' after Swing. Well, anyway, to cut it short, I trailed Swing to where he met Andy Ball and Butter Nelson at Flat Creek. He had a talk with them and then he went on to the Kettle and sat down on the rim lookin' over.

"I didn't dare Injun up too close. All I could do was keep his pony in sight where he'd tied it. After we'd been at the Kettle a while a feller came boilin' out of the cottonwoods along Risin' Creek, and roped a cow and flanked a calf. He'd been busy some time, this second man, with one calf and another, and finally Swing went down and held him up and took his gun away.

"They got to talkin', and before long Swing gave him his gun back, and a little later Swing shot him. Yeah, it struck me as sort of odd, too.

"After Swing had shot the feller he made up his brandin' fire, and after earmarkin' the calf over again—the feller he shot had done it first—he earmarked the cow. Then he branded 'em both, turned 'em loose, and rode away.

"I made certain he'd gone before I went down into the Kettle. The feller Swing had shot wasn't dead—only unconscious. No, I didn't know him. Bullet had grooved his head. Not deep, either. And he wasn't bleedin' much, so I didn't touch him. I knew he'd come to all right, and even if he didn't it would serve him right."

"Huh?" For Miss Dawson tone was vicious.

"Yes. The last cow and calf—the ones Swing branded—were branded Box H Box, and the calf's ears were cropped and the cow's grubbed."

"Show's the calf was overlooked at the spring roundup," commented Coryell, "or it would 'a' had grubbed ears too. An' it shows the cow was one o' Lander's. Grubbin' is the only thing that 'll cut out his hole in each ear. Plain croppin' does the trick for my earmarks."

"Right. After that I scouted round for the first calf the wounded man branded. I found it. It was with an L Up-and-Down cow, it was branded Staple Box, and the earmarks were a staple fork in the left and the right cropped."

"Now I know who yore wounded man

is—Rudy Orison. Was his face bunged up an' swelled, an' did he have black hair, black eyes, and' a lil black mustache?"

"His eyes were closed—but the rest of him fits. Rudy Orison. Didn't he use to live here?"

"Yep. Left before you come. Reversed my earmarks, huh? I guess Swing must 'a' overlooked or forgot that calf. He'd never let it go by otherwise. He's got more sense. He'd know it would make folks think too much. What you do then?"

"I came home. What else could I do? Next day I went back with Bub. The wounded man was gone like I expected, and by the tracks it looked as though he'd gone away alone."

"Tell anybody?"

"I did not—not Bub or even pa. I was savin' it up for you. You're *the* interested party in this Slash K business, and I didn't want to interfere with your—plans."

"Thanks is just words, Connie," he began awkwardly. "I dunno how— You oughtn't 'a' done it. You might 'a' got plugged. I can't thank—"

"Don't," she interrupted quickly. "I ain't lookin' for thanks. I—I just done it like I'd 'a' done it for anybody. I—I could swear to that wounded feller in court if you want me to," she finished quickly.

"I don't think it 'll be hardly necessary," he told her grimly. "You won't be brought into it."

"I don't mind."

"I do," he said with finality. "Hear anythin' about the Rowlands?" he added with a man's unconscious brutality.

"They're back at the Two Bar," she answered with a strained smile.

"How's Miss Rowland's head?"

"She's doin' fine. I saw her last week."

"Hear how she pulled me out there at Buck River?"

"Light told me." Her blue eyes flickered.

"She saved my life," he declared simply. "An' her a tenderfoot, as you might say. It was almighty brave of her. Well, I gotta be goin', Connie. Some day I'm hopin' to pay you back for what you done over there in the Kettle. Only next time don't do it. She's too much risk for a girl. Well, so-long."

He bobbed his head awkwardly, pulled on his hat, and mounted.

"Good-by," she said, stiff-lipped, her voice steady.

She stood plaiting and unplaiting the corner of her checked apron long after he had turned the corner of the house. "Oh," she moaned suddenly, "why couldn't I have been the one to save his life? Why couldn't it have been me?"

With slow, dragging footsteps she went to the wood-shed to release her brother.

From Hatchet, Coryell rode directly to the Staple Box shack. He found Light Laurie, his thumb in a bandage, nailing cedar shakes on the roof.

"'Lo, stranger," nodded Light, waving a hammer. "Have a nice ride?"

"Then they didn't kill you after I left?" grinned Coryell.

"Which ain't sayin' they didn't want to. That eagle-beak feller—him with the nose—say, I thought he'd strangle. He shore hated to lose you like his left lung. Where you been?"

"All over. Tell yuh later. What you wood-butcherin' for?"

"Cat fur, to make kitten breeches. Have a pair?"

"If that roof leaks anywhere she's yore fault in the first place. You shingled on them shakes yoreself."

"How could I know the blasted nails would draw? I couldn't help it, could I? You don't think I'm enjoyin' this, do yuh? Hell's bells, I mashed my thumb, an' I got more splinters than a tamarack board, an' I ain't seen a livin' soul for more'n a week—not since I left the Two Bar."

"Mashed yore thumb, huh, an' all splintered up? That *is* tough. You won't be able to do no ridin', then, I can see that."

Light Laurie pricked up his ears like a collie dog. "Ride? Ride where?"

"To Surry Side."

"Surry Side?"

"Yup."

"Oh, that's it, huh? You must 'a' been awful busy these last two weeks."

"Oh, so-so."

"Oh, for Gawd's sake, drop the other sock!" cried Light Laurie, wriggling with impatience. "This suspense is killin' me!"

"Smoky go back to his own place?"

"Yeah! Tell it, tell it!"

Coryell stared critically at Light Laurie.

"I guess you an' I can manage it between us," he announced in a maddening drawl. "Yo're kind of bright, an' with me— All right, all right, don't sling that hammer! C'mon down an' I'll tell yuh all about it."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FRIENDS IN NEED.

"IS that a saloon, or do my eyes deceive me?" said Light Laurie, blinking at the grimy sign of the Say When saloon as he and Coryell rode into Dogrib.

"You don't want no drink," denied Coryell.

"I don't, huh? I been spittin' cotton the last two hours. I'm drier than the top lid of hell. I wanna drink, you wanna drink, we both wanna drink. That's fair enough."

"Well, maybe a couple wouldn't hurt. I am kind o' dry, now I think of it. Need some tobacco too."

"I'll get some cigars—real ones, no Ropo de Stinko Cabbago for this lil orphan. Say, lookit—'Asheim's Gents' Emporium.' That ain't our Solly?"

"Shore is. Got a wife an' kid now. Solly has."

"The lil devil. I'll have to see Solly. Move over, Bill. They's plenty o' room at this hitch-rail for anybody but a hawg. Wonder who all belongs to these other ponies?"

"They *is* quite a congregation in town to-day," assented Coryell, making a black and white pinto stand over.

They entered the Say When, and Coryell was greeted by Jack Haney, the bartender. At the sound of Coryell's name the bar's lone customer, an overalled gentleman with the black stains of axle grease on his hands, turned his head. It was Lou Taylor, hostler at the stage station, the man who had run afoul of Swing Kyler in Hatchet Main Street and escaped death by the skin of his teeth and Coryell's intervention.

The meeting of three friends spells business.

Jack Haney beamed. "What 'll it be, gents?" said he.

But that particular round was never drunk. For, before Coryell could make reply, a harsh voice spoke from the doorway, saying:

"Hands up!"

Even Lou Taylor obeyed the command.

"Nemmind turnin' round," continued the voice, the triumphant voice of Hawk-Face. "I'll just take yore gun away, Coryell. Tobe, you get Light Laurie's. Feel him over careful for hideouts, Tobe. We ain't takin' no chances on either o' you gents this trip."

Coryell said nothing. There was nothing to say. But Light objected vigorously.

"Whatcha want my gun for?" he demanded in part. "Whatell have I done?"

"It ain't whatcha done," said Tobe Haskins, patting Light Laurie from armpit to ankle. "It's whatcha might do. Not that we want you for anythin'. You'll be allowed to go free as air when we get Coryell started on his way."

"But you had too much to say the last time, Laurie," sneered Hawk-Face. "An' this time we ain't overlookin' any bets."

"You might try to do over again what the girl done," suggested the familiar voice of Piggy Question.

Coryell laughed. "How's yore watch, Piggy? Mended it yet?"

"Say, gents," broke in Jack Haney, "what's this anyway? Are you a sheriff's posse?"

"We're what takes the place of a posse when the sheriff won't do nothin'," said Hawk-Face. "This gent Coryell is a rustler. We're allowin' t hang him."

"Well, you ain't allowin' to hang me," said Lou Taylor. "It it's alla same to

you I'd like to go back to my job at the stage station."

"Fly at it," Hawk-Face told him.

Lou Taylor departed unhurriedly. Once in the street, and past the corner of the saloon, he ran.

"This is shore luck," continued Hawk-Face to Coryell. "Say, we been huntin' you from hell to breakfast the last two weeks, an' I couldn't hardly believe I was seein' straight when I looked out the window of the saloon across the street an' seen you fellers tyin' yore hosses right in among ours. Luck, I should say so! An' you didn't recognize none of 'em. It pays to keep yore eyes open. Yeah. You can turn round now an' put yore hands down."

They promptly availed themselves of the permission. Coryell leaned back against the bar. His eyes roved deliberately over the eleven men that had crowded into the saloon. Hawk-Face, Tobe Haskins, Sam the practical-minded, his jaws working over the eternal chew, Piggy Question, and seven other men—he knew them all by name or sight.

"Where's the rest of Buck Snort?" inquired Coryell. "Where's Fatty Larkin?"

"We thought we'd get along without Fatty this trip," said Hawk-Face, with a knowing wink and a pursing of his thin lips. "He's too much of a friend of yores."

"It's good I got one friend in Buck Snort."

"Ain't it? S'pose we get started, Bill, if you don't mind. We got quite a lil ride before us."

"I ain't carin' a thing about it, not a thing. Speakin' frank, as one gent to another, Funny-Face, I'd rather stay here."

"I guess you would, but—"

"Put the hants up! Dun't move! Qvick!"

Coryell glanced sidewise. Resting on the window-sill of one of the rear windows were the twin barrels of the largest shotgun he had ever seen. Behind the cocked hammers, his fat chin cuddling the small of the stock, was the face of Solomon Asheim. The little Jew's left eye was closed. The right glared defiance through the sights.

"Two off you fellers in de back haf not not de hants up," Solly exclaimed impatiently. "You put dem up, I ask it vonce for all. If you go for try any monkey-shiners mit me, I blow you in pieces!"

"For Gawd's sake!" cried Hawk-Face, waggling nervous upthrust hands, one of which still held his six-shooter. "If any o' you fellers in the back ain't got yore hands up, put 'em up! I'm the nearest to this shotgun. Go 'way from me, Sam! You needn't try gettin' behind me at all!"

"Look out, Solly!" warned Coryell, a sudden movement at the door catching his eye. "One of 'em's skipped out the door."

"Dot's all right," said the unperturbed Solly. "Dot's all right."

Evidently it was all right. For the would-be skipper, minus, his gun, his hands above his head, returned quicker than he went, and took his place among his comrades.

"Anybody else want out?" carolled Lou Taylor on the sidewalk. "I just drew one six-shooter. Who'll make it a pair?"

"Dot's how it is," said Solly Asheim. "Lou Taylor in de front, an' me in de back—an' dere ain't no side vindows. You big feller! Stop wigglin'. You make me t'ink you do somethin' yet maybe. Bill, s'pose you an' Light take deir guns avay. An' no monkey-shiners, you odder men."

"Say, you don't have to keep yore fingers on the triggers, do you?" said Hawk-Face to Asheim, when the bar-top was strewn with eleven guns and five bowies. "Coryell an' Laurie got the drop on us. Ain't that enough?"

"No, it ain't," declared Asheim. "I vish to make it all shore. So I vill vait like I am for a vile. I got two shells in dis gun—sixteen buckshot to de shell, thirty-two buckshot, an' vill give 'em all to you if you get vobbly before mein vife come back mit Tommy Osborne an' de marshal."

"So that's the game!" chuckled Coryell. "Gents, this here would shore make a cat laugh. But it's hardly necessary to wait for Lou an' Tim or anybody else.

Light an' Solly an' me oughta be able to see that you leave town."

"We'll stick till Tim an' the marshal comes," declared the practical Sam. "I know Timmy Osborne. We'll see what he says about lettin' rustlers an' murderers escape. Can I reach down for my plug, Coryell? I done swallowed my chew."

"We'll stretch a point an' let yuh wait for Tim," said Coryell, "but don't do no reachin' for no tobacco—that is, if you wanna be here when Tim comes."

"Puttin' it that way," said Sam, "I guess I'll wait."

"Far's I can see," said Timmy Osborne judicially, "yore evidence is about as clear as slumgullion. I can't see no reason for hangin' Mr. Coryell. Can you, marshal?"

"Which I should say not!" the marshal of Dogrib declared emphatically.

"Men have been stretched on damsight less evidence than this," Hawk-Face exclaimed passionately.

"So they have," agreed Timmy Osborne. "They's nothin' like bein' original, is they?"

"Now lookit, Tim," put in practical Sam, "you gotta admit all the evidence points at this feller Coryell. Can't you see it? I can."

"Can you, Sam? That's fine. Remember, Sam, when you was livin' in Bygone, how you missed five hundred dollars, an' nothin' must do but the roustabout down at the Stinger saloon glommed it, an' how you crawled his hump, an' nigh scared the poor jigger out o' the few wits he owned? Remember all that, Sam?"

Practical Sam was reddening and standing first on one embarrassed foot and then on the other.

"Well—" he began.

"You was certain shore," pursued Timmy Osborne with relish, "that the roustabout stole yore five hundred dollars. You was shore 'cause you'd seen him passin' yore house an' he'd looked in at yuh cross-eyed or some such damn foolishness. Oh, yeah, you was shore, an' you got the marshal to throw the roustabout in the calaboose till he owned up, an' then you found the money yoreself in a lard pail under some old clo'es in a corner right where you'd cached it in the first place."

"I forgot," Sam endeavored to explain. "Yuh know well enough, Timmy, I wouldn't accuse nobody of nothin' wrong unless I thought I was right. Yuh know that."

"I know you can't help goin' off at half-cock any more than a gun without a trigger. I know you from 'way back, Sam, an' you was always a heap precipitate in yore judgments."

"Well, *I* ain't precipitate in my judgments," blazed Hawk-Face, "an' all I got to say is, this here is a helluva note! Obstructin' justice, that's what yo're doin'. An' the marshal, too."

"Say," Piggy Question burst in perturbedly, "I just looked out the window, an' they's about thirty gents standin' round with shotguns an' Winchesters."

"Took 'em long enough to organize," grumbled the marshal. "They should 'a' been ready ten minutes ago."

"Ready? Ready for what?" rasped Hawk-Face.

"Oh, 'most anythin', 'most anythin'," Timmy Osborne replied airily. "We thought maybe we'd need 'em in case—just in case, that's all."

"You see how it is, boys," said the marshal. "They ain't really nothin' more you can do here in Dogrib."

Hawk-Face looked at the marshal; he looked through the doorway that framed a section of Dogrib's inhabitants; he looked at his men. His face was very glum. There could be only one sensible decision.

Coryell and his friends awaited it in polite silence.

"Do we get our guns back?" inquired Hawk-Face.

"How about it?" Timmy Osborne deferred to Coryell.

The latter nodded.

"They're welcome to 'em. I've unloaded 'em, anyway."

When the Buck Snort men were gone Coryell and his friends in need foregathered. Which, after what had passed, was eminently fitting. Later, when Coryell and

Light Laurie resumed their journeying, Tim Osborne rode with them. His ranch lay between Dogrib and Surry Side, and he desired company on the way.

To Osborne, that discreet gentleman of seventeen killings, Coryell gave a condensed history of the rustling epidemic in Hatchet County. His plans for the immediate future he detailed in full.

"I'll go with yuh to Surry Side," said Osborne without comment. "That is, if you ain't got no objections."

"Shore not, but—"

"That's all right. Yuh see, they know me there pretty well. The secretary's a personal friend o' mine, an—"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE FLARE-BACK.

MR. RUDY ORISON, driving three cows and three calves before him through a notch in the southern rim of the Kettle, was disagreeably surprised by the sudden appearance at the bottom of the declivity of six horsemen. Mr. Orison abandoned his cattle and fled rearward.

Bursting pell-mell through the cottonwoods and aspens at the foot of the reverse slope, he ran plump in among five more riders. He knew them all.

"'Lo, gents," he called, striving to present a semblance of assured ease while proceeding northward at his horse's best gait. "See you later."

Somehow this struck the five as doubtful. They purposed to see him sooner than that.

"Hey, wait a minute, Rudy!" shouted Hawk-Face.

"I can't stop!" Mr. Orison yelled back, spurring amain.

"You stop!" bawled practical Sam, dragging the Winchester from under his left leg.

But Mr. Orison merely waved his hand, shook an uncomprehending head, and continued to retreat rapidly. The practical-minded Sam tucked his chew into his cheek, dismounted quickly, dropped on one knee and planted a bullet in the vitals of Mr. Orison's horse. The horse slid sprawling. Mr. Orison, by the greatest of luck, landed on his feet. Without a moment's delay Mr. Orison started to run.

"He shore must 'a' done somethin'," practical Sam averred to himself while he clicked a fresh cartridge through the loading-gate and his four comrades pursued the speeding Mr. Orison.

When Sam came up with them Mr. Orison had been surrounded, halted and deprived of his weapons. Bitter were the words of Mr. Orison.

"I dunno why you fellers gotta cut down on me this way," snarled he, tenderly feeling his neck, for Hawk-Face had had the temerity to employ his rope.

"I dunno either," said Hawk-Face, coiling his rope.

"But we hope to find out," nodded Tobe Haskins. "What didja run for?"

"I was goin' somewhere," explained Mr. Orison.

"Where?"

"Buck Snort."

"But why the rush?"

"My Gawd! Can't a feller ride faster than a walk now an' then without gettin' his hoss shot by five idjits?"

"Why didn'tcha stop when I told you to?" Hawk-Face demanded.

"You ain't my keeper," snapped Mr. Orison.

"No, but—"

"Whatcha lookin' south for so nervous like, Rudy?" asked the inquisitive Piggy Question.

"Maybe that's why," suggested practical Sam, cocking a listening ear.

The others heard the horses, too. Mr. Orison's eyelids flickered. Practical Sam happened to be looking at Mr. Orison. Sam rubbed his chin. He was not so astonished as he thought he ought to have been.

Out from the patch of cottonwoods and aspens four horsemen came galloping—Buck Snort men. The leader was Fatty Larkin.

"I thought I recognized yore hoss, Rudy," said Fatty Larkin, folding fat hands across the saddle-horn while his horse spread his legs and breathed hard.

"What of it?" brazened Mr. Orison.

"Nothin' much, only you might explain how you happened to be drivin' two Staple Box cows with two calves branded Slash K, an' another cow branded L Up-and-Down an' her calf branded Slash K."

Fairly stumped, Mr. Orison became profane. But there was little spontaneity in his curses.

"Andy Ball an' Butter Nelson are bringin' along the cows an' calves," Fatty Larkin went on for the benefit of the others. "I don't understand it myself," he added candidly, staring in puzzled fashion at Mr. Orison. "Are you workin' for the Slash K by any chance, Rudy?"

"You go to hell!"

"Yeah, but if you are workin' for the Slash K, why didn'tcha burn or cut the cows' feet an' run off only the calves? An' why was you headin' south?"

Mr. Orison was understood to repeat his former remark.

"The notion o' keepin' cows o' one brand an' calves of another together gets my time," persisted Fatty Larkin. "It don't seem sensible somehow."

"He ain't workin' for the Slash K," decided Hawk-Face. "The Slash K has always been straight."

"So is a road agent till he holds up his first stage," countered Fatty Larkin.

"I dunno—" began practical Sam doubtfully, and stopped. He recalled that Fatty Larkin rarely made a statement without some justification.

When Andy Ball and Butter Nelson arrived with the cattle the animals were all roped, thrown and hogtied, and the brands and earmarks sat upon after the fashion of a coroner's jury.

"These three calves may 'a' been sleepers," offered Andy Ball.

"What difference does it make?" asked practical Sam.

"None," said Butter Nelson. "Sleepers or mavericks, their brands don't agree with their mas'."

"They ain't only one thing to do," Hawk-Face declared briskly. "They's cottonwoods yonder, an'—"

"You ain't gonna hang me?" cried Mr. Orison.

"Why not?" Thus practical Sam.

"I didn't blot them brands," Mr. Orison denied desperately.

"Kind o' late to say so," Hawk-Face told him.

"I found them cows an'—"

"Who's a-comin'?" interrupted Andy Ball.

"Ten men," replied practical Sam, squinting northwestward toward Rising Creek.

"Maybe they're some o' the Slash K outfit," suggested Piggy Question.

But the newcomers were none of the Slash K. They were Bill Coryell, Light Laurie, Smoky Nivette, Timmy Osborne, a black-avised citizen, a red-faced one, and four obvious punchers.

Coryell spoke to his friends and greeted the Buck Snorters quite as if his late meeting at Dogrib with the latter had not been a painful occasion. He glanced gravely at the weaponless Mr. Orison and the dead horse lying to leeward.

"When you caught him," said Coryell to Fatty Larkin, "was he with them three cows an' calves?"

"He was with 'em just before he was caught," answered Fatty Larkin.

Coryell nodded. "We cut his trail—him an' the cows—this mornin'. We kind o' thought he was farther ahead. I dunno as I expected—" He broke off, his eye skimming Mr. Orison and coming to rest on the earmarks of the nearest calf.

"What didja reverse them Slash K earmarks for, Rudy?" he asked dispassionately.

"I didn't reverse 'em! I dunno nothin' about 'em." But Mr. Orison's eyes were uneasy.

"Yore right hand sort o' made a dive for yore hip-pocket just then. Lessee whether you got a hideout there or what. Hold still! Ugh!" With a twist and a trip Coryell slammed Mr. Orison to his disgraced knees and twitched from Mr. Orison's hip-pocket a limp, rectangular book.

"I thought so," continued Coryell. "You got a brand book now. You ain't makin' no more mistakes like you done when you switched them brands an' earmarks over near Buck Snort."

Fatty Larkin looked at Hawk-Face. The latter reddened. Each remembered that the

calf found near the body of Coombs had been earmarked with Coryell's marks reversed.

Coryell got down on his knees and examined the hoof-marks of Mr. Orison's horse. Mr. Orison followed his every movement with fascinated eyes. Coryell stood up and looked calmly upon Mr. Orison.

"Next time," said Coryell, "be careful none of yore hoss's shoes are twisted so's they make a fine mark to trail yuh by. The mark of this near hind is just like the print of the near hind of the hoss belongin' to the man that shot Coombs."

"I didn't shoot Coombs!" Mr. Orison denied frantically. "I— He pulled on me —he—I—it was self-defense—" He choked on an oath. A froth was on his lips. He wiped it away and swore again.

"You see," Coryell nodded to the Buck Snorters. "You come near makin' a mistake that time you was gonna hang me."

They were dumb—except Fatty Larkin. He said: "I knowed it all along."

"Lookit, Rudy," said Coryell, "you was drivin' them cows an' calves south. What you got against the Slash K?"

This was a new angle, and one hitherto unperceived by the Buck Snort men.

Mr. Orison shook his head. "Nothin' to say."

"When Swing nicked you that day over on the other side of the Kettle, what was you quarrelin' about?"

"Whu-where was you?" gasped the stunned Mr. Orison.

"Nemmind where I was. What was the row between you an' Swing?"

But Mr. Orison had partly recovered his wits. Again he shook his head. "Nothin' to say."

"You ain't denyin'," went on the easy voice, "you branded these calves Slash K an' was drivin' 'em south where Lander's riders or one of Rockerby's boys would likely find 'em an', seein' their brands wouldn't agree with the cows, the Slash K would be blamed accordin'?"

"I didn't brand them calves," insisted Mr. Orison.

"Yo're a liar by the clock. I'll just look at yore saddle."

Coryell strode to the fallen horse of Mr. Orison. He lifted the saddle-skirt. Neither of the cinch-rings on that side showed any evidence of having been near a fire. Coryell, with the assistance of willing friends, loosened the cinches and pulled the saddle from the horse's body.

On the other side of the saddle the evidence lay snugly—a burnt and blackened cinch-ring. Coryell rubbed it with his fingers. He held them up. They were smutched with soot.

"An' you don't own a cow in the world," Coryell said to Mr. Orison.

"I tell yuh I found them cows," Mr. Orison held to it stubbornly.

A shrewd look crept into the eyes of the black-avised citizen. He stepped to the side of Mr. Orison. "If you know anythin' about *anybody*," he insinuated, "let's hear it. We might let you off a lil easier."

But compromising with a rustler was too much for the Buck Snort contingent.

"No, you won't let him off a lil easier," contradicted Hawk-Face. "Don'tcha go makin' him no promises like that. He's guilty as all hell. If he didn't brand them calves, which we're shore now he did, he downed Coombs anyway. Either one's enough to hang him. We'll attend to him, an' we'll do it before we leave here, too."

"He'd oughta be tried," demurred the red-faced individual. "Lot o' things come out durin' a trial."

"No trial," averred Hawk-Face. "We've had sort o' hard luck with our prisoners lately. We ain't takin' no chances on losin' this one—not a chance."

"Fair enough," said Fatty Larkin. "Yuh see, he lived in our town. He sort o' belongs to us that away."

"But—" began the black-avised person.

Fatty Larkin shook his head. "If you was the sheriff now, or even one of his deputies, you might have a right to argue about it. But yo're only association detectives, you an' yore friend, an' you can't even arrest anybody, or stop any proceedin' like this here. All you can do is get the sheriff to try what he can do. Not that he could do much—now."

The black-avised man recognized the truth of this. He gave over his efforts to stay the execution of Mr. Orison.

"No use waitin'," hinted practical Sam. Hawk-Face laid his hand on his rope-strap, but thought better of his intention and went instead to where Mr. Orison's horse lay. "Might's well use his own rope," he said as he knelt to the buckle. "He won't need it again."

"With any kink o' luck they'll be usin' this rope to hang you," had been the burden of a prophecy made upon a former occasion by Coryell to Mr. Orison. The latter now recalled this prophecy. The recollection augmented the gone feeling at the pit of Mr. Orison's stomach. The rope! He, Rudy Orison, a human being having the use of all his faculties both physical and mental, would within a few minutes have the breath of life strangled out of him. He licked his lips. But his tongue was dry. So was his mouth. He tried to spit. He couldn't.

Hawk-Face had unstrapped the rope. He was walking toward him shaking out the coils. Now he was running the honda up and down the bight of the rope. It was a rawhide honda, and stiff. Corresponding as it did to the hangman's knot, that honda would be adjusted beneath his ear. And his arms would be tied. He would not be able to move them. But the honda—his thoughts continually reverted to the honda, the honda that would go under his ear.

It must be a tremendous sensation to realize that one is about to be lynched. Only the strongest of natures may endure it with calm. Mr. Orison's nature was not of the strongest. He drank too much. And he had lately received two heavy beatings at the hands of Coryell.

"C'mon, Rudy," said Hawk-Face. "Le's go over to them cottonwoods."

This was the last straw. Mr. Orison started to run. Fatty Larkin and Tobe Haskins held him fast before he had covered six feet. His knees gave way. He would have fallen. They held him up. His eyes were glassy. They rolled in their sockets. Anon they fixed themselves on the face of Coryell. But they did not see Coryell. What they saw was the honda beneath a dead man's ear.

Fatty and Tobe began to walk him toward the cottonwoods. The black-avised citizen and his red-faced mate followed at his heels. They were like wolves trailing a steer to its death. Mr. Orison had seen a wolf one winter long ago—a violent shiver of nausea shook him. He stopped and was sick.

"Better tell what yuh know," advised the dark-faced detective.

"Flop to it," urged the other.

Mr. Orison shook his head. Tinhorn, liar, rustler, bushwhacker that he was, still he clung to his peculiar code of ethics. His nerve was rocking, but it continued to hold. He would not squeal. He had come to a low pass indeed. But he would go no lower.

"Leave him be," Hawk-Face interposed. "Can'tcha let a feller hang in peace?"

Butter Nelson had been examining the hoofs of Rudy Orison's horse. "I don't see no twisted shoe on any hoof," he announced. "An' his hoof-marks are round as a dollar almost."

"Shore," said Coryell. "I know they are. I just said they wasn't to see if he'd bite."

"Lessee that brand book," requested Butter Nelson.

"Oh, them Slash K earmarks are right side up with care all right," Coryell told him. "I was just fishin' for another bite."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE NESTERS.

"HOW do you know all this?" Wat Pickett demanded, sourly eying Coryell.

Coryell jerked his thumb toward two sullen-faced gentlemen sitting side by side between a black-avised citizen and one with a red face.

"Meet Mr. Miller an' Mr. Deegan," said Coryell. "They're the two in the middle."

"Well—"

"Nesters from Canteen Creek," Coryell went on smoothly.

"Still I don't see what—"

"Yeah, I know, but they are two of the gents that have been buyin' cattle branded Triangle Up-an'-Down, Box H Box, Heart

Bar Cross an' so on world without end. Mr. Miller specialized on Triangle Up-an'-Down, and Mr. Deegan bought Box H Box only. They was another gent who owned a lot o' Heart Bar Cross stock, but he got away."

"I guess these two here will be enough to convince you, sheriff," purred the black-avised citizen.

"Just tell the sheriff who sold you them cattle," Coryell nodded encouragingly to one of the sullen-faced persons.

"He said his name was Stevens, Bill Stevens," said Mr. Miller. "But I knowed him all right. It was Swing Kyler. I kept my mouth shut. He didn't know me. He had cows to sell, an' I bought 'em. I didn't think nothin' wrong. Why should I?"

"Yeah, why should we?" put in Mr. Deegan. "They's lots o' brands in this country, an' a gent can change his name if he likes."

Here Mr. Deegan gazed defiantly upon the group of men that well-nigh filled the sheriff's office.

"Yes," said Timmy Osborne, "a man can change his name if he likes. That's his privilege. But he wants to go slow about buyin' cows from a sport with a changed name."

Mr. Deegan's eyes contemplated the floor.

The sheriff cleared his throat.

"How many cows did you buy from Swing Kyler, Miller?" inquired the sheriff.

"One hundred an' eleven, cows an' calves."

The sheriff was visibly moved. One hundred and eleven is a sizable jag to rustle. "Deegan?" said he.

"Hundred an' thirty-eight," grumbled the man addressed.

"They was all mine an' Lander's," explained Coryell.

"Humph," grunted the sheriff disgustedly. "How about the third sport—the gent that got away?"

"About sixty Heart Bar Cross," replied Coryell, "accordin' to his brother."

"His brother?"

"Yeah. He got shot up a lil before we could catch him. He'll recover, only he can't be moved just now."

"Well, you've done made out a case, I guess, Coryell," admitted the sheriff with none too good grace. "You shore had a lot of luck to be able to work it out this-away," he added patronizingly. "It must 'a' been quite a strain."

"Think so?" purred Coryell. "Different here. Soon's I heard o' that Box H Box calf drifted up on a sand-bar in the Hatchet near Sally's Creek I began to think they, the rustlers, was drivin' across the Hatchet in the direction of Canteen Creek. Knowin' what I'd already guessed about the Slash K bein' in on somethin' pretty big the rest was easy. I just rode to the Canteen Creek country soon's I had time, sloped round from one ranch to another, then went to the association headquarters at Surry Side an' got 'em to assign two detectives on the job. With them an' some o' my friends we went back to Canteen Creek an' collected the evidence I'd picked up. No strain, no work, all luck like you said at first, sheriff."

The sheriff grinned wryly. "I'll be goin' right out to the Slash K."

Coryell glanced over the sheriff's head. The windows behind the officer commanded the length of Main Street. Coryell gave a short laugh.

"Here come some of 'em now," said he. "Rebel Stanley an' two punchers drivin' four cows an' three calves." His eyes narrowed as he gazed more closely at the cattle. "Dave," he went on, nudging Mr. Dawson to look, too, "do you remember them three calves you seen in the lil Slash K corral the day I rode the dun? You do? Tha's good, 'cause here they are. How about you, Grover?"

Grover Dawson's memory proved equally excellent.

Entered then Rebel Stanley, treading lightly, his wicked eyes alight with anticipation. The light dimmed a trifle when he perceived the crowd that filled the office. Beyond the sheriff, who was sitting half-turned on his chair at the desk, he saw his enemy Coryell. He—at his ear Tom Jones was speaking.

"We'll have no quar'llin' in here," were the words of the coroner.

Rebel Stanley sensed the warning beneath

the statement of fact and nodded, smiling crookedly.

"I guess," he said easily, "they ain't no need o' quar'llin'—not now."

"Why no," Coryell took him up, "I guess they ain't. You look like you'd come here to see us on important business, Mr. Stanley."

Rebel Stanley leered truculently. "I got some business with the sheriff," said he, "an' if the rest o' you gents will take a look or two at what I'm gonna show him I'll be obliged. Sheriff, will yuh come outside?"

Rebel Stanley turned and walked out. He had failed to observe Mr. Miller and Mr. Deegan where they sat against the wall. Perhaps a sidelong movement of both Coryell and Timmy Osborne had screened the two nesters from observation. Certainly Coryell and Timmy had intended that it should.

Save Luke Travis and his fellow deputy, both of whom remained to guard the nesters, the whole crowd followed the sheriff and Rebel Stanley out of doors.

"Where's Bill?" queried Rebel of the lone puncher with the cattle.

"Gone to get a drink," was the reply.

"He oughta stayed," frowned Rebel Stanley, to whom a little authority meant much. "Well, anyhow, sheriff, lookit them three calves—all of 'em with Staple Box ear-marks an' brands an' runnin' with three Slash K cows. Yo're satisfied them three calves belong to them three cows, ain'tcha, sheriff? Here, I'll show yuh. Haze 'em along, Jim."

Jim complied. The three cows limped sore-footedly out to the street. Jim turned them and herded them back to the company of the fourth cow.

"See how close each calf sticks to its ma," pointed out Rebel Stanley.

"I see," assented the sheriff. "Cut feet, ain't they, the cows?"

"They *had* been cut," said Rebel Stanley, bestowing a vindictive glance upon Coryell; "but they're gettin' over it some. Calves was run off from 'em all right enough, but they managed to work their way back—after bein' branded."

"What's the fourth cow gotta do with all this?" prompted Coryell, his face a blank.

"Found her in the Kettle day before yesterday. You can easy see how her brand an' earmarks been changed from Lander's to fit Coryell's."

"I can see how they been changed all right," said the sheriff. "I'm beginnin' to see a lot more 'n I used to."

"I'm shore glad o' that, sheriff," tucked in Coryell, "'cause that cow with my brand on top an' Lander's underneath was one o' the bunch Rudy Orison was drivin' yesterday."

"It's her," nodded Timmy Osborne. "I took notice particular."

"Wasn't they no Slash K calf with this cow?" Coryell inquired of Rebel Stanley, whose eyes were becoming furtive.

"They was not."

"Curious. They was when we found her. An' you found her day before yesterday branded Staple Box on top of the L Up-an'-Down, an' yesterday when we found her she was only branded L Up-an'-Down. An' yesterday she had her calf along, her calf branded Slash K. I don't understand it at all."

"We found her day before yesterday," persisted Rebel Stanley. "An' she didn't have no calf with her."

"All right," said Coryell. "Sheriff, them three cutfoot cows you can bet are three of the four cutfoot cows Swing Kyler found on his range a while back. I can't swear to it, but that ain't necessary. Them three calves are three calves Dave an' Grover Dawson, Light Laurie an' me saw at the Slash K one day after the cutfoot cows had been found. They wasn't earmarked nor branded none then. Now anybody can see them calves has only been branded *once*, no blottin' about it. Is it reasonable to suppose Swing Kyler would turn them calves loose without brandin' 'em *first*—no matter what particular iron he felt like usin'?"

"I'm satisfied," said the sheriff. "Stanley, that's Tom Jones's gun stickin' in the back o' yore neck—if you feel like movin'. Take care of him, Tom. Jim, you ain't gonna act foolish, are yuh?"

"Not me," disclaimed Jim frankly, al-

lowing the sheriff to take his weapon. "You've done called the turn."

It was then that they bethought themselves of the absent Bill. Coryell and several friends repaired hastily to the Mint Saloon. But Bill was not there. The bartender said that he had seen Bill mount his horse and depart.

"Which it was five minutes ago, maybe less," amplified the bartender when pressed for details, "an' he shore jumped that cayuse down the street like a bullet from a gun. Funny you folks didn't notice him. Whatcha want him for?"

The question remained unanswered, for the "folks," intent on pursuit, were racing for their corrals.

CHAPTER XL.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

At the door of the Slash K ranch-house Bill slid from his panting horse. He burst into the office upon Swing Kyler, Shotgun Blue, and Squinteye Maginn. The three were playing draw. Squinteye Maginn, it may be said, had completely recovered of his wound.

"Drag it!" cried Bill. "They got Reb an' Jimmy!"

"That L Up-an'-Down cow!" exclaimed Shotgun Blue, jumping to a conclusion. "I told you not to monkey with her, Swing. I knowed she was a plant! I knowed it!"

"Was it that cow?" Swing stared at Bill.

"Yup," nodded Bill. "Her, an'—"

"I told yuh!" snarled Shotgun Blue. "Of course she was a plant, her an' her calf. Why'nell would her calf be branded Slash K if she wasn't. None of us branded that calf! An' none of us branded the two Slash K calves with them Staple Box cows neither! An' you said it had been done to put the kibosh on us! Hell—"

Shotgun Blue spat vindictively upon the floor. He had risen and, leaning forward, was resting both hard fists on the table. His eyes glared down into those of his employer— "So you killed the calves an' skinned 'em an' buried the hides an' said that would make it all right an' safe to go ahead an' brand the two cows Box H Box an' the other Staple Box! Safe! I told yuh it was a plant! —— —— you! I told you it was a plant!"

"You've told me so for the last time!" Swing cried in combination with a flash and a bang and a swirl of gray smoke.

Shotgun Blue slumped down across the table. He never knew what hit him.

"It was yore downin' Art Whittle that started the bees a hummin' at last!" continued Swing in a squall, holding his six-shooter trained on the mark. "I told you not—" He broke off, Shotgun Blue having obviously passed, and without another glance at his handiwork, he pushed back his chair and got to his feet.

"What was the rest of that sentence you was tryin' to get out when he interrupted, Bill?" Swing Kyler asked, ejecting the spent shell.

"What? Huh—I—" stammered Bill, thrown somewhat off balance by the unexpectedness of the killing. "Oh—the cow—well, her an' Miller an' Deegan."

"They got them, you mean?"

"In the sheriff's office."

"How come they let you get away?"

"They didn't mean to, I guess. But my luck was with me. When we got the cows to the sheriff's house—we'd come round to the side instead of stayin' in the street—Reb went in an' left Jim an' me with the cows. Me, I was thirsty, an' I went to get a drink. I noticed in the street they was a lot o' ponies tied to the hitch-rail, more'n usual, an' two in front of the sheriff's had Surry Side brands. So I injuned round an' listened at a window, an' when I'd heard an' seen enough I pulled my freight. Oh, they know it all, you can stick a pin in that."

"Tell the boys at the bunkhouse what's happened, Bill," said Swing quietly. "An' after they've saddled up they can come to the office an' get their time. I'll have it ready for 'em by then."

Bill departed on the run. Squinteye still lingered.

"You better shove for the corral, too, Squinteye," Swing suggested sharply. "We ain't got all day. Them fellers from Hatchet may pull in any minute."

Squinteye went out—briskly. But a less

harassed eye than that of Swing Kyler might have perceived that his haste was more apparent than actual.

Swing Kyler turned toward the safe in the corner.

When the Slash K boys spurred up to the office for their pay ten minutes later, the office door stood open and the office was empty of life. The safe door, likewise, stood open and the safe was empty of money. Swing Kyler was not. Nor was there any sign of Squinteye Maginn. In sorrow and rage at this last proof of the peculiar perfidy of their employer, the Slash K outfit rode away. By twos and threes they fled in all directions save one—westward. For in that quarter lay Hatchet and the avenging hand of law and order.

Miss Rowland, riding the trail to Lander's, was singing a song. Her heart was as light as the breeze that stirred the summer air, and brought the scent of pine and sweet green growing things. And the song she sang was one long out of fashion, a song Kit Marlowe made and Maudlin sang.

Come, live with me, and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, or hills, or fields,
Or woods, and steepy mountains yield.

She broke off and looked with tender unseeing eyes at a clump of pilot daisies flaunting their brown and gold beside the trail ahead.

"If he doesn't ask me," she murmured, "I'll ask him."

She blushed a vivid red and glanced about her quickly as if in fear of eavesdroppers. She laughed, knowing well that she rode solitary in a world of her own that day, and stretched her two arms out straight in front of her.

"He held me—once," she said. "My dear! My dear! My dear!"

Her hands dropped on the saddle-horn, and her eyes closed to shut in the picture painted by the magic of her thoughts. Then her horse stopped and her eyes flew open with a jerk that was almost painful.

Before her, blocking the trail, stood Swing Kyler. Even as she stared he laid his hand on her bridle-rein.

"I've been watching you some time," he said with a wide, thin-lipped smile. "Why were you holding out your arms?"

She could only stare.

"Come," he continued, and started to lead her horse off the trail.

At this her surprised faculties were galvanized into action. She swayed back on her reins and struck at him with the quirt she wore on her right wrist. But he maintained his hold on the bridle of the plunging, bewildered horse, and dodged her blow. The next instant the quirt was held fast in his left hand. With a sharp, quick jerk he snapped the wrist thong and dropped the quirt on the ground.

"Sorry if I hurt your wrist," he said calmly, and with barely a trace of his Western accent; "but I can't have you cracking me with a whip, you know."

Impotent, she glared at him, her red under-lip caught between her teeth.

"Let me go," she demanded.

He shook his head, and continued to lead her horse through the bushes that flanked the trail and blanketed the level ground between it and the low pine-clad hill a hundred yards distant.

At his headshake she slid from the saddle. Her intention had been to run for it. But he had her gripped fast before she could take the first step.

"Get on that horse," he said quietly, holding her so tightly that she could scarcely breathe.

"I won't!" she gasped.

"You will if I have to tie you," he countered in dull, expressionless tones. "You are going with me."

Slowly he exerted his strength. Her ribs—they were cracking. The breath whistled from her cramped lungs. A button on his shirt front was mashing her nose. "I don't want to hurt you," continued the voice within six inches of her ear, "but you are going with me. Willingly or unwillingly, quietly or otherwise, you are going. Is it to be quietly?"

The terrible pressure on her body relaxed somewhat. She contrived to gasp out "No." Instantly he whirled her away from him, and whipped her hands behind her.

"All right," said he. "I'll have to tie you."

Holding her hands fast in one of his, he snapped off a pair of her own saddle-strings and bound her hands behind her back. Then, seizing her by the collar and the belt, he swung her up and astride the horse. With solicitude he tucked her feet into the hooded stirrups, and with expert ease he evaded the kicks she aimed at him with each foot in turn.

"Kick away," he told her. "But I'd advise you to keep your feet on the treads. You might fall off. Guess I'd better tie the stirrups together and your ankles to the leathers. Then there can't be an accident."

These things he did.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked in a small voice when they were proceeding toward the hill.

"Marry you," was the succinct reply.

"Marry me!"

He nodded without looking up.

"But—"

"But you don't love me. Is that it? Well, I love you. I've loved you from the day I met you there at my ranch. But under the circumstances I've not had the opportunity of coming and telling you properly. I—I've been pretty busy. But I always intended to come to you as soon as the rush of my affairs slackened a trifle."

"Why—why not have told me at my home?"

"You haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Anything about me?"

"I know quite sufficient about you without hearing anything further."

"It doesn't matter anyway. The thing is I've got you, and the truth is, I was on my way to your ranch to risk speech with you when I saw you coming along the trail. You've saved me a lot of trouble."

"But where are you taking me?"

"I don't know," he replied truthfully. "Away somewhere—a town where we can be married."

"I'll never marry you," she said thinly.

"We'll see."

"But look here—" she began desperately.

"There's no use talking," he said decisively. "I've thought it all out. After we've been married a while you'll get used to me. You'll even feel affection for me. And let me tell you you'd better feel it. You'll find life easier."

They rounded the little hill, he always leading her horse, and came to his horse where it stood dozing three-cornered, rope-tied to a pine-tree.

Swing Kyler, his captive's bridle over his arm, laid hands on the rope. His fingers were busy with the knot when a man rose out of a willow-bush at his back and shot him through the head.

Miss Rowland's startled horse plunged and reared. If it had not been for the saddle-strings that bound her to the saddle she might have been unseated. The bridle-reins, under the continued pulling of the horse, were slipping from Swing Kyler's dead arm when the murderer seized them and yanked the horse up short.

The murderer was Squinteye Maginn. Of course Miss Rowland did not know who he was. What she saw was simply a Heaven-sent rescuer with a smoking Colt in his right hand.

Squinteye favored Miss Rowland with a smile that was intended to be reassuring. She required no reassurance. She beamed upon him.

"Please untie me," she said. "My hands hurt so."

"Not just now," Squinteye told her, and his smile became a leer.

Her eyebrows drew together in a puzzled frown. But her tremendous relief at being rescued from Swing Kyler still maintained her emotional pendulum at the top of its arc. "I don't understand," she said. "You—haven't you rescued me from him?"

Squinteye's little cross-eyes devoured her. "Oh, yeah, shore, I've rescued you from him all right," he chuckled coarsely, then laughed with an abandon that revealed the interior of his mouth to the palate. "That's rich, that is. Now I dunno what he was gonna do with yuh, but I know what I'm gonna do, an' that 'll be a plenty."

Here he laughed again, and holstered his

six-shooter without taking the trouble to replace the exploded cartridge.

Miss Rowland's heart skipped a beat. The trees about her reeled and swung and tossed their branches. The ground rocked. The ugly, laughing face of the man in front of her dominated everything. She saw him now for what he was—a man after the fashion of him who had bent her back across the table in the Two Bar ranch-house. But despite herself she would not believe it. The fates could not be so unkind as to raise her up simply to dash her down. It was unthinkable. It was—the squint-eyed man was speaking.

"Yo're a comin' along with me for now," he said. "That's enough for you to know now."

Holding her bridle in his left hand, he turned out the pockets of the dead man with the other. Of their contents he took what pleased him, left the remainder scattered abroad, and straightened his tough body.

"I'll ride his horse," said he, with a hateful grin. "The money's safe in the cantinas. I made shore o' that while he was down there on the road a waitin' for you."

The allusion to the money she did not understand. The explanation was to come later. He mounted and, leading her horse, trotted to where he had left his own mount. And all the time she alternately pleaded and threatened in her striving to be allowed to go. To all of which he paid small attention. He loosed his tied horse without dismounting, added its reins to those already in his left hand, and rode on.

One may not describe the thoughts of Miss Rowland. Mercifully after a time her brain became numb. In this it was following the example of her wrists and ankles. They had lost all feeling within an hour.

The man, riding a neck ahead, kept his eyes before him. Miss Rowland, her mouth dry, her tongue cottony, stared dumbly down at the saddle-horn. There was a brass screw set in the middle of that horn. But the driving slot lay neither square all nor fore and aft. It slanted to the right, and the slant annoyed her. The fact kept impinging upon her dulled consciousness with the irritating activity of a buzzing and persistent fly.

It had been not later than nine o'clock when she left the Two Bar ranch-house. Noon was past, and the afternoon dragged on and still the squint-eyed man maintained the pace—a steady fox trot. It is an easy gait to one riding free in the saddle. But Miss Rowland was bound. Restricted circulation will in time cause other effects than mere numbness. But the shadows were long before black spots danced and rocketed in her tortured vision. She felt herself going—she must have gasped, for the squint-eyed man turned, reined back, and caught her as she started to pitch forward.

She did not quite lose consciousness, but she was perilously close to fainting before he had cut her lashings, swung her from the saddle and laid her on the ground. She lay there in a gray mental fog while the blood ran back into her wrists and ankles with a sharp tingling—a tingling that grew ever sharper till it dispelled completely the gray fog and she caught her under-lip between her teeth to keep from screaming. The pain wore away at last, and she sat up. The squint-eyed man had unsaddled the horses, hobbled them, built a fire and was frizzling bacon on a stick and boiling coffee in a pail.

"Come to, huh?" was his harsh acknowledgment of her reviving. "After tonight you'll do this," he added, waggling a thumb at the fire and the bacon. "Don't understand, huh? You will. You'll understand a heap o' things before I'm through with yuh."

Involuntarily she shuddered. He saw and laughed his hateful laugh and turned the bacon slowly. When the bacon was cooked to his liking, and the coffee properly boiled, he ate the one and drank the other. He offered her none of either. The sketchy meal disposed of, he sat down cross-legged, facing her, and constructed and lit a cigarette.

"I'm shore in luck to-day," said he. "Shore am. Here's you an' here's me. What more could a feller want? An' they's ten thousand dollars in the cantinas on

Swing's saddle. Ten thousand dollars will be a real help to me an' you. But I won't spend it on yuh the way Swing would. You'll earn yore board with me, you bet. Swing Kyler! They's a smart damfool for yuh. Thought he'd gimme the razzle-dazzle just like he done the rest o' the Slash K outfit. But he couldn't fool *me!* I knowed what he was up to the second he sent Bill out to warn the others. An' I trailed him. An' where is Swing Kyler now? So take warnin' by that, you red-headed blackbird, an' don't try to run any blazers on yores truly, Squinteye Maginn."

"Squinteye Maginn!" she breathed.

"That's me," he said with a sneering lift of the lip. "I had a brother Bill."

At this she shrank from him. Bill Maginn his brother! The man whom Coryell had killed for maltreating her that day at the Two Bar.

"Yeah," he continued softly, grinning at her terror, "I'm Squinteye Maginn, an' I got a li'l' bill against yore young man. Makes yuh wiggle, does it? Don't fret, he'll never see you again. Well, maybe you ain't his girl, but he's yore boy all right enough. No mistake about that. We've been hearin' at the Slash K how things was goin' between you two—savin' him from them Buck Snorters, tellin' 'em you was engaged to him an' all. So you see how my meetin' up with you thisaway is a heap providential."

He nodded at her with great satisfaction and inhaled long and deeply. She sat perfectly still. It was the end of the world for her, and she knew it.

"My notion was," he went on, picking his words with care, "after I got through with Swing Kyler to bushwhack this Coryell jigger an' down him, but after meetin' you I changed my mind. I'll let him live. It 'll pay me better, see, 'cause don'tcha think he'd a heap rather be dead than know yo're traipsin' along with me?" He paused and set the cigarette to his lips. "I'm figurin' thataway anyhow, an' I'll take care, you bet, to let him know what's happened to yuh, an' how they ain't a chance in the world of his ever findin' yuh again. How's that for a plan, huh?"

It was then that a stick cracked behind her, and Squinteye Maginn leaped at her like a cougar. She felt herself jerked upright and scruffled tightly against his body. Her neck was twisted sidewise so that her right ear was flattened against his chest. Her eyes looked down upon a rigid forearm. The wrist terminating in the hand that held the six-shooter was not seven inches from her chin. The muzzle of the gun was pressed against her side. The gun was not cocked, but Squinteye's thumb was on the hammer.

"Get back!" Squinteye was saying. "Get back, or I'll blow her apart!"

"You'll never get away if you do," said the voice of Coryell (he was standing, she judged, not thirty feet distant). "It ain't only me here. They'se Telescope an' four of the boys a mile behind. Alla way from where you downed Swing Kyler we been trailin' you. Do you think we'll ever let you go, unless—" He paused. "Let her go, Maginn," he went on, "an' I'll let you go."

"You'll lemme go anyhow," countered Squinteye Maginn, "an' by Gawd, you'll let her go with me!"

Miss Rowland drew a short breath. The presence of Coryell gave her a tremendous courage. Her chance lay before her face—at a distance of less than seven inches. She opened her mouth, dropped her head with the speed of a striking snake, and seized her chance and Squinteye's thumb between her teeth.

The next instant she was battered to her knees and trampled upon, but she did not unclamp her clenched teeth. A gun roared at her ear—once, twice, and again. Deafened, stunned, she collapsed beneath the crushing weight of a heavy body.

Yet she held on. Then the heavy body was removed suddenly, and Coryell was saying huskily, "It's all right, it's all right," over and over again. Now she knew that everything was indeed all right, and she relaxed the grip of her jaws and let him help her to her feet. And now, almost precisely as she had done upon a former occasion, she flung her arms round his neck and clung to him. But while her actions were similar her words were not. For now she said, "I thought you'd never come! I

thought you'd never come! Kiss me! Oh, kiss me! My dear! My dear!"

CHAPTER XLI.

THE END.

THE summer moon rode high. The world was greeny-gray all shot with velvet-black. In one of the Two Bar corrals a horse whinnied softly. A far-away coyote yapped his displeasure at the moon. Two nearer friends added their sentiments. Somewhere a wakeful cow bawled.

But the two people sitting on the top step of the Two Bar porch heard none of these things. Miss Rowland stirred slightly in the clasp of the arm that encircled her waist.

"Sleepy?" inquired the arm's owner.

"Not yet," was the lady's comfortable reply. "I— Tell me you love me, Bill."

He told her three times over in most satisfactory fashion.

"That 'll do," she said decisively, pushing him away somewhat. Truthfully, however, it was the merest somewhat. Even the densest of individuals would have known that she was not displeased. But she refused to let him kiss her again—then.

"No," she told him, "even an engaged girl has to breathe occasionally. Besides, I want you to tell me something: when did you first begin to love me?"

"Always."

"Always! And yet I had to beg you to kiss me that—that first time. It wasn't fair. You made me do all the lovemaking. You—I said *not* again—just one then, and just one doesn't mean two. Might have known you'd cheat. What's that?"

"How long have you loved me?" repeated Coryell, looking down at her face, dusky in the darkness.

"How long—oh, I don't know. At first I hated you—I know that."

"Hated me?"

"With all my heart," she said cheerfully. "And then—and then I felt my hate grow less and less—" She paused.

"—An' less," he prompted.

"Until. It's still 'until.' You don't find anything wrong with 'until,' do you?"

"Not a thing," he denied humbly. "I was curious to know what changed you."

"I imagine it was being engaged to you there at Buck River."

"Engaged to me at Buck River! Oh, that! But that wasn't a real engagement."

"It came to me then—oh, very sudden—that—I wanted it real."

He bent his head and pressed his lips to her hair.

"Yes," she continued, "at first I disliked you extremely, and I meant to make you sorry for taking on the contract for my reformation. I knew all about it from the beginning. My father and aunt used to leave too many doors open while they discussed the project. So I tried to make you fall in love with me at first with the intention of scorning you in the most thorough novelistic style."

"Good Lord!"

"Wasn't I silly? But I expect you've forgiven me."

"I do—I have— There. Go on."

"Go on? Where? Oh, then after I'd gotten to know you better I wasn't so sure I—I could scorn you—especially if you actually fell in love with me."

"So that was the reason for those talks about friendship an' about wantin' a thing enough to have it come true."

"That's it, and that's why, when I felt myself falling in love with you I wanted Connie to come with us to save me."

"To save you?"

"I thought you might fall in love with her instead. Oh, don't you see? I wasn't sure of myself yet—and I didn't want to run any risk of letting myself go. And then came Buck River, and right after that I knew—and dearest dear, I almost died."

"What?" Alarm on the part of Coryell.

"I was afraid that you might not love me as I loved you. And it hurt. It hurt here—" She pressed a hand to her left side. "And then you came and—and everything *was* all right. My dear, I *will* be a good wife."

"You haven't used a double negative or said *them* once since we came home."

He regarded her whimsically. "I went to college, too, once upon a time—an' my memory has always been fairly good. You won't have to teach an' train me, Honey. I know how incorrect grammar—"

"As if I could ever train you in anything," she said indignantly. "Of course you may kiss my hand if you like," she added matter-of-factly, "but while my lips are here, why—"

(The end.)

His Last Crime

by Ben Smith

WHEN Paddy the Fox slunk into the Bur Oak Inn late that night, his face was dark and drawn from sleepless worry. Without even as much as a glance in reply to the bartender's greeting, he shuffled into the deserted back room.

Seating himself at the table near the door, Paddy the Fox carefully scrutinized the solitary customer at the bar. Such was the nature of his business that he could not afford to run any risks with strangers at the Bur Oak. As he looked, he realized that he knew the fellow.

Lurching out into the main room, he peered eagerly into the stranger's face. Then he placed a dirty hand on the man's arm.

"Say," began Paddy hoarsely, "hain't youse Willie Gardner?"

When the man addressed had shot a quick glance at the rough being at his side, a look of recognition flashed into his eyes also.

"Yes," he admitted. Then, sharply: "Why, you must be Paddy the Fox."

"The same," acknowledged the Fox, bowing crudely as he extended his hairy hand.

As their hands touched, Paddy gazed intently into the face of Willie Gardner.

"Youse hain't forgot them days when we was kids together, 'Back o' the Yards,' has youse?"

"Those days are unforgettable, Paddy."

"Them was the times before your daddy became city judge an' hit it rich. Well, life's been hard on Paddy an' good to Willie, eh?"

"My father's death left me in bad straights, you know," parried Gardner. "Life isn't the bed of roses I was thinking it was going to be once. He died financially ruined. Worse: he left a big debt for me to pay. But I expect to do it for his sake."

The bartender had seated himself sleepily in a big chair. Again Paddy's watery eyes scanned the young man's face. Then he lifted a commanding finger.

"Say," he whispered, "I kin use youse. Let's talk!"

He led the way to the deserted back room. The two men sat facing each other across a little round table—the well-dressed chap and the criminal.

"Youse need money," stated Paddy.

"Yes, of course—like every one else. I have a job, though, that will eventually pay—"

"But I've a better one fer youse," interrupted Paddy. "Just listen to this. I gotta have some one like youse; in fact, I ought to have youse. I—I—well, I'm goin' to be open an' frank with youse. I want to sell about eighty-two cases of whisky."

"Well?"

"I can't git in touch with the right guys, the fellers with the dough. Jest suppose I'd go marchin' up to some millionaire's front door in these duds an' say: 'I've got a nice bunch of booze fer sale, how many cases do youse want, sir?' I'd git kicked right down those same front steps, fast as the devil, and they yellin' until they drawed the bulls. That's what!"

Paddy reflected on the terrible possibilities of such a misadventure, then went on:

"Nope, it can't be done—by me. But a young chap like youse, up agin the swells every day of your life, could slip 'em the dope without any such trouble."

"Your plan, then, I take it, is to have me act as selling agent for your liquor."

"Exactly!"

"What do I get out of it, Paddy?"

"There's a good eight thousand dollars' worth at only a hundred per. I'm wantin' jest four thousand fer myself. So we kin split fifty-fifty."

"But why four thousand for you?"

"Youse see, I'm goin' to buy a farm in Michigan. I've a wife an' kids growin' up. They're little shavers now, but soon they'll be askin' how their dad gits his money, an' I couldn't tell 'em. It's a great thing, Mr. Gardner, to have kids settin' on a feller's knees. An' wife Molly, too—sweet little gal she is—she wants me to go straight. An' that's the way I aim to travel after this."

Gardner sat motionless in a thoughtful silence. The bartender, not having been disturbed, slept noisily.

"Sometimes I git afraid," went on Paddy, his voice a mere startled whisper. "When I come out of the Englewood warehouse where I'd been stealin' the stuff, there was a feller on Sixty-Third Street right at the door. An' from the way he looked at me, I seen that he knew me, and knew what I was doin'. I could see that, plain enough. Then he lit out down the street." Paddy leaned over toward Gardner, his face tense. "An' I've had strange feelin's about it, too. Dreams hang about me like shadders. They warn me. I'd go crazy ef I don't quit. This is to be my last crime."

The dark lines under his gleaming, bloodshot eyes deepened to blue shadows.

"But why do you ask me to help yo Paddy?" asked Gardner.

"I remember that youse wasn't any too good back in the old days. An' when I seen youse leanin' up again that bar, I had a hunch to ask youse. You'd be safe enough all right, playin' this game. Youse could handle all the cash, fer I kin trust youse." And his voice trailed off into a deep silence.

At a single glance, Gardner took in the empty saloon. Then he spoke.

"I'm working, Paddy, though just now I rather dislike my job. But"—after a thoughtful silence—"I have it to do!"

Reaching into his pocket he fumbled about deliberatingly, his eyes on the ragged being before him. Gardner's face, though lighting for a second with sympathy for the kids and the wife who wanted the Michigan farm, turned harsh and bitter. The weary Paddy was listening to the monotonously ticking clock, his head bent forward.

Unexpectedly, Gardner leaped upon the unwary Fox. There was a sharp, metallic click.

With a surprised start, Paddy the Fox came out of his lethargy. He looked down, bewildered. Bright nickeled handcuffs ornamented his wrists. He glanced upward. Pointing into his face was the shiny, cold muzzle of a gun.

"I'm mighty sorry, Paddy, for the sake of the kids. You didn't ask me what my job was. It's this: I was sent out here to arrest you"—he pulled open his coat to display a silver star—"on the charge of robbing the Englewood Warehouse Company of eighty-two cases of bonded whisky."

In the barroom the deep, heavy breathing of the barkeeper continued to mingle with the ticking of the clock.

"Paddy," said Gardner reminiscently, "you were right. This was your last crime."