ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

Miss Angel

by Katharine Eggleston

A Western Tale of Conflict and Conspiracy

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by Katharine Eggleston

Author of "Bully Bess," "Flaming Hearts," "The Girl in Khaki," etc.

CHAPTER I.

PRISONERS OF THE SNOW.

"SNEAK!"

They were big men, both of them. But the one with the burning black eyes was extra strong with the energy of righteous indignation. The man he accused went down before him, close to the disconsolate-looking stove. The can of tomatoes, clutched in his hands and under him as he fell, was the cause of the quarrel.

"Think you'll get up alive with that can in your hands?"

Wharton felt the man under him shudder. Then he felt the gathering of power to unseat him. But he was on top. It was his natural position. His stiff lips half smiled as he waited for Clayton to try to fling him off.

"Better lie still or fork out the chow!" he suggested. "We've both been hungry for two days. We're numb with cold. But I'm warming up at great speed. And you're getting colder every minute; you're scared, and it's putting ice in your veins! Behave or you'll get yours!"

Wharton knew that the ghoulish fluency of his words was a sign that he was sinking beneath the difficulties of the situation and being buried by them. Strange lights shot back of his eyeballs. The climax of the three days' torture in the snow-buried shack had come.

His fluency was the more disturbing because he and Clayton had not spoken for two days—not since they ripped up the last pine board that they dared to take. The hungry little stove had demanded food so voraciously that the shack quivered when the wind hit it, so seriously had they robbed it of strength to resist. Now they were freezing and starving.

Three days before Wharton had set out on horseback with Clayton. They were bound for the Neck-and-Neck Ranch, ten miles across the rolling prairie.

They had thought the cold encouraging when they left the little town; it meant that snow was next to impossible. They had ridden what they believed to be over half the distance to the Neck-and-Neck, when, as if with malignant intention toward the two men who had not expected it, the snow had twisted itself in blizzard ferocity from the clouds.

Going back in the riotous whirl of it had seemed the sensible thing to do. But Clayton had objected. He had hired Wharton, and claimed a right to dictate. So the common sense of the younger man had yielded to the cupidity of the elder.

In the white horror of the snow that

covered the ground with such unbelievable speed and lay deep all about them Clayton's horse had suddenly gone down. Clayton tumbled off and stood swearing at the brute.

But Wharton saw that the creature was in agony. He leaped from his own pony and helped the struggling animal to extricate its left foreleg from the prairie-dog hole into which it had slipped.

"We'll have to shoot her!" he exclaimed, feeling for his gun with cold fingers and moved to a compassion that hurt, so pitifully did the horse suffer.

"You'll regret it!"

Clayton had not meant his words to reach Wharton. But Wharton turned quickly as if they had flagged his attention. He saw Clayton climbing into the saddle he had occupied before he sprang down to the pony's assistance.

In a flash Wharton knew that the opinion he had subconsciously entertained was right. This man, with whom he had allied himself for money, was lacking in the essentials of manhood.

"Hold on, there! My gun's out!" he warned.

Clayton's cold hands recoiled from the reins he had barely grasped. He looked at the big figure outlined vaguely through the rushing white.

"I wasn't going off and leave you," he said somewhat uncertainly.

"Well, I guess not!"

Through the swishing and hissing of the snow and the dull roar of the conspiring winds of heaven the crack of a gun sounded. The suffering mare fell back into the softness of the snow.

Wharton thrust his pistol into the holster and approached Clayton.

"Climb up. I'll let you ride."

Clayton climbed, even though he sensed the contemptuous tolerance in the other's voice. Wharton caught the bridle in his hand; and they moved off through the chaos.

Wharton could not see. Thinking did no good, as he had no knowledge of the country on which to base a plan. He held the bridle and went as the horse went, trusting brute instinct.

He had utterly lost all sense of direction since he dismounted. Clayton asked him querulously if he thought they were almost at the Neck-and-Neck. Wharton knew from the question that the other believed him to be moving with definite idea of his destination.

But even though the finding of shelter seemed one chance in a thousand, he counted on it. He plowed forward, contemptuous of the man who would impose his weight on a beast that must struggle against the impeding snow.

They had reached the shack somehow. It had just thrust itself up in front of them.

Clayton had fallen stiffly from the saddle. It did not occur to either of them to think of the horse till they had got the little stove going. Then, of course, it was too late to find it.

They had found five cans of tomatoes on a shelf, and ate them without a thought of further supply. That is, they ate all but the one now warming itself against Clayton's empty stomach as he lay on the floor, the floor that was now earth, the boards that paved it having gone to feed the fire. Now that single can of tomatoes stood in the mind of each as the last barrier between him and a painful death. Wharton looked about him. Every available inch of board had been burned. The roof above him shivered as the wind dropped on it. The sullen little stove sat blackly watching them as if it resented their failure to keep it glowing.

Wharton grew impatient. Clayton put up no fight at all. He just lay on the can.

"Say, do you think that can's going to hatch?" he demanded roughly. "Fork it out! I'll give you half."

But the fair play did not penetrate Clayton's self-interest. Wharton rose slowly, too disgusted with his companion to want to be near him.

"One of us must go for help," Clayton said sleepily, as if he were already succumbing to the cold. "The one who goes will have to eat this."

He lay there, face down, hugging the can.

Wharton's irritation rose hot and hard.

"And you'll be the one? Is that your delicate suggestion?" he asked, then went on slowly: "You idiot, don't you know that it's sure death to get out into that whirling hell?"

"I'll starve and freeze if I stay here," Clayton said.

"You're doing it now. Get up and move around!"

"I—can't!" Clayton retorted weakly.

"You can!" Wharton insisted.

He bent and thrust his hand under Clayton. It closed on the can. Clayton went mad.

Wharton felt the other's fingers close on his throat with a grip not to be disregarded. He spun the can out of reach, and then set about shaking himself free.

But Clayton hung on, his grip a stranglehold. The big coward had gone crazy, and the strength of his madness made him a frightfully effective antagonist.

Wharton could not breathe. He fell back a step. Clayton pressed his advantage. Suddenly, through the red mist, Wharton saw a white and shining mark. His fist doubled automatically. With every ounce of power he could muster he drove at that white spot.

The blow crashed tremendously onto Clayton's temple. Like an ox felled with an ax, the man went down. He struck the stove, knocking a leg out from under it.

Wharton stood back dizzily from the havoc he had wrought. A fierce shriek of accusation was hurled at him by the wind. "Now you *have* done it!" it seemed to shout.

He leaned hard against the wall and dug at his eyes as if to displace what he saw. But Clayton continued to lie there, still, so horribly still.

It could not possibly be true that he had killed a man. In all the tight places where he had been he had never used the great power of his body to hurt any one who threatened him. It could not be possible that he had made the supreme mistake.

He shuddered away from recognizing what he had always vaguely feared. In a moment of great temptation his strength had got beyond his control. He had killed Clayton for a can of tomatoes.

They had met in a third-class hotel. Wharton wore some of the marks of the soldier of fortune when fortune's face was averted. His runover heels and his unpressed clothes had won him Clayton's attention.

Wharton talked with apparent freedom in response to Clayton's sounding. He told of adventures that cut a wide swath indeed—from Alaska to the far shores of tropic seas. He always talked with that apparent freedom when he needed money.

It took him but a moment to find out that his muscles and his fearlessness were the attractions that Clayton found in him, though the fact that he had had a somewhat superior training for the law did not go unappreciated.

"Is this enterprise—straight?" he had asked.

"Straight as a die!" Clayton replied, taking a roll of bills from his pocket.

"Whatever it is, it will cost two hundred and fifty to secure my society," Wharton observed nonchalantly.

To his amazement Clayton had peeled off half of his roll and handed it over.

"We start now. Got any heavy clothes?" Clayton had asked.

"Riding things and a sheep-fur coat," Wharton answered. "But I want a little more information, please."

"Give it to you on the train. We've got to make the nine thirty."

"You're a scoundrel! I'm dead sure of it now," Wharton told himself as his reluctant gaze came back to the man he had killed. "There's dirty work in connection with this trip. Maybe it's a good thing for some one that I finished you. But it's hell for me!"

Suddenly a hideous feeling of being shut in with death came over him. Outside the wind howled and snuffled about the place as if it sought entrance to a ghastly orgy. "I might as well get out of here—and end everything!" Wharton decided.

He started toward the door. Then he stopped, face to face with a conviction.

"But it wouldn't end everything. It's just a foolish interruption. Even—even—

this," he muttered as he glanced down at Clayton, "doesn't excuse bolting."

In a vague impulse to do something good where the evil was so evidently his fault, he bent and drew Clayton back against the wall. He slid his hand under coat and vest, hoping against hope. But his numbed fingers could detect no heart-beat. He smiled in pitiful fashion as if he tried to jeer at himself for expecting anything else. With one of the unaccountable impulses that convince men of a power of decision within them, independent of the brain through which it operates, Wharton felt in Clayton's breast pocket for the envelope which he knew it contained.

"Might as well try to do a little good to try to balance the evil," he told himself as he stowed the envelope away in his pocket. "If I get anywhere I may be able to give this to whomever it concerns."

He had heard Clayton refer to the man whose will favored him as "old Capet." The impression he derived was that Clayton had had no affection for the individual whom Wharton assumed must be a relative. Even though the beneficiary of the will was beyond the chance of benefiting, there might be others who had claims which Clayton had usurped or unjustly displaced. If he won through, he could somehow find out who and where they were, and assist them to gain their own.

Stumblingly he strode to the door and flung it open. But the raging storm did not reach clutchingly in for him. White and hard from pressing against the portal and melting slightly, only to freeze in a gleaming crust, a wall of snow rose before him.

He bent, seized the stove leg, and began to dig. As he loosened the retaining crust, the dry snow rushed down about his legs. He pushed through. Beyond the drift, the gale seized him as if it had been lying in wait for him to come out.

But the assault stimulated him. It was something to fight, not something he could only miserably sit down under like the ghastly deed he had committed.

"I did it in self-defense!" he growled as if the storm were too daring in its accusation.

But the scorn that had always burned in him when a big man used his strength instead of his brain to settle his difficulties rose and stifled the excuse he offered his conscience.

He fought with the swirling chaos of the storm. The cold bit at him viciously. But its pinchers had not grip sufficient to drive him to take refuge with what Clayton had become.

Gradually a sense of triumph began to possess him. He was warming with his supreme exertion. He became less conscious of what he had left in the shack. He thought longingly of that can of tomatoes.

For a moment he paused, minded to return for it. Then Clayton's still, white face rose before his eyes forbiddingly. He plowed on ahead. There had been in him ever since he could remember an indomitable faith in his coming out right. He had clung to it when it seemed that the impossible alone could justify his faith. But now, above the gale, in spite of his crime, he heard the clarion note of triumph. He would win through!

A pause in the wind's wild riot ensued. Sounding softly through the interstices of the gale he heard the ringing of a bell.

CHAPTER II.

A REFUGE.

EDWARD WHARTON grinned.

"What does that make me think of, that blessed bell?" he asked himself as the strokes came unevenly on the wind. "Gee, that's it! I learned to recite a poem about a bell ringing when I was a kid at school."

He plowed eagerly along the route of the mellow ringing; it was like a hand reached forth to guide him.

"'Such was the wreck of the Hesperus—' Not by a long shot!" he interrupted himself. "Hesperus was the wrong name to give a ship that went down. Hesperus—hope! Hope never sinks. Not even in a snow-sea! I knew I'd win to harbor!"

Not a sight of anything other than the

rolling, reeling billows of snow covered with the misty veils of more snow, swirling and falling, greeted his eyes. But inside of him something sang. He was sure of reaching shelter.

And leaping into prominence from the depths of his subconscious mind came words he had not known he remembered: "I say unto you, *always rejoice!*"

With the weight of a man's death on his conscience, with only the ringing of a bell to tell him that there was something near him besides the cold intimacy of death by suffocation in the snow, he did rejoice. For in a great glow of realization he sensed profoundly the element of indestructibility that forms an elemental ingredient of the combination of qualities called man. He glowed with the consciousness of mastery.

Of course the question popped up: why should he be glad to live when he had done so evil a deed? Nevertheless he rejoiced in life and the security from death he knew he was approaching.

Suddenly he found himself on his knees in the snow. With a shock of horror, he realized that he was succumbing to the hunger and cold he had been forced to endure. He stumbled.

Impatiently, resentfully, he picked himself up, blowing the snow from his nostrils and mouth, realizing how weak he was since he had not known enough even to turn his face as he went down. It was all up with him.

But the bell was still ringing. He could hear it very distinctly. He remembered that approaching death sometimes sharpened the senses of which the dying man was soon to take leave. Was this clearness death's salutation to him?

"Not on my life!" he suddenly declared with a vigor that seemed to knock the cork from something within him that brimmed up effervescently.

He opened his eyes, looked through the veils of snow, and caught a rosy glow that resembled the heatless fire of a fake fireplace on the stage. But Wharton, with a faith fed from within, knew there was something real about it.

Warmth! A fire! The words rocked and reeled through his mind. He plunged toward the rosy glow. Weirdly the bell kept sounding; it almost seemed to pat him approvingly with its soft tones. And then he thought his addled brain conceived the sweetness of a woman's voice to make the bell's voice more alluring.

"By George! I *am* dead!" he muttered as if forced, even against his conviction of life, to accept this last gentle lure as comfort beyond the veil.

As he said it he sank forward. The warm prison of a woman's chin and shoulder held his cold face. A ruffly radiance, all yellow and rose, enveloped a countenance of which he caught a glimpse. Then he sank into the heaven of her arms and felt the rosy ruffles close around them both in warmth and light.

"Mr. Nemo! Dear Mr. Nemo!"

Then the angel pushed his head back after the first instant's ecstasy.

"Mercy gracious!" she exclaimed as if he were not the Mr. Nobody she had expected, and staggered back into the low room.

Wharton's inert body inclined against her like a felled pine. She lowered his bulk to the floor with a deliberate care that proved her strength.

Across the big, bare room was the fireplace, piled high with logs and flaming splendidly, forming the rosy beacon that had reached its glowing hands out to rescue Wharton.

The girl looked him up and down. His inch over six feet made for a disconcerting appearance of hugeness.

"What a lot to thaw!" she reflected aloud.

She knelt on the floor, looked searchingly at his white face, and thrust her hands between his woolen "comforter" and his ears, feeling at the latter gingerly. She had heard too much of careless treatment of frozen members to risk spoiling the effect of the face she studied.

However, she did not linger over his frozen good looks. Out of the still open door she bounded, and came back with her hands full of snow, which she tucked between muffler and ears.

"There! We won't have any ears broken off your nice-looking head!" she

observed. "Oh, your feet! Your big feet, you man! How can I ever unlace those frozen boots? I—oh!"

Her eyes lighted on a wooden tub filled with water. Wind-mill and pump were useless. This tubful of water was for use in the house till the storm was over.

With the skill of an engineer she jerked and wriggled and shoved till she had the tub on boards in a line with Wharton's feet. Then, with comparatively little difficulty, she pulled it toward him.

She stuck a testing forefinger in the water and gasped a bit.

"That's not warm. It can't thaw him so fast his feet 'll drop off!"

With visible dislike but heroic purpose she pursued her thawing process. She bent his legs at the knees and put his feet, boots and all, into the cold water. In another two minutes his right hand was safely embedded in snow. Then the left was similarly treated. But to an observer Ed would have presented the amazing appearance of having an iron pot as a finish for his right arm and a tin bucket for his left.

Breathing quickly from her exertions, the girl stood back and contemplated her work. Then she laughed.

"Wouldn't he be fussed if he could see himself! He's too good-looking to want to look—funny!"

Then she started.

"Damn!"

Ed made a weak effort to move his right hand, and met the iron pot's resistance. He gathered will-power and intention and tried the left. The tin bucket slipped off, rolled sidewise, and dumped its melting snow cargo into his face.

He thought he heard a poorly suppressed giggle, which focused his awaking thoughts. He saw the iron pot and discovered something queer about his feet.

The girl had retired to the fireplace; and, in spite of there being a very serious aspect to the occasion, she was watching with evident relish to see the big man find out how he had been treated. He lay very still for a while, working to bring his faculties into line.

Then he lifted a foot experimentally and heard the water dripping from it.

"One on somebody! Boots are waterproof!" he muttered.

"Water-proof" reached the girl.

"Are they?" she asked impulsively, concerned for the effectiveness of her first aid.

At the sound of her voice Wharton remembered that brief, blissful imprisonment in the soft grip of a woman's chin and throat. His face tingled at the memory.

"I'm not frozen," he explained, his voice a pale reflection of itself. "I'm hungry."

"Oh!"

"I can imagine something better in this kettle than my own hand," he added.

Then she bent above him. Deep, gray eyes plunged silver probes into his. The richness of healthy young blood flaunted brightly in her cheeks and lips.

The glowing, double assault on his dreaming senses waked them thoroughly. The rose glowed fiercely in her cheeks as she sank back from her scrutiny, certain that he was quite conscious—especially of her—and entirely responsible.

"You might take your feet out of the tub. That's all the water I have to cook with!"

Ed's flashing black eyes caught the tag end of a silver glance. She was laughing. He solemnly removed his feet from the tub, drew his hand from the iron pot, sat up—and wabbled about it.

Then the girl came into his range of vision. He knew she detected his shakiness, so he shook more. She came close, as if afraid he would topple backward. Then he noticed the open door, and forgot to serve his own interests.

"You're keeping the door open—"

"You mustn't thaw too quickly," she explained. "Something might crack."

"I'm afraid I'm a nuisance," he said.

"Not—when you're frozen," she assured him.

She approached and stood where he could see her plainly. She was dressed in brown, in riding-clothes, well cut and serviceable. Her legs were incased in laced boots, very high. A gleaming little spur tinkled as she moved. The edges of a bright red flannel shirt outlined her coat at neck and wrists; and a soft black tie finished the little v where her white throat shone.

But her expression was so serious that Wharton was careful to look as if he had no eyes for the delectable appeal of her; he seemed to wait for her words with concentrated attention.

"You have come very near death. It stalks everywhere across these snow-swept plains. When you fell into the house, I thought you were some one else. I'm honestly glad to have you here safe; but—but I'm worried about him!"

Tears came. Her lips trembled and then were caught in the calm-compelling pressure of her white teeth.

Unconsciously Wharton had assumed that she and he were alone in a world of their own. He had appropriated her so naturally that he was aghast at it now. For she loved some one—loved and waited for him in suffering uncertainty. How singular it was that his very being should have clung to a girl whose heart and head were already completely filled.

With the withdrawal of this stimulus to his imagination he felt how hungry he was, how wretchedly shivery and damp.

"May I—have something hot to eat?" he asked, sinking against the floor.

"Of course!" the girl exclaimed. "I'll give you some nice, warm tomato soup."

"Nix on tomatoes! I'd rather starve!" he cried out with self-surprising energy.

She stopped on her way to the fireplace. With her head tilted in speculative fashion she observed, with the soft, slurring euphony of her Southern voice:

"I reckon you'd like pompano and chicken-gumbo?"

"I didn't mean to be rude," he apologized, pushing himself up to a sitting posture and gripping his head in his hands. "I—I'll never be able to face a tomato. I have a reason, a great reason!"

She saw him shiver: it was at the thought of the fight in the shack, the part tomatoes had played in it, and its dire ending. Tomatoes seemed to epitomize the horror he had wrought.

"Listen to me!" she said with an insistence that was full of real concern. "You must get up and come near the fire. I'll give you some coffee. Do come!"

Ed tried to rise and wavered backward. She was at his side, her hand on his shoulder.

"Come, come—don't be womanish and faint! It looks so silly in a man!"

Wharton gripped his receding consciousness, clutched at it desperately. A taunting little thread of scorn ran through her words. But he could not hang on. It seemed to him he slid out of his own grasp. Then he knew nothing.

It must have been an appreciable time that he was unconscious. For he came slowly back to the knowledge of her presence through a comfortable feeling that the dampness about his ears and neck was gone. She had taken off the muffler, got rid of the remnants of melting snow, and was rubbing his throat and chest with warm little hands.

She had two buttons of his stiff coat undone. He lay with closed eyes and rejoiced. And something of that realization of the unconquerable power within himself that he had experienced out in the storm began to come again. He waited for it with expectancy.

Then he knew why his heart sang. However much she loved the man she waited for, she was earnestly devoting all the tender woman faculty she possessed to him, Edward Wharton.

She worked with another button of his coat, and finally had them all unfastened. As she laid back the sides of the sheep-skin lined garment, the envelope he had taken from Clayton fell to the floor.

There was a long silence. Her ministering hands were gone. Wharton looked at her.

She was gazing in horror at the envelope. "Arch Clayton" was written boldly on it. As if his eyes drew hers from what they beheld, the girl looked at Wharton. Then she shrank from him as if he were a snake.

CHAPTER III.

HUNGER AND A DISCOVERY.

"HOW long have you been around here?"

Wrapped in the spell of this girl as Wharton was, there was nothing in his

nature to render him submissive to the tone she used.

"It's the wrong time of year for rattlesnakes," he said, his eyes lighting with resentment.

"I don't know. They have to hibernate somewhere."

He had named her "Miss Angel" in his mind. After the instant of resentment his first impression resumed control in his head and heart. He even smiled as he told himself that Miss Angel had spunk.

She walked away from him with something about the way she held her shoulders that taunted him. He pulled himself up, just angry enough to feel stronger.

"I refuse to be insinuated at, even if I am imposing on your hospitality. Are you alone in this house?"

Miss Angel spun around on her toe to give him a sharp reply.

"Oh! I know you're not afraid!" he said before she could speak. "I just wanted to know if there was any one within call who had heart enough to feed a starving man."

She stood looking at him as if she studied an unfeeling hulk.

"You know you have nothing to fear from me," he added mistakenly.

"I'm not so sure of that. I haven't any use for men like you."

"So you eliminate them by a process of slow starvation? Well, I'm not the kind that takes to elimination."

As he said it he pulled himself up to his knees and then rose slowly. He swayed a bit, but he clenched his teeth and stood still, forcing his muscles to render service. Her gray eyes swept him with a look that seemed to say:

"You *are* big; but size isn't the only sign of strength!"

Her brown-clad little body appeared to expand defiantly, and the indomitable fire of her glance and the crisp curve of her lips proclaimed another kind of strength. He looked at her, schooling his eyes to show neither weakness nor sign of flattering interest in her, and moved toward the fireplace.

"Since your hospitality has a crick in its neck, I'll help myself."

A tea-towel had been tossed over the back of a chair. He took it and grabbed the handle of a coffee-pot that was perched on a stove lid.

Two cups, altogether too cozily suggestive to suit Wharton, were on the wide shelf above the fireplace. Though he resented their paired significance, the inner man was too clamorous to be denied. He filled a cup, replaced the pot, and sat down in the big chair drawn expectantly before the blaze.

Cup and chair were there for the man she waited for. But Wharton told himself that he was in possession and would make the most of brief privileges.

The coffee burned him, but it tasted like nectar. She watched him. He was as empty as could be. She felt a warm human impulse to feed him.

But the impulse flatted out like a punctured balloon as her eyes happened to flash toward the envelope. It lay there, four-squared conviction of this man. This was the fiend, Arch Clayton. Why should she feed him? What mercy had he shown to the need of another? And now, when she had that envelope in her hands, she had Arch Clayton in her power.

Unconsciously she smiled in triumph. And Wharton, over the edge of his second cup of coffee, saw her and wondered at the chill brilliancy of her eyes.

Suddenly she moved toward the envelope. She must get it into her hands, must be sure that it contained the document she wanted so tremendously.

But her look and her sudden energy inspired Wharton with a feeling that he needed to be on guard. He rose quickly and took a step as if he contemplated stopping her.

At least, she interpreted his movement that way. Naturally, now that he was himself again, he would not let her get hold of the envelope. His movement to interrupt her as she approached it was to her proof positive that the document he had forced her uncle to sign was in the envelope.

"I beg your pardon," she heard this arch villain saying.

There was a stereotyped familiarity about his words.

"For what?" she asked, her thoughts only half on his answer.

"It's rather a test to be polite on an empty stomach," he replied, still standing, but gripping the chair back.

"Were you trying to be polite?" she asked, thinking it might be well to get on terms of less formality so that she might be freer to secure the envelope.

"Funny that coffee should give man the impulse to live up to his breeding when his legs refuse to support his traditions!"

"Oh! Won't you sit down, please?" she invited.

"May I? Thank you."

"Out here we do not think a man is committing one of the deadly sins if he sits when a lady is standing. Our manners are more genuine and our hospitality more generous."

Miss Angel had lost sight of all but one thing—gaining possession of the envelope. Quite naturally, she fell into the alluring little ways of speech and expression that were her usual avenues of securing what she wanted. She forgot that this big man was a villain; she just concerned herself with lulling his attention to such an extent that it would be completely concentrated on her conversation. Then, under cover of his interest, she meant gracefully to approach and secure the envelope.

"Ah! I understand!" Wharton responded, seeing her resort to the pretty tricks of social life, but not guessing why. "I cannot thank you enough for the soft, damp welcome your hospitality prompted. The generosity with which you allowed me to help myself to your coffee is of the first-water, simon-pure type—it is, indeed, the large-hearted Western kind of hospitality to which I find myself—exposed!"

He spoke with a mincing elegance that was a caricature of her manner. She flushed with embarrassment, but acknowledged that he had scored.

"I offered you the best I had—tomatoes," she defended herself.

"I declined for a reason. If your hospitality will display some more of its generosity it will indicate the location of the bread-box. I'll serve myself."

Miss Angel considered. The bread-box was on a table near the cook-stove. It was empty; but it could serve her none the less. She pointed in that direction.

Wharton started for it, urged by his appetite. But he stopped. Miss Angel, the instant his back was turned, had made a running jump and landed beside the envelope. As he turned she seized it.

"There, sir, I reckon that 'll do for you!" she triumphed, backing away from him as if she anticipated a charge.

But Wharton simply stared at her, not unappreciative of her flaming animation, but at a loss to account for her excitement. He recalled that the envelope had lain on the floor a good while. Just why she exulted in having it mystified him.

Suddenly an idea hit him hard. His eyes swept the room and came back to her.

"This isn't—this doesn't happen to be the Neck-and-Neck Ranch?"

"It just does!" Miss Angel replied, hastening toward the opposite side of the room, where she faced him belligerently.

"Can you beat that?" Wharton muttered under his breath. "Did a Mr. Capet live here?"

"Yes, but he—" Miss Angel paused.

Much as she hated this big creature who had mistreated her uncle, she remembered that the time was not opportune for voicing her scorn. She certainly would not let him know that she was alone in the midst of the blizzard's isolation.

"Yes, he's—out," she said, and then realized the absurdity of expecting any one to believe that an old man was abroad on a day like this. "There's a shack near here; he's there," she added.

Wharton looked surprised and a bit startled.

"You mean that small wooden building, where the tomato-cans—"

He caught himself. But he saw at once that she as too much confused at his knowledge of the place to notice what he said very accurately.

"Is that shack near this house?" he asked, dreading to hear that it and its grim tenant were in the immediate neighborhood.

She nodded.

He shuddered. Clayton had lied; said

old Capet was dead. Could Capet have gone out there and would he come back at any dreadful moment?

"It's pretty bad walking. How long since Mr. Capet started to wade out to that shack?" he asked.

"He—he—well, he—"

"You mean he hasn't gone out there?" Wharton broke in, almost fierce in his eagerness for assurance that his secret was safe.

"Well, he said he would just go out and look about—"

"I can't make out what motive you have in lying to me," Wharton interrupted. "You see, I've been in that shack. Unless—"

"Alone?" she interrupted.

Her whole interest and concern was to know whether her uncle had again come into association with the man who had so inhumanly ill-treated him before.

But to Wharton her significant question called for an accounting of the treatment he had given his companion in the shack. For one instant he seemed to lose the power to restrain the confession she demanded. Then, with an effort of will so tremendous that he felt it physically, he answered calmly:

"Unless some one has wandered in there since I left and came here, that shack is unoccupied."

Miss Angel could not have told whether her feeling was that of relief or added anxiety. The call that Wharton made upon his will sounded in his words as the quiet conviction of truth-telling. She believed him.

With a leap of satisfaction Wharton realized how the reply he had made would serve him later. When Clayton's body was found she would recall what he had said. In default of any other explanation and in remembrance of the storm that took its toll, the natural conclusion would be that the wayfarer had found the shack only to perish there.

He looked at the graceful figure of the girl who was his unintentional and not very willing hostess. A warming recognition of the fact that they were alone in the house swept him.

The envelope and its value to her did not concern him. He merely thought that it had come into the proper hands. His one great wish that the relations between them might be pleasanter occupied him. When this storm was over, his brief happiness would melt more rapidly than the snow.

Depressed by the thought, he sat down, holding his swimming head. If she would only be good enough to give him food, he felt he might face his difficulties. The bread-box to which she had pointed seemed miles away.

Of course, he had killed Clayton in self-defense. But this girl wore all the subtle evidences of one to whom such knowledge would be so horrible that she could not view the man who was guilty with any kind of endurance.

He knew the tendency of big hearts and high minds to take the part of the victim. He knew how he had himself once done just that. A man, who had been the pal of another in their miserable wanderings in a heat-and-drink cursed country, was strung up just because his chum had been found dead. Wharton recalled how a pseudo-righteous indignation had possessed the mob. Now he wondered if that man had been even as guilty as he was himself. Yet he had been one of those who stood aside and let vengeance take its way.

For some reason, this girl did not treat him with the kindness that any hungry and weak stranger might have expected. If she suspected him of having knocked the life from a fellow creature with one of his fists she would be terrified at his presence and would condemn him wholly. She would think, as he always had when death was not clutching at his own throat, that there was no excuse for taking a man's life.

Suddenly she sat up, pulling himself together. He never had got anywhere when he permitted himself to be uncertain or to defer too much to others. Little as he had succeeded in the ways of the world to which he was born he had written a record of daring and accomplishment in the out-of-the-way places where adventure is rife.

He was hungry. He was a man alone with a woman. She dreaded that fact or she would not have tried to provide herself

with a protector unseen in the neighborhood. If she had not the grace to offer him the food he needed, he would use her fear to secure it.

"I don't want to employ cave-man tactics; but if you do not give me something to eat I shall—take it!"

"I have a lot of crackers, two cans of sardines, a small piece of bacon, and some chocolate fudge. I wasn't expecting a blizzard and you, Mr. Clayton. What will you take?"

Wharton started as she called him by the name of the man in the shack. Surreptitiously, he glanced toward the door, fooling himself with the idea that she might have meant the name for the one who really bore it and who was now entering. The hope in him that the dead should arise and be alive again was fantastic. His lips curled in scorn as he answered:

"Everything."

"We may be snowbound for days. It's ten miles to more. I suggest—"

"Oh, give me anything, so it's something!" he broke in savagely, fixing his blazing eyes on her and half rising.

"If you think you'll get anything from me by that method, you're wrong!" she said, coolly eying him.

The next instant Edward Wharton was looking along a metal barrel to two gray eyes, as calm and bright and cold as stars in a winter sky.

"I'm rather the best shot around here. It seems to come natural. I'll take your gun. Thanks. And I'll feed you what I feel like giving you."

Wharton handed over the gun; her coolness and courage thrilled him like music. Her beauty shone as something luminous behind thin veils as cold and cloudily lovely as spray dashed up from torrents.

She dropped her weapon into the pocket of her skirt, its butt ready to siege, and laid his on a shelf.

"Now, Mr. Clayton, I'll feed you. And the first word I hear from you that doesn't suit me, I'll walk you out into the storm at the business end of these guns!"

She went to the cupboard, and Wharton sank back in the armchair. He was not ill-pleased with the situation.

It occurred to him to correct her mistake in his name. Then it occurred to him not to. It might serve him to be Clayton. So far as he knew, there was not a person aware that he had accompanied Clayton. He doubted if he had an acquaintance within miles who knew his name. The horses he and Clayton had ridden were engaged by Clayton and brought to the edge of the station platform, where he had waited without having exchanged a word with any one. That still form in the shack was safe from discovery till after the snow melted and communication became easy. If he got away under the name of Clayton, it was more than probable that efforts to locate him when the police got to work on the mystery of the shack would be rendered futile. The dead man would be nameless, so that what friends Clayton might have would not be attracted to investigation. If he kept his nerve, Wharton saw how probable it was that the mystery of the shack should remain a mystery.

And he cogitated wisely—this glorious girl has, at least, enough humanity about her not to turn me out in the snow. "I shall play up the very best of all that's in me to the inspiration of her presence. If she doesn't like me a little before I turn out of here, it will be my fault absolutely."

He looked at her; and, without realizing it, the ardor of his interest burned in his eyes. She looked at him as if her eyes responded to a magnetism that caught her off-guard. And under his gaze, the color leaped to her cheeks and deepened their glow. She dropped the salt-cellar.

Wharton had played many games with life. But never one so potent in its appeal to his imagination.

She did not like him. But she blushed because of him. He cared; he cared enough for both. No girl had ever waked in him what she did. Some girls had cared for him and left him cold. This one—

The key to the sardine-can she was trying to open leaped half across the room toward him. He rose to it as if it were tempting bait.

They both bent to pick it up. Their heads bumped.

Wharton's hands went out instinctively,

and fell on her shoulders. He felt a surging sense of possession that seemed to mark her his.

Miss Angel's poise was gone. For a second she looked as confused and scared as a child caught in mischief. The fire of his eyes poured into hers.

Then her woman-modesty rose like a thin, impenetrable wall. But she jerked away with the embarrassed haste of one not quite sure of herself.

"Eat!" she commanded, pointing to the food set on the table near the fireplace.

Then she went scudding across the room with a sudden loss of the temporary dignity that completely finished Wharton.

"Jove, I'm in love!" he exclaimed silently while he wrestled with the sardine-can.

CHAPTER IV.

CLAYTON AND CAPET.

MISS ANGEL had a name scarcely less picturesque than the one Wharton gave her. She was Dewilde Capet, a strenuous daughter of a house tottering on the last weak timbers of its aristocracy.

She was an outlaw in the eyes of her mother and sister, having come West from her home in New Orleans to teach school. She declared herself tired of living on nothing but family traditions and trying not to show the effects.

She literally bolted from home. And she actually arrived in time to save her uncle's life. Later she secured the school near Ransom's ranch and spent the week-ends with her uncle when she was not in Ellsworth with Mrs. Mosher.

Her advent into the country had changed things a good deal. Ellsworth was the railroad town and the pay-day place of celebration for the cow-men. Minnie Mosher was the wife of the grocer and postmaster. When Miss Capet was her guest, she became the hostess of the town.

For Dewilde put on one of her pretty, up-to-date frocks and shed the witchery of her charm and her quick sympathy across the social starvation in the hearts of a number of unmarried young men who rode the range or prospected in the mountains. Hers became a name to conjure with—it stirred enthusiasm and dreams.

Old Fosdick Capet liked her in spite of his prejudice. Her mother had literally hounded him away from New Orleans by insisting that he provide the proper social setting for his niece. And his whole heart and his small fortune were wrapped up in scientific investigations; it hurt his pride that none of the present-day Capets had added to a reputation for public service which had won the family its distinction. To do something to put the Capet name on something besides the social register was his aim.

He happened on the Neck-and-Neck ranch and bought it cheap. Ten miles from Ellsworth and forty from Weenykin, a rough mining town in the mountains, his new home was as secluded and satisfying as an experimenting genius could desire.

For a blissful year he worked away at his experiments. He was really a genius in his way. Then Arch Clayton made the Neck-and-Neck ranch one day in time to find the old scientist all but burned to death by an unexpected reaction of one of his combinations.

Clayton thought he was dying. It seemed incredible that a man could endure such torture and live. He did what he could for him, which in no way alleviated the pain. But Capet clung desperately to companionship in his agony.

Finally it was borne in upon Clayton that the old man's agony was partly due to something besides his physical condition. Clayton, an intriguer by nature, beguiled the explanation. And the fangs of greed received a peculiar incentive to fasten securely in his mind.

Capet had perfected a formula for making a remedy which would be a boon to humanity and give to the Capet name the importance he craved. But—he interrupted his story to ask tragically if Clayton thought he was going to die.

And Clayton thought he was. He said so. Capet explained that he had but one relative with the common sense and the ambition to bring his work to practical fruition. He wanted to convey the rights in his invention to his niece, Dewilde Capet.

Clayton suggested that Capet make him executor, give him the formula and he would deliver it to Miss Capet. But Capet demurred; he was absolutely unwilling to disclose his secret.

The pain eased a bit as if to encourage the old man in his resolve. Clayton was not particularly interested. The bare ranch-house and the tumble-down appearance of the surroundings did not impress him with the idea that Capet was worth much.

But he was to receive the most prodigious surprise. Capet nearly went mad, his agony accumulating till he was driven beyond considering anything but release from it.

Capet finally told him between paroxysms to write out an agreement in which his name was to appear as executor for Fosdick Capet. Clayton did so, wishing that he might get away from the trying experience, but not quite daring to leave the old man.

He listened to piece-meal instructions; but as they all dealt with the safe conveyance of the formula to Dewilde Capet, he listened carelessly.

With a howl of pain like that from a tortured animal, Capet suddenly gripped Clayton's arm and pointed a trembling finger.

"Get—that—bottle—catsup-bottle!"

Clayton, with the unsigned paper in his hand, sprang up to obey the command.

"Hurry, hurry, for God's sake!"

The pain-racked voice impelled Clayton like a powerful hand. He leaped across the room. A catsup-bottle stood alone on a board shelf.

Scarcely noticing its contents, Clayton rushed back to Capet. The old man seized it as a drowning swimmer clutches at help.

Out from the bottle exuded a colorless liquid. Capet let it ooze over his raw flesh. To Arch Clayton's amazement, the old man relaxed with a sobbing sigh like a baby's suddenly freed from pain.

"That—that's your remedy?" Clayton gasped, almost staggered by the seeming miracle of its efficacy.

Avariciously he reached for the bottle, but Capet held it upturned so that every drop had run from it.

Clayton made another effort.

"You'd better sign this and write out the formula," he said, scarcely able to speak for the intensity of his desire to see the symbols which explained the remedy.

But Capet was his shrewd old self now. He signed his name to the paper; but he did not write out the formula.

"The effect lasts about four hours," he said quietly. "You ride my pony to the station and wire for Dr. Sessum at Weeks. He can get over in his car in an hour."

"But if you—if you don't live, the formula will be lost!" Clayton exclaimed, determined to possess himself of the wonderful secret.

"Not quite. It's—well, it's in this house. And there's a paper in a bank in New Orleans which can be secured only by my niece; it tells how to find the formula."

Capet was almost asleep as he spoke; the relief from the torture he had endured was so great; and his racked nerves and flesh cried out for rest. He admonished Clayton to hurry and dozed off.

Clayton rushed out. He had no intention of leaving; he merely meant to be sure that the old man was asleep. Then he would set about finding the formula.

Peering through a window he watched Capet. He was sure that the ointment had done its perfect work and that the old man rested in deep abandon.

For the next three hours Clayton searched that ranch-house systematically, sounding the unplastered walls for receptacles in which the formula might be hidden.

He did not expect to come upon a bottle of the precious mixture. He was sure that the canny old man had had only the catsup-bottleful made up; he had kept from revealing even that amount in the presence of a stranger until the agony drove him to desperation.

A tantalizing discovery rewarded Clayton's search. On a tin tray, neatly arranged, he found a number of small bottles and glass jars. Mixing-spoons and an empty bowl proclaimed that this was the material and the paraphernalia that Capet used to concoct his miracle-worker.

Clayton was minded to take the whole layout. But he had had enough experience with Capet to be certain that the secret of the remedy was not left thus openly. Some-

thing in the combination was lacking; it would defy any chemist.

A muffled groan interrupted his search. Clayton started guiltily. Nothing would have tempted him to stay to see the torture which his failure to carry out instructions would induce. He guessed that Capet had meant to confide in the doctor he had sent for; had gone to sleep in the soothing belief that by the time the effect of the anesthetic was gone, help in making more of it would be at hand.

Clayton slid out of the door as the groans grew louder. He went to the lean-to at the back of the house. He led out Capet's pony, and flung on the saddle and bridle. He heard a shriek of pain from the house.

Without a second's compunction, utterly unmindful of anything except putting distance between him and the old man, he galloped away. He had no other idea than that Capet must succumb to the suffering; he would be dead in a few hours. Clayton was not disposed to be alone with him; he dug his heels into the pony and rushed away toward the railway station.

As the distance stretched between him and the agonized old man, he began to plan. In his pocket was the signed paper appointing him executor. When the old man was dead, he would return and, armed by the authority of the agreement, he would make more thorough search. For he was sure Capet spoke the truth when he said the formula was about the house.

He reflected on the possibility of the relatives being informed of Capet's death. But their coming to the ranch seemed improbable. All about the rundown place indicated that Capet's seclusion had not been interrupted by any one desirous of rendering him more comfortable.

Secretive as the old man appeared to be, it was more than likely that none of his relatives—he had no neighbors near enough to come upon him unawares and discover his activities—knew of the particular thing he had accomplished. It was because there was no other way in which the niece in New Orleans could learn of the formula and of the old man's ambition in connection with it that he, a stranger, had been entrusted with informing her.

As Clayton neared the station on the pony that he had appropriated when he callously left Capet to die, he was congratulating himself that he virtually held a fortune in his hands. He had only to find that formula; and he had the authority for doing that.

He did not wire Dr. Sessum. He dropped the bridle over the pony's head as he leaped to the station platform. Bearded and bronzed from a long stay in the mountains he knew he was fairly sure of defying recognition when he should return later on his errand and in the shaven and pressed elegance he affected when his finances permitted.

He barely made the train going West on which old Capet had counted when he asked him to wire for a doctor. It was only at train time that the station and the agent were active.

Almost dizzy with the roseate visions of wealth that he was weaving, Clayton boarded the train and entered the smoking-car. He did not guess that a plotter quite as intent upon her purpose as he upon his, alighted from the sleeping-car at the rear of the train.

A girl in blue serge, French heels and an altogether smart effect was left standing on the Ellsworth platform as Clayton left it.

It was longer than he had expected it would be before Clayton had time—and money—to return to Ellsworth. He was turned out in a fashion completely unlike the manner of his appearance when he had left old Capet to die.

Shaven and shorn, in tweeds and high-laced boots, he carried a butterfly-net and a tin box, ostensibly a naturalist. He knew so well the tolerance with which the Westerners regarded such amiable potterers. A new agent at the station looked at him with only casually curious eyes.

Clayton decided to get in touch with affairs in the neighborhood through him.

"Do you know any one by the name of Capet around here?"

"Yep. Seen him yestiddy!"

Clayton could not suppress a start.

"He ain't in town now. Him and his niece—"

"His niece is here?" Clayton interrupted,

schooling himself to show no further emotion.

"Yep. She come along jes' after he blowed himself up, they tell me. She soaked him in oil; an' he's as lively as a cricket and wrinkleder'n alligators. Yes, sir, after all that oil—that's what gits me!"

The loquacious stationmaster talked on while Archibald Clayton readjusted his expectations. The fact that old Capet was alive came as a shock; but the presence of the niece was more disquieting.

Could she have found that tray and mixed its ingredients according to her uncle's instructions? Why had he not thought to destroy the whole layout?

"Say, she's some skirt! She's got eyes like 'lectric lamps. She turned 'em on full-tilt at Morg Martin; an' he ain' bin the same chap sence. She's got him hitched for sure. He don't know how to take the post; but he ain't got the starch to pull it up and run. Big Silliman, of Bow-Hill, is at the hitchin'-post, too. Plain leggin' it is all you kin do to get shet of a gal like her!"

"Uncle's crazy about her, I suppose," Clayton interpolated.

"Well, he's a funny old gink. He thinks anything that's his'n is all right. He won't interdoos her to no one when he comes in with her. Thinks *his* niece ought to have a speakin' acquaintance with the stars an' a few of the most exclusive angels. But when she comes tearin' over here alone—good gophers! You'd think Queen Liz and Sir Walt Rowley was doin' stunts. She smiles an' waves her hand an' every man-jack crowds up to help her off her cayuse. She's sure put some pep in these parts!"

"Got some of it in Morg Martin's eyes, has she?"

"You happen to know Morg?" the stationmaster asked.

Clayton realized he had made a false move. He knew the keen faculty for reading his fellow man that develops in the Westerner whose experience rather than a study of psychology enlightens him. This one eyed him as he mentioned Morg's name, suspicious of his too-ready grasp of it.

"I think he's the chap I engaged as a guide when I was out here—"

"You've got another think comin', stranger. You couldn't hire Morg for the mintful. He's so damned rich it makes him tired to think about it. Got mines over yonder in them mountains and connections in New York to work 'em proper. Lord! If he once gits his diamond bridle on the Capet girl, they'll have a airyplane that 'll fly round the sun—an' she'll do the drivin'!"

Clayton silently reviewed the situation. The Capet girl was with her uncle. And the local plutocrat was with the Capet girl. It seemed rather an unwise time to push his own interests.

He hated the Capet girl. She had come into affairs he regarded as his own in a most unjustifiable fashion. But he pulled himself up in his disgruntled thinking of her; it did not get him anywhere.

His personal vanity was considerable. He wondered how crude this Morgan Martin was and whether the niece of the old aristocrat might not be won to friendly relations with a man who had the refinement and appearance to which she was accustomed.

To keep up the rôle he had come prepared to play, he meandered off over the brown prairies, occasionally breaking off a feathery bit of grass or picking an autumn blossom. It gave him a chance to think.

Out of sight of the stationmaster, he walked aimlessly along. His eyes responded to the magnet of the mountains, tossed against the sky like huge, dark breakers from the sea of the plains. He kept turning over the advisability of making an effort to supplant Morg Martin with the Capet girl.

"Vamose!"

It was spoken with suppressed intensity. Clayton felt the impact keenly. He looked about.

"Snake?" he asked anxiously.

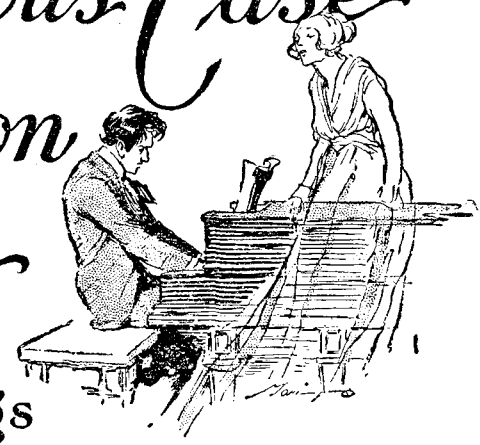
"You know!" seemed to come along the black barrel of a gun that caught and diverted the rays of the sun to flash them menacingly at Clayton.

The gun was pointed at him. Its threat was obvious, though its owner searched the landscape about him with cool, keen blue eyes.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

The Curious Case of Norton Hoorne

by Ray Cummings



THE case of Norton Hoorne was related to the author by one of the most eminent diagnosticians in America. The hope that it may prove of value to those many patient investigators now engaged in Psychical Research is the only reason for its publication at this time. The amazing phenomena bearing upon this most mysterious subject recently brought to light and by painstaking effort proved authentic, have convinced Dr. M— that to withhold longer this case of Norton Hoorne would be an injustice to those now engaged in the work.

If any of our readers have had Psychic experiences that may seem to explain or in any way relate to the case of Norton Hoorne, we *shall be glad to hear from them.*

For obvious reasons the names given and the date are fictitious. But no attempt has been made to embellish the facts. The events narrated here have been reconstructed by the author from the memory of Dr. M— as nearly as possible exactly as they occurred.

A "DIFFERENT" STORY

I DO not feel that now, after these many years, it is any breach of professional etiquette for me to relate the case of Norton Hoorne. It was so remarkable, so extraordinary an incident, that it seems wrong to let it lie forever buried in the professional secrecy to which my good friend, the late Dr. Johns, consigned it. And so now, after nearly twenty years, I have decided to give my remembrance of the events just as they occurred.

I attempt no explanation. I am not psychic. Indeed, I know very little of the subject, for it is not one that appeals to me. I have never seen a ghost, nor have I ever talked with any one who had. You who read this may explain it as you will. I shall merely set down for you the plain facts; and if, by so doing, I shall have added anything of value to the existing data on Psychical Research, I shall be amply repaid.

At the time the incidents occurred, I remember, I had just taken my medical degree. My mother had wanted me to become a musician. I was, and in fact always have been, tremendously interested in music. But the career of professional pianist, for it was that branch of the art to which I leaned, seemed to hold little promise for a youth whose talent obviously fell far short of genius, so I decided upon the medical profession instead.

At the time I took my degree I had two friends who meant a great deal to my life. They were Dr. Johns and Norton Hoorne, the latter one of the most famous concert pianists in the country. The friendship of

these two men, and the inspiration I derived from them both, was the biggest thing in my life at this period—excepting possibly my interest in my work.

It was in the spring of 1900, I remember, that Dr. Johns and I attended one of Hoorne's concerts in New York. I know we were both proud, as we sat in that huge, enthusiastic audience, to feel we were the closest friends of such a man.

Norton Hoorne was at this time at the very pinnacle of his fame. He was about thirty-five years of age—a most picturesque figure, tall and straight, with very black wavy hair slightly touched with gray at the temples. His features were strong—almost rugged. Yet his mouth was sensitive as a girl's, and his face, for all its sturdy strength, was the face of a poet. He had never married, but lived alone in his luxurious studio on Riverside Drive with an old housekeeper who was devoted to him.

Hoorne was unquestionably a great artist. But we knew him also as a great man—a man big mentally, physically and spiritually; had he been otherwise the events I am about to relate might have been less inexplicable.

I think it was hardly two or three days after the concert that Dr. Johns called me up one morning shortly after breakfast.

"Something has happened," he explained hurriedly. "Norton's housekeeper has just phoned me. Will you come right up to his studio?"

Then he hung up without waiting for me to reply.

When I arrived I was ushered in at once by the frightened housekeeper. She took me immediately to the studio and I found Dr. Johns already there. He led me across the room without a word and pointed to the grand piano that stood in a corner by the window. On the bench before it sat Norton Hoorne, his body sprawled forward over the keyboard of the instrument.

How curious it is, that in moments of great mental stress little details impress themselves upon one's mind that in other times would pass unnoticed! I can remember the scene in Hoorne's studio that morning as though it had happened yesterday. It was a luxurious room, in perfect order now as always. Large French windows opened onto the Drive, and by the piano stood a many-pillowed divan where frequently I had lain and listened to Hoorne's playing.

Dr. Johns had arrived but a short while before, and now in a few words he told me what had happened as far as he knew it. Hoorne was not dead as I had supposed by my first hurried glance, but was in a most extraordinary state of catalepsy. There was absolutely no sign of life except in so far as there was also no positive sign of death. Both pulse and respiration apparently had ceased.

We lifted our friend from his position at the piano and laid him prone upon the divan. Dr. Johns had not wanted to move him, he said, until I arrived. I had a dozen horrified questions to ask, but he would have none of them. I could see by his manner that he knew, or suspected, the cause of Hoorne's condition. And because he wished it so, I questioned no more, but helped him with his further examination.

When we had finished, at his request, I summoned the housekeeper. The poor woman came at once; she was frightened almost out of her wits and was crying softly.

"Did Mr. Hoorne have his dinner here last evening?" Dr. Johns began at once.

"Yes, sir, he did."

"Alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"You told me you did not notice he was ill?"

"No, sir, he ate very well."

"What did he do after dinner?"

"Came right up here, sir. I think he spent the first part of the evening reading."

I looked over the few books scattered on top of the library table. Lying under the electrolier I found an opened volume of Freud's Psychoanalysis, several sheets of music, and two or three operatic scores. I picked up the volume of Freud and showed it to Dr. Johns.

"Very probably," he said, and continued his questions.

"You retired about half past eight?"

"Yes, sir."

"And very soon afterward you heard Mr. Hoorne begin playing?"

"Very soon after; yes, sir."

"How long did he play?"

"I don't know, sir; I fell asleep listening to him."

Dr. Johns looked at her curiously. "Do you know anything about music?" he asked.

The housekeeper smiled a little through her tears. "I ought to, sir, I've been with Mr. Hoorne a long time."

"I know you have—yes. What sort of music was it he was playing?"

The old lady thought a moment. "I don't rightly think I can say, sir," she replied. "I don't remember he played anything I had ever heard before."

"If he had played any ordinary piece—anything in his repertoire, or those he sometimes plays for diversion—would you have recognized it?"

"Yes, sir; I think so, sir — though I might not know its name."

"But you are familiar with most of the standard pieces, aren't you?" pursued the doctor.

"I know a great many—I do love music," she added earnestly, and her eyes filled with tears again as she looked at the motionless figure on the divan.

"What about the music, Fred?" I asked impatiently.

Dr. Johns raised his hand deprecatingly. "I was just recalling a conversation I had with Norton last week. I'll tell you later." He turned back to the housekeeper who stood looking at her master with pleading eyes.

"Oh, sir," she burst out. "Isn't there something I can do? Is it right just to let him lie there? He isn't—oh, please tell me he isn't dead."

The doctor gently led her to a chair and sat her down.

"No," he said, "he isn't dead. And there's nothing we can do just now. Don't you worry too much—perhaps he's not in great danger. We were talking about the music," he went on. "What sort of music was it? Did you notice anything peculiar about it?"

"Yes, sir, I did, now that you mention it. It was very curious music, sir."

"How curious?"

"It was sort of weird, sir. I never heard anything like it before. One part of it gave me the creeps. And some of it sounded like discords, sir."

The doctor drew a long breath. "Thank you very much, Mrs. Beacon. I think that will do for now."

The housekeeper rose. "Yes, sir," she said. "And if there's anything I can do—oh, you will let me help, won't you, sir?" she pleaded.

"Yes, Mrs. Beacon, we will let you help," he answered kindly, and closed the door upon her pathetic figure.

"You know, Will," he said, turning back to me, "there's something mighty curious about this—I'm hanged if I understand it."

I was just about to reply when there happened the first of the extraordinary incidents that made this case so remarkable. I had just seated myself on the piano bench, with my back to the instrument. I remember I was leaning backward with my elbows resting on the music-ledge above the keyboard.

At Dr. Johns's remark I must have shifted my position slightly, for one of my elbows slipped off the rack and hit the keys with a thump, sending a crashing, jangling discord reverberating through the room. At the same instant there came a sharp rap from the floor near at hand. With the roots of my hair tingling, I turned toward the divan. Hoorne's right hand had slipped from his side to the floor, a large seal ring he wore striking sharply its polished surface. And as I looked at his face, I caught just the fleeting end of a convulsive jerk of the lips as they steadied again into immobility.

"Good God!" ejaculated Dr. Johns, as we started toward the divan. "Did you see that?"

We were both trembling violently as we examined the body. The convulsion had passed. Hoorne was in the same state of living death as before.

That was the first intimation I had of the connection of music with the case.

What Dr. Johns knew and conjectured he was soon to tell me.

We were sitting beside the table, and Dr. Johns was idly fingering the volume of Freud.

"There's something mighty curious about this," he repeated slowly.

"You've some idea," I pursued, "or you wouldn't have talked to Mrs. Beacon that way."

"What I had in mind, Will," he answered, turning the leaves of the book in his hand—"you know how interested Norton was in psychic phenomena?"

"Of course."

"We were talking about it at the club a week or so ago. He confided something to me then — something he said he had never told any one. It seems for some time he had been experimenting with a theory that through the power of a new style of music he had evolved the soul could be transported temporarily out of its body and brought back at will. You know there are people who claim to be able to send their astral body with its soul wandering into other planes while their human body lies inert and helpless?"

"I know."

"Well, Norton said he had found that he could do just that by using certain kinds of music. I think I offended him a little, for I must have smiled rather skeptically. At any rate he wouldn't say much more except that he was afraid of the power he had acquired. I told him I thought that it might prove inconvenient when he was playing in public some time, and he replied quite seriously that was just what he feared. He seemed to be sorry that he had told me at all—just a little sheepish at my ridicule—and I couldn't get him to say any more. He asked me not to tell you about it."

Dr. Johns hesitated.

"Go on," I urged.

"That's all he said. Only—the look in his eyes made me know there was far more to it than that. Something so personal, so intimate, he could not even tell it to me."

Silence fell between us.

"And you think—" I prompted finally.

"What do *you* think? He was probably reading Freud last night. You heard what Mrs. Beacon said about the music. And now, when you happened to hit the piano—"

Dr. Johns stopped abruptly, his face very white, and for a long time we sat and stared at each other.

"What are we going to do about it?" I asked, breaking a silence that had become oppressive.

"We've got to assume, I think," Dr. Johns said, "that Norton's theory as he told it to me has turned to fact. He has forced or lured, or whatever you might term it, his astral body away to another plane. And for some reason it does not want to or cannot get back."

In spite of the seriousness of the situation, and the intense, earnest expression on my friend's face, I could not help smiling just a little at hearing such words from the lips of a man so coldly scientific as he.

"Do you believe that?" I asked when he paused.

"What else can I believe?" he answered. "At least it is a theory that fits the facts. Norton may have been experimenting with this thing for some time. God knows how far along he got with it—what he was able to do."

We tried to discuss the matter calmly; but to us it was so gruesome a subject, so darkly mysterious, so weird, that in spite of our efforts we found ourselves frequently at the point of becoming unnerved. There had been no change whatever in the body on the divan; it remained as before in a state that was the complete simulation of death.

I do not know what feelings caused us both to avoid suggesting the obvious thing to do. I think perhaps it was the almost supernatural aspect of the incident when I had unwittingly sounded a discord from the piano that made us hesitate to repeat it.

It was Dr. Johns who voiced first what was in both our thoughts.

"Whatever else may be in doubt," he began, "one thing is clear. Music has some definite connection with Norton's condition. It is to music we must look for a solution."

"How?" I asked.

"You know a great deal about music," he replied; "we shall have to experiment."

I jumped to my feet impulsively and struck a chord on the piano. I do not know what I expected, but my heart was beating furiously as the room vibrated with the music. I turned toward the divan; the body lay motionless as before.

Dr. Johns drew a chair beside the divan and sat down, staring steadily at Hoorne's face. "Try another," he said.

I played several chords in both major and minor keys; there was no effect whatever upon the body. With a sudden inspiration I turned around and rested my elbows on the music-ledge. Then I brought one of them sharply down upon the black keys. Simultaneously with the discord came a piercing shriek, followed by a low, mumbling groan, the most hideous, horrible sound I have ever heard issue from human lips.

When I got to the divan the body was lying on its side, the knees drawn closely up to the chest. I caught a glimpse of the contorted, agonized face. Then, with a convulsive jerk the legs straightened, the face relaxed. It was as though nothing had occurred, save that now the body was lying on its side, with one of its arms still hanging down, and the hand lying limply upon the floor.

Nothing else of importance happened that morning; the body remained motionless, and we were too unnerved to try any further experiments. We pulled down the shades and sat beside the divan, looking into the placid, ghastly white face of our friend, and talking together in low tones. Occasionally Dr. Johns would jump up and begin nervously to pace up and down the room, only to drop back in his chair again after a moment.

About noon the housekeeper timidly knocked on the door and brought us lunch. Dr. Johns agreed with me that until we considered it vitally necessary we should not call in any assistance, for publicity of this character would be extremely harmful to Hoorne's career. We decided therefore to carry the case through ourselves, and cautioned Mrs. Beacon to say nothing to the servants beyond the fact that their master was very ill, with two physicians in attendance.

We both felt better when we had eaten lunch. At Dr. Johns's request Mrs. Beacon and I brought down from one of the upper bedrooms a small cot. We undressed Hoorne and laid him on it, covering him to his neck with its white counterpane. Then dismissing the tearful, almost hysterical housekeeper with another admonition to say nothing concerning her master's condition, we prepared to carry out another experiment.

It was our plan—we had discussed it all very carefully at lunch—to begin with the faintest possible musical sounds, and find by trial those that would effect the body without causing the agony we had witnessed before.

Dr. Johns sat at the bedside and I at the piano began striking chord combinations as softly as I could. It was not until I had evolved what amounted practically to a discord that a sharp exclamation from Dr. Johns made me stop abruptly.

"Remember that," he commanded. "Play that again. Louder—a little louder." I doubled it with my left hand, striking it several times. An exclamation from my companion made me leave the piano and rush to his side.

"Look," he whispered; Hoorne's lips were moving, apparently trying to form words. Dr. Johns bent over him; then he straightened up and shook his head.

For over an hour we worked, trying every possible kind of music I could think of, but to no purpose; we got no further than this. Only one fact stood out plainly. The reactions the body gave were quite consistent; I could now almost anticipate the effect of my playing.

Then it occurred to me to look at the music we had found lying on the center table with the volume of Freud. The sheet music, that part of it that was in manuscript, I could tell even at first glance was like nothing I had ever seen before. It was not built upon the ordinary eight-note scale with its two whole tone intervals followed by a half tone, with which we are familiar. Perhaps it was based upon the old Chinese scale—I do not know.

One of the sheets was a composition of Debussy. There were some songs—one of them by Rimsky—Korsakow, I remember—and there was the pianoforte score of Moussorgsky's "Boris Godounov." Of this latter several pages were turned down at the corners. I opened at the places indicated and found many of the passages marked with a pencil, with penciled notations altering slightly the tempo and rhythm, and occasionally the harmony.

This music, which I found after a little practise I could play indifferently well, had far more effect upon the body than any I had hitherto been able to evolve. I played, with trembling fingers; Dr. Johns sat at the bedside, watching the effect of my music.

For some time I played, softly, haltingly. The body of Norton Hoorne, I could see it from where I sat playing, jerked convulsively. The face twitched and from the lips issued occasional heart-rending cries that were almost more than we could bear.

Then all at once there came a death-like silence. The body on the bed lay quiet. A sharp exclamation from Dr. Johns made me stop playing; in a moment I was by his side, leaning over the bed. Hoorne's lips were moving. We held our breaths, bending closer. From the lips came the sound of a low, mouthing muttering, and then the words distinctly audible:

"*It is all so useless.*"

I hardly know how to describe the tone in which these words were uttered. It had the quality I might best describe as *hollow*, a cold, measured, *detached* intonation, devoid absolutely of every quality of inflection—a voice forming words but embodying no human personality. I want to make this quite clear, because I think now that this detached quality, this *lack of personality* in the voice, was significant of much that subsequently happened.

Not only was the fact that Hoorne spoke startling in itself, but the weird, unearthly tones of his voice filled me with the utmost horror. I turned and fled back to the piano, in doubt whether to wait, or resume playing.

Then I heard Dr. Johns gently asking:

"What is all so useless?"

There was a long pause, and then in the same ghastly voice as before came the words:

"*Nothing matters now!*"

I sat down on the piano bench, and turning, caught a glimpse of the passive, livid face on the pillow, and Dr. Johns bending over it.

"What is all so useless?" he repeated. There was no answer, though we waited a long time, with our beating hearts audible it seemed in the heaviness of the silence.

Then Dr. Johns signed me to go on playing, and for perhaps ten minutes I went over and over the themes, elaborating them at times as fancy led me.

"Stop!" called the doctor sharply; I ceased abruptly, my hands poised above the keyboard.

"Play slowly, very softly," he commanded, and as I obeyed I heard his voice, in the gentle tones one uses toward a child, asking, "Can you speak now, Norton?"

A long pause and then came the answer:

"*Yes.*"

"What can we do to help you?"

There was no answer.

"What can we do to help you, Norton?" repeated Dr. Johns. "Play louder," he added aside to me.

"*It is all so useless,*" said the voice, louder and stronger than before. I let my playing die down a little.

"Why is it all so useless. Why is it, Norton?" asked Dr. Johns firmly and yet almost tenderly.

There was a longer pause than usual, and then came the words.

"*So useless. So useless, because she is not here—you must not make me live.*"

I do not know whether I played wrongly at this point or that it was merely from some other cause, but immediately after uttering these words the body was seized with a convulsion horrible to witness. I heard Dr. Johns's sharply indrawn breath and his muttered exclamation.

"Stop playing!" he commanded.

I did so, and hurried again to the bedside. The convulsion had ceased; the contorted face was relaxing.

"Why must we not make you live? Why, Norton?" Dr. Johns spoke almost in a whisper.

Standing directly over the bed I could see the muscles of the face as the lips parted and the words came forth.

"Because she has gone. I cannot reach her now."

And then a shudder seemed to pass over the entire body, and with more power than ever before the voice said:

"The desk. Look in the desk. Use it, for God's sake use it."

The body abruptly relaxed into immobility; we waited and waited, but there came nothing more.

That was the first we knew about the girl. On the desk stood a photograph—we had not noticed it before—in a small silver frame. It was the picture of a girl perhaps twenty-five years of age—a shy, beautiful face with very large wistful eyes and a mass of golden hair. She was undeniably a girl of refinement and culture. The photograph showed her in what evidently was her own drawing-room. The fittings of the room were distinguishable, and the girl was seated with her back to a large grand piano, leaning an elbow upon the keyboard.

We took the photograph from its frame; there was nothing written upon it. Then we rummaged through the papers on the desk and came across a note written in a woman's small script. It gave an address in the East Sixties just off Fifth Avenue—one of the most fashionable sections of the city. It read simply:

> They wish it to be otherwise so—good-by.
> ELAINE.

The note bore a date some three months previous to the time at which we read it.

We located the name of the family living in the palatial private residence at this address. It was the name of one of this country's most prominent financiers—you would remember it now if I were to mention it here. And I remembered then having read in the society columns of this daughter, Elaine.

That night Mrs. Beacon brought in our dinner and we ate it by the bedside. When we had finished it was nearly eight o'clock. We ordered Norton Hoorne's car, and, locking the piano, and cautioning the housekeeper to admit no one to the studio in our absence, we drove to the address where lived this girl whose connection with the case appeared so definite, and yet, to us, so unfathomable.

II.

AFTER we had waited perhaps five minutes a young man entered the room, holding in his hand the card Dr. Johns had sent up. He was a few years younger than I — a clean cut, athletic-looking chap — a typical rich man's son of the better sort.

"Won't you sit down, gentlemen?" He waved us back to the chairs from which we had risen, speaking, I thought, in an unnaturally low tone. "I am Mr. Henten —my father is not at home."

"Dr. Manning and myself," Dr. Johns began, when we were seated, glancing at me an instant by way of introduction. "Mr. Henten, we came here this evening to see your father on rather a curious matter. I am sure you will do quite as well."

Our young host inclined his head in agreement and waited.

"I — er — must ask, Mr. Henten, that you will keep all we say strictly confidential?"

The young man nodded gravely.

"Then I will be quite frank with you. I should like to ask first—do you know Norton Hoorne?"

"I have heard of him," said the young man. "I have been to his concerts—he is a very great artist." I thought he spoke a little cautiously, and with a note of coldness in his voice.

"You do not know him personally?"

"I believe—yes, I have met him—some months ago."

Young Mr. Henten seemed to make this admission with reluctance. Then, a little impatiently but without dropping his politely formal manner, he went on—

"But will you tell me what Norton Hoorne—"

"Mr. Henten," Dr. Johns interrupted, "I shall be still more frank with you. We are Norton Hoorne's physicians—and his friends also. Mr. Hoorne is very ill at this moment—very dangerously ill, I might say. This afternoon in his delirium he spoke the

name of—er—Miss Henten. There is a photograph of her standing on his desk. From the words he spoke—incoherent—"

The look on the young man's face made Dr. Johns stop abruptly. After an instant he continued, speaking much more firmly than before.

"You will pardon me, Mr. Henten. You must understand we have not the wish—the indelicacy—to pry into Miss Henten's affairs. What we three say here is said in the strictest confidence. We are Mr. Hoorne's physicians. His life is in danger. The information we seek is for his good only. I trust you will understand that and will do what you can to help us."

"What information is it you desire?" asked the young man.

Dr. Johns leaned forward earnestly. "Miss Henten and Norton Hoorne were friends?"

"They were, but the friendship was broken off several months ago."

"Why?"

Young Mr. Henten hesitated. "Elaine was to have married Sir Oliver Baconfield. It was announced recently," he said finally.

"Was to—?"

"My sister died this morning," said the young man quietly.

The effect of this announcement on Dr. Johns and me must have surprised our host greatly.

"Oh, I am very sorry, Mr. Henten," Dr. Johns hastened to say contritely when he had recovered himself somewhat. "I can understand now your reluctance—our coming at such a time—"

The young man bit his lip and looked away; we could see he was struggling to suppress his emotion.

"We will not keep you more than a moment longer," Dr. Johns added. "There are a few questions—I beg you will not think them irrelevant. They have, I assure you, a direct bearing upon Norton Hoorne's present welfare. If you will let me hurt you just a moment more, Mr. Henten. It may be—I think it is—a matter of life or death to our patient."

The young man bowed his head. "What is it you want to know?" he asked in a low voice.

"I will be as brief as possible. Was your sister ever engaged to Norton Hoorne?"

"No—not that I know of."

"They were very good friends?"

"I think so—yes."

"Why was the friendship broken off?"

The young man met Dr. Johns's gaze with a look of almost pleading appeal.

"Why was the friendship broken off?" persisted the doctor. "Did they quarrel?"

"No." The youth spoke so low we could hardly hear him.

"Were they—were they in love?"

Young Mr. Henten's increasing agitation became manifest.

"I'm sorry to hurt you, my lad," Dr. Johns added gently. "But I must know these things. Were they in love?"

"Yes, they were."

"And it was broken off so that she could become engaged to some one else?"

"My—my mother wished her to marry Lord Baconfield. My father forbade her seeing Norton Hoorne again."

Dr. Johns sat back in his chair. "What was the cause of your sister's death, Mr. Henten?" He tried to ask the question quietly, but I knew by my own emotion the anxiety with which he awaited its answer.

Young Mr. Henten raised his head wearily. "She died of pneumonia," he said. "She caught a severe cold. It was very sudden—though she had not been well for some time."

Dr. Johns thought a moment and then resumed.

"After her friendship with Norton Hoorne was broken off, was she—did she seem ill?"

"She never seemed quite herself. She—she— Oh, Dr. Johns, if you please, I—" The young man seemed at the point of breaking down.

"I'm sorry," Dr. Johns said kindly. "If you will just bear with me a moment more—then we will go. Your sister was musical?"

"She would have been a very fine pianist. She was a pupil of Norton Hoorne."

"Afterward—I mean these last few months—did she play frequently?"

"Not as much as before. Only at night sometimes, in the evenings, she would go into the music-room alone and play."

"What sort of music would she play?"

"I don't know. It *was* peculiar. Improvisations of her own sometimes, I think. We did not like her to play—it was not good for her."

"Why not?" Dr. Johns's eyes never left the young man's face.

"It made her ill. Once or twice she—she fainted. We found her lying there once on the floor where she had fallen."

Dr. Johns rose abruptly, and crossing to where the young man sat low down in his chair, laid an arm over his shoulder.

"We will go now, my lad," he said gently. "I am sorry to have hurt you, but it was necessary. I know you do not understand why I have asked these questions. You need never understand—now. And remember—our visit here to-night and what we have said, you have given your promise—you will tell no one?"

"No, sir, I will not mention it, if you wish me not to."

"Thank you." The doctor straightened up. "Your sister was a very fine little woman. You know that—and we know it. Good night my lad."

"Good night, sir," said the young man, rising.

During the drive back to Norton Hoorne's studio, Dr. Johns showed a peculiar reticence in discussing the interview we had just had. The few questions and comments I volunteered he answered so shortly and with such abstraction of manner that I soon gave up and remained silent.

Back at the house on Riverside Drive, we went immediately to Hoorne's studio. We found nothing unusual had occurred during our absence. Norton Hoorne's body still lay motionless on the cot.

After we had dismissed the housekeeper with such assurances of her master's recovery as we could give, and were again alone, Dr. Johns locked both doors of the room, and turning to face me, began abruptly:

"Will, whatever you or I may think about this case, it is obvious that theoretical discussion of it is futile. I am convinced of but one thing—the secret lies with Norton; we must make him tell us."

"De we dare?" I asked; I dreaded further musical experiments.

"We must—there is no other way. And to do nothing—" Dr. Johns broke off and shuddered.

"Shall I play now?" I asked. My companion nodded and seated himself beside the cot.

I began to play, softly at first, then louder. For what seemed ages there was no response. Again I heard the sound of that weird voice, babbling incoherently, with low moans, and once interrupted by a piercing shriek.

I ceased playing and heard Dr. Johns say:

"You must speak more clearly, Norton. Now—try—what is it you want to tell us?"

In the silence that followed I played slowly a series of soft modulations. Then I waited, and after a time, from the lips of Norton Hoorne came the words:

"In the desk—another drawer—the letter—for you. Use it, for God's sake, use it."

We found it after a long search, in a secret drawer of the desk. It was a large envelope, sealed, and inscribed with both our names. It contained a folded sheet of music manuscript and a letter. The letter, which was in Hoorne's handwriting, we opened first. It contained only two lines:

> I fear this thing. I cannot tell to what it will lead. I know I can trust you both, if need arises, to use the enclosed.

That was all.

The music was written in Hoorne's careless, hurried way, with which I was quite familiar. It was a composition of perhaps sixty bars. And at the top, for its title, was the one word:

"RELEASE."

For a moment we started at this cryptic paper in silence. Then our glances met, and in Dr. Johns's eyes I read the same doubt of its meaning that he must have seen in mine.

"Can you play it?" he asked; his voice almost broke with the intensity of his emotion.

"Yes," I answered. "Shall I?"

He flung his hands to his head with a gesture of despair.

"Play it," he said hopelessly.

The scene in Norton Hoorne's studio that night, as I remember it, was fantastic and gruesome in the extreme. The room was in semidarkness. The shades were down, and we had drawn the heavy portières together before the French windows. The corners of the room and its heavily beamed ceiling were shrouded in thick, black shadows. The piano stood quite in shadow, with only a dim glow of amber light from a lamp shining upon its rack and keyboard.

Near by stood the white-linened bed with the ghastly white face of Norton Hoorne upon its snowy pillow. And from a stand at the bedside a beam of light fell full upon the expressionless features.

At first I was trembling so violently I would not dared have made the attempt to play. Forcing myself to calmness, I ran my fingers silently over the keys, staring intently at what I knew instinctively was Hoorne's unplayed composition, finding its extraordinary harmonies, and fixing the rhythm in my mind.

After many minutes of guiding my cold, trembling fingers in their unfamiliar way over the keys, I began to play. In the hush of the room the fantastic music welled out with a throbbing intensity. No longer was I nervous, no longer afraid. The shadows of the studio faded into blackness—a great void of nothingness all about me—as I abandoned myself more and more to the influence of the strange harmonies I was creating. Now my innermost being felt their power, for they awakened emotions my soul had never known before.

The blackness around grew denser. My senses seemed freed of every earthly tie. The room, the piano, everything, was blotted out. Only the music remained, quivering out through the void, crying with the sorrow of the ages, but always tender, inexpressibly tender, and luring—luring me on—and on—

I shall never forget the shock to my senses when the first sharp cry from Dr. Johns brought me to myself. The music died—throbbing away into silence. I found myself sitting at the keyboard, cold and shivering in the hot, close air of the room.

"Look! Look there!" I heard Dr. Johns's low whisper as though from a great distance.

The corner of the room and the ceiling beyond and above Hoorne's white, expressionless face was shrouded with a great, black, grotesque shadow. I do not know what made me stare in that direction, but as I stared the shadow began to take form. At first it seemed merely to waver; then it began to contract, slowly at first, then more rapidly.

Then it seemed no longer black but vaguely luminous, like a silver fog gleaming in the dim light of a hidden moon. And then all at once I realized that it was taking shape. I could see plainly the tiny glowing particles that composed it, twisting and crawling upon themselves. But the shape remained, grew more definite, until at last I recognized it for what it was—the figure of a young girl—the girl of the photograph—the girl whose brother we had just left.

I do not know how long it took me to come to this realization of what I was seeing. Probably it was only an instant; it seemed an eternity.

I could hear Dr. Johns's labored breathing—see dimly the outlines of the cot and Hoorne's face upon its pillow. But all that remained clear and real was the figure of this girl, quivering there in the air above the bed.

The upper part of her body particularly was vivid; below the breasts it seemed to melt away into the blackness of the room beyond. Her hair hung in two flowing braids over her bare shoulders; her arms were reaching down toward the bed, and on her beautiful face was a look of tenderness and sorrow and unutterable longing.

And then I saw that around her head and shoulders there hung another radiance, dimmer far than the outlines of her form—a radiance that seemed to fade away as I looked at it directly. Yet I knew it was

there; and I seemed to feel, too, rather than see, that it was not silver, but the delicate color of a rose — a color extraordinarily beautiful, yet fragile, wistful as the rose petals it resembled.

Then as I sat staring I heard a whisper come up from the bed. The whisper grew louder, and I heard that same toneless voice from the lips of Norton Hoorne, saying:

"*I cannot stay here. I must go. Play —play—you must play.*"

I think I must have resumed playing; I know I heard music—the same music as before, only softer, sweeter, more tender.

And then, from the body lying inert on the bed, I saw issue another shape—in outline, form, and every detail the body of Norton Hoorne. It glowed, swirled, and drifted upward. It *was* Norton Hoorne—its face the face of my friend as I had always known him. After an instant his figure hung swaying above the bed. And from it depended a thin silver cord—fine as the finest gossamer, holding it chained to its human shell below.

The music swelled louder. The arms of the girl reached out; her eyes seemed to cry aloud with yearning. The man's figure pulled and strained at its leash, but the silver cord held strong.

The music grew still louder, thundering now in the hush of the room. The body in the bed sat up suddenly, beating with clenched hands its naked breast. And then, slowly it seemed, the silver cord parted.

A look of ineffable happiness suffused the girl's face as the man's figure, growing suddenly brighter, swirled upward and mingled with hers.

The body on the bed fell back upon the pillow and lay motionless. The mingled shapes above drifted away. The music ceased abruptly.

Norton Hoorne was—dead?

THE SNOOZING HOUR

BETWEEN the sleep and the waking,
When daylight begins to o'erpower,
There's a time when we try to keep slumbering—
That is known as the snoozing hour.

We turn our face from the windows,
Insisting it's early still;
We plug our ears with the pillows,
And breathe with a steady will.

Outside the street-boys are yelling—
We hold they are voices in dreams;
And, spite of them, soon we're departing
On slumberland's mystic streams.

But what's that incredible racket?
A riot, a battle at night?
Ah, no—'tis the spirited children
Engaged in the day's pillow-fight.

Even that, as we snuggle down deeper,
We think to forget—and we can;
We sink into sleep of the sweetest—
But help!—there's the hand-organ man!

George J. Smith.

The Tempting Tangle

by Victor Lauriston

Author of "Pay Sand," etc.

WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

GLORY ADAIR, adept at palmistry, to whom every problem was a direct challenge, had been installed as nurse to Malcolm Ferintosh by Dr. David Wright. Glory found the house a strange one; Ruth Ferintosh, the daughter, herself a curious contradiction; Robinson, the butler, an enigma; Ferintosh himself dignified to the point of aloofness. Then, following the finding of a queer, four-figured cryptogram, which Ferintosh endeavored to make light of, and the arrival of Captain Ken Grant, an old-time flame of Glory's, from overseas, Ferintosh vanished between two days—his room had not been slept in.

Creighton, his partner in the Petroloma Oil Company, arrived, a brusk bully of a man, who, following his investigation of the mystery, betrayed a strange interest in a pistol exhibited by Grant, supplemented by his rather unusual statement that he expected to die by a pistol-shot. He had regaled them with tales of suicide, and after Grant had pursued what seemed to be a shadow on the lawn, there came the sound of a shot—and Creighton, the unimaginative, the practical, was found dead, leaving a note which seemed to give color to the suicide theory.

Mrs. Ferintosh, to Glory at least, appeared unduly solicitous that a verdict of suicide be given without delay. Therefore, Glory was the more amazed when a certain newspaper reporter, one Tripp, had bluntly stated his opinion that it was a murder. Mrs. Ferintosh agreed with him. She did more, for her next words were:

"Now, Mr. Tripp, I leave it to you, without any unnecessary publicity, to find the murderer of Mr. Creighton."

CHAPTER VI.

DETECTIVE TRIPP TAKES HOLD.

DETECTIVE TRIPP—for detective it now seemed he was—wasted no time in preliminaries.

He sat down at the table, opened his note-book, and proceeded further to question Mrs. Ferintosh. She was as frank with Tripp as she had been reticent with the unlucky coroner.

"I ask myself," interposed Tripp suddenly, "this question: What connection has the disappearance of Mr. Ferintosh with the murder of Mr. Creighton?"

Miss Adair felt that he scrutinized Mrs. Ferintosh surreptitiously but closely for some hint of emotion. None came. She was quite composed.

So Tripp went on with more practical interrogation. Mrs. Ferintosh was quite frank regarding her husband's affairs; but what little she knew of her husband's affairs threw no light on her husband's disappearance, and asuredly none on the murder of Creighton.

"Mr. Tripp," she concluded with unexpected energy and emotion, "I want to repeat one thing. Mr. Creighton was *my* guest. He was murdered in *my* house. I want you to run down the murderer, no matter who he may be."

Tripp made an ostentatious note.

"I have an absolutely free hand?"

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for March 26.

"Absolutely, Mr. Tripp."

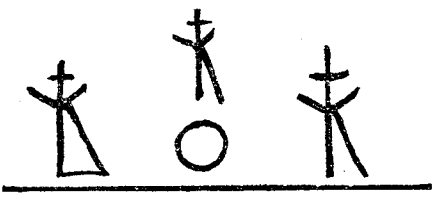
"Very well, Mrs. Ferintosh."

Mrs. Ferintosh, with all her quiet-mannered composure, had told a rather disjointed story, helped out by frequent questions. But Glory Adair, as she narrated her experience at Ferintosh House, felt that Tripp approved her.

His approval became vocal as she concluded.

"Miss Adair," he said with decision, "if you were a man, you would, I am sure, make a most capable investigator. You miss no detail, however unimportant it may seem. For," he added, "in reality no detail can be unimportant. In a case like this the least detail may make all the difference in the world."

Having thus delivered himself, he had her sketch with pencil and paper the sign of the three crosses, thus:



Tripp studied it. Unlike Creighton, he refused to regard the cryptogram as so much child's play. It was something more serious than that.

"There is nothing in the world without a logical cause behind it," he commented. "This sign doubtless had its significance for Mr. Ferintosh. Yet it had none for Mr. Creighton?" He glanced inquiringly at Miss Adair, who nodded. "That is curious. Could it be"—his imagination went to work—"that Creighton was shot in mistake for Ferintosh?"

He left that question in the minds of his hearers.

The push-button summoned Robinson, and Robinson was sent to find Ruth Ferintosh. But Ruth Ferintosh, when she came, had no light to throw on the mystery, beyond her simple, uncomplicated part in the discovery of her father's disappearance and his partner's tragic end.

"Mr. Tripp, my dear," explained Mrs. Ferintosh composedly, "is a newspaperman, and I have promised that he will be given all the facts."

Unlike Creighton, Tripp did not dismiss his witnesses. So Ruth stayed. Glory Adair presently realized the purpose behind this method. She felt the detective's keen eyes rest on her from time to time in the course of his questioning of Captain Grant, which followed.

The captain was palpably reluctant to talk. Getting information from him was like pulling teeth. But Tripp persisted; and ultimately, with Grant admitting this and conceding that, the detective secured what looked like a straight story.

Tripp helped him by interpolating one suggestion.

"Perhaps"—he smiled slightly—"if you would refrain from tracing R. F. on the table-top with your forefinger you could concentrate your attention on my questions."

The officer flushed, a trifle angrily. But Tripp paid no attention to that. Grant admitted arriving in Carisford the night before Ferintosh disappeared. He had gone to the hotel.

"And," pursued Tripp, "after getting settled at the hotel you went out for a walk—to see the town?"

Grant nodded.

"You walked as far as Ferintosh House?"

Grant looked nervous at that. Ruth's gray eyes opened very wide. "I didn't say that," faltered Grant at last; when the silence grew embarrassing.

"You left the hotel toward eleven o'clock,, had some difficulty in locating Ferintosh House, and were in the vicinity of the house around midnight."

Grant did not answer.

"I know that," went on Tripp coolly. "You asked the hotel clerk for a directory; and, having looked up the street and number, you inquired your way to the avenue. You had difficulty finding your way, because you made inquiries later of a policeman. From that fact, plus the time you left the hotel and the time you turned in, I can infer pretty accurately what time you were in the vicinity of Ferintosh House. Now," pursued Tripp smartly, "why?

Why did you pay Ferintosh House this surreptitious visit?"

Grant reddened, and kept silence. He regarded the detective with a hint of anger. And then he smiled.

"I expected to call next morning, and was spying out the ground," he said insouciantly. "You're quite inquisitive, aren't you?"

"I've been called the human question-mark," flashed Tripp. He leaned closer to Captain Grant. "Since there is nothing discreditable involved, why not be frank? You were outside this house—at midnight."

"I mean to be frank," retorted Grant. "To that question—yes."

"Did you see anything suspicious?"

"I saw nothing."

"Was there any one on the lawn?"

"I could not be positive. I saw enough to identify the house from the description Miss Ferintosh had once given me. I stood outside only a moment. A shadow on the lawn might readily have been mistaken for a person."

Tripp, a bit discomfited, went on to the day and the night of the murder. To him Grant frankly disclosed what he had hid from the coroner—his pursuit of the supposed man on the lawn. That man might have been merely a shadow. In the pursuit he had stepped into a hole, fallen, and grazed his wrist. As a consequence, the fugitive had escaped—if there were really a fugitive.

Tripp tried to pick out of the captain's memory some vague description of the fugitive. But the effort was useless. "It was too dark to see clearly," said Grant. "In fact, I could not really be positive—but I am inclined to think it was a man I followed, and not a shadow."

"You went back to the porch?"

"Yes."

"And how long before you heard the shot?"

"Perhaps a minute. It seemed to come from the other end of the lawn."

Tripp's questioning troubled itself with a wealth of infinite detail. He was exceedingly painstaking, was the alert detective; and lived up to his dictum as to the importance of every detail.

"Now," he said at last, "as to your talk with Mr. Creighton?"

At which Glory Adair listened even more intently; for what had passed between Grant and Creighton on the afternoon before the murder was still unknown to her. Grant seemed embarrassed. "Our second conversation," he urged, "was confidential." But Tripp brushed aside the objection; and Grant told, quite frankly, of his brief passage-at-arms with Creighton in the morning.

"I've a bit of a temper," he explained, "and he was rather overbearing. I resented that. I had a talk with him in the den that same afternoon. I apologized and he apologized, and we shook hands. He sought information as to the disappearance of Ferintosh. Well, I could throw no light on that."

"And then—"

"He was very much interested in the German army revolver I had brought with me. He had examined it in the morning. In the afternoon, as I was going out, he followed me. 'Could you lend me that weapon of yours?' he asked. 'I may have need for one before I leave.' I told him he could use it, of course. Then I chaffingly asked if any one had been threatening him. He made no answer that I remember."

Tripp's detailed questioning elicited nothing further that seemed worth while. The detective pondered a long moment before announcing his next conclusion.

"Captain Grant's story dovetails with the other circumstances. The door of Creighton's room was locked from the inside, and the key in the lock. The shot might have been fired by Creighton himself, inside; if not, it must have been fired by some one who entered through the wondow, or who fired from just outside the window. There is one chance of suicide, as I see it; there are two chances of murder."

"Three," interpolated Glory Adair softly.

Tripp regarded her in amazement.

"Eh? What?" he demanded.

"Three chances of murder."

"I see only two," insisted Tripp.

"You see a man entering by the win-

dow," returned the nurse, "or a man firing the shot from outside. But what evidence have you that Mr. Creighton locked the door immediately he went to his room? You have none. Then what was there to prevent some one—any one—coming into the house by the side entrance, and going up either the front or the back stair, and entering the room before Creighton locked the door? Or, for that matter, going up with Creighton?

"No one saw Creighton after he left the others below-stairs. We do not know that he went up immediately. Just before the shot was fired Mrs. Ferintosh was in her room, Captain Grant was on the lawn pursuing the shadow, Ruth and I were on the porch, and the servants were in the attic. The door might have been locked by Mr. Creighton after his visitor arrived. Or it may have been locked by the murderer himself to delay posible discovery."

Said Tripp admiringly:

"You clever woman!"

Plainly these added possibilities had not occurred to him.

Tripp lingered to dogmatize once more.

"In solving a mystery of this sort," he remarked, apropos of nothing that had gone before, "we must find in the suspect three elements—the time, the place, and the motive. In other words, the suspect must have been present at the time and place of the murder—and he must have a sufficient motive for murder."

With which he took up the questioning of the maid, Sarah Tiffin. But Sarah had nothing to disclose. She had been in her room in the attic. She had heard the shot, but thought nothing of it. Her room was toward the front of the house.

Mrs. Wedge, the housekeeper, had also heard the shot. She went into considerable detail:

"I jumped a bit. It seemed right under my window. I ran to the door, and yelled to Robinson. 'What's that?' says I. But he didn't hear me. His room door was open and he was sittin' with his back to me, shavin'. It's a wonder he didn't cut himself, the shot came that sudden."

"Shots usually come that way," commented Tripp.

He drew a diagram of the attic rooms—four of them. Here, in front, was the maid's room; the housekeeper's room to the right; Robinson's to the left; and at the back of the house what was termed the lumber-room. And Creighton's room was also at the back of the house, immediately below this lumber-room. The lumber-room, explained Mrs. Wedge, was used for storing all sorts of things that might come handy—broken furniture and old clothes—

"I see." Tripp cut short her voluble explanations. "Then your room is at one end of the hall and Robinson's at the other. Now, where does the stair come up?"

"Here"—she indicated—"betwixt my room and the lumber-room."

Tripp revised his sketch accordingly.

"You heard the shot?"

"I couldn't miss it. The night was a bit warm, and the windows were open. I was taking down my hair, and I nigh swallowed a hairpin. Robinson was sitting at his dressing-table, shavin' hisself; his door was part open, just as I said, and I could see him quite plain in my mirror, and it made me nervous. It always makes me nervous to see a man shaving—my man, he used to cut hisself something awful when he done it. I was wondering if Robinson would cut hisself. Then comes the shot, and says I to myself, 'Now he's cut hisself, sure!'"

"Did he?" Tripp allowed himself to be lured into this bypath.

"No, sir—as it turned out. I yelled to him, 'What's that?' He didn't hear. Then I guessed the shot must have sort of deafened him. I ran to my window and looked out and couldn't see nothing. Well, I was frightened. Shooting always frightens me. I ran and knocked on Sarah's door. She come, and I told her about the shot. 'Nonsense,' she says, 'there wasn't no shot.' 'Wasn't there?' says I. 'We'll just ask Robinson?' So we went to Robinson's room. He turns around, a-holdin' of the razor. 'Well?' says he. 'Robinson,' says I, 'did you hear a shot?' Says Robinson, 'I thought I heard one.'"

Tripp was growing impatient at the woman's volubility. All her nervousness regarding Robinson's shaving and her dis-

putations regarding the shot had no bearing on the immediate question.

"Did you go to Robinson's window?" he asked.

"We all run to the window and looked out. We didn't see nobody. Oh, yes, Sarah thought she saw some one; but Robinson and I, neither of us saw any anybody. We thought we heard a noise outside, but it was only the branches of the big tree blowing against the back of the house. It took us a minute to figure that out, though, and I was sure scared when I heard it first."

Tripp asked more questions, but learned little. Eventually he brushed the women aside.

"Don't go," he said. "Sit back there." And he indicated chairs at the far end of the long room. When they were out of earshot he lowered his voice. "About these servants?" he asked.

"Sarah has been with me a couple of years," said Mrs. Ferintosh. "And Mrs. Wedge five years or more."

"Carisford people?"

"Both from the country, near Carisford."

"Now, this man Robinson. I want a line on him."

"He has been with Mr. Ferintosh ever since I can remember." She explained Robinson's status at Ferintosh House.

So Tripp summoned Robinson. Robinson, however, had little to add to the story told by Mrs. Wedge. He had fancied hearing a shot.

"The diagram makes that plain," commented Tripp. "Here is the maid's room, to the front; Mrs. Wedge's room, to the right; Robinson's room, to the left; and Creighton's room just below this lumber-room, and well toward the right. So Mrs. Wedge, with doors and windows open, would be sure to hear the shot; Robinson, at a greater distance, would perhaps hear it faintly; and Sarah Tiffin, unless she were listening for it, would, with door and window closed, probably not heard it at all."

Having thus worked out the problem to his satisfaction, he pursued his questionings:

"You were shaving in front of the mirror?"

"At my dressing-table, sir."

"Close to the window?"

"The dresing-table was rather betwixt me and the window. I had my back to the door, sir."

"Did you hear any sound from Mr. Creighton's room?"

"No, sir—not till the shot. You see, sir, Mr. Creighton's window was around the corner."

Tripp recalled Mrs. Wedge. She, however, had heard no sounds in the room below prior to the shot. She had, in fact, not been listening for any argument, and remembered hearing nothing till the shot. So Tripp resumed his questioning of Robinson.

Beyond his recollection of hearing the shot, however, and the finding of Creighton, Robinson had no light to throw upon the tragedy. Tripp, closing his book, regarded the man meditatively. From time to time, in the course fo his interrogations, his eyes had strayed to one or other of his audience; but most of the time he had watched Robinson with a curious intentness.

"Mr. Creighton had questioned you in the afternoon?"

"Yes, sir."

"You told him about the three crosses?"

Robinson regarded his interlocutor with a look of blank surprise.

"Me, sir! Oh, no, sir. I did not tell him that."

"Miss Adair told him."

The man regarded Miss Adair with a look of deep reproach. "Oh, but, sir," he qualified, "Miss Adair had probably never promised Mr. Ferintosh not to tell. I had."

Tripp regarded the man as though mentally estimating him.

"Did I do wrong, sir? I've been with Mr. Ferintosh for nigh twenty-five years. He asked me to tell no one."

"You did quite right, Robinson," approved Tripp. "I don't blame you. So you did not tell Creighton a word about that?"

"No, sir."

"But you will tell me, won't you?"

Robinson hesitated. His jaw set. Tripp saw clear into the man's thoughts, and felt the inherent loyalty of him. He whispered

to Miss Adair, as though tacitly accepting her as a coadjutor.

"We've got to use skill here. This man can help us if he only will—but—if he feels it's his duty to keep silence, wild horses can't drag the truth from him. And he won't lie to us—of that I'm morally certain. He will simply refuse to talk."

He turned abruptly to the others.

"Would you mind leaving us alone a moment? I want a word with Robinson." His eyes rested meditatively on Miss Adair. "You can stay," he said; and the nurse realized approving appraisal in his words. He leaned closer. "You are the only one here with a photographic memory," he whispered, "and I dare not use my notebook. Listen carefully."

When the others had gone he rose quietly and drew close to Robinson. He laid his hand on the man's shoulder and gazed kindly into his eyes.

"Robinson," he began, in a tone almost incongruously deep and thrilling, "you've served Mr. Ferintosh faithfully for a long time—I daresay ever since he set up house here?"

"Since before that," agreed Robinson. "Since he first came to Bothwell. I was a sort of handy man when he was in the oil-field, and he took me with him when he traveled abroad. I've been Mr. Ferintosh's man close to twenty-five years, sir." He spoke with a quiet pride.

"He was proud of you, as I happened to know," pursued Tripp earnestly; and, had the nurse not already known it, she would never have suspected that he merely played a part. "He has gone away. Mr. Creighton has been murdered. The disappearance of Mr. Ferintosh and the murder of Mr. Creighton are connected events. Of that I am sure. I have been called in to solve the one mystery. Incidentally, I think I must solve the other. What would Mr. Ferintosh wish you to do under the circumstances?"

Robinson regarded him steadily before replying.

"Mr. Ferintosh would wish me to help you, sir. I'm sure of it now. I've been in doubt so long whether to tell or not, sir. But now I must tell—everything. I did promise never to tell a soul while he was living."

He paused, his lean face working.

"But I must tell now. You see, Mr. Ferintosh is dead."

CHAPTER VII.

THREE ON THE TRAIL.

"BUT why—"

Tripp checked his involuntary question.

"But why didn't you tell us all this before?" he had meant to say. Glory Adair could readily fill in the rest of the sentence; but Robinson sat placid.

"I wanted to tell, sir," he asured the detective. "I wanted to call the police the first time I saw these people. I wanted Mr. Ferintosh to turn over those letters to the police—yes, the very first letter. But he would not agree to that, Mr. Tripp. He told me to tell no one—and I have told no one till now, when he is dead."

"You *know* he is dead?" challenged Tripp.

"I feel sure he is dead," insisted Robinson.

None of this suited methodical Tripp. Tripp preferred categorical question and answer; or, failing that, a clear-cut, consecutive story. Thus Glory Adair read the alert little man. Tripp had a card-index mind. That, she mused, was invaluable equipment for a detective.

"Just a minute," said Tripp. If the vaguely hinted disclosures had startled him, his manner did not reveal the fact. He had struck pay; but, quite unexcited, he was going ahead with a systematic development of this unexpected vein.

"First," he said, "the night before Mr. Ferintosh left? Tell me about that. You stood guard?"

"I had reason to stand guard," returned Robinson, doggedly. "You see, sir, I thought I heard some one about the house. I looked out the window, and I'm sure I did see some one, sir. It was very dark, and past eleven o'clock. I got the gun, and went down-stairs to the front door. I fancied I heard some one on the walk, and

then on the porch. I could not see through the red glass; I opened the door and ran out on the porch. Whoever was there had gone. I did not see any one, sir."

"You heard more than one?"

Robinson studied.

"It might be a man, or it might be a woman," he said. "Or more than one."

"Now as to the time—"

"It was nine minutes after eleven," said Robinson. "I know, because I looked at the grandfather's clock in the hall."

"Positive?" challenged Tripp.

Robinson assented.

"Then that visitor certainly could not be Captain Grant, who left the hotel at eleven or a little later, spoke to the policeman fifteen minutes afterward, having gone in the opposite direction, and got to Ferintosh House, as nearly as I can estimate, close to midnight. That certainly was not Captain Grant you heard."

Robinson took up his story.

"Then, sir, I closed the door and sat in the vestibule. They might come back. But no one came. Then I thought to take a look about the house. I walked clear around the house, and saw no one, and came back to the vestibule. Then I thought I heard some one on the porch again. I ran outside. It was then Miss Adair came down."

"Very good, Robinson," approved Tripp.

Here, it seemed, was a methodical witness after the investigator's own heart.

"Miss Adair," added Robinson, "found the paper on the floor, just inside the door. Whoever was on the porch must have thrust it under the door."

Tripp's brows lifted; he rose abruptly. "Just a minute, will you?" he barked; and went out. Presently he returned. "It could be done," he said. "The door does not fit absolutely snug at the bottom."

Robinson told again of the appearance of Ferintosh. Ferintosh had taken the paper and bidden him tell no one of what had happened, and sent him to his room.

"And that was the last time you saw Mr. Ferintosh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did he go to bed?"

"I do not know."

"He did not," said Miss Adair.

Tripp paused in his questioning. He had made painstaking notes as the narrative progressed; but he had a habit of halting at intervals to fix the gleanings of the quest in his mind. "I must keep my perspective, you see," he explained to Miss Adair.

Now he turned again to Robinson.

"You say you had reason to stand guard?" he commented. "That means something had already occurred to alarm you? What was it?"

"There were several such messages, sir."

"To whom?"

"To Mr. Ferintosh."

"What was in them?"

"Just the same thing, sir—the three crosses, the circle, the straight line."

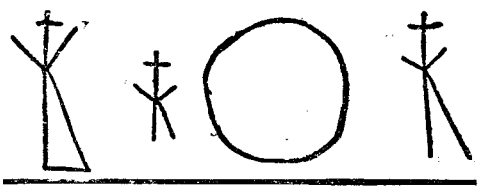
"Arranged in the same order?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know if Mr. Ferintosh kept them?"

For answer, Robinson drew out a worn leather wallet. "Mr. Ferintosh just laughed and threw them away at first," he said. "So I kept them. I thought when we did go to the police they might be valuable evidence, sir."

He unfolded the papers. Plain scribbling paper, torn from a book: here was the first message:



"When did this come?"

Robinson indicated a notation.

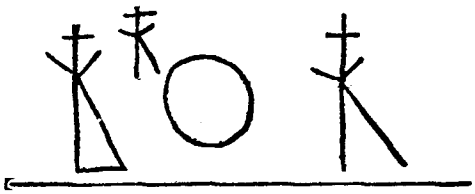
3/7/17

"That would be the 3rd of July, 1917?" commented Tripp. "Who noted the date?"

"I did, sir. I thought it might be worth while to know."

Tripp was almost bewildered. God-given intelligence of this type was rare in his experience, it seemed. "Bless you!" he exclaimed impulsively. "You've got brains." With which he turned to the next slip, dated 6/9/17.

"The 6th of September, 1917—more than two months later," he said reflectively.



He studied closely the changed position of the various signs.

"The circle," he commented, "is shrinking in size. And the positions of the signs vary. I have an idea as to what this signifies—"

But, before voicing the idea, he turned to the next slip, and the next, hurriedly glancing them over. They came at intervals of about two months—sometimes less, once considerably more. The positions fluctuated.

Tripp drew out Miss Adair's replica of the message received on the night that Ferintosh had disappeared.

"That's the idea, sure," he exclaimed. "See, in this last message the circle is very small, the crosses have become disproportionately large, and—the crosses have the circle backed against the straight line, and cornered there. So there is no escape. There have been fluctuations in the pursuit, but it has come to this end. With this last message, Ferintosh disappears."

The detective was palpably pleased with his own discernment.

"How did these messages come?" he asked.

"Under the door sometimes as this last one did. One was found on the mantel. The maid found one on the porch floor when she was sweeping. There was one pasted on the outside of Mr. Ferintosh's window, sir."

Robinson paused.

"That," commented Glory Adair, "was the same room where Mr. Creighton was shot?"

Robinson noded assent.

Said Tripp: "Whoever this man is, he has nerve to come into a house at all hours. Were there any other messages besides these?"

"There may have been, sir. I kept those I found, and some that Mr. Ferintosh found, and threw away. And the one the maid found." He picked it out, identified by the additional notation, "S. T." "Sara Tiffin, her name is, sir."

Tripp seemed to ponder the possibilities of Sarah Tiffin for a brief moment. The trim, pleasing young country girl seemed hardly a likely party to so complicated a conspiracy.

"Now," said Tripp, "how did these messages affect Mr. Ferintosh?"

"The first, sir, he found himself, under the door. He called me. 'Robinson,' he said, 'is this a new kind of gas-bill?' He laughed. Well, sir, I thought it was a joke of some sort, but I just happened to keep it. Then I saw them—"

"*Them?*" Tripp was puzzled.

"The three people, sir?"

"What three people?" Tripp, as he might, could not conceal his interest at this new suggestion.

"I noticed them sometimes when I was with Mr. Ferintosh. I thought nothing of it at first, but they appeared so often, and looked so odd, I called his attention to them. That, sir, would be between the first and the second message—just before the second message, sir. He seemed disturbed then. But I didn't connect them with the message—not then, sir."

"Describe them."

Robinson did so. One was a large, dark man, smooth-shaven except for a black mustache, who wore a red neck-scarf and a black negligee workman's shirt. Then there was a woman with a red kerchief over her head. And there was a child. Later, he tried to get close to them, but they must have suspected him, for they made themselves scarce whenever he approached. He thought they were foreigners—

"Black Handers?" suggested Miss Adair ironically.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Tripp quite serious.

"But," urged Miss Adair, "Mr. and Mrs. Ferintosh traveled a great deal. Ruth, you know, was born at Florence."

Tripp regarded the nurse quizzically.

"The Mafia, and such organizations, mostly originates in Sicily," he commented.

Yet she suspected that her suggestion had taken deeper root in Tripp's mind than the investigator was willing openly to concede.

"This Black Hand talk," pursued Tripp, "is mostly bosh—newspaper rubbish. There was an epidemic of that sort of thing for a while; then the novelty wore off, and the Black Hand activities simmered down to normal proportions. The Italian, of a certain class, preys on his fellow Italian; but he leaves his English-speaking neighbor pretty much alone."

However, he questioned Robinson closely regarding the three foreigners. Robinson added some details to his description. Evidently in his anxiety for his master, the man had made the most of his long-range opportunities for observation. The man wore a dark, soft felt hat, and seemed rather shabby; the woman almost always wore bright colors, and the red kerchief over her head stuck in Robinson's memory.

To the child he had given little attention; four or five years old, he thought, just able to walk nicely. In any Canadian town, Tripp averred, such a group would be noticed. There would be little difficulty in locating them.

"I'll get them in a trice," he remarked with confidence.

The Italians—if they were Italians—had appeared at intervals, usually just before the mysterious messages were delivered at Ferintosh House. Robinson had not seen them, however, within a month of the time that Ferintosh disappeared.

"And Mr. Ferintosh—"

"He seemed disturbed, sir."

Glory Adair mentally recalled, with a hard little smile, Dr. Wright's theory that he had confided to her when he sent her on this case. The young doctor had, it seemed, guessed nearer the truth than he realized. This then was the trouble that had secretly preyed on Ferintosh.

"At first Mr. Ferintosh laughed," said Robinson, "when the signs came. But after the people appeared, and began to dog his steps, he grew serious. Still, he was very steady, sir; his nerves did not seem at all shaken. He told me it was nothing; and he would not let me send for the police."

"You suggested that—"

"Time and again, sir. Mr. Ferintosh said, 'This is a private matter, Robinson. I can fight it out myself, in my own way.' He did not seem afraid; but he did not laugh as he had laughed when he found the first message thrust under the door."

"Then the message signified nothing," commented Miss Adair, "but the three people signified a great deal?"

She snatched her own replica of the last message from the table. With her forefinger she tapped the crosses, one after the other.

"Man—child—woman," she commented. "And"—her finger fell on the circle, backed against the straight line—"*is this Ferintosh?*"

Tripp seemed a trifle annoyed.

"I have seen less plausible theories," he commented dryly.

"I wished to tell the police, sir," interpolated Robinson. "I once or twice thought to do it myself. I wish I had done so, sir. It would have prevented all this."

"But," reflected Tripp aloud, "the obedient habits of a lifetime were too strong." He meditated a long moment. "Robinson," he said, "I want you to watch for these people. If you see them, tell me at once. That will do now. You may go."

Robinson went out.

"A valuable man, that," commented the investigator. "I wish, though, he had kept a written record of the comings and goings of those foreigners. You see, Miss Adair, he has a butler's mentality—he keeps track of tangible objects put in his hands, like spoons and slips of paper, most methodically; but he can't prepare an original narrative of what he merely sees. Otherwise, I'm sure he'd have given us day and date on the foreigners also. Still, he's going to be an immense help to us."

Tripp was through his questioning, as Miss Adair understood it; but he seemed in no haste to dismiss her. Presently she discovered the reason. He liked an audience; and she was, it seemed, the most receptive audience he could find.

"I am glad those foreigners appeared on the scene," he said.

"You think they killed Creighton?"

"I am sure they killed Creighton—and probably Ferintosh — when they could blackmail him no longer. For, of course, those messages meant blackmail—the fluctuations in position show where he has gained respite by paying money to them. Well, I'll be through with this inquiry inside a fortnight—maybe inside a week—anyway, the minute I lay hands on those people. They were here not more than two months ago, and I feel morally certain they were here, all of them, that night Creighton was killed. So they're not far away now. I'll get them."

He rose.

"I'm mighty glad, too. I was afraid I'd run into an embarrassing situation in connection with this search."

Miss Adair regarded the detective with questioning brown eyes.

"You mean," she said, "that you suspected—Mrs. Ferintosh?"

Tripp laughed uproariously.

"Mrs. Ferintosh? Why, it was Mrs. Ferintosh sent for me. She couldn't have done this thing. For, if she had, she would have kept quiet and let it go as suicide—she would never have sent for me when sending for me meant quick and certain exposure."

Glory Adair smiled faintly. The little man did not underestimate his powers.

"No," added Tripp, "it wasn't that I was afraid of. I was afraid I'd discover that it was Ferintosh who killed Creighton."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SCIENCE OF PALMISTRY.

TRIPP laughed propitiatingly, as though to apologize for such a suggestion.

"And in that case what would you have done?" challenged the nurse. Her brown eyes danced.

Tripp shrugged his shoulders.

"It is not 'in that case,' fortunately. The foreigners are of course guilty."

"But—*in that case?*" she insisted.

"Why," retorted Tripp, "if it *had* been Ferintosh, I would have gone ahead and got him."

She could respect the detective's cold-blooded ideal of ineluctable justice.

"It wasn't Ferintosh," she said with decision. "Put your mind at rest on that point. Ferintosh was no killer."

"But," protested Tripp, "you can never tell what a man will do when he's cornered—"

"Oh, but I can, Mr. Tripp." The smile played in the nurse's eyes. "That is, if I can see his hand. That tells me, just as clear as new print, just what he will do when cornered."

Tripp sniffed.

"Palmistry?" he ejaculated contemptuously.

"Palmistry—yes. It would help you so much, Mr. Tripp. But"—she caught his stubby hand and studied it—"you will never believe in palmistry. You are dogged and plodding and methodical and a skeptic in such things." She lifted her eyes to his face again.

Yes, the skepticism was just as indelibly written in Tripp's face. She hesitated a moment; then her enthusiasm got the better of her judgment.

"See here, Mr. Tripp." She disclosed a grimy bit of white blotting-paper. "There," she exclaimed, "you see the hand of Malcolm Ferintosh."

Tripp regarded the smudge without illumination.

"Blotting-paper," she explained, "and lamp-black. "I collect prints of interesting subjects. It's my hobby. And, after all, there's no subject uninteresting. I have hundreds of prints, all arranged and dated and classified. Mr. Ferintosh impressed me as an interesting subject. So, right after dinner that first night, I added his hand to my collection."

"Well?" Tripp's tone was immensely bored.

"He could not have killed Mr. Creighton," pursued Glory Adair with conviction. "He was not a killer. Not even in passion, for he was too strong-willed and too equable of temper to let himself fly into a passion."

Tripp showed a sudden trace of interest.

"How did he act when you asked him for the hand-print?" he questioned.

"With the utmost courtesy."

"Oh, but I don't mean that. Did he seem disturbed or alarmed or suspicious—"

She saw the drift of this questioning.

"Not at all."

With which Tripp's brief interest seemed to evaporate. Still, he silently turned her words over and over in his mind, as if skeptically trying to digest their possibilities.

"Perhaps," he remarked sarcastically, "if I concede that Ferintosh would not kill anybody else, you might reciprocate by telling me why three foreigners should want to blackmail—and kill—Ferintosh?"

Glory Adair's hand sought the bosom of her dress. She produced a little microscope, and went closely over the grimy hand-print. The detective chuckled softly to himself.

"I'm sure, Mr. Tripp, I can't see any reason. Unless—" Her brow puckered.

"Unless—what?"

"Mr. Ferintosh," she said slowly, "is the sort of man inclined to gamble for big stakes. So, I reason, he might take up all sorts of wildcat ventures. In that sort of thing you take in fellow investors who may be disappointed if they lose. But on the other hand, Ferintosh is absolutely honest. Inconceiveably honest in money matters. He would not cheat at cards, nor welsh—if he won, he would win honestly, and if he lost, he would lose with a smile—and try again. And we have Creighton's word for it that Ferintosh took his chances with his own money. No, I really see nothing, unless—" She hesitated.

"He would, I think, be deeply attached to a woman he loved, and would go considerable lengths for her. In his younger days there might have been entanglements. But when he married he would be loyal to the woman he married, even if he came to dislike her, which seems improbable. An entanglement with a woman presents the one possible excuse for blackmail, and to get to that you must go back twenty-five years, to the time before his marriage."

Tripp laughed contemptuously.

"Miss Adair, you interest me." But she didn't, and she knew she didn't. What Tripp believed, he believed fervently; and what he didn't believe could not be pounded into his head in a moment.

"Ferintosh," the nurse went on to elucidate, "is the sort of man who would prefer to play a big game, for high stakes. He would go into enterprises where the winnings were huge and the loss meant ruin, rather than into something small and safe. Yet there is a qualification to that: his nature demands constructive work. He would not speculate; he would rather create. Hence, oil production instead of the Stock Exchange. He is the sort of man to travel far, and to wish to see more of the world than his own petty bailiwick. And, in love, he would aspire high. He is, too, a man with a singular tenacity of purpose."

Tripp showed interest at last.

"But I suppose you couldn't tell me what a man of that sort would do when he found himself cornered—as the three crosses had him cornered here."

He flashed the last of the messages before her eyes. She answered without hesitation:

"He would fight back."

"Now," said Tripp triumphantly, "I guess we've got the innards of your precious palmistry. For Ferintosh didn't fight back. He simply ran away."

Glory Adair looked a bit crestfallen.

"And the rest is on a par with that," continued Tripp caustically. "You say we must go back twenty-five years to find the motive for blackmail. Well, at most, I am going back just two years or a trifle more—to the time when these three foreigners first appeared on the scene. If I don't get those foreigners at once, then I am going to rake over those two years with a fine-tooth comb." He rose. "Put away your hand-print. It tells you nothing, though you may imagine it tells you a whole lot."

Glory Adair was serene again.

"Now," said Tripp, "I am going to see Mrs. Ferintosh. She has given me a free hand and told me to spend whatever I needed. But I want her specifically to sanction a thousand-dollar reward for the apprehension of certain individuals. I'll not tell her who those individuals are, but the reward is for the three foreigners. I'll send their description to every police chief in the country. With a thousand dollars offered I'll land them in a hurry."

With which Tripp departed.

Glory Adair rose, a bit ruffled. She crossed to the window and studied the hand-print of Malcolm Ferintosh.

"Still, I think I'm right," she murmured, though a bit dubiously. "We've got to go back twenty-five years to find any motive for blackmail. And that motive is a woman, if there is any motive at all."

She puzzled, wondering how the life of Malcolm Ferintosh, plain as an open book, could supply material for any blackmailer. Clear-cut, substantial ambition—undeviating honesty—high ideals—loyalty to the woman of his choice—these things she had read in his hand. Where was there room for a foreign blackmailer to gain so much as a toe-hold?

"I'm just here as a nurse," she told herself. "I must not forget that. Oh, if I had a free hand—if I hadn't to hold myself—*I'd show you, Mr. Tripp.*"

Tripp went about his business methodically.

He despatched complete printed descriptions of the foreigners to police officers far and wide. They had been in Carisford on such and such dates—they had probably been in Carisford on the 29th of May, 1919—any officer locating them was to keep them under surveillance and wire or white full particulars—and the one thousand dollars reward would be forthcoming the minute Tripp identified the suspects.

In the next few days Tripp was deluged with messages. He had put up at the Carisford Arms Hotel, but he came daily to Ferintosh House.

"I'll land them sure," he told Glory Adair. "The only trouble is, so many people fit that description. Well, in each case I send further particulars. If the suspects can show an alibi, all right—they're eliminated. But in such a crowd I'm sure to get the three I'm after."

The suspects ultimately narrowed down to seven. These Tripp decided to inspect in person. So he spent a week or more in flying visits to first one then another locality. He went as far east as Montreal and as far south as Indianapolis. And ultimately he came back empty-handed.

"They've vanished from the face of the earth," he told Miss Adair. "I wonder," he added, "if that foreign get-up was a disguise. Well, I have the police of the entire continent still on the lookout for those people. Meanwhile, the fine-tooth comb is due to get in its work."

So he resumed his task, already carried on at odd intervals when he was at Ferintosh House, of going through the correspondence and other papers of Malcolm Ferintosh.

"The scent is getting warm," he announced one day. "I think I'll take a trip to Oklahoma and see those oil properties that Creighton and Ferintosh were interested in."

With which he lost himself for a couple of weeks. When he came back he was a decidedly different Tripp from the rather dejected individual he had seemed after the failure of his quest for the foreigners. Yet there was a trifle of embarrassment in his manner also; his report to Mrs. Ferintosh seemed to hold something back.

"Do you happen to know, Mrs. Ferintosh," he asked abruptly, "if Mr. Ferintosh had any extra heavy expenditures in the last few months?"

The lady replied in the negative.

"Running into, say, forty thousand dollars?" persisted Tripp.

Assuredly there had been none. Mrs. Ferintosh was too well bred to show curiosity or excitement, but she did not try to conceal a hint of surprise.

"This is peculiar," commented Tripp. "Very peculiar! You have heard of Mr. Creighton's will, of course?"

She had not.

"Oh, then, I have news for you. Mr. Creighton left all his holdings in the Petroloma Oil Company—some five hundred thousand dollars at market value—to Miss Ferintosh."

Mrs. Ferintosh betrayed no elation. But she sent Robinson for Ruth. The daughter came.

"Poor Mr. Creighton!" she exclaimed impetuously. The tears came into her gray eyes; for once, despite her mother's reproachful gaze, she refused to hold her emotions in check.

Mrs. Ferintosh made no comment.

"Here," pursued Tripp, after Ruth had gone, "is the curious point, though. At intervals for nearly two years prior to his disappearance Mr. Ferintosh had been quietly selling his holdings in the Petroloma Oil Company. He would sell a few shares now, and another small block again. At first Creighton did not know this. When he found out he remonstrated.

"The Petroloma was a valuable property, paying big dividends, it seemed. The shares were worth several times par value on the market; but Creighton thought it would pay to hold them, for the leases are extra rich. Still, after Creighton had remonstrated—by letter—Ferintosh went on unloading his shares.

"That," added the detective, "was why Creighton came East—to have a show-down and to find out what his partner meant. What Ferintosh was doing sems to have been well known at the Oklahoma end of the business, and has puzzled oil men there. But by the time Creighton reached Carisford, Ferintosh had disappeared."

Mrs. Ferintosh was frankly though decorously puzzled.

"These stock sales date back all of two years," pursued Tripp. "I find that the Petroloma stock was the easiest of Mr. Ferintosh's holdings to dispose of and the property calculated to sell to the best advantage. He sold little by little, at intervals, so as not to attract too much attention or depress the market. The presence of new proxies at the shareholders' meeting a year ago was the first intimation Creighton had of what Ferintosh was doing. Then Creighton protested. He believed Ferintosh was making a sacrifice in selling, and he seems to have feared that the control of the company might pass into other hands. Mr. Ferintosh, however, went on selling."

Mrs. Ferintosh vouchsafed no comment. Tripp methodically pursued his trail a step further.

"I find that no such sums as he realized from these sales were ever deposited, either here or in Tulsa, to the credit of Mr. Ferintosh. His bank-books show no records in the matter. As to the drafts or checks he received in payment for the holdings, it's practically impossible to trace them. The endorsements might show something. But this money—close to fifty thousand dollars—seems to have vanished into thin air between the Tulsa Oil Exchange and Carisford. The question is: where did the money go?"

"That I cannot tell," returned Mrs. Ferintosh evenly. "Mr. Ferintosh never mentioned selling his stock, nor did I see any letters from Mr. Creighton in the matter, nor did I know of any extraordinary expenditures to call for so much money. The income from our investments has always been more than ample."

"Then," asked Tripp, "could there have been blackmail?"

"Blackmail!" ejaculated the woman, with every token of well-bred incredulity.

Tripp nodded.

"Here," he said, "are large sums of money secured at intervals over two years and which have not been spent in any normal way. To be absolutely frank, Mrs. Ferintosh, blackmail is the only explanation I can see."

She was still palpably incredulous.

"And the conclusion grows irresistible when I take into consideration this further evidence."

And he laid before her the series of cross-and-circle messages, and told her Robinson's story of the three mysterious foreigners who had for two years dogged the footsteps of Malcolm Ferintosh.

"I cannot understand it at all," returned Mrs. Ferintosh quietly. "I do not see where these people could come into our life. Mr. Ferintosh never mentioned them to me."

"But, then," remarked Tripp pointedly, "he never mentioned those curious messages."

"No, Mr. Tripp."

Tripp hid a triumphant smile. Ferintosh was palpably a man who could keep his secrets, even from his wife, and who preferred to do so.

The woman regarded him steadily.

"You have my authority," she said quietly, "to do whatever is necessary."

She nodded, and Tripp rose to go. Glory

Adair, an unobtrusive spectator throughout the conference, followed him. He turned to her when they were out of ear-shot of Mrs. Ferintosh.

He hesitated a moment; but the allure of airing his views to an interested audience proved too strong. He had a secret and he must confide it.

"It's an awkward situation," he said. "But, as you see, there's no getting away from it. Every step we take, the case grows more convincing. Ferintosh was unloading to pay blackmail, and he quarreled with Creighton over the sale of the shares. The foreigners have their part in the scheme of things, I suppose—but I am as certain as I am alive that it was Malcolm Ferintosh who fired the shot which killed Creighton."

Miss Adair smiled quizzically at the earnest investigator.

"I would sooner suspect Mrs. Ferintosh," she said.

"Why?"

"Mrs. Ferintosh could kill—if she thought it absolutely necessary. Her hand tells me that. But Ferintosh was no killer."

"Palmistry?" scoffed Tripp.

"Yes, palmistry," retorted Glory Adair a bit warmly. Her brown eyes flashed lightnings at the skeptical officer. "There *is* something in palmistry, as I intend to show you."

"You also are going to investigate?" he inquired pleasantly.

"I am."

Her tone was resolute.

"Then let us shake hands. Our rivalry may as well be friendly, seeing that it is not serious."

She smiled, a malicious little smile.

"Ah," she said softly, "you depreciate yourself far too much, Mr. Tripp."

CHAPTER IX.

RUTH FERINTOSH IS PERTURBED.

RUTH FERINTOSH bade her mother good night in softly modulated tones. In the silence of her room she burst into tears. Her poise was just a momentary mask, hiding turbulent emotions. Her mother's serenity was second nature. Just now Ruth's mind insisted on conjuring up the blustering figure of Creighton. The oil man had always been fond of her, in his rough way. Now the news of the legacy shocked her into tears.

She saw a light glowing yellow through the keyhole of Nurse Adair's room across the hall.

"Miss Adair!"

Miss Adair did not respond.

That piqued Ruth, who was accustomed to summoning other people. Presently she called again.

This time, when there was no answer, she crossed to the nurse's door and tapped softly.

"Come in!" commanded Glory.

Ruth Ferintosh stepped inside and softly closed the door. She knew there were traces of tears in her eyes, but she smiled a dazzling smile.

The smile, however, was wasted. The nurse did not look up from her task. By the light of the reading-lamp on the little table she was examining something. Ruth Ferintosh, wondering, drew closer. The microscope in the nurse's hand puzzled her. So did the subject of her study, a sheet of white blotting-paper covered with a blur of grayish black.

"Sit down, dear," commanded Glory Adair. Her tone was very reassuring. "I am just analyzing our friend, Mr. Tripp."

"The reporter?"

"Uhuh! He kindly consented to give me his hand-prints, without the least idea that they would really tell me anything. To-morrow I shall inform him that he is keen, shrewd, very active of mind and body, and—entirely too dogmatic. Also that he is stubborn and opinionated, and for that very reason a great deal less efficient in his profession than he might be. And, as he is perfectly aware that last statement is incorrect, he will then assure me that there's nothing in palmistry whatever, and that I've just demonstrated the fact. In so doing he will be merely vindicating me. How much better off he'd be if he'd only believe and take the lessons of palmistry to heart!"

She smiled warmly as she laid aside the paper and the microscope and at last glanced up at Ruth.

"Now, dear, what is troubling you?"

Ruth Ferintosh hesitated a moment.

"Everything," she at last faltered.

"How so?"

"Poor Mr. Creighton, and—and—my father—and—all."

Glory Adair patted her slim hand sympathetically.

"There, there," she said as one who would soothe a child, "we cannot help Mr. Creighton. As for your father—"

She forced herself to smile. "Your father, I think, is taking care of himself very satisfactorily. If there were anything wrong with him we would surely have heard."

That did not satisfy Ruth.

"Normally, yes," she said, speaking now with drawing-room precision. "But today I had a talk with Dr. Wright. I have been uneasy more or less since the first—since father went away on that trip. You see, there might be aphasia—temporary aberration—complete loss of memory and of—of identity."

She brought out the unfamiliar phrases with an almost painful effort at exactness. "You do hear of such things?" she challenged.

"I do," smiled the nurse. "More than occurs, perhaps."

"Then you don't think it likely?"

Ruth plucked up a little hope.

"Not after seeing your father's hand."

"Oh! You saw that?"

Miss Adair pulled open a drawer and brought forth her portfolio. "These are my subjects," she commented dryly. "Here is your father. I have Mr. Creighton."

"You read Mr. Creighton's hand?"

The nurse nodded.

"Did it tell you anything of what was going to happen?"

"Remember, dear," said Miss Adair softly, "he that liveth by the sword shall perish by the sword."

"You mean—"

"Mr. Creighton was not the sort of man to die peaceably in his bed. He had driven violent, rebellious men by sheer force. He would have preferred to finish in a stand-up fight. That, though, was denied him."

"Then—you mean he didn't commit suicide?"

Ruth was bewildered. Then Miss Adair remembered that Miss Ferintosh had not yet learned the true inwardness of the tragedy and the real significance of Tripp's visit. She strove to head off further disclosures. But Ruth was too quick for her.

"Mr. Creighton was murdered? And—that's why Mr. Tripp asked all those questions?"

Miss Adair threw her hands apart with a characteristic gesture of resignation.

"Why hide the truth?" she retorted in a mock-desperate tone. "This Tripp, my dear, is a detective—or thinks he is. Your mother did not want newspaper publicity and consequently scandal. But she does insist on justice being done and the truth ferreted out. Hence—Tripp."

The girl shuddered instinctively and closed her eyes, trying to shut out the vision of what had happened to Creighton in the loneliness of his room while they sat on the porch chatting with Captain Grant. She drew closer to the comforting light.

"It's horrible to think of!" she whispered.

And she tried not to think of it, and had to think—of Ferintosh House, with all its childhood memories, stained with the life-blood of a man who, however rough, had loved her.

Then she thought again of the ghostly figure that Captain Grant had pursued that night on the lawn. Her hands turned nervously toward the light. With a sudden gesture Glory Adair caught one, and twisted it almost harshly, till the many facets of the glittering diamond shot back the radiance of the lamp.

"This," said the nurse in a tone strangely quiet, "is from—Ken Grant?"

Ruth nodded, and smiled happily.

The nurse gazed very steadily at the diamond.

"I had not thought I would care," she said.

The girl was all sudden contrition.

"Why—Miss Adair?"

She gazed into the nurse's face penitently. It was a fair face, not given to showing deep emotion; the brown eyes glowed like steady lamps; the red lips never quivered; only the cheeks seemed oddly pale for a passing moment. The girl gazed and wondered a little.

"You see," said the nurse quietly, "I knew Ken Grant—a long time ago—when we were both little. I told you some things about that, but not all."

"Then tell me now."

"There isn't much to tell. He was my first sweetheart—when we were a couple of kids."

She hummed a bar or two of the popular air, once, twice, thrice, then broke off with a short laugh.

Ruth Ferintosh regarded her fixedly with big, wide-open, wondering eyes.

"You know," she ventured at last, trying to banter, "you could not expect anything different, when what has actually happened was all the time written in your hands—when the lines didn't cross, you know!"

Glory Adair smiled. She was her normal, steady self again.

"I didn't know anything of palmistry in those days," she returned. "If I had, it might have taken some of the joy out of life."

Ruth Ferintosh hesitated, still regarding her with that puzzled, questioning look.

"Dare I?" she asked herself. After all, she mused, there was nothing in this science of palmistry. But at last, slowly, she laid her hands, palms upward, on the little table.

"Tell me, does he really care for me as much as he says? Tell me—"

The nurse shook her head.

"You don't want to tell?" Behind closed doors, away from her mother's eye, Ruth ventured to be petulant.

"You see, dear," explained Miss Adair very patiently, "there are many things that palmistry cannot tell. I can look into your hand and describe the man who would be your ideal mate—and the man likely to appeal most strongly to your fancy—and can tell you at what age you are likeliest to marry. But as to Captain Grant—I would have to see *his* hand, too, before I answered this question."

Ruth Ferintosh shook her curls impatiently. This was not the sort of palmistry she had been fed on. Her idea of a palmist was a woman in red robes who predicted unexpected money that arrived according to schedule and unexpected visits that materialized, and dark men threatening, and women jealous, and handsome men making love.

Glory Adair's palmistry, with its modest description of natural affinities and probable mates, was sadly disappointing.

Really, she decided, this Glory Adair knew less than she claimed to know.

"Good night," she said shortly, and stepped into the hall.

Outside, she hesitated, then turned back.

"Miss Adair."

"Yes."

"I am not angry."

"No?"

"If you see Captain Grant's hand—please tell me."

"I will."

Ruth Ferintosh heard the nurse, laughing softly, pick up her microscope. That laugh irritated her in a vague way. In her own room, Ruth lay awake, wondering—wondering how deep was the old affection between these two, and how she could ever have won Captain Grant away from this calm-eyed, steady-nerved, wonderful Miss Adair.

Yet she had. That bewildering fact fairly stunned her at times. Ken Grant loved her—he had told her so. And she loved him. But they must wait till her father came back. So she had told him to-night, when he urged an early wedding.

With approaching drowsiness, her thoughts grew a bit disjointed. She found herself laughing at the recollection of Glory Adair and her microscope. What was there to palmistry, anyway? Nothing. Queer, wasn't it, that a sane, steady, practical woman in the most cold-blooded and unemotional business in the world should dabble in such a superstitious pastime?

Then she stiffened. Another thought

had come. It was since Glory Adair had come to Ferintosh House at her mother's invitation that all these strange things had begun to happen. The brown-eyed, fair-faced nurse was the beginning of all their troubles. Whence had she come, and why, this strange woman with the perpetual soft smile in her eyes? At her mother's invitation? Yes. But why?

She sat troubled and perplexed at this thought—troubled, not for herself, but for Ken Grant. Curiously enough, she felt a practical sense of her own stability. Nothing could happen to her. But Captain Grant—would he be the next victim of the unseen enemy who was thus bitterly warring against the house of Ferintosh?

"It all happened since *she* came," mused Ruth Ferintosh again.

She tried to stifle that thought. Palmistry was a harmless if empty pastime, and the nurse was warm-hearted and friendly and above suspicion—but, try as she would to stifle her suspicions, that thought insisted on recurring. "It all happened since she came here—all our troubles began with Glory Adair.

She fell into a restless doze. For she was not accustomed to this sort of mental distress. She had lived her young life at ease, in the shallows of emotion; the depths of her nature had never been seriously stirred.

Two years ago Captain Grant had swept her off her feet. His smile, his uniform, the glamour of heroism about him—these things had gripped her fancy.

So Tripp was a detective—

She found herself awake again, and once more thinking. And, half waking, half dreaming, she worked out the infinite puzzle of life in all its intricate details.

Tripp was a detective.

But what was Glory Adair doing here? And how was it that Captain Grant had chosen Ruth Ferintosh in preference to his boyhood sweetheart?

Glory Adair sought no opportunity to read Captain Grant's hand. He was gone all morning and most of the afternoon. The opportunity would have been hard to find had she sought it.

She was alone on the porch in the early evening when he came swinging up the walk. He nodded and passed on into the house. But at the door he turned and glanced back at her.

Her brown eyes flashed him a sudden glance, then hid behind their demure, dark lashes.

He came and sat beside her.

"Kid," he said boyishly, "I like you."

The words shocked her. She gazed at him a long moment without saying anything.

He chuckled softly to himself.

"I liked you in the pink-lemonade days," he pursued. "Eh? And you thought a bit of me then, I'll wager?"

There was something alluring about the man; she felt it, despite herself. It warmed her to bits of reminiscence. She told herself, more than once, that she had no business to talk to him like this—to the fiancé of Ruth Ferintosh. But, after all, she enjoyed it. The cheery reminiscence called back Maitland Port, which she might never see again, and childhood days that were long years behind her. At least she called them long years, though she was only in her early twenties.

So she talked daringly of those old times, leading the man on and on.

She felt suddenly that his manner grew tense. She felt his hand close on hers. She put the hand away with a touch of irresolution.

After all, that Ken Grant of long ago—the freckle-faced, enticing kid—had been hers. He had loved her in his exuberantly boyish way. What fool kids they had been!

His next words echoed her thoughts.

"I guess," he said, quite complacent, "I was pretty much in love with you once."

She said nothing to that. What was there to say?

"And I don't know"—his tone grew deeply serious—"that I've quite got over it yet. There are times when I wonder—" He smiled grimly.

She gazed expectantly up at him.

"When I wonder if maybe I haven't made a mistake—if perhaps you and I—"

Despite herself, her heart was pounding. She laughed, a choking sort of laugh. She had loved the boy—and now came the man and said such things!

And last night Ruth Ferintosh—

Glory Adair's thoughts, usually so steady, were all a confused jumble for a moment. To steady herself she caught Grant's hands and turned them palms upward.

She studied the slender fingers. The lines written on those palms were not complicated, crisscross lines like hers—they were few and boldly marked.

The warmth of recollection gave place in an instant to the cold pursuit of her pastime—palmistry.

Yet she found time for the thought that this was the first time she had ever read the hand of Kenric Chisholm Grant—spite of all he had been to her these years.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm reading your soul," she said calmly. "It is all written here, legible as a book."

He laughed, but his eyes were grim.

"Then read all the mistakes I've made, and all the impulses I've let run away with me—and read, too, that I've never forgotten the old days when we were kids. No, I never forgot *you*, whatever else I forgot."

His tone grew a bit husky.

She sat very stiff and straight. She let go his hands. His eyes challenged hers.

"Are you satisfied?"

"I am satisfied—*Captain* Grant."

"Ken," he insisted. "For the sake of the old days, can't you call me that?"

She kept him at arm's length now. Her eyes sought to read his face.

He gazed at the porch floor.

"There," he muttered, "we shouldn't talk like this."

"No," she said steadily.

She sat a long while after he was gone, pondering on the long, slim fingers and the palm with its few clearly marked lines—and on the boy she had known. Then she thought again of the possessory diamond glittering on the finger of Ruth Ferintosh.

He was not the Ken Grant she had fancied he would be, she who had known the boy. The boy had seemed impulsively generous, warm of heart, loyal—but the man was self-centered, coldly selfish, a fortune-seeker. Else why his passionate professions of devotion to Ruth Ferintosh while he still cared for *her?*

"Well?" demanded Ruth Ferintosh.

Her tone was chill. She drew aside the curtain behind the open French window, and came out upon the porch. Glory Adair looked at her once, and knew in an instant that most of this, perhaps all this time, Ruth had been listening.

"Ken Grant was always impulsive," she said with a smile.

But Ruth Ferintosh, too, was impulsive.

"You sit here," she sobbed. "and—and flirt with him—and—"

Glory Adair drew her down to a seat and patted her shoulder soothingly.

Ruth snatched herself away. Her gray eyes flashed almost wickedly.

"Don't come near me!" she snapped.

Miss Adair smiled reassuringly.

"I was talking to Captain Grant, and Captain Grant was talking to me—about old times. But don't worry, dear. I'm not in love with him. I'm too selfish to love any one—except Glory Adair."

"But when he was a boy—you told me—"

"Oh, yes," repeated the nurse dreamily, "I used to think I loved the boy. But that was a long time ago. And Captain Kenrich Chicholm Grant"—her tone faltered—"isn't one bit like the boy I knew."

Ruth Ferintosh eyed her questioningly. Glory Adair could not know that back of her questioning regard lay all the suspicious thoughts that had kept the girl wakeful the long night through."

"Anyway," added the nurse quietly, "I'm through here. I'm going away at once. Glory Adair will simply obliterate herself. That will settle the whole difficulty, don't you see?"

Ruth Ferintosh hugged the nurse impulsively.

"Oh, but," she protested, "you don't need to go, dear Miss Adair. I'm a foolish girl. I get angry about nothing." A sudden thought struck her. "Tell me,

what did you find—in his hand? If there is anything in palmistry, that ought to tell you the truth?"

Glory Adair stared away before her with eyes unseeing.

"I'd rather not say anything as to that," she returned, after a long silence.

"But we love one another—"

The nurse studied.

"There is nothing for *me* there," she said at last. "His hand told me that quite plainly."

"You're a dear!" exclaimed Ruth Ferintosh.

CHAPTER X.

BY PROCESS OF ELIMINATION.

GLORY ADAIR in a rarely impetuous moment had set herself up as an antagonist to the alert Tripp.

"There, I've put my foot in it!" she exclaimed almost immediately. "I came to Ferintosh House as a nurse, and, if I'd had any sense at all, I'd have kept myself out of this tangle."

But now it was too late to draw back. She had committed herself, at least in her own eyes, however mirthfully Tripp might regard her announcement, and she had to see the thing through. And in a little while, as her soul warmed to the tempting tangle, she felt elation that she had at last taken the plunge.

The tangle itself had allured her from the first.

Unlike Tripp, she did not run about excitedly. In fact, she sat down and thought exceeding hard. Then she examined under her microscope what hand-prints she had bearing on the case.

She was thus engaged that night Ruth Ferintosh came into her room to show her newly acquired diamond. For Glory Adair, with a sort of merciless clarity of mind, stripped the girl's visit of all its tearful and smiling camouflage, and in these few words got to the bottom of the thing.

She had felt a momentary pang at sight of the diamond. She had cherished her girlhood memories, in spite of time and distance. But she did not allow her reminiscences to trouble her excessively. The tangle she had engaged to solve meant more to her, after all, than the Captain Grant she had met at Ferintosh House; even if it meant a great deal less than had the freckle-faced Ken Grant in the old days at Maitland Port.

So she put both Grants resolutely out of her mind, and, within the twenty-four hours, Captain Grant avenged himself by intruding in person, thereby drawing her into a sharp jangle with jealous Ruth Ferintosh.

"Poor little kid!" mused Glory Adair after Ruth had gone. For the year's interval between their ages justified her in her own mind in patronizing the younger girl.

Then the lure of the tangle reasserted itself, and she said: "Get thee behind me, Captain Grant!" and—

The next minute the memory of the boy of Maitland Port was confronting her. She couldn't get rid of him—she had to admit that. He would insist on recurring to her thoughts, despite herself.

Well, she could diagnose, or try to diagnose, this grown-up edition of him, quite unemotionally. Captain Grant was engaged to Ruth Ferintosh. Yet he made love to Glory Adair, or at least disclosed feelings that—

She snapped those thoughts off short. There was but one explanation. Incredible as it might seem to Glory Adair, who had known him as a boy, Captain Grant was a mere fortune-seeker. And after all these years, despite the fortune Ruth Ferintosh would surely bring him, he was still obsessed by the same sentimental hankering for Glory Adair as she had always cherished for the Ken Grant of long ago.

She puzzled on that a moment, then resumed a mental process of analysis and elimination in which Captain Kenrich Chisholm Grant was merely one of the pawns.

To her mind, the tangle arising from the disappearance of Ferintosh and the murder of Creighton assumed a decidedly complex form. But then her soul rejoiced in complex tangles. As she saw it, the

various outstanding kinks thus far disclosed were all parts of a harmonious yet jangled whole.

The mysterious crosses and the mysterious foreigners lurking in the background of the picture were related to the sales of Petroloma stock for money of which the books of Malcolm Ferintosh gave no accounting. This, in turn, had its bearing, somehow, on the disappearance of Ferintosh himself. The disappearance of Ferintosh, in turn, linked up intimately with the murder of Creighton.

In the darkness, these incidents and figures stood out in mysterious isolation. With light flashed on the picture, all would be found connected parts of the one piece.

Of this she felt positive. Nothing in this scheme of things was fortuitous. All things were connected.

Had she not known Ferintosh, as she thought she knew him through his hand, the solution of the mystery would have been very simple. Ferintosh had some time in his life got into a scrape. The foreigners had blackmailed him. He had sold his Petroloma stock to provide hush-money. Creighton had objected, and they had quarreled. And Ferintosh, after vanishing to provide an alibi, had come back and killed Creighton.

That would have been perfectly logical—had she never studied the hand of Malcolm Ferintosh.

But the hand of Malcolm Ferintosh, as she insisted on reading it, upset the whole plausible chain of circumstances. Here was a man scrupulously honest and upright—hence unlikely to provide excuse for justified blackmail. Also, he as a man steady nerved and courageous, who would fight back against unjustified blackmail—hence, unlikely to run away from it.

"But he did run away." Miss Adair checked herself at this point. There, in the vanishing of Ferintosh, was, incidentally, a small puzzle within the larger puzzle.

Finally, Ferintosh was a man by nature loyal to the woman of his choice—so that the last possible motive for blackmail must be sought before his marriage, twenty-five years ago.

"Of course Tripp can't see that," mused Glory Adair satirically.

And Ferintosh was not a killer. On that she insisted. There was the barest of possibilities that he might kill in a passion, if through some miracle of feeling he let passion run away with his steady, sober judgment. But under the obvious circumstances of the murder—a deliberately planned and cold-blooded killing—that solution had no place.

The hand of Ferintosh told her clearly that it was contrary to his nature to kill subtly, and contrary to all his instincts and impulses to kill at all.

Just then up sauntered a man who was very much in her thoughts.

Tripp.

Tripp was manifestly feeling very kindly toward himself and toward all the world.

"I've got them this time!" he ejaculated.

He did not go in at once to impart his good news to Mrs. Ferintosh. Instead, he sat in the chair next Glory, and enjoyed his triumph.

It appeared that he had just received word by telephone that a party of three foreigners answering the description had been located at Detroit. He would go down on the next train to interrogate them.

"But they fit the description exactly," he added with elation.

Then his brow clouded.

"The further I go, the surer I am that Ferintosh killed Creighton." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "But, anyway," he added, "these foreigners will surely throw light on the affair. That's the great thing in this business, Miss Adair—nab your witnesses as quick as you can, and frisk 'em for the facts."

He chuckled.

"When does your train go?" asked Miss Adair.

"Nine thirty." Tripp glanced at his watch.

"You have a good hour yet." Miss Adair, womanlike, corroborated his statement from her wrist-watch "You need only a moment with Mrs. Ferintosh. I've been trying to work out a process of elimi-

nation. Has it ever occurred to you, Mr. Tripp, that this might be an inside crime?"

"Eh? How? Oh, you mean, done by some one inside the house—some one we know? Sure. I've worked all that out," said Tripp contentedly.

He whipped out a note-book.

"Just what I wanted," commented Miss Adair, "but I was too lazy to get it. You are providential." She produced a pencil, and they bent their heads close together over the page. There was still some lingering light, but it sufficed.

"You see," interpolated Tripp presently, "it has to be an outside party who killed Creighton. For here we have placed all those inside the house at the very moment of the shooting—and we have witnesses to the placing of every one of them."

Individual.	*When the Shot was Fired.*	*Witnesses.*
Sarah Tiffin	In her room	Mrs. Wedge, Robinson
Mrs. Wedge	In her room	Miss Tiffin, Robinson
Robinson	In his room, shaving	Mrs. Wedge, Sarah Tiffin
Glory Adair	On the porch	Miss Ferintosh, Captain Grant
Ruth Ferintosh	On the porch	Miss Adair, Captain Grant
Captain Grant	On the porch	Miss Adair, Miss Ferintosh
Mrs. Ferintosh	In her room	

Tripp paused in his enumeration.

"You see," he said, "every member of the household has a clear-cut alibi—"

"Except Mrs. Ferintosh," said Glory Adair softly.

"Mrs. Ferintosh? Why, it was she who summoned me to take up the case!"

Glory Adair smiled.

Tripp's imagination was not just what she had fancied it.

"So, you see, I must look for an outsider," insisted Tripp.

Miss Adair flashed an amused glance at him. She produced from the bosom of her dress, not the usual microscope, but a slip of paper.

"Here," she said with emphasis, "is *my* process of elimination."

Tripp regarded the paper interrogatively.

"Oh, I say," he exclaimed, "what's all this, anyway?"

"That's what their hands tell me, so far as I've been able to examine them."

"Eh?"

"You said once, Mr. Tripp, that there were three points to be reconciled in determining the culprit in any given case. The time, the place, and—"

"And the motive," concluded Tripp. "Yes, I said that. And that's what eliminates Mrs. Ferintosh. She had no motive for killing Creighton. As for time and place, we have witnesses to clear every other member of the household."

"Perhaps it will help you, though, suggested Miss Adair, "to read what I've written. Palmistry *is* a help, you know."

At which Tripp scoffed, but condescended to read.

This Individual	*Would Kill for This Motive*
Sarah Tiffin	Accident or fright
Mrs. Wedge	Accident or fright
Robinson	Justified self-defense
Glory Adair	(I refrain from specifying)
Ruth Ferintosh	Emotional Impulse
Captain Grant	Necessity
Mrs. Ferintosh	Necessity
Mr. Ferintosh	Not at all

"Except for Ferintosh," said Tripp blankly, "you'd have every member of the household a potential murderer—or at least guilty of manslaughter?"

Glory Adair smiled.

"Circumstances alter cases," she said softly, "but they do not alter fundamental human nature. If we in Ferintosh House were beleaguered by bloodthirsty Bolsheviki, Sarah Tiffin would faint or fire in the air. I would kill several of the besiegers with considerable pleasure. Robinson would kill them with a certain regret at the necessity of taking human life. Captain Grant would endeavor to kill them with as little risk as possible to himself.

"But the basic attitude of each one of us would be characteristic. Sarah Tiffin doesn't change on account of changed circumstances—she merely rises to the emergency in the fashion typical of her. She is the same girl in emergency as she is now, only that emergency calls on her to exercise qualities that are merely latent."

Tripp sniffed aloud.

"Don't you see, Mr. Tripp, that is where palmistry ceases to be a fake and becomes a science? That's why it's so helpful to any one who uses it intelligently and honestly. Your basic nature or my basic nature will never change. What is latent in us, however, may develop. But each of us develops along predetermined lines, and those lines are legible from the lines in our hands.

"There we can read our natures and discover our potentialities. Then we will know along what line to concentrate our efforts and what perils to guard against. Our worst perils are born in us—if we only knew it."

And as she said it she steeled her soul once more against the thought of Captain Grant.

Tripp's dry, skeptical little laugh recalled Glory Adair to herself. She flushed.

"I'm too enthusiastic," she admitted.

"I'll say so," agreed Tripp with a tinge of contempt. "Then your palmistry doesn't tell you so very much, after all."

"It tells me what I am, and what you are. It tells me that of all the members of Ferintosh House when I came here, Malcolm Ferintosh was the only one who, no matter what the surrounding circumstances, could not have murdered Mr. Creighton."

"Just the same, I rather think he did it," said Tripp mulishly. "He's the only one not positively eliminated. And if he did it or if he didn't do it—between us, the Detroit police and I will wring the truth out of those foreigners."

With which he left to report to Mrs. Ferintosh, and to call a taxi.

Two days later Tripp came back.

"Well?" challenged Miss Adair when she saw him.

He looked rather surly and conspicuously disappointed. But at the moment he vouchsafed nothing, though for a half-hour or more after he arrived he was in secret conference with Mrs. Ferintosh.

That, mused Miss Adair, would indicate that the man had perhaps achieved some measure of success.

She met him shortly after he came out. The meeting was not entirely accidental on her part, and seemed not so unwelcome to Tripp as she had fancied. He anticipated her question with a really good-natured smile.

"It was another colossal fizzle," he said. "The Detroit police had my dates all wrong. If they'd had them right, I'd have been saved a couple of days' time. These foreigners were in Bay City on the day of the murder. Well, there was nothing to do but just let them go."

Then what did the long conference with Mrs. Ferintosh mean? Glory Adair asked herself that question.

"Now," concluded Trip, "we're going right to the nub of the matter. We're going to find Malcolm Ferintosh. The good lady hated to see the noble old name dragged through the mire of public print, but I put it up to her good and strong, and I won out. This case has dragged too long for us to be finnicky about family scruples."

With which he went briskly about his business—once more keenly watchful, cheerfully confident, and with self-assurance of speedy success.

CHAPTER XI.

GLORY IS TEMPTED.

FERINTOSH.—Information wanted as to whereabouts of Malcolm Ferintosh, formerly of Carisford. Reward on addressing Box 202, *Times-Star.*

GLORY ADAIR chanced on that advertisement a few days later, in the personal column of a Detroit daily. Plainly, Detective Tripp was getting into action, now that he had overcome what he contemptuously referred to as the "finnicky scruples" of Mrs. Ferintosh. Those same finnicky scruples had troubled Glory Adair not a little.

It was incredible that any woman, however reserved and dignified and fearful of scandal, should thus allow her husband to disappear without making the slightest effort to locate him.

Yet that was just what Mrs. Ferintosh

had done. Malcolm Ferintosh had vanished utterly, without warning and without leaving any message whatever. And Mrs. Ferintosh, beyond telegraphing his partner, had made not the slightest move to find him.

Not till after Creighton was shot had she acted. Even then she had revealed the same unhealthy terror of publicity. She had deliberately schemed to make the murder appear as suicide to the coroner, and she had deliberately and successfully sought to avoid the search-light of an inquest. And then, having called in Tripp, she had called him in, not to find her husband, but to find Creighton's murderer.

So far as her husband was concerned, Mrs. Ferintosh seemed a stoic. She had shown no emotion whatever. The thing was incredible, but it was true.

Even in his search for the murderer of Creighton, Mrs. Ferintosh had tacitly hampered the active Tripp by her scruples. But now Tripp had, it seemed, determinedly swept aside her objections. The little detective, spurred to enhanced activity by the repeated futility of his efforts, refused to remain fettered.

Glory Adair silently admired the bloodhound trait in the man. He was on the trail, and, whatever deference he felt toward Mrs. Ferintosh, he was no quitter.

She felt, intuitively, that he would not quit, even if Mrs. Ferintosh bade him do so.

She showed him the advertisement next time he called at Ferintosh House.

"Yes," he admitted frankly, "I did that. But just see—"

He pulled out his wallet and showed her a bunch of clippings. He handed her one with this flaring caption:

$1,000 REWARD.

One thousand dollars was offered for information leading to the discovery of the whereabouts of Malcolm Ferintosh. There followed a full description, and a striking likeness of the missing man.

"What's more," announced Tripp, "the police everywhere are on the lookout. Every bonehead who imagines he's a detective is hustling for that reward. You'll see in a few days that it pays to advertise." He wrinkled his smooth forehead, and dropped his voice to a husky whisper: "If it hadn't been for that woman's finnicky ideas, I'd have had this thing cleared up inside a week. Here she has been telling me 'No publicity! No publicity! No publicity!' when publicity is the one thing that will solve the riddle for us. I've got to find Ferintosh before I can clear up the bigger mystery of the murder of Creighton."

"The bigger mystery?" she challenged.

He nodded.

"I doubt if it is as big," she commented.

Tripp whistled. He was feeling decidedly cheerful, for he was doing things. Murder or blackmail or missing man, it was all part of his day's work.

"Well," he said, "now we're using barrels of publicity. See this."

This was another item from Tripp's wallet—a news story, clipped and dated in the detective's methodical fashion. It bore a Carisford date-line; it fairly sobbed its grief over the missing Ferintosh, and told of the anxiety of the wife and daughter of the millionaire oil man. Had he suffered aphasia, and was he wandering about, homeless and demented, forgetful of his own identity?

"That 'll get people talking," observed Tripp with satisfaction. "That's the way Professor Lavell was located, after he'd been missing for months. You remember that case?"

Glory Adair nodded.

Tripp, plainly, was letting no grass grow under his feet.

"Get Ferintosh," added he, "and we get at the same time the inside story of the blackmail business and the sale of the Petroloma stock. When we have that, we have everything."

Glory Adair just smiled at him. Her mental reservations she kept to herself this time.

"We'll hammer away along this line," pursued Tripp. "Somebody who reads this stuff is bound to locate Ferintosh for us. Then it's an easy job to mop up the rest of the mystery. Meanwhile," he added serenely, "I still have my lines out for those three foreigners."

Glory Adair regarded him steadily.

"I think you are making a mistake," she said. "Ferintosh knows absolutely nothing regarding the murder of Creighton."

At which Tripp scoffed.

"I mean it. His hand tells me—"

"Bosh!" Tripp dared be rude.

"But, Mr. Tripp, it's true. His hand tells me that if he had any light to throw on the murder of Creighton he'd come forward of his own free will. He has no guilty knowledge of the affair, for he would not kill or be an accomplice to killing. He has no innocent knowledge, or he would tell us what he knows. He believes, as does the rest of the world, that Creighton committed suicide."

"But suppose he can't come forward?"

"You mean, he's dead?"

"Dead—or suffering from aphasia—temporary loss of memory, you know. Or, in spite of your belief, he is the actual murderer."

"Oh, but," protested Glory Adair, "I tell you he couldn't be that. His hand tells me—"

Tripp's laugh interrupted her.

"So," she insisted, "I argue Ferintosh knows nothing of the murder of Creighton. When you find Ferintosh you'll be no nearer a solution of the murder mystery than you were at first."

Tripp shrugged his shoulders.

"What's more, Ferintosh's hand tells me that if there were blackmail, the cause arose in the remote past. Here is a man scrupulously honest, so that blackmail could not arise out of any shady financial transaction. He is incapable of injustice. If a woman were concerned—a woman with a claim on him—that claim must have arisen before his marriage, perhaps before he made his fortune; that is, all of twenty-five years ago."

The detective laughed at her enthusiasm.

"I'm too busy with live issues to go back that far," he commented.

"I am going back," said Glory Adair; "for that, I am sure, is the one live issue."

Tripp regarded her quizzically.

"And what," he demanded, "are you going to do?"

"That is my secret," and with this retort she left him.

With which, for three entire days, Glory Adair vanished from Ferintosh House.

Tripp, too, vanished.

Late the afternoon of the third day Glory Adair returned.

On the winding walk she met Captain Grant. His blue eyes lit at sight of her. He lingered for a chat; he seemed anxious to detain her. There was something in his note of despairing indecision that gripped her.

Loyalty to Ruth Ferintosh—more than that, cold-blooded, selfish common sense—bade her fight down the urge to respond to the tacit plea of his eyes.

She hurried on. But from the porch she turned and gazed after him.

"It's not you, Captain Grant," she whispered to herself. "I'll never bring myself to care for you. It's Ken—the Ken Grant I used to know when we were boy and girl. It's his memory that tugs at my soul right now."

Yes, that was it, she told herself. She must never blind herself to that fact. This later, more egotistical Captain Grant, with the scars of war on him, was not for her; he had no allure for her except as he fanned into glowing coals the embers of what she had thought a long-dead memory. And it was merely the same sort of vagrant, half-rekindled memories tugging at his soul that tugged at hers.

"No," she said, "it was Ken Grant, the boy at Maitland Port, I loved. And you are not the boy—you belong to Ruth Ferintosh."

She went into Ferintosh House with steady, quiet step, and in the vestibule came face to face with Tripp, who, it seemed, was just leaving.

"Well?" challenged Tripp amusedly.

The little man's face wore a barely half-concealed grin of triumph.

"Come in here," and he motioned her toward the sitting-room. "I have something to show you."

She was fired instantaneously with curiosity; yet she managed to control it.

"If you will excuse me a moment—just a moment, Mr. Tripp," she urged.

She wanted to wash and brush up, for she was tired and dusty and uncomfortable after her railroad journey, and there was a vagrant cinder in one brown eye that made her blink tearfully at intervals.

Before the mirror in her room she speedily extracted the cinder. Then she took time to enjoy its absence and to brush up a bit. But all the while she wondered what Tripp might have to show her. He had presumably discovered something important bearing on the case; and he could not rest till he had unburdened himself to her.

Well, a little restless waiting would not hurt the man. She had him at a disadvantage, and she meant to keep him there while she enhanced her own advantage by making herself perfectly comfortable.

She descended to the sitting-room at last, looking cool and sweet, so that Tripp regarded her with unmixed admiration.

"Your moment," he said, "was very like half an hour."

She sat down, glanced out of the window, and commented on the weather. The July day was warm; there was a hint, however, of coming rain. That sort of talk palpably annoyed Tripp.

"I mentioned," he interpolated, "that I had something to show you." And with a great air of triumph he opened his wallet and drew forth a typewritten document covering several pages. He paused, regarding her interrogatively.

"I understand," he said, with coldly malicious deliberation, "that you said something the other day about investigating this affair on your own hook."

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

That's Different

by

Artemus Calloway

MELANCTHON SCROGGINS landed in the city by sections. First came his long feet encased in tan coverings of much brilliancy. These occupied one of the two seats that Melancthon Scroggins turned together when he boarded the train.

Following the feet came two long, beanpole-looking legs. These also were encased. The portions disappearing in the depths of the ponderous tans were covered with socks of brightest green. The portions extending in an upward direction sported garments ornamented with many stripes of gray and black, with here and there a trace of green and red.

Under a green and blue checked coat with a background of dark gray, Melancthon's taste again ran to stripes. His shirt was a masterpiece of the striper's art. Each stripe was about half an inch wide, and they were black, yellow, and red.

The sleeves of his coat were much too short, displaying a goodly section of slender, bony wrist. To each wrist was attached a freckled, powerful hand. One elbow rested on the arm of the seat upon which most of Melancthon reclined, and

on the hand which was connected to this elbow rested Melancthon's chin. It wasn't much chin, but what there was of it, rested. Above the not-much chin was a freckled face, attached to which was a long, straight, thin nose.

Two eyes were located where eyes are usually found. They were pale blue eyes, rather close together. Just above the eyes —and not much above—Melancthon's forehead started. And it wasn't much start. His head was covered by a mop of stubborn red hair. A dark brown derby of the vintage of ninety-three rested partly on the northeast corner of his head and partly on the ear in that same locality.

The face, head, and all pertaining thereto, were attached to the rest of Melancthon by a long, thin neck. Around this neck was a very low rubber collar of the straight-up variety. And as a necessary companion to the collar there reposed on Melancthon's shirt-front a tie. This tie had a white background, with pink horseshoe dots.

In Melancthon's pocket was twenty-five dollars. In his battered straw suit-case was his other shirt. In his brain was the determination never to return to the spot he had once called home.

The train came to a slow stop. Melancthon slowly and painfully removed his feet from the dusty seat, stood erect and gazed about him.

Melancthon was the last passenger to walk through the gate that led to the station. He had traveled seventy-five miles, and needed time to regain the use of his legs. Around the corner from the station he stopped at a little fruit and soft-drink stand and invested ten cents of his wealth in a long, cold strawberry ice-cream soda.

Before the sun went to rest Melancthon secured a boarding place. And before the sun was very high in the heavens the following morning he was searching for employment. Melancthon looked slow and easy, but he was letting no grass grow under his feet.

As most of Melancthon's working years had been devoted to farming, he realized that there were many positions in the city which he could not fill. He lost no time in looking for them.

There was one wholesale grocery firm there that hadn't discarded the horse-drawn dray in favor of the automobile truck. Two days after his arrival, Melancthon wandered into the office of this concern just when they needed a driver and got the job.

If there were but few things Melancthon could do, one of those few he did well. And that was handling horses. Melancthon was in the seventh heaven of delight when seated on a dray, transporting boxes and barrels to freight-houses and to the side entrances of retail grocery stores.

And the thing which the dray boss liked most about the long-legged, angular, gawky, freckled-faced fellow, was the manner in which he looked after his team. Melancthon would have gone without his own dinner rather than leave his horses improperly cared for. And as his dinner was something that Melancthon was very fond of, there was but small chance of his team being neglected.

"Queer fellow," his boss remarked to one of the clerks in the shipping office. "Don't seem overly bright, but he certainly does his work well. He's only been here a week and his horses already show the result of his care and attention."

The clerk laughed. "I've noticed it. He spends every spare minute he has looking after his team."

The dray boss smiled. "Something else I've noticed about him. He's the most courteous fellow to women I ever saw. Seems to think a woman is something placed here on earth for him to worship. And he does the job well. I took him in the main office the other day to check up some tickets there was a mix-up about, and you should have seen him in there with the girl clerks and stenographers. Some o' his courtesy ain't exactly up to snuff, but the natural — whatever you call it — is there. I'm sort o' like Melancthon, I can't use all the different kinds o' language there is, but you get my meanin'."

The clerk laughed and nodded. "What makes what you say so funny, is his gruff way with the men about the place. He's not at all popular with the other drivers and the truckmen here in the store. Always in a row with them. I had to

straighten out a fuss he started in here yesterday."

"Well, there's one thing," the dray boss remarked thoughtfully. "He may never have much of this here world's wealth to give his wife, but he'll certainly give her plenty o' decent treatment. I'll bet that fellow fairly worships his wife."

"He's married?"

"Yes. Told me that the day he was hired. His wife is back on the farm at—at—oh, well, whatever the name o' the place is he come from. Asked him if he intended bringing her to the city soon, and he said he didn't know just yet. I suppose he wants to wait and see how the job turns out. And he's makin' it turn out all right."

Melancthon's reputation for courtesy to the gentler sex was not confined to the grocery store. At Mrs. O'Neil's boarding-house on Sycamore Street, Melancthon's chivalrous attitude toward the fair sex was regarded as being the seventh wonder of the world. Already the few married women there were using him as a pattern for suggestive education of their husbands.

More than one of the unencumbered lady boarders had ceased to note his rough, uncouth manner because of certain thoughtful little attentions. True, Melancthon had in the beginning admitted the possession of a wife, but this had detracted not one whit from the admiration any woman bestows on a man who excels any other man of her immediate circle in the matter of courtesy.

With the men at the boarding-house Melancthon was not so popular. With them he was gruff, snappy, and at times displayed a disposition more nearly resembling that of a mule than any other known animal.

The women put this antagonism on the part of the male boarders down as jealousy, and Melancthon continued to occupy his high pedestal in their esteem.

The men, most of whom were employed in the near-by wire and nail mill, earning good money, or who drew down several dollars a day as expert bricklayers, were inclined to scoff at what they termed a dray driver's uppishness, and more than one muttered many things under his breath, not at all complimentary to Melancthon.

Melancthon's great moment came one night when Mr. James Moran came home in an unusually bad humor. Mr. Moran's boss had been unusually hard to please that day. Mr. Moran could not well afford to beat up his boss. Besides, the boss was the larger man. Some one must suffer for the boss's shortcomings. And Mrs. Moran was handy.

Alone in his room, Melancthon had just finished scrubbing his freckled face until it was as shiny as a new dollar. He heard Mrs. Moran scream. Melancthon's single-action brain telegraphed the instructions throughout the lanky body to get busy.

With a bound, he reached the door. From the door he catapulted into the hall. From the Morans' room came the second scream and the husky voice of Mr. Moran telling the wife of his bosom to "shut up!"

Mr. Scroggins was possessed of a weak chin, but chins were not needed in this affair. Good, hard muscles were the materials required. Melancthon had 'em. He threw his weight against the Moran door. The Moran door gave. Without stopping to look around, Melancthon put all his strength in a straight right that caught Mr. Moran just under the left ear. Then something else caught Mr. Moran. It was the floor. Mr. Moran was down. Mr. Moran remained down. Mrs. Moran's husband was through.

Melancthon hadn't much gift o' gab. He didn't need it. Mrs. Moran had all that was necessary. The things she told Melancthon about butting into other people's affairs were more than sufficient. Melancthon stumbled from the Moran room and into his own.

At the dinner-table the woman's champion felt Mrs. Moran's gaze strongly upon him. His appetite deserted him. He left the table and stumbled out into the hall that led to the living-room. Mrs. O'Neil stopped him.

Mrs. O'Neil was regretful but positive. The Morans had been with her a long time. They were good boarders. Mr. Scroggins had brutally assaulted Mr. Moran. And Mrs. Moran refused to remain longer under the O'Neil roof unless Mr. Scroggins should depart. Mrs. O'Neil hated to lose Mr.

Scroggins as a boarder—but of course he'd understand. He needn't move that night—but the next day.

Melancthon nodded understandingly. He'd get another boarding place.

Again in his room, Melancthon felt strangely lonely. His intentions had been of the best. He shook his head. Women were hard to understand. Wasn't Mrs. Moran at that very moment the possessor of a black eye presented by her husband? Hadn't Melancthon saved her other eye from being blackened?

Mr. Scroggins picked up his hat and wandered down-stairs. He stopped in the living-room for a moment. Most of the boarders were gathered there, talking and laughing. Every voice became strangely silent when Melancthon entered.

One of the women sniffed. Mrs. Moran rose and left the room. Mr. Moran didn't have to leave the room. He wasn't there. He was sprawled across his bed trying to figure out just how it happened.

From the living-room Melancthon wandered to the sidewalk, and thence downtown. On one of the busiest corners he paused. Then he moved on again, working his way rapidly through the crowd.

And as Melancthon moved on, a short, thick-set man followed. Once he lost sight of Melancthon for a moment. Then he located him again. Half a block away the short, thick-set man met a policeman. He stopped and conversed hastily with the officer of the law, all the time keeping one eye on Melancthon's gawky figure as he progressed rapidly along.

In front of the Triumph Theater, the city's leading vaudeville house, Melancthon stopped. He'd never seen a vaudeville performance. He was lonely. So—why not?

Melancthon was occupying a seventh row, left, orchestra seat when the thick-set man and the policeman reached the theater. They knew he was inside, but just where his seat was located they did not know. The man on the door could not tell them, as several others entered about the same time as Melancthon. Very well, they'd wait until he came out. Perhaps they might need another officer—the policeman would go for one. The thick-set man removed his wide-brimmed gray hat and thought for a moment. Perhaps that would be best—he'd remain in front of the theater and watch.

In his seventh row, left, orchestra seat, Melancthon was enjoying the show. Forgotten was Moran; forgotten was Moran's wife; forgotten was Mrs. O'Neil—forgotten was everything unpleasant.

The first act was a trained dog stunt. Melancthon liked animals and enjoyed this.

The next number was a black-face comedy. Melancthon enjoyed this fairly well, but in his opinion it was not nearly so good as the performing dogs.

Then came act number three. The curtain went up. A pretty little woman came out on the stage, looked around hesitatingly, then turned to the audience.

"I'm very sorry, ladies and gentlemen," she began in a rather weak, tired-out voice, "but the management requests me to ask your indulgence for a moment. The gentleman who works with me in this act was detained and won't be here for a few minutes. If you'll just be patient—"

She was interrupted. From the eighth row, center, came the interruption in a man's voice. "A-a-ah! That's what you tryin' to give us, eh? Fine thing to do! Get our money and then when we get in here go to stallin' like that. I bet there ain't no gentleman. And if there is I bet he ain't no actor. I bet I'm a better actor than he ever has been or ever will be. I bet—"

Melancthon turned half around the better to view the tough who dared talk to a lady in this manner. Then he glanced at the woman. She appeared near tears.

She was speaking again. "I'm sorry you look at it in that way. We are trying to put on our act, and—"

The man laughed. "Tryin' to put on your act! That's good. Tryin'! That's all you can do. That's what this theater gets for hookin' up with unreliable people. Now if I could only get a trial—"

The audience was in an uproar by this time. The stunt was going good. Not so with Melancthon. He wasn't pleased.

The man continued. "I think you and your partner's just putting up a bluff. If

he don't look no more like an actor than you do like an actress—"

Too much was plenty. Melancthon jumped to his feet. With a roar like that of an angry bull he shook a bony fist at the interrupter.

"Just you stop talkin' to that girl like that!" he yelled.

The audience went wild. Similar vaudeville stunts were pulled in the Triumph at least once every season, but Melancthon's touch was a little new.

The girl cast a startled glance in Melancthon's direction. The interrupter in the eighth row, center, turned to get a good look.

The girl again addressed the audience. "I am very sorry this interruption should have come up. I thank the gentleman for interfering in my behalf—" She nodded in Melancthon's direction. "If the man who has been casting insinuations on our act thinks he can do any better, I'd be glad to have him come up on the stage. Then we'll see what he can do."

The interrupter sneered. "You're just bluffin'. Your scheme is just to get these people's money. You—"

Melancthon climbed over two people to reach the aisle. He was making for the intruder when two ushers grabbed him. He shook them off as if they were rag dolls —and on he went. An usher in the back of the house rushed outside and returned with two policemen. A short, thick-set man, wearing a gray hat, followed them.

Inside, Melancthon was doing grand work. He'd only got one swipe at the interrupter, but that was a good one. Melancthon made a good job for a dentist.

One of the policemen gave Mr. Scroggins a rap over the head with his club. The other grabbed Mr. Scroggins by the arm. People were crowding around angrily. Melancthon decided that for the second time that evening he'd become suddenly unpopular.

Unresistingly Melancthon walked between the policemen to the door. The man with the gray hat uttered a low exclamation when he saw him. "Oh! And he was the one who was raising the rough-house in there?"

One of the policemen nodded. "Yes—Know him?"

The gray-hatted man laughed. "I imagine I do. That's the fellow we're after."

And then Melancthon for the first time noticed the gray-hatted man. The blow from the policeman's club had somewhat blurred his vision.

Melancthon jumped as if he had been shot. "Reese!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, Melancthon," said the short, thick-set man, smiling. "I've come after you. These cops and I were waiting till after the show, but you got out a little ahead of time."

Melancthon shook his head. "I didn't think—" He felt a touch on his shoulder. One of the ushers was speaking.

"That actor that was out in the audience says he wants to see you after the show if you can get the cops to let you off by then. He wants you to join the act. He says you're great."

Melancthon frowned. "Join the act?"

The man Melancthon had addressed as Reese laughed. "You'd make a good actor, too, Melancthon. But you'll have to go on back home with me. I guess the judge will give you a job that you know more about than you do actin'. Come along."

The gray-hatted man, Melancthon, and one of the policemen walked slowly out of the lobby and down the street. The other policeman hesitated a moment. Then he, too, started away. The door man touched him on the sleeve.

"Too bad they arrested that fellow. He only thought he was protectin' a woman. He's ignorant, but he's certainly got the right spirit—"

The policeman laughed. "That's not what he's arrested for. That guy with the gray hat is a deputy sheriff from the long fellow's home. He's been up here looking for his man for two or three days. He spotted him on the street to-night and followed him down here."

The door man nodded. "H-m! That so? What's he wanted for?"

The policeman smiled dryly. "It's kind o' queer, I suppose, but it's a fact. He's arrested for beatin' up his wife."

The Red Dust

by Murray Leinster

Author of "The Mad Planet," etc.

CHAPTER I.

PREY.

THE sky grew gray and then almost white. The ever-hanging banks of clouds seemed to withdraw a little from the steaming earth. Haze that hung always among the mushroom forests and above the fungus hills grew more tenuous, and the slow and sodden rain that dripped the whole night long ceased reluctantly.

As far as the eye could see a mad world stretched out, a world of insensate cruelties and strange, fierce maternal solicitudes. The insects of the night—the great moths whose wings spread for yards upon yards in the dimness, and the huge fireflies, four feet in length, whose beacons made the earth glow in their pale, weird light—the insects of the night had sought their hiding-places.

Now the creatures of the day ventured forth. A great ant-hill towered a hundred feet into the air. Upon its gravel and boulder-strewn side a commotion became visible.

The earth crumbled, and fell into an invisible opening, then a dark chasm appeared, and two slender, threadlike antennæ peered out.

A warrior ant emerged, and stood for an instant in the daylight, looking all about for signs of danger to the ant-city. He was all of ten inches long, this ant, and his mandibles were fierce and strong. A second and a third warrior came from the inside of the ant-hill, and ran with tiny clickings about the hillock, waving their antennæ restlessly, searching, ever searching for a menace to their city.

They returned to the gateway from which they had made their appearance, evidently bearing reassuring messages, because shortly after they had reentered the gateway of the ant-city, a flood of black, ill-smelling workers poured out of the opening and dispersed upon their businesses. The clickings of their limbs and an occasional whining stridulation made an incessant sound as they scattered over the earth, foraging among the mushrooms and giant cabbages, among the rubbish-heaps of the gigantic beehives and wasp colonies, and among the remains of the tragedies of the night for food for their city.

The city of the ants had begun its daily toil, toil in which every one shared without supervision or coercion. Deep in the recesses of the pyramid galleries were hollowed out and winding passages that led down an unguessable distance into the earth below.

Somewhere in the maze of tunnels there was a royal apartment, in which the queen-ant reposed, waited upon by assiduous courtiers, fed by royal stewards, and combed and rubbed by the hands of her subjects and children.

But even the huge monarch of the city had her constant and pressing duty of maternity. A dozen times the size of her largest loyal servant, she was no less bound by the unwritten but imperative laws of the city than they. From the time of waking to the time of rest, she was ordained to be the queen-mother in the strictest and most literal sense of the word, for at intervals to be measured only in terms of minutes she brought forth a tiny egg, perhaps three inches in length, which was instantly seized

by one of her eager attendants and carried in haste to the municipal nursery.

There it was placed in a tiny cell a foot or more in length until a sac-shaped grub appeared, all soft, white body save for a tiny mouth. Then the nurses took it in charge and fed it with curious, tender gestures until it had waxed large and fat and slept the sleep of metamorphosis. When it emerged from its rudimentary cocoon it took the places of its nurses until its soft skin had hardened into the horny armor of the workers and soldiers, and then it joined the throng of workers that poured out from the city at dawn to forage for food, to bring back its finds and to share with the warriors and the nurses, the drone males and the young queens, and all the other members of its communities with duties in the city itself. That was the life of the social insects. Absolute devotion to the cause of its city, utter abnegation of self-interest for the sake of its fellows—and death at their hands when its usefulness was past. They neither knew nor expected more nor less.

It is a strange instinct that prompts these creatures to devote their lives to their city, taking no smallest thought for their individual good, without even the call of maternity or sex to guide them. Only the queen knows motherhood. The others know nothing but toil, for purposes they do not understand, and to an end of which they cannot dream.

At intervals all over the world of Burl's time these ant-cities rose above the surrounding ground, some small and barely begun, and others ancient colonies which were truly the continuation of cities first built when the ants were insects to be crushed beneath the feet of men. These ancient strongholds towered two, three, and even four hundred feet above the plains, and their inhabitants would have had to be numbered in millions if not in billions.

Not all the earth was subject to the ants, however. Bees and wasps and more deadly creatures crawled and flew above its surface. The bees were four feet and more in length. And slender-waisted wasps darted here and there, preying upon the colossal crickets that sang deep bass music to their mates—and the length of the crickets was the length of a man, and more.

Spiders with bloated bellies waited, motionless, in their snares, whose threads were the size of small cables, waiting for some luckless giant insect to be entangled in the gummy traps. And butterflies fluttered over the festering plains of this new world, tremendous creatures whose wings could only be measured in terms of yards.

An outcropping of rock jutted up abruptly from a fungus-covered plain. Shelf-fungi and strangely colored molds stained the stone until the shining quartz was hidden almost completely from view, but the whole glistened like tinted crystal from the dank wetness of the night. Little wisps of vapor curled away from the slopes as the moisture was taken up by the already moisture-laden air.

Seen from a distance, the outcropping of rock looked innocent and still, but a nearer view showed many things.

Here a hunting wasp had come upon a gray worm, and was methodically inserting its sting into each of the twelve segments of the faintly writhing creature. Presently the worm would be completely paralyzed, and would be carried to the burrow of the wasp, where an egg would be laid upon it, from which a tiny maggot would presently hatch. Then weeks of agony for the great gray worm, conscious, but unable to move, while the maggot fed upon its living flesh—

There a tiny spider, youngest of hatchlings, barely four inches across, stealthily stalked some other still tinier mite, the little, many-legged larva of the oil-beetle, known as the bee-louse. The almost infinitely small bee-louse was barely two inches long, and could easily hide in the thick fur of a great bumblebee.

This one small creature would never fulfill its destiny, however. The hatchling spider sprang—it was a combat of midgets which was soon over. When the spider had grown and was feared as a huge, black-bellied tarantula, it would slay monster crickets with the same ease and the same implacable ferocity.

The outcropping of rock looked still and innocent. There was one point where it overhung, forming a shelf, beneath which

the stone fell away in a sheer drop. Many colored fungus growths covered the rock, making it a riot of tints and shades. But hanging from the rooflike projection of the stone there was a strange, drab-white object. It was in the shape of half a globe, perhaps six feet by six feet at its largest. A number of little semicircular doors were fixed about its sides, like inverted arches, each closed by a blank wall. One of them would open, but only one.

The house was like the half of a pallid orange, fastened to the roof of rock. Thick cables stretched in every direction for yards upon yards, anchoring the habitation firmly, but the most striking of the things about the house—still and quiet and innocent, like all the rest of the rock outcropping—were the ghastly trophies fastened to the outer walls and hanging from long silken chains below.

Here was the hind leg of one of the smaller beetles. There was the wing-case of a flying creature. Here a snail-shell, two feet in diameter, hanging at the end of an inch-thick cable. There a boulder that must have weighed thirty or forty pounds, dangling in similar fashion.

But fastened here and there, haphazard and irregularly, were other more repulsive remnants. The shrunken head-armor of a beetle, the fierce jaws of a cricket—the pitiful shreds of a hundred creatures that had formed forgotten meals for the bloated insect within the home.

Comparatively small was the nest of the Clotho spider, it was decorated as no ogre's castle had ever been adorned. Legs sucked dry of their contents, corselets of horny armor forever to be unused by any creature, a wing of this insect, the head of that. And dangling by the longest cord of all, with a silken cable wrapped carefully about it to keep the parts together, was the shrunken, shriveled, dried-up body of a long-dead man!

Outside, the nest was a place of gruesome relics. Within, it was a place of luxury and ease. A cushion of softest down filled all the bulging bottom of the hemisphere. A canopy of similarly luxurious texture interposed itself between the rocky roof and the dark, hideous body of the resting spider.

The eyes of the hairy creature glittered like diamonds, even in the darkness, but the loathsome, attenuated legs were tucked under the round-bellied body, and the spider was at rest. It had fed.

It waited, motionless, without desires or aversions, without emotions or perplexities, in comfortable, placid, machinelike contentment until time should bring the need to feed again.

A fresh carcass had been added to the decorations of the nest only the night before. For many days the spider would repose in motionless splendor within the silken castle. When hunger came again, a nocturnal foray, a creature pounced upon and slain, brought bodily to the nest, and feasted upon, its body festooned upon the exterior, and another half-sleeping, half-waking period of dreamful idleness within the sybaritic charnel-house.

Slowly and timidly, half a dozen pink-skinned creatures made their way through the mushroom forest that led to the upcropping of rock under which the Clotho spider's nest was slung. They were men, degraded remnants of the once dominant race.

Burl was their leader, and was distinguished solely by two three-foot stumps of the feathery, golden antennæ of a night-flying moth he had bound to his forehead. In his hand was a horny, chitinous spear, taken from the body of an unknown flying creature killed by the flames of the burning purple hills.

Since Burl's return from his solitary—and involuntary—journey, he had been greatly revered by his tribe. Hitherto it had been but a leaderless, formless group of people, creeping to the same hiding-place at nightfall to share in the food of the fortunate, and shudder at the fate of those who might not appear.

Now Burl had walked boldly to them, bearing upon his back the gray bulk of a labyrinth spider he had slain with his own hands, and clad in wonderful garments of a gorgeousness they envied and admired. They hung upon his words as he struggled to tell them of his adventures, and slowly and dimly they began to look to him for

leadership. He was wonderful. For days they had listened breathlessly to the tale of his adventures, but when he demanded that they follow him in another and more perilous affair, they were appalled.

A peculiar strength of will had come to Burl. He had seen and done things that no man in the memory of his tribe had seen or done. He had stood by when the purple hills burned and formed a funeral pyre for the horde of army ants, and for uncounted thousands of flying creatures. He had caught a leaping tarantula upon the point of his spear, and had escaped from the web of a banded web-spider by oiling his body so that the sticky threads of the snare refused to hold him fast. He had attacked and killed a great gray labyrinth spider.

But most potent of all, he had returned and had been welcomed by Saya—Saya of the swift feet and slender limbs, whose smile roused strange emotions in Burl's breast.

It was the adoring gaze of Saya that had roused Burl to this last pitch of rashness. Months before the Clotho spider in the hemispherical silk castle of the gruesome decorations had killed and eaten one of the men of the tribe. Burl and the spider's victim had been together when the spider appeared, and the first faint gray light of morning barely silhouetted the shaggy, horrible creature as it leaped from ambush behind a toadstool toward the fear-stricken pair.

Its attenuated legs were outstretched, its mandibles gaped wide, and its jaws clashed horribly as it formed a black blotch in mid air against the lightening sky.

Burl had fled, screaming, when the other man was seized. Now, however, he was leading half a dozen trembling men toward the inverted dome in which the spider dozed. Two or three of them bore spears like Burl himself, but they bore them awkwardly and timorously. Burl himself was possessed by a strange, fictitious courage. It was the utter recklessness of youth, coupled with the eternal masculine desire to display prowess before a desired female.

The wavering advance came to a halt. Most of the naked men stopped from fear, but Burl stopped to invoke his newly discovered inner self that had furnished him with such marvelous plans. Quite accidentally he had found that if he persistently asked himself a question, some sort of answer came from within.

Now he gazed up from a safe distance and asked himself how he and the others were to slay the Clotho spider. The nest was some forty feet from the ground, on the undersurface of a shelf of rock. There was sheer open space beneath it, but it was firmly held to its support by long, silken cables that curled to the upper side of the rock-shelf, clinging to the stone.

Burl gazed, and presently an idea came to him. He beckoned to the others to follow him, and they did so, their knees knocking together from their fright. At the slightest alarm they would flee, screaming in fear, but Burl did not plan that there should be any alarm.

He led them to the rear of the singular rock formation, up the gently sloping side, and toward the precipitous edge. He drew near the point where the rock fell away. A long, tentaclelike silk cable curled up over the edge of a little promontory of stone that jutted out into nothingness.

Burl began to feel oddly cold, and something of the panic of the other men communicated itself to him. This was one of the anchoring cables that held the spider's castle secure. He looked and found others, six or seven in all, which performed the task of keeping the shaggy, beastly ogre's home from falling to the ground below.

His idea did not desert him, however, and he drew back, to whisper orders to his followers. They obeyed him solely because they were afraid, and he spoke in an authoritative tone, but they did obey, and brought a dozen heavy boulders of perhaps forty pounds weight each.

Burl grasped one of the silken cables at its end and tore it loose from the rock for a space of perhaps two yards. His flesh crawled as he did so, but something within him drove him on. Then, while beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead—induced by nothing less than cold, physical fear—he tied the boulder to the cable. The first one done, he felt emboldened, and made a second fast, and a third.

One of his men stood near the edge of the rock, listening in agonized apprehension. Burl had soon tied a heavy stone to each of the cables he saw, and as a matter of fact, there was but one of them he failed to notice. That one had been covered by the flaking mold that took the place of grass upon the rocky eminence.

There were several of the boulders for which there was no use left upon the promontory, but Burl did not attempt to double the weights on the cables. He took his followers aside and explained his plan in whispers. Quaking, they agreed, and, trembling, they prepared to carry it out.

One of them stationed himself beside each of the boulders, Burl at the largest. He gave a signal, and half a dozen ripping, tearing sounds broke the sullen silence of the day. The boulders clashed and clattered down the rocky side of the precipice, tearing—perhaps "peeling"—the cables from their adhesion to the stone. They shot into open space and jerked violently at the half-globular nest, which was wrenched from its place by the combined impetus of the six heavy weights.

Burl had flung himself upon his face to watch what he was sure would be the death of the spider as it fell forty feet and more, imprisoned in its heavily weighted home. His eyes sparkled with triumph as he saw the ghastly, trophy-laden house swing out from the cliff. Then he gasped in terror.

One of the cables had not been discovered. That single cable held the spider's castle from a fall, though it had been torn from its anchorage, and now dangled heavily on its side in mid air. A convulsive struggle seemed to be going on within.

Then one of the archlike doors opened, and the spider emerged, evidently in terror, and confused by the light of day, but still venomous and still deadly. It found but a single of its anchoring cables intact, that leading to the clifftop hard by Burl's head.

The spider sprang for this single cable, and its legs grasped the slender thread eagerly while it began to climb rapidly up toward the clifftop.

As with all the creatures of Burl's time, its first thought was of battle, not flight, and it came up the thin cord with its poison fangs unsheathed and its mandibles clashing in rage. The shaggy hair upon its body seemed to bristle with insane ferocity, and the horrible, thin legs moved with desperate haste as it hastened to meet and wreak vengeance upon the cause of its sudden alarm.

Burl's followers fled, uttering shrieks of fear, and Burl started to his feet, in the grip of a terrible panic. Then his hand struck one of the heavy boulders. Exerting every ounce of his strength, he pushed it over the cliff just where the cable appeared above the edge. For the fraction of a second there was silence, and then the indescribable sound of an impact against a soft body.

There was a gasping cry, and a moment later the curiously muffled clatter of the boulder striking the earth below. Somehow, the sound suggested that the boulder had struck first upon some soft object.

A faint cry came from the bottom of the hill. The last of Burl's men was leaping to a hiding-place among the mushrooms of the forest, and had seen the sheen of shining armor just before him. He cried out and waited for death, but only a delicately formed wasp rose heavily into the air, bearing beneath it the more and more feebly struggling body of a giant cricket.

Burl had stood paralyzed, deprived of the power of movement, after casting the boulder over the cliff. That one action had taken the last ounce of his initiative, and if the spider had hauled itself over the rocky edge and darted toward him, slavering its thick spittle and uttering sounds of mad fury, Burl would not even have screamed as it seized him. He was like a dead thing. But the oddly muffled sound of the boulder striking the ground below brought back hope of life and power of movement.

He peered over the cliff. The nest still dangled at the end of the single cable, still freighted with its gruesome trophies, but on the ground below a crushed and horribly writhing form was moving in convulsions of rage and agony.

Long, hairy legs worked desperately from a body that was no more than a mass of

pulped flesh. A ferocious jaw tried to clamp upon something—and there was no other jaw to meet it. An evil-smelling, sticky liquid exuded from the mangled thing upon the earth, writhing, moving in terrible contortions of torment.

Presently an ant drew near and extended inquisitive antennae at the helpless monster wounded to death. A shrill stridulation sounded out, and three or four other foot-long ants hastened up to wait patiently just outside the spider's reach until its struggles should have lessened enough to make possible the salvage of flesh from the perhaps still-living creature for the ant city a mile away.

And Burl, up on the cliff-top, danced and gesticulated in triumph. He had killed the Clotho spider, which had slain one of the tribesmen four months before. Glory was his. All the tribesmen had seen the spider living. Now he would show them the spider dead. He stopped his dance of triumph and walked down the hill in haughty grandeur. He would reproach his timid followers for fleeing from the spider, leaving him to kill it alone.

Quite naively Burl assumed that it was his place to give orders and that of the others to obey. True, no one had attempted to give orders before, or to enforce their execution, but Burl had reached the eminently wholesome conclusion that he was a wonderful person whose wishes should be respected.

Burl, filled with fresh notions of his own importance, strutted on toward the hiding-place of the tribe, growing more and more angry with the other men for having deserted him. He would reproach them, would probably beat them. They would be afraid to protest, and in the future would undoubtedly be afraid to run away.

Burl was quite convinced that running away was something he could not tolerate in his followers. Obscurely—and conveniently in the extreme back of his mind—he reasoned that not only did a larger number of men present at a scene of peril increase the chances of coping with the danger, but they also increased the chances that the victim selected by the dangerous creature would be another than himself.

Burl's reasoning was unsophisticated, but sound; perhaps unconscious, but none the less effective. He grew quite furious with the deserters. They had run away! They had fled from a mere spider.

A shrill whine filled the air, and a ten-inch ant dashed at Burl with its mandibles extended threateningly. Burl's path had promised to interrupt the salvaging work of the insect, engaged in scraping shreds of flesh from the corselet of one of the smaller beetles slain the previous night. The ant dashed at Burl like an infuriated fox-terrier, and Burl scurried away in undignified retreat. The ant might not be dangerous, but bites from its formic-acid-poisoned mandibles were no trifles.

Burl came to the tangled thicket of mushrooms in which his tribe-folk hid. The entrance was tortuous and difficult to penetrate, and could be blocked on occasion with stones and toadstool pulp. Burl made his way toward the central clearing, and heard as he went the sound of weeping, and the excited chatter of the tribes people.

Those who had fled from the rocky cliff had returned with the news that Burl was dead, and Saya lay weeping beneath an over-shadowing toadstool. She was not yet the mate of Burl, but the time would come when all the tribe would recognize a status dimly different from the usual tribal relationship.

Burl stepped into the clearing, and straightway cuffed the first man he came upon, then the next and the next. There was a cry of astonishment, and the next second instinctive, fearful glances at the entrance to the hiding-place.

Had Burl fled from the spider, and was it following? Burl spoke loftily, saying that the spider was dead, that its legs, each one the length of a man, were still, and its fierce jaws and deadly poison-fangs harmless forevermore.

Ten minutes later he was leading an incredulous, awed little group of pink-skinned people to the spot below the cliff where the spider actually lay dead, with the ants busily at work upon its remains.

And when he went back to the hiding-place he donned again his great cloak that was made from the wing of a magnificent

moth, slain by the flames of the purple hills, and sat down in splendor upon a crumbling toadstool, to feast upon the glances of admiration and awe that were sent toward him. Only Saya held back shyly, until he motioned for her to draw near, when she seated herself at his feet and gazed up at him with unutterable adoration in her eyes.

But while Burl basked in the radiance of his tribe's admiration, danger was drawing near them all. For many months there had been strange red mushrooms growing slowly here and there all over the earth, they knew. The tribe folk had speculated about them, but forebore tasting them because they were strange, and strange things were usually dangerous and often fatal.

Now those red growths had ripened and grown ready to emit their spores. Their rounded tops had grown fat, and the tough skin grew taut as if a strange pressure were being applied from within. And to-day, while Burl luxuriated in his position of feared and admired great man of his tribe, at a spot a long distance away, upon a hill-top, one of the red mushrooms burst. The spores inside the taut, tough skin shot all about as if scattered by an explosion, and made a little cloud of reddish, impalpable dust, which hung in the air and moved slowly with the sluggish breeze.

A bee droned into the thin red cloud of dust, lazily and heavily flying back toward the hive. But barely had she entered the tinted atmosphere when her movements became awkward and convulsive, effortful and excited. She trembled and twisted in mid air in a peculiar fashion, then drooped to the earth, while her abdomen moved violently.

Bees, like almost all insects, breathe through spiracles on the under surfaces of their abdomens. This bee had breathed in some of the red mushroom's spores. She thrashed about desperately upon the toadstools on which she had fallen, struggling for breath, for life.

After a long time she was still. The cloud of red mushroom spores had strangled or poisoned her. And everywhere the red fringe grew, such explosions were taking place, one by one, and everywhere the red clouds hung in the air creatures were breathing them in and dying in convulsions of strangulation.

CHAPTER II.

THE JOURNEY.

DARKNESS. The soft, blanketing night of the age of fungoids had fallen over all the earth, and there was blackness everywhere that was not good to see. Here and there, however, dim, bluish lights glowed near the ground. There an intermittent glow showed that a fire-fly had wandered far from the rivers and swamps above which most of his kind now congregated. Now a faintly luminous ball of fire drifted above the steaming, moisture-sodden earth. It was a will-o'-the-wisp, grown to a yard in diameter.

From the low-hanging banks of clouds that hung perpetually overhead, large, warm raindrops fell ceaselessly. A drop, a pause, and then another drop, adding to the already dank moisture of the ground below.

The world of fungus growths flourished on just such dampness and humidity. It seemed as if the toadstools and mushrooms could be heard, swelling and growing large in the darkness. Rustlings and stealthy movements sounded furtively through the night, and from above the heavy throb of mighty wing-beats was continuous.

The tribe was hidden in the midst of a tangled copse of toadstools too thickly interwoven for the larger insects to penetrate. Only the little midgets hid in its recesses during the night-time, and the smaller moths during the day.

About and among the bases of the toadstools, however, where their spongy stalks rose from the humid earth, small beetles roamed, singing cheerfully to themselves in deep bass notes. They were small and round, some six or eight inches long, and their bellies were pale gray.

And as they went about they emitted sounds which would have been chirps had they been other than low as the lowest tone of a harp. They were truffle-beetles, in search of the dainty tidbits on which epicures once had feasted.

Some strange sense seemed to tell them when one of half a dozen varieties of truffle was beneath them, and they paused in their wandering to dig a tunnel straight down. A foot, two feet, or two yards, all was the same to them. In time they would come upon the morsel they sought and would remain at the bottom of their temporary home until it was consumed. Then another period of wandering, singing their cheerful song, until another likely spot was reached and another tunnel begun.

In a tiny, open space in the center of the toadstool thicket the tribe-folk slept with the deep notes of the truffle-beetles in their ears. A new danger had come to them, but they had passed it on to Burl with a new and childlike confidence and considered the matter settled. They slept, while beneath a glowing mushroom at one side of the clearing Burl struggled with his new problem. He squatted upon the ground in the dim radiance of the shining toadstool, his moth-wing cloak wrapped about him, his spear in his hand, and his twin golden plumes of the moth's antennae bound to his forehead. But his face was downcast as a child's.

The red mushrooms had begun to burst. Only that day, one of the women, seeking edible fungus for the tribal larder, had seen the fat, distended globule of the red mushroom. Its skin was stretched taut, and glistened in the light.

The woman paid little or no attention to the red growth. Her ears were attuned to catch sounds that would warn her of danger while her eyes searched for tidbits that would make a meal for the tribe, and more particularly for her small son, left behind at the hiding-place.

A ripping noise made her start up, alert on the instant. The red envelope of the mushroom had split across the top, and a thick cloud of brownish-red dust was spurting in every direction. It formed a pyramidal cloud some thirty feet in height, which enlarged and grew thinner with minor eddies within itself.

A little yellow butterfly with wings barely a yard from tip to tip, flapped lazily above the mushroom-covered plain. Its wings beat the air with strokes that seemed like playful taps upon a friendly element. The butterfly was literally intoxicated with the sheer joy of living. It had emerged from its cocoon barely two hours before, and was making its maiden flight above the strange and wonderful world. It fluttered carelessly into the red-brown cloud of mushroom spores.

The woman was watching the slowly changing form of the spore-mist. She saw the butterfly enter the brownish dust, and then her eyes became greedy. There was something the matter with the butterfly. Its wings no longer moved lazily and gently. They struck out in frenzied, hysterical blows that were erratic and wild. The little yellow creature no longer floated lightly and easily, but dashed here and there, wildly and without purpose, seeming to be in its death-throes.

It crashed helplessly against the ground and lay there, moving feebly. The woman hurried forward. The wings would be new fabric with which to adorn herself, and the fragile legs of the butterfly contained choice meat. She entered the dust-cloud.

A stream of intolerable fire—though the woman had never seen or known of fire—burned her nostrils and seared her lungs. She gasped in pain, and the agony was redoubled. Her eyes smarted as if burning from their sockets, and tears blinded her.

The woman instinctively turned about to flee, but before she had gone a dozen yards—blinded as she was—she stumbled and fell to the ground. She lay there, gasping, and uttering moans of pain, until one of the men of the tribe who had been engaged in foraging near by saw her and tried to find what had injured her.

She could not speak, and he was about to leave her and tell the other tribe-folk about her when he heard the clicking of an ant's limbs, and rather than have the ant pick her to pieces bit by bit—and leave his curiosity ungratified—the man put her across his shoulders and bore her back to the hiding-place of the tribe.

It was the tale the woman had told when she partly recovered that caused Burl to sit alone all that night beneath the shining toadstool in the little clearing, puzzling his just-awakened brain to know what to do.

The year before there had been no red mushrooms. They had appeared only recently, but Burl dimly remembered that one day, a long time before, there had been a strange breeze which blew for three days and nights, and that during the time of its blowing all the tribe had been sick and had wept continually.

Burl had not yet reached the point of mental development when he would associate that breeze with a storm at a distance, or reason that the spores of the red mushrooms had been borne upon the wind to the present resting-places of the deadly fungus growths. Still less could he decide that the breeze had not been deadly only because lightly laden with the fatal dust.

He knew simply that unknown red mushrooms had appeared, that they were everywhere about, and that they would burst, and that to breathe the red dust they gave out was grievous sickness or death.

The tribe slept while the bravely attired figure of Burl squatted under the glowing disk of the luminous mushroom, his face a picture of querulous perplexity, and his heart full of sadness.

He had consulted his strange inner self, and no plan had come to him. He knew the red mushrooms were all about. They would fill the air with their poison. He struggled with his problem while his people slumbered, and the woman who had breathed the mushroom-dust sobbed softly in her troubled sleep.

Presently a figure stirred on the farther side of the clearing. Saya woke and raised her head. She saw Burl crouching by the shining toadstool, his gay attire draggled and unnoticed. She watched him for a little, and the desolation of his pose awoke her pity.

She rose and went to his side, taking his hand between her two, while she spoke his name softly. When he turned and looked at her, confusion smote her, but the misery in his face brought confidence again.

Burl's sorrow was inarticulate—he could not explain this new responsibility for his people that had come to him—but he was comforted by her presence, and she sat down beside him. After a long time she slept, with her head resting against his side, but he continued to question himself, continued to demand an escape for his people from the suffering and danger he saw ahead. With the day an answer came.

When Burl had been carried down the river on his fungus raft, and had landed in the country of the army ants, he had seen great forests of edible mushrooms, and had said to himself that he would bring Saya to that place. He remembered, now, that the red mushrooms were there also, but the idea of a journey remained.

The hunting-ground of his tribe had been free of the red fungoids until recently. If he traveled far enough he would come to a place where there were still no red toadstools. Then came the decision. He would lead his tribe to a far country.

He spoke with stern authority when the tribesmen woke, talking in few words and in a loud voice, holding up his spear as he gave his orders.

The timid, pink-skinned people obeyed him meekly. They had seen the body of the Clotho spider he had slain, and he had thrown down before them the gray bulk of the Labyrinth spider he had thrust through with his spear. Now he was to take them through unknown dangers to an unknown haven, but they feared to displease him.

They made light loads of their mushrooms and such meat-stuffs as they had, and parceled out what little fabric they still possessed. Three men bore spears, in addition to Burl's long shaft, and he had persuaded the other three to carry clubs, showing them how the weapon should be wielded.

The indefinitely brighter spot in the cloud-banks above that meant the shining sun had barely gone a quarter of the way across the sky when the trembling band of timid creatures made their way from their hiding-place and set out upon their journey. For their course, Burl depended entirely upon chance. He avoided the direction of the river, however, and the path along which he had returned to his people. He knew the red mushrooms grew there. Purely by accident he set his march toward the west, and walked cautiously on, his tribes-folk following him fearfully.

Burl walked ahead his spear held ready.

He made a figure at once brave and pathetic, venturing forth in a world of monstrous ferocity and incredible malignance, armed only with a horny spear borrowed from a dead insect. His velvety cloak, made from a moth's wing, hung about his figure in graceful folds, however, and twin golden plumes nodded jauntily from his forehead.

Behind him the nearly naked people followed reluctantly. Here a woman with a baby in her arms. There children of nine or ten, unable to resist the instinct to play even in the presence of the manifold dangers of the march. They ate hungrily of the lumps of mushroom they had been ordered to carry. Then a long-legged boy, his eyes roving anxiously about in search of danger.

Thirty thousand years of flight from every peril had deeply submerged the combative nature of humanity. After the boy came two men, one with a short spear, and the other with a club, each with a huge mass of edible mushroom under his free arm, and both badly frightened at the idea of fleeing from dangers they knew and feared to dangers they did not know and consequently feared much more.

So was the caravan spread out. It made its way across the country with many deviations from a fixed line, and with many halts and pauses. Once a shrill stridulation filled all the air before them, a monster sound compounded of innumerable clickings and high-pitched cries.

They came to the tip of an eminence and saw a great space of ground covered with tiny black bodies locked in combat. For quite half a mile in either direction the earth was black with ants, snapping and biting at each other, locked in vise-like embraces, each combatant couple trampled under the feet of the contending armies, with no thought of surrender or quarter.

The sound of the clashing of fierce jaws upon horny armor, the cries of the maimed, and strange sounds made by the dying, and above all, the whining battle-cry of each of the fighting hordes, made a sustained uproar that was almost deafening.

From either side of the battle-ground a pathway led back to separate ant-cities, a pathway marked by the hurrying groups of reinforcements rushing to the fight. Tiny as the ants were, for once no lumbering beetle swaggered insolently in their path, nor did the hunting-spiders mark them out for prey. Only little creatures smaller than the combatants themselves made use of the insect war for purposes of their own.

These were little gray ants barely more than four inches long, who scurried about in and among the fighting creatures with marvelous dexterity, carrying off, piecemeal, the bodies of the dead, and slaying the wounded for the same fate.

They hung about the edges of the battle, and invaded the abandoned areas when the tide of battle shifted, insect guerillas, fighting for their own hands, careless of the origin of the quarrel, espousing no cause, simply salvaging the dead and living débris of the combat.

Burl and his little group of followers had to make a wide detour to avoid the battle itself, and the passage between bodies of reinforcements hurrying to the scene of strife was a matter of some difficulty. The ants running rapidly toward the battle-field were hugely excited. Their antennae waved wildly, and the infrequent wounded one, limping back toward the city, was instantly and repeatedly challenged by the advancing insects.

They crossed their antennae upon his, and required thorough evidence that he was of the proper city before allowing him to proceed. Once they arrived at the battle-field they flung themselves into the fray, becoming lost and indistinguishable in the tide of straining, fighting black bodies.

Men in such a battle, without distinguishing marks or battle-cries, would have fought among themselves as often as against their foes, but the ants had a much simpler method of identification. Each ant-city possesses its individual odor — a variant on the scent of formic acid—and each individual of that city is recognized in his world quite simply and surely by the way he smells.

The little tribe of human beings passed precariously behind a group of a hundred excited insect warriors, and before the fol-

lowing group of forty equally excited black insects. Burl hurried on with his following, putting many miles of perilous territory behind before nightfall. Many times during the day they saw the sudden billowing of a red-brown dust-cloud from the earth, and more than once they came upon the empty skin and drooping stalk of one of the red mushrooms, and more often still they came upon the mushrooms themselves, grown fat and taut, prepared to send their deadly spores into the air when the pressure from within became more than the leathery skin could stand.

That night the tribe hid among the bases of giant puff-balls, which at touch shot out a puff of white powder resembling smoke. The powder was precisely the same in nature as that cast out by the red mushrooms, but its effects were marvelously—and mercifully—different.

Burl slept soundly this night, having been two days and a night without rest, but the remainder of his tribe, and even Saya, were fearful and afraid, listening ceaselessly all through the dark hours for the menacing sounds of creatures coming to prey upon them.

And so for a week the march kept on. Burl would not allow his tribe to stop to forage for food. The red mushrooms were all about. Once one of the little children was caught in a whirling eddy of red dust, and its mother rushed into the deadly stuff to seize it and bring it out. Then the tribe had to hide for three days while the two of them recovered from the debilitating poison.

Once, too, they found a half-acre patch of the giant cabbages—there were six of them full grown, and a dozen or more smaller ones—and Burl took two men and speared two of the huge, twelve-foot slugs that fed upon the leaves. When the tribe passed on it was gorged on the fat meat of the slugs, and there was much soft fur, so that all the tribe-folk wore loin-cloths of the yellow stuff.

There were perils, too, in the journey. On the fourth day of the tribe's traveling, Burl froze suddenly into stillness. One of the hairy tarantulas — a trap-door spider with a black belly—had fallen upon a scaraboeus beetle, and was devouring it only a hundred yards ahead.

The tribe-folk, trembling, went back for half a mile or more in panic-stricken silence, and refused to advance until he had led them a detour of two or three miles to one side of the dangerous spot.

Long, fear-ridden marches through perilous countries unknown to them, through the golden aisles of yellow mushroom forests, over the flaking surfaces of plains covered with many-colored "rusts" and moulds; pauses beside turbid pools whose waters were concealed by thick layers of green slime, and other evil-smelling ponds which foamed and bubbled slowly, which were covered with pasty yeasts that rose in strange forms of discolored foam.

Fleeting glimpses they had of the glistening spokes of symmetrical spiders'-webs, whose least thread would have been beyond the power of the strongest of the tribe to break. They passed through a forest of puff-balls, which boomed when touched and shot a puff of vapor from their open mouths.

Once they saw a long and sinuous insect that fled before them and disappeared into a burrow in the ground, running with incredible speed upon legs of uncountable number. It was a centipede all of thirty feet in length, and when they crossed the path it had followed a horrible stench came to their nostrils so that they hurried on.

Long escape from unguessed dangers brought boldness, of a sort, to the pink-skinned men, and they would have rested. They went to Burl with their complaint, and he simply pointed with his hands behind them. There were three little clouds of brownish vapor in the air, where they could see, along the road they had traversed. To the right of them a dust-cloud was just settling, and to the left another rose as they looked.

A new trick of the deadly dust became apparent now. Toward the end of a day in which they had traveled a long distance, one of the little children ran a little to the left of the route its elders were following. The earth had taken on a brownish hue, and the child stirred up the surface mould with its feet.

The brownish dust that had settled there was raised again, and the child ran, crying and choking, to its mother, its lungs burning as with fire, and its eyes like hot coals. Another day would pass before the child could walk.

In a strange country, knowing nothing of the dangers that might assail the tribe while waiting for the child to recover. Burl looked about for a hiding-place. Far over to the right a low cliff, perhaps twenty or thirty feet high, showed sides of crumbling yellow clay, and from where Burl stood he could see the dark openings of burrows scattered here and there upon its face.

He watched for a time, to see if any bee or wasp inhabited them, knowing that many kinds of both insects dig burrows for their young, and do not occupy them themselves. No dark forms appeared, however, and he led his people toward the openings.

The appearance of the holes confirmed his surmise. They had been dug months before by mining bees, and the entrances were "weathered" and worn. The tribefolk made their way into the three-foot tunnels, and hid themselves, seizing the opportunity to gorge themselves upon the food they carried.

Burl stationed himself near the outer end of one of the little caves to watch for signs of danger. While waiting he poked curiously with his spear at a little pile of white and sticky parchment-like stuff he saw just within the mouth of the tunnel.

Instantly movement became visible. Fifty, sixty, or a hundred tiny creatures, no more than half an inch in length, tumbled pell-mell from the dirty-white heap. Awkward legs, tiny, greenish-black bodies, and bristles protruding in every direction made them strange to look upon.

They had tumbled from the whitish heap and now they made haste to hide themselves in it again, moving slowly and clumsily, with immense effort and laborious contortions of their bodies.

Burl had never seen any insect progress in such a slow and ineffective fashion before. He drew one little insect back with the point of his spear and examined it from a safe distance. Tiny jaws before the head met like twin sickles, and the whole body was shaped like a rounded diamond lozenge.

Burl knew that no insect of such small size could be dangerous, and leaned over, then took one creature in his hand. It wriggled frantically and slipped from his fingers, dropping upon the soft yellow caterpillar-fur he had about his middle. Instantly, as if it were a conjuring trick, the little insect vanished, and Burl searched for a matter of minutes before he found it hidden deep in the long, soft hairs of the fur, resting motionless, and evidently at ease.

It was a bee-louse, the first larval form of a beetle whose horny armor could be seen in fragments for yards before the clayey cliff-side. Hidden in the openings of the bee's tunnel, it waited until the bee-grubs farther back in their separate cells should complete their changes of form and emerge into the open air, passing over the cluster of tiny creatures at the door-way. As the bees passed over, the little bee-lice would clamber in eager haste up their hairy legs and come to rest in the fur about their thoraxes. Then, weeks later, when the bees in turn made other cells and stocked them with honey for the eggs they would lay, the tiny creatures would slip from their resting-places and be left behind in the fully provisioned cell, to eat not only the honey the bee had so laboriously acquired, but the very grub hatched from the bee's egg.

Burl had no difficulty in detaching the small insect and casting it away, but in doing so discovered three more that had hidden themselves in his furry garment, no doubt thinking it the coat of their natural though unwilling hosts. He plucked them away, and discovered more, and more. His garment was the hiding-place for dozens of the creatures.

Disgusted and annoyed, he went out of the cavern and to a spot some distance away, where he took off his robe and pounded it with the flat side of his spear to dislodge the visitors. They dropped out one by one, reluctantly, and finally the garment was clean of them. Then Burl heard a shout from the direction of the

mining-bee caves, and hastened toward the sound.

It was then drawing toward the time of darkness, but one of the tribesmen had ventured out and found no less than three of the great imperial mushrooms. Of the three, one had been attacked by a parasitic purple mould, but the gorgeous yellow of the other two was undimmed, and the people were soon feasting upon the firm flesh.

Burl felt a little pang of jealousy, though he joined in the consumption of the find as readily as the others, and presently drew a little to one side.

He cast his eyes across the country, level and unbrokn as far as the eye could see. The small clay cliff was the only inequality visible, and its height cut off all vision on one side. But the view toward the horizon was unobstructed on three sides, and here and there the black speck of a monster bee could be seen, droning homeward to its hive or burrow, and sometimes the slender form of a wasp passed overhead, its translucent wings invisible from the rapidity of their vibrations.

These flew high in the air, but lower down, barely skimming the tops of the many-colored mushrooms and toadstools, fluttering lightly above the swollen fungoids, and touching their dainty proboscides to unspeakable things in default of the fragrant flowers that were normal food for their races—lower down flew the multitudes of butterflies the age of mushrooms had produced.

White and yellow and red and brown, pink and blue and purple and green, every shade and every color, every size and almost every shape, they flitted gaily in the air. There were some so tiny that they would barely have shaded Burl's face, and some beneath whose slender bodies he could have hidden himself. They flew in a riot of colors and tints above a world of foul mushroom growths, and turgid, slime-covered ponds.

Burl, temporarily out of the limelight because of the discovery of a store of food by another member of the tribe, bethought himself of an idea. Soon night would come on, the cloud-bank would turn red in the west, and then darkness would lean downward from the sky. With the coming of that time these creatures of the day would seek hiding-places, and the air would be given over to the furry moths that flew by night. He, Burl, would mark the spot where one of the larger creatures alighted, and would creep up upon it, with his spear held fast.

His wide blue eyes brightened at the thought, and he sat himself to watch. After a long time the soft, down-reaching fingers of the night touched the shaded aisles of the mushroom forests, and a gentle haze arose above the golden glades. One by one the gorgeous fliers of the daytime dipped down and furled their painted wings. The overhanging clouds became darker—finally black, and the slow, deliberate rainfall that lasted all through the night began. Burl rose and crept away into the darkness, his spear held in readiness.

Through the black night, beneath deeper blacknesses which were the dark undersides of huge toadstools, creeping silently, with every sense alert for sign of danger or hope of giant prey, Burl made his slow advance.

A glorious butterfly of purple and yellow markings, whose wings spread out for three yards on either side of its delicately formed body, had hidden itself barely two hundred yards away. Burl could imagine it, now, preening its slender limbs and combing from its long and slender proboscis any trace of the delectable foodstuffs on which it had fed during the day. Burl moved slowly and cautiously forward, all eyes and ears.

He heard an indescribable sound in a thicket a little to his left, and shifted his course. The sound was the faint whistling of air through the breathing-holes along an insect's abdomen. Then came the delicate rustling of filmy wings being stretched and closed again, and the movement of sharply barbed feet upon the soft earth. Burl moved in breathless silence, holding his spear before him in readiness to plunge it into the gigantic butterfly's soft body.

The mushrooms here were grown thickly together, so there was no room for Burl's body to pass between their stalks, and the rounded heads were deformed and misshapen from their crowdings. Burl spent

precious moments in trying to force a silent passage, but had to own himself beaten. Then he clambered up upon the spongy mass of mushroom heads, trusting to luck that they would sustain his weight.

The blackness was intense, so that even the forms of objects before him were lost in obscurity. He moved forward for some ten yards, however, walking gingerly over his precarious foothold. Then he felt rather than saw the opening before him. A body moved below him.

Burl raised his spear, and with a yell plunged down on the back of the moving thing, thrusting his spear with all the force he could command. He landed on a shifting form, but his yell of triumph turned to a scream of terror.

This was not the yielding body of a slender butterfly that he had come upon, nor had his spear penetrated the creature's soft flesh. He had fallen upon the shining back of one of the huge, meat-eating beetles, and his spear had slid across the horny armor, and then stuck fast, having pierced only the leathery tissue between segments of the insect's thorax.

Burl's terror was pitiable at the realization, but as nothing to the ultimate panic which possessed him when the creature beneath him uttered a grunt of fright and pain, and, spreading its stiff wing-cases wide, shot upward in a crazy, panic-stricken, rocket-like flight toward the sky.

CHAPTER III.

THE SEXTON-BEETLES.

BURL fell headforemost upon the spongy top of a huge toadstool that split with the impact and let him through to the ground beneath, powdering him with its fine spores. He came to rest with his naked shoulder half-way through the yielding flesh of a mushroom-stalk, and lay there for a second, catching his breath to scream again.

Then he heard the whining buzz of his attempted prey. There was something wrong with the beetle. Burl's spear had struck it in an awkward spot, and it was rocketing upward in erratic flight that ended in a crash two or three hundreds yards away.

Burl sprang up in an instant. Perhaps, despite his mistake, he had slain this infinitely more worthy victim. He rushed toward the spot where it had fallen.

His wide blue eyes pierced the darkness well enough to enable him to sheer off from masses of toadstools, but he could distinguish no details—nothing but forms. He heard the beetle floundering upon the ground; then heard it mount again into the air, more clumsily than before.

Its wing-beats no longer kept up a sustained note. They thrashed the air irregularly and wildly. The flight was zigzag and uncertain, and though longer than the first had been, it ended similarly, in a heavy fall. Another period of floundering, and the beetle took to the air again just before Burl arrived at the spot.

It was obviously seriously hurt, and Burl forgot the dangers of the night in his absorption in the chase. He darted after his prey, fleet-footed and agile, taking chances that in cold blood he would never have thought of.

Twice, in the pain-racked struggles of the monster beetle, he arrived at the spot where the gigantic insect flung itself about madly, insanely, fighting it knew not what, striking out with colossal wings and legs, dazed and drunk with agony. And each time it managed to get aloft in flight that was weaker and more purposeless.

Crazy, fleeing from the torturing spear that pierced its very vitals, the beetle blundered here and there, floundering among the mushroom thickets in spasms that were constantly more prolonged and more agonized, but nevertheless flying heavily, lurching drunkenly, managing to graze the tops of the toadstools in one more despairing, tormented flight.

And Burl followed, aflame with the fire of the chase, arriving at the scene of each successive, panic-stricken struggle on the ground just after the beetle had taken flight again, but constantly more closely on the heels of the weakening monster.

At last he came, panting, and found the giant lying upon the earth, moving feebly, apparently unable to rise. How far he was

from the tribe, Burl did not know, nor did the question occur to him at the moment. He waited for the beetle to be still, trembling with excitement and eagerness. The struggles of the huge form grew more feeble, and at last ceased. Burl moved forward and grasped his spear. He wrenched at it to thrust again.

In an instant the beetle had roused itself, and was exerting its last atom of strength, galvanized into action by the agony caused by Burl's seizure of the spear. A great wing-cover knocked Burl twenty feet, and flung him against the base of a mushroom, where he lay, half stunned. But then a strangely pungent scent came to his nostrils—the scent of the red mushrooms!

He staggered to his feet and fled, while behind him the gigantic beetle crashed and floundered—Burl heard a tearing and ripping sound. The insect had torn the covering of one of the red mushrooms, tightly packed with the fatal red dust. At the noise, Burl's speed was doubled, but he could still hear the frantic struggles of the dying beetle grow to a very crescendo of desperation.

The creature broke free and managed to rise in a final flight, fighting for breath and life, weakened and tortured by the spear and the horrible spores of the red mushrooms. Then it crashed suddenly to the earth and was still. The red dust had killed it.

In time to come, Burl might learn to use the red dust as poison gas had been used by his ancestors of thirty thousand years before, but now he was frightened and alone, lost from his tribe, and with no faintest notion of how to find them. He crouched beneath a huge toadstool and waited for dawn, listening with terrified apprehension for the ripping sound that would mean the bursting of another of the red mushrooms.

Only the wingbeats of night-flying creatures came to his ears, however, and the discordant noises of the four-foot trufflebeetles as they roamed the aisles of the mushroom forests, seeking the places beneath which their instinct told them fungoid dainties awaited the courageous miner. The eternal dripping of the rain-drops falling at long intervals from the overhanging clouds formed a soft obbligato to the whole.

Burl listened, knowing there were red toadstools all about, but not once during the whole of the long, dark hours did the rending noise tell of a bursting fungus casting loose its freight of deadly dust upon the air. Only when day came again, and the chill dampness of the night was succeeded by the steaming humidity of the morning, did a tall pyramid of brownish-red stuff leap suddenly into the air from a ripped mushroom covering.

Then Burl stood up and looked around. Here and there, all over the whole countryside, slowly and at intervals, the cones of fatal red sprang into the air. Had Burl lived thirty thousand years earlier, he might have likened the effect to that of shells bursting from a leisurely bombardment, but as it was he saw in them only fresh and inexorable dangers added to an already peril-ridden existence.

A hundred yards from where he had hidden during the night the body of his victim lay, crumpled up and limp. Burl approached speculatively. He had come even before the ants appeared to take their toll of the carcass, and not even a buzzing flesh-fly had placed its maggots on the unresisting form.

The long, whiplike antennæ lay upon the carpet of mold and rust, and the fiercely toothed legs were drawn close against the body. The many-faceted eyes stared unseeingly, and the stiff and horny wing-cases were rent and torn.

When Burl went to the other side of the dead beetle he saw something that filled him with elation. His spear had been held between his body and the beetle's during that mad flight, and at the final crash, when Burl shot away from the fear-crazed insect, the weight of his body had forced the spear-point between the joints of the corselet and the neck. Even if the red dust had not finished the creature, the spear wound in time would have ended its life.

Burl was thrilled once more by his superlative greatness, and conveniently forgot that it was the red dust that had actually administered the *coup de grace*. It was

so much more pleasant to look upon himself as the mighty slayer that he hacked off one of the barb-edged limbs to carry back to his tribe in evidence of his feat. He took the long antennæ, too, as further proof.

Then he remembered that he did not know where his tribe was to be found. He had no faintest idea of the direction in which the beetle had flown. As a matter of fact, the course of the beetle had been in turn directed toward every point of the compass, and there was no possible way of telling the relation of its final landing-place to the point from which it had started.

Burl wrestled with his problem for an hour, and then gave up in disgust. He set off at random, with the leg of the huge insect flung over his shoulder and the long antennæ clasped in his hand with his spear. He turned to look at his victim of the night before just before plunging into the near-by mushroom forest, and saw that it was already the center of a mass of tiny black bodies, pulling and hacking at the tough armor, and carving out great lumps of the succulent flesh to be carried to the near-by ant city.

In the teeming life of the insect world death is an opportunity for the survivors. There is a strangely tense and fearful competition for the bodies of the slain. There had been barely an hour of daylight in which the ants might seek for provender, yet in that little time the freshly killed beetle had been found and was being skilfully and carefully exploited. When the body of one of the larger insects fell to the ground, there was a mighty rush, a fierce race, among all the tribes of scavengers to see who should be first.

Usually the ants had come upon the scene and were inquisitively exploring the carcass long before even the flesh-flies had arrived, who dropped their living maggots upon the creature. The blue-bottles came still later, to daub their masses of white eggs about the delicate membranes of the eye.

And while all the preceding scavengers were at work, furtive beetles and tiny insects burrowed below the reeking body to attack the highly scented flesh from a fresh angle.

Each working independently of the others, they commonly appeared in the order of the delicacy of the sense which could lead them to a source of food, though accident could and sometimes did afford one group of workers in putrescence an advantage over the others.

Thus, sometimes a blue-bottle anticipated even the eager ants, and again the very flesh-flies dropped their squirming offspring upon a limp form that was already being undermined by white-bellied things working in the darkness below the body.

Burl grimaced at the busy ants and buzzing flies, and disappeared into the mushroom wood. Here for a long time he moved cautiously and silently through the aisles of tangled stalks and the spongy, round heads of the fungoids. Now and then he saw one of the red toadstools, and made a wide detour around it. Twice they burst within his sight, circumscribed as his vision was by the toadstools among which he was traveling.

Each time he ran hastily to put as much distance as possible between himself and the deadly red dust. He traveled for an hour or more, looking constantly for familiar landmarks that might guide him to his tribe. He knew that if he came upon any place he had seen while with his tribe he could follow the path they had traveled and in time rejoin them.

For many hours he went on, alert for signs of danger. He was quite ignorant of the fact that there were such things as points of the compass, and though he had a distinct notion that he was not moving in a straight line, he did not realize that he was actually moving in a colossal half-circle. After walking steadily for nearly four hours he was no more than three miles in a direct line from his starting-point. As it happened, his uncertainty of direction was fortunate.

The night before the tribe had been feeding happily upon one of the immense edible mushrooms, when they heard Burl's abruptly changing cry. It had begun as a shout of triumph, and ended as a scream of fear. Then they heard hurried wing-beats as a creature rose into the air in a scurry of desperation. The throbbing of huge

wings ended in a heavy fall, followed by another flight.

Velvety darkness masked the sky, and the tribesmen could only stare off into the blackness, where their leader had vanished, and begin to tremble, wondering what they should do in a strange country with no bold chief to guide them.

He was the first man to whom the tribe had ever offered allegiance, but their submission had been all the more complete for that fact, and his loss was the more appalling.

Burl had mistaken their lack of timidity. He had thought it independence, and indifference to him. As a matter of fact, it was security because the tribe felt safe under his tutelage. Now that he had vanished, and in a fashion that seemed to mean his death, their old fears returned to them reenforced by the strangeness of their surroundings.

They huddled together and whispered their fright to one another, listening the while in panic-stricken apprehension for signs of danger. The tribesmen visualized Burl caught in fiercely toothed limbs, being rent and torn in mid air by horny, insatiable jaws, his blood falling in great spurts toward the earth below. They caught a faint, reedy cry, and shuddered, pressing closer together.

And so through the long night they waited in trembling silence. Had a hunting spider appeared among them they would not have lifted a hand to defend themselves, but would have fled despairingly, would probably have scattered and lost touch with one another, and spent the remainder of their lives as solitary fugitives, snatching fear-ridden rest in strange hiding-places.

But day came again, and they looked into each other's eyes, reading in each the selfsame panic and fear. Saya was probably the most pitiful of all the group. Burl was to have been her mate, and her face was white and drawn beyond that of any of the rest of the tribe folk.

With the day, they did not move, but remained clustered about the huge mushroom on which they had been feeding the night before. They spoke in hushed and fearful tones, huddled together, searching all the horizon for insect enemies. Saya would not eat, but sat still, staring before her in unseeing indifference. Burl was dead.

A hundred yards from where they crouched a red mushroom glistened in the pale light of the new day. Its tough skin was taut and bulging, resisting the pressure of the spores within. But slowly, as the morning wore on, some of the moisture that had kept the skin soft and flaccid during the night evaporated.

The skin had a strong tendency to contract, like green leather when drying. The spores within it strove to expand. The opposing forces produced a tension that grew greater and greater as more and more of the moisture was absorbed by the air. At last the skin could hold no longer.

With a ripping sound that could be heard for hundreds of feet, the tough wrapping split and tore across its top, and with a hollow, booming noise the compressed mass of deadly spores rushed into the air, making a pyramidal cloud of brown-red dust some sixty feet in height.

The tribesmen quivered at the noise and faced the dust cloud for a fleeting instant, then ran pell-mell to escape the slowly moving tide of death as the almost imperceptible breeze wafted it slowly toward them. Men and women, boys and girls, they fled in a mad rush from the deadly stuff, not pausing to see that even as it advanced it settled slowly to the ground, nor stopping to observe its path that they might step aside and let it go safely by.

Saya fled with the rest, but without their extreme panic. She fled because the others had done so, and ran more carelessly, struggling with a half-formed idea that it did not particularly matter whether she were caught or not.

She fell slightly behind the others, without being noticed. Then quite abruptly a stone turned under her foot, and she fell headlong, striking her head violently against a second stone. Then she lay quite still while the red cloud billowed slowly toward her, drifting gently in the faint, hardly perceptible breeze.

It drew nearer and nearer, settling slow-

ly, but still a huge and menacing mass of deadly dust. It gradually flattened out, too, so that though it had been a rounded cone at first, it flowed over the minor inequalities of the ground as a huge and tenuous leech might have crawled, sucking from all breathing creatures the life they had within them.

A hundred and fifty yards away, a hundred yards away, then only fifty yards away. From where Saya lay unconscious on the earth, eddies within the moving mass could be seen, and the edges took on a striated appearance, telling of the curling of the dust wreaths in the larger mass of deadly powder.

The deliberate advance kept on, seeming almost purposeful. It would have seemed inevitable to draw from the unhurried, menacing movement of the poisonous stuff that some malign intelligence was concealed in it, that it was, in fact, a living creature. But when the misty edges of the cloud were no more than twenty-five yards from Saya's prostrate body a breeze from one side sprang up—a vagrant, fitful little breeze, that first halted the red cloud and threw it into confusion, and then drove it to one side, so that it passed Saya without harming her, though a single trailing wisp of dark-red mist floated very close to her.

Then for a time Saya lay still indeed, only her breast rising and falling gently with faint and irregular breaths. Her head had struck a sharp-edged stone in her fall, and a tiny pool of sticky red had gathered from the wound.

Perhaps thirty feet from where she lay, three small toadstools grew in a little clump, their bases so close together that they seemed but one. From between two of them, however, just where they parted, twin tufts of reddish threads appeared, twinkling back and forth, and in and out. As if they had given some reassuring sign, two slender antennæ followed, then bulging eyes, and then a small black body which had bright-red scalloped markings upon the wing-cases.

It was a tiny beetle no more than eight inches long—a burying-beetle. It drew near Saya's body and clambered upon her, explored the ground by her side, moving all the time in feverish haste, and at last dived into the ground beneath her shoulder, casting back a little shower of hastily dug earth as it disappeared.

Ten minutes later another similar insect appeared, and upon the heels of the second a third. Each of them made the same hasty examination, and each dived under the still form. Presently the earth seemed to billow at a spot along Saya's side, then at another. Perhaps ten minutes after the arrival of the third beetle a little rampart had reared itself all about Saya's body, precisely following the outline of her form. Then her body moved slightly, in a number of tiny jerks, and seemed to settle perhaps half an inch into the ground.

The burying beetles were of those who exploited the bodies of the fallen. Working from below, they excavated the earth from the under side of such prizes as they came upon, then turned upon their backs and thrust with their legs, jerking the body so it sank into the shallow excavation they had prepared.

The process would be repeated until at last the whole of the gift of fortune had sunk below the surrounding surface and the loosened earth fell in upon the top, thus completing the inhumation.

Then in the darkness the beetles would feast and rear their young, gorging upon the plentiful supply of succulent foodstuff they had hidden from jealous fellow scavengers above them.

But Saya was alive. Thirty thousand years before, when scientists examined into the habits of the burying-beetles, or the sexton-beetles, they had declared that fresh meat or living meat would not be touched. They based their statement solely upon the fact that the insects (then tiny creatures indeed) did not appear until the trap-meat placed by the investigators had remained untouched for days.

Conditions had changed in thirty thousand years. The ever-present ants and the sharp-eyed flies were keen rivals of the brightly arrayed beetles. Usually the tribes of creatures who worked in the darkness below ground came after the ants had taken their toll, and the flies sipped daintily.

When Saya fell unconscious upon the

ground, however, it was the one accident that caused the burying-beetle to find her first, before the ants had come to tear the flesh from her slender, soft-skinned body. She breathed gently and irregularly, her face drawn with the sorrow of the night before, while desperately hurrying beetles swarmed beneath her body, channeling away the earth so that she would sink lower and lower into the ground.

An inch, and a long wait. Then she sank slowly a second inch. The bright-red tufts of thread appeared again, and a beetle made his way to the open air. He moved hastily about, inspecting the progress of the work. He dived below again. Another inch, and after a long time another.

Burl stepped out from a group of overshadowing toadstools and halted. He cast his eyes over the landscape, and was struck by its familiarity. It was, in point of fact, very near the spot he had left the night before, in pursuit of a colossal wounded beetle.

Burl moved back and forth, trying to account for the sensation of recognition, and then trying to approximate the place from which he had last seen it

He passed within fifty feet of the spot where Saya lay, now half buried in the ground. The loose earth cast up about her body had begun to fall in little rivulets upon her. One of her shoulders was already screened from view.

Burl passed on, unseeing. He was puzzling over the direction from which he had seen the particular section of countryside before him. Perhaps a little farther on he would come to the place. He hurried a little. In a moment he recognized his location. There was the great edible mushroom, half broken away, from which the tribe had been feeding. There were the mining bee burrows.

His feet stirred up a fine dust, and he stopped short. A red mushroom had covered the earth with a thin layer of its impalpable, deadly powder. Burl understood why the tribe had gone, and a cold sweat came upon his body. Was Saya safe, or had the whole tribe succumbed to the poisonous stuff? Had they all, men and women and children, died in convulsions of gasping strangulation?

He hurried to retrace his footsteps. There was a fragment of mushrooms on the ground. Here was a spear, cast away by one of the tribesmen in his flight. Burl broke into a run.

The little excavation into which Saya was sinking, inch by inch, was all of twenty-five feet to the right of the path. Burl dashed on, frantic with anxiety about the tribe, but most of all about Saya. Saya's body quivered and sank a fraction more into the earth.

Half a dozen little rivulets of dirt were tumbling upon her body now. In a matter of minutes she would be hidden from view. Burl ran madly past her, too busy searching the mushroom thickets before him with his eyes to dream of looking upon the ground.

Twenty yards from a huge toadstool thicket a noise arrested him sharply. There was a crashing and breaking of the brittle, spongy growths. Twin tapering antennæ appeared, and then a monster beetle lurched into the open space, its horrible, gaping jaws stretched wide.

It was all of eight feet long, and its body was held up from the ground by six crooked, saw-toothed limbs. Its huge multiple eyes stared with machinelike preoccupation at the world.

It advanced deliberately, with a clanking and clashing as of a hideous machine. Burl fled on the instant, running as madly away from the beetle as he had a moment before been running toward it.

A little depression in the earth was before him. He did not swerve, but made to leap it. As he shot over it, however, the glint of pink skin caught his eye, and there was impressed upon his brain with photographic completeness the picture of Saya, lying limp and helpless, sinking slowly into the ground, with tiny rills of earth falling down the sides of the excavation upon her. It seemed to Burl's eye that she quivered slightly as he saw.

There was a terrific struggle within Burl. Behind him the colossal meat-eating beetle. Beneath him Saya, whom he loved. There was certain death lurching toward him on

evilly glittering legs, and there was life for his race and tribe lying in the shallow pit.

He turned, aware with a sudden reckless glow that he was throwing away his life, aware that he was deliberately giving himself over to death, and stood on the side of the little pit nearest the great beetle, his puny spear held defiantly at the ready. In his left hand he held just such a leg as those which bore the living creature toward him. He had torn it from the body of just such a monster but a few hours ago, a monster in whose death he had had a share. With a yell of insane defiance, he flung the fiercely toothed limb at his advancing opponent.

The sharp teeth cut into the base of one of the beetle's antennæ, and it ducked clumsily, then seized the missile in its fierce jaws and crushed it in frenzy of rage. There was meat within it, sweet and juicy meat that pleased the beetle's palate.

It forgot the man, standing there, waiting for death. It crunched the missile that had attacked it, eating the palatable contents of the horny armor, confusing the blow with the object that had delivered it, and evidently satisfied that an enemy had been conquered and was being devoured. A moment later it turned and lumbered off to investigate another mushroom thicket.

And Burl turned quickly and dragged Saya's limp form from the grave that had been prepared for it by the busy insect scavengers. Earth fell from her shoulders, from her hair, and from the mass of yellow fura about her middle, and three little beetles with black and red markings scurried in terrific haste for cover, while Burl bore Saya to a resting-place of soft mold.

Burl was an ignorant savage, and to him Saya's deathlike unconsciousness was like death itself, but dumb misery smote him, and he laid her down gently, while tears came to his eyes and he called her name again and again in an agony of grief.

For an hour he sat there beside her, a man so lately pleased with himself above all creatures for having slain one huge beetle and put another to flight, as he would have looked upon it, a broken-hearted, little pink-skinned man, weeping like a child, hunched up and bowed over with sorrow.

Then Saya slowly opened her eyes and stirred weakly.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FOREST OF DEATH.

THEY were oblivious to everything but each other, Saya resting in still half-incredulous happiness against Burl's shoulder while he told her in little, jerky sentences of his pursuit of the colossal flying beetle, of his search for the tribe, and then his discovery of her apparently lifeless body.

When he spoke of the monster that had lurched from the mushroom thicket, and of the desperation with which he had faced it, Saya pressed close and looked at him with wondering and wonderful eyes. She could understand his willingness to die, believing her dead. But a little while before she had felt the same indifference to life.

A timid, frightened whisper roused them from their absorption, and they looked up. One of the tribesmen stood upon one foot some distance away, staring at them, almost convinced that he looked upon the living dead. A sudden movement on the part of either of them would have sent him in a panic back into the mushroom forest. Two or three blond heads bobbed and vanished among the tangled stalks. Wide and astonished eyes gazed at the two they had believed the prey of malignant creatures.

The tribe had come slowly back to the mushroom they had been eating, leaderless, and convinced that Saya had fallen a victim to the deadly dust. Instead, they found her sitting by the side of their chief, apparently restored to them in some miraculous fashion.

Burl spoke, and the pink-skinned people came timorously from their hiding-places. They approached warily and formed a half-circle before the seated pair. Burl spoke again, and presently one of the bravest dared approach and touch him. Instantly a babble of the crude and labial language spoken by the tribe broke out. Awed questions and exclamations of thankfulness, then curious interrogations filled the air.

Burl, for once, showed some common

sense. Instead of telling them in his usual vainglorious fashion of the adventures he had undergone, he merely cast down the two long and tapering antennæ from the flying beetle that he had torn from its dead body. They looked at them, and recognized their origin. Amazement and admiration showed upon their faces. Then Burl rose and abruptly ordered two of the men to make a chair of their hands for Saya. She was weak from the effects of the blow she had received. The two men humbly advanced and did as they were bid.

Then the march was taken up again, more slowly than before, because of Saya as a burden, but none the less steadily. Burl led his people across the country, marching in advance and with every nerve alert for signs of danger, but with more confidence and less timidity than he had ever displayed before.

All that noontime and that afternoon they filed steadily along, the tribesfolk keeping in a compact group close behind Burl. The man who had thrown away his spear had recovered it on an order from Burl, and the little party fairly bristled with weapons, though Burl knew well that they were liable to be cast away as impedimenta if flight should be necessary.

He was determined that his people should learn to fight the great creatures about them, instead of depending upon their legs for escape. He had led them in an attack upon great slugs, but they were defenseless creatures, incapable of more dangerous maneuvers than spasmodic jerkings of their great bodies.

The next time danger should threaten them, and especially if it came while their new awe of him held good, he was resolved to force them to join him in fighting it.

He had not long to wait for an opportunity to strengthen the spirit of his followers by a successful battle. The clouds toward the west were taking on a dull-red hue, which was the nearest to a sunset that was ever seen in the world of Burl's experience, when a bumblebee droned heavily over their heads, making for its hive.

The little group of people on the ground looked up and saw a scanty load of pollen packed in the stiff bristles of the insect's hind legs. The bees of the world had a hard time securing food upon the nearly flowerless planet, but this one had evidently made a find. Its crop was nearly filled with hard-gathered, viscous honey destined for the hival store.

It sped onward, heavily, its almost transparent wings mere blurs in the air from the rapidity of their vibration. Burl saw its many-faceted eyes staring before it in worried preoccupation as it soared in laborious speed over his head, some fifty feet up.

He dropped his glance, and then his eyes lighted with excitement. A slender-bodied wasp was shooting upward from an ambush it had found in a thicket of toadstools. It darted swiftly and gracefully upon the bee, which swerved and tried to flee. The droning buzz of the bee's wings rose to a higher note as it strove to increase its speed. The more delicately formed wasp headed the clumsier insect back.

The bee turned again and fled in terror. Each of the insects was slightly more than four feet in length, but the bee was much the heavier, and it could not attain the speed of which the wasp was capable.

The graceful form of the hunting insect rapidly overhauled its fleeing prey, and the wasp dashed in and closed with the bee at a point almost over the heads of the tribesmen. In a clawing, biting tangle of thrashing, transparent wings and black bodies, the two creatures tumbled to the earth. They fell perhaps thirty yards from where Burl stood watching.

Over and over the two insects rolled, now one uppermost, and then the other. The bee was struggling desperately to insert her sting in the more supple body of her adversary. She writhed and twisted, fighting with jaw and mandible, wing and claw.

The wasp was uppermost, and the bee lay on her back, fighting in panic-stricken desperation. The wasp saw an opening, her jaws darted in, and there was an instant of confusion. Then suddenly the bee, dazed, was upright with the wasp upon her. A movement too quick for the eye to follow —and the bee collapsed. The wasp had

bitten her in the neck where all the nerve-cords passed, and the bee was dead.

Burl waited a moment more, aflame with excitement. He knew, as did all the tribe-folk, what might happen next. When he saw the second act of the tragedy well begun, Burl snapped quick and harsh orders to his spear-armed men, and they followed him in a wavering line, their weapons tightly clutched.

Knowing the habits of the insects as they were forced to know them, they knew that the venture was one of the least dangerous they could undertake with fighting creatures the size of the wasp, but the idea of attacking the great creatures whose sharp stings could annihilate any of them with a touch, the mere thought of taking the initiative was appalling. Had their awe of Burl been less complete they would not have dreamed of following him.

The second act of the tragedy had begun. The bee had been slain by the wasp, a carnivorous insect normally, but the wasp knew that sweet honey was concealed in the half-filled crop of the bee. Had the bee arrived safely at the hive, the sweet and sticky liquid would have been disgorged and added to the hival store. Now, though the bee's journey was ended and its flesh was to be crunched and devoured by the wasp, the honey was the first object of the pirate's solicitude.* The dead insect was rolled over upon its back, and with eager haste the slayer began to exploit the body.

Burl and his men were creeping nearer, but with a gesture Burl bade them halt for a moment. The wasp's first move was to force the disgorgement of the honey from the bee's crop, and with feverish eagerness it pressed upon the limp body until the shining, sticky liquid appeared. Then the wasp began in ghoulish ecstasy to lick up the sweet stuff, utterly absorbed in the feast.

Many thousands of years before, the absorption of the then tiny insect had been noticed when engaged in a similar feat, and it was recorded in books moldered into dust long ages before Burl's birth that its rapture was so great that it had been known to fall a victim to a second bandit while engaged in the horrible banquet.

Burl had never read the books, but he had been told that the pirate would continue its feast even though seized by a greater enemy, unable to tear itself from the nectar gathered by the creature it had slain.

The tribesmen waited until the wasp had begun its orgy, licking up the toothsome stuff disgorged by its dead prey. It ate in gluttonous haste, blind to all sights, deaf to all sounds, able to think of nothing, conceive of nothing, but the delights of the liquid it was devouring.

At a signal the tribesmen darted forward. They wavered when near the slender-waisted gourmet, however, and Burl was the first to thrust his spear with all his strength into the thinly armored body.

Then the others took courage. A short, horny spear penetrated the very vitals of the wasp. A club fell with terrific impact upon the slender waist. There was a crackling, and the long, spidery limbs quivered and writhed, while the tribesmen fell back in fear, but without cause.

Burl struck again, and the wasp fell into two writhing halves, helpless for harm. The pink-skinned men danced in triumph, and the women and children ventured near, delighted.

Only Burl noticed that even as the wasp was dying, sundered and pierced with spears, its slender tongue licked out in one last, ecstatic taste of the nectar that had been its undoing.

Burdened with the pollen-covered legs of the giant bee, and filled with the meat from choice portions of the wasp's muscular limbs, the tribe resumed its journey. This time Burl had men behind him, still timid, still prone to flee at the slightest alarm, but infinitely more dependable than they had been before.

They had attacked and slain a wasp whose sting would have killed any of them. They had done battle under the leadership of Burl, whose spear had struck the first blow. Henceforth they were sharers, in a

* The pirate is the *Philanthus Apivorus.*

mild way, of his transcendent glory, and henceforth they were more like followers of a mighty chief and less like spineless worshipers of a demigod whose feats they were too timid to emulate.

That night they hid among a group of giant puffballs, feasting on the loads of meat they had carried thus far with them. Burl watched them now without jealousy of their good spirits. He and Saya sat a little apart, happy to be near each other, speaking in low tones. After a time darkness fell, and the tribefolk became shapeless bodies speaking in voices that grew drowsy and were silent. The black forms of the toadstool heads and huge puffballs were but darker against a dark sky.

The nightly rain began to fall, drop by drop, drop by drop, upon the damp and humid earth. Only Burl remained awake for a little while, and his last waking thought was of pride, disinterested pride. He had the first reward of the ruler, gratification in the greatness of his people.

The red mushrooms had continued to show their glistening heads, though Burl thought they were less numerous than in the territory from which the tribe had fled. All along the route, now to the right, now to the left, they had burst and sent their masses of deadly dust into the air.

Many times the tribefolk had been forced to make a detour to avoid a slowly spreading cloud of death-dealing spores. Once or twice their escapes had been narrow indeed, but so far there had been no deaths.

Burl had observed that the mushrooms normally burst only in the daytime, and for a while had thought of causing his followers to do their journeying in the night. Only the obvious disadvantages of such a course—the difficulty of discovering food, and the prowling spiders that roamed in the darkness—had prevented him. The idea still stayed with him, however, and two days after the fight with the hunting wasp he put it in practise.

The tribe came to the top of a small rise in the ground. For an hour they had been marching and counter-marching to avoid the suddenly appearing clouds of dust. Once they had been nearly hemmed in, and only by mad sprinting did they escape when three of the dull-red clouds seemed to flow together, closing three sides of a circle.

They came to the little hillock and halted. Before them stretched a plain all of four miles wide, colored a brownish brick-red by masses of mushrooms. They had seen mushroom forests before, and knew of the dangers they presented, but there was none so deadly as the plain before them. To right and left it stretched as far as the eye could see, but far away on its farther edge Burl caught a glimpse of flowing water.

Over the plain itself a dull-red haze seemed to float. It was nothing more or less than a cloud of the deadly spores, dispersed and indefinite, constantly replenished by the freshly bursting red mushrooms.

While the people stood and watched a dozen thick columns of dust rose into the air from scattered points here and there upon the plain, settling slowly again, but leaving behind them enough of their finely divided substance to keep the thin red haze over the whole plain in its original, deadly state.

Burl had seen single red mushrooms before, and even small thickets of two and three, but here was a plain of millions, literally millions upon millions of the malignant growths. Here was one fungoid forest through whose aisles no monster beetles stalked, and above whose shadowed depths no brightly colored butterflies fluttered in joyous abandon. There were no loud-voiced crickets singing in its hiding-places, nor bodies of eagerly foraging ants searching inquisitively for bits of food. It was a forest of death, still and silent, quiet and motionless save for the sullen columns of red dust that ever and again shot upward from the torn and ragged envelope of a bursting mushroom.

Burl and his people watched in wonderment and dismay, but presently a high resolve came to Burl. The mushrooms never burst at night, and the deadly dust from a subsided cloud was not deadly in the morning. As a matter of fact the rain that fell every night made it no more than a sodden, thin film of reddish mud by daybreak, mud which dried and caked.

Burl did not know what occurred, but

knew the result. At night or in early morning, the danger from the red mushrooms was slight. Therefore he would lead his people through the very jaws of death that night. He would lead them through the deadly aisles of this, the forest of malignant growths, the place of lurking annihilation.

It was an act of desperation, and the resolution to carry it through left Burl in a state of mind that kept him from observing one thing that would have ended all the struggles of his tribe at once. Perhaps a quarter-mile from the edge of the red forest three or four giant cabbages grew, thrusting their colossal leaves upward toward the sky.

And on the cabbages a dozen lazy slugs fed leisurely, ignoring completely the red haze that was never far from them and sometimes covered them. Burl saw them, but the oddity of their immunity from the effects of the red dust did not strike him. He was fighting to keep his resolution intact. If he had only realized the significance of what he saw, however—

The slugs were covered with a thick, soft fur. The tribespeople wore garments of that same material. The fur protected the slugs, and could have made the tribe immune to the deadly red dust if they had only known. The slugs breathed through a row of tiny holes upon their backs, as the mature insects breathed through holes upon the bottom of their abdomens, and the soft fur formed a mat of felt which arrested the fine particles of deadly dust, while allowing the pure air to pass through. It formed, in effect, a natural gas-mask which the tribesmen should have adopted, but which they did not discover or invent.

The remainder of that day they waited in a curious mixture of resolve and fear. The tribe was rapidly reaching a point where it would follow Burl over a thousand-foot cliff, and it needed some such blind confidence to make them prepare to go through the forest of the million deadly mushrooms.

The waiting was a strain, but the actual journey was a nightmare. Burl knew that the toadstools did not burst of themselves during the night, but he knew that the beetle on which he had taken his involuntary ride had crashed against one in the darkness, and that the fatal dust had poured out. He warned his people to be cautious, and led them down the slope of the hill through the blackness.

For hours they stumbled on in utter darkness, with the pungent, acrid odor of the red growths constantly in their nostrils. They put out their hands and touched the flabby, damp stalks of the monstrous things. They stumbled and staggered against the leathery skins of the malignant fungoids.

Death was all about them. At no time during all the dark hours of the night was there a moment when they could not reach out their hands and touch a fungus growth that might burst at their touch and fill the air with poisonous dust, so that all of them would die in gasping, choking agony.

And worst of all, before half an hour was past they had lost all sense of direction, so that they stumbled on blindly through the utter blackness, not knowing whether they were headed toward the river that might be their salvation or were wandering hopelessly deeper and deeper into the silent depths of the forest of strangled things.

When day came again and the mushrooms sent their columns of fatal dust into the air would they gasp and fight for breath in the red haze that would float like a tenuous cloud above the forest? Would they breathe in flames of firelike torment and die slowly, or would the red dust be merciful and slay them quickly?

They felt their way like blind folk, devoid of hope and curiously unafraid. Only their hearts were like heavy, cold weights in their breasts, and they shouldered aside the swollen sacs of the red mushrooms with a singular apathy as they followed Burl slowly through the midst of death.

Many times in their journeying they knew that dead creatures were near by—moths, perhaps, that had blundered into a distended growth which had burst upon the impact and killed the thing that had touched it.

No busy insect scavengers ventured into this plain of silence to salvage the bodies, however. The red haze preserved the sanctuary of malignance inviolate. During the

day no creature might hope to approach its red aisles and dust-carpeted clearings, and at night the slow-dropping rain fell only upon the rounded heads of the mushrooms.

In all the space of the forest, only the little band of hopeless people, plodding on behind Burl in the velvet blackness, callously rubbed shoulders with death in the form of the red and glistening mushrooms. Over all the dank expanse of the forest, the only sound was the dripping of the slow and sodden rainfall that began at nightfall and lasted until day came again.

The sky began to grow faintly gray as the sun rose behind the banks of overhanging clouds. Burl stopped short and uttered what was no more than a groan. He was in a little circular clearing, and the twisted, monstrous forms of the deadly mushrooms were all about. There was not yet enough light for colors to appear, and the hideous, almost obscene shapes of the loathsome growths on every side showed only as mocking, leering silhouettes as of malicious demons rejoicing at the coming doom of the gray-faced, huddled tribefolk.

Burl stood still, drooping in discouragement upon his spear, the feathery moth's antennæ bound upon his forehead shadowed darkly against the graying sky. Soon the mushrooms would begin to burst—

Then, suddenly, he lifted his head, encouragement and delight upon his features. He head heard the ripple of running water. His followers looked at him with dawning hope. Without a word, Burl began to run, and they followed him more slowly. His voice came back to them in a shout of delight.

Then they, too, broke into a jog-trot. In a moment they had emerged from the thick tangle of brownish-red stalks and were upon the banks of a wide and swiftly running river, the same river whose gleam Burl had caught the day before from the farther side of the mushroom forest.

Once before Burl had floated down a river upon a mushroom raft. Then his journey had been involuntary and unlooked for. He had been carried far from his tribe and far from Saya, and his heart had been filled with desolation.

Now he viewed the swiftly running current with eager delight. He cast his eyes up and down the bank. Here and there the river-bank rose in a low bluff, and thick shelf-growths stretched out above the water.

Burl was busy in an instant, stabbing the hard growths with his spear and striving to wrench them free. The tribesmen stared at him, uncomprehending, but at an order from him they did likewise.

Soon a dozen thick masses of firm, light fungus lay upon the shore where it shelved gently into the water. Burl began to explain what they were to do, but one or two of the men dared remonstrate, saying humbly that they were afraid to part from him. If they might embark upon the same thing with him, they would be safe, but otherwise they were afraid.

Burl cast an apprehensive glance at the sky. Day was coming rapidly on. Soon the red mushrooms would begin to shoot their columns of deadly dust into the air. This was no time to pause and deliberate. Then Saya spoke softly.

Burl listened, and made a mighty sacrifice. He took his gorgeous velvet cloak from his shoulders—it was made from the wing of a great moth—and tore it into a dozen long, irregular pieces, tearing it along the lines of the sinews that reinforced it. He planted his spear upright in the largest piece of shelf-fungus and caused his followers to do likewise, then fastened the strips of sinew and velvet to his spear-shaft, and ordered them to do the same to the other spears.

In a matter of minutes the dozen tiny rafts were bobbing on the water, clustered about the larger, central bit. Then, one by one, the tribefolk took their places, and Burl shoved off.

The agglomeration of crank, unseaworthy bits of shelf-fungus moved slowly out from the shore until the current caught it. Burl and Saya sat upon the central bit, with the other trustful but somewhat frightened pink-skinned people all about them. And, as they began to move between the mushroom-lined banks of the river and the mist of the night began to lift from its surface, far in the interior of the forest of the red fungoids a column of sullen red leaped into the air. The first of the malignant

growths had cast its cargo of poisonous dust into the still-humid atmosphere.

The conelike column spread out and grew thin, but even after it had sunk into the earth, a reddish taint remained in the air about the place where it had been. The deadly red haze that hung all through the day over the red forest was in process of formation.

But by that time the unstable fungus rafts were far down the river, bobbing and twirling in the current, with the wide-eyed people upon them gazing in wonderment at the shores as they glided by. The red mushrooms grew less numerous upon the banks. Other growths took their places. Molds and rusts covered the ground as grass had done in ages past. Toadstools showed their creamy, rounded heads. Malformed things with swollen trunks and branches in strange mockery of the trees they had superseded made their appearance, and once the tribesmen saw the dark bulk of a hunting spider outlined for a moment upon the bank.

All the long day they rode upon the current, while the insect life that had been absent in the neighborhood of the forest of death made its appearance again. Bees once more droned overhead, and wasps and dragon-flies. Four-inch mosquitoes made their appearance, to be fought off by the tribefolk with lusty blows, and glittering beetles and shining flies, whose bodies glittered with a metallic luster buzzed and flew above the water.

Huge butterflies once more were seen, dancing above the steaming, festering earth in an apparent ecstasy from the mere fact of existence, and all the thousand and one forms of insect life that flew and crawled, and swam and dived, showed themselves to the tribesmen on the raft.

Water-beetles came lazily to the surface, to snap with sudden energy at mosquitoes busily laying their eggs in the nearly stagnant water by the river-banks. Burl pointed out to Saya, with some excitement, their silver breast-plates that shone as they darted under the water again. And the shell-covered boats of a thousand caddis-worms floated in the eddies and back-waters of the stream. Water-boatmen and whirligigs—almost alone among insects in not having shared in the general increase of size—danced upon the oily waves.

The day wore on as the shores flowed by. The tribefolk ate of their burdens of mushroom and meat, and drank from the fresh water of the river. Then, when afternoon came, the character of the country about the stream changed. The banks fell away, and the current slackened. The shores became indefinite, and the river merged itself into a swamp, a vast swamp from which a continual muttering came which the tribesmen heard for a long time before they saw the swamp itself.

The water seemed to turn dark, as black mud took the place of the clay that had formed its bed, and slowly, here and there, then more frequently, floating green things that were stationary, and did not move with the current, appeared. They were the leaves of water-lilies, that had remained with the giant cabbages and a very few other plants in the midst of a fungoid world. The green leaves were twelve feet across, and any one of them would have floated the whole of Burl's tribe.

Presently they grew numerous so that the channel was made narrow, and the mushroom rafts passed between rows of the great leaves, with here and there a colossal, waxen blossom in which three men might have hidden, and which exhaled an almost overpowering fragrance into the air.

And the muttering that had been heard far away grew in volume to an intermittent, incredibly deep bass roar. It seemed to come from the banks on either side, and actually was the discordant croaking of the giant frogs, grown to eight feet in length, which lived and loved in the huge swamp, above which golden butterflies danced in ecstasy, and which the transcendently beautiful blossoms of the water-lilies filled with fragrance.

The swamp was a place of riotous life. The green bodies of the colossal frogs—perched upon the banks in strange immobility and only opening their huge mouths to emit their thunderous croakings—the green bodies of the frogs blended queerly with the vivid color of the water-lily leaves. Dragon-flies fluttered in their swift and

angular flight above the black and reeking mud. Greenbottles and bluebottles and a hundred other species of flies buzzed busily in the misty air, now and then falling prey to the licking tongues of the frogs.

Bees droned overhead in flight less preoccupied and worried than elsewhere flitting from blossom to blossom of the tremendous water-lilies, loading their crops with honey and the bristles of their legs with yellow pollen.

Everywhere over the mushroom-covered world the air was never quite free from mist, and the steaming exhalations of the pools, but here in the swamp the atmosphere was so heavily laden with moisture that the bodies of the tribefolk were covered with glistening droplets, while the wide, flat water-lily leaves glittered like platters of jewels from the "steam" that had condensed upon their upper surfaces.

The air was full of shining bodies and iridescent wings. Myriads of tiny midges —no more than three or four inches across their wings—danced above the slow-flowing water. And butterflies of every imaginable shade and color, from the most delicate lavender to the most vivid carmine, danced and fluttered, alighting upon the white water-lilies to sip daintily of their nectar, skimming the surface of the water, enamored of their brightly tinted reflections.

And the pink-skinned tribesfolk, floating through this fairyland on their mushroom rafts, gazed with wide eyes at the beauty about them, and drew in great breaths of the intoxicating fragrance of the great white flowers that floated like elfin boats upon the dark water.

CHAPTER V.

OUT OF BONDAGE.

THE mist was heavy and thick, and through it the flying creatures darted upon their innumerable businesses, visible for an instant in all their colorful beauty, then melting slowly into indefiniteness as they sped away. The tribefolk on the clustered rafts watched them as they darted overhead, and for hours the little squadron of fungoid vessels floated slowly through the central channel of the marsh.

The river had split into innumerable currents which meandered purposelessly through the glistening black mud of the swamp, but after a long time they seemed to reassemble, and Burl could see what had caused the vast morass.

Hills appeared on either side of the stream, which grew higher and steeper, as if the foothills of a mountain chain. Then Burl turned and peered before him.

Rising straight from the low hills, a wall of high mountains rose toward the sky, and the low-hanging clouds met their rugged flanks but half-way toward the peaks. To right and left the mountains melted into the tenuous haze, but ahead they were firm and stalwart, rising and losing their heights in the cloud-banks.

They formed a rampart which might have guarded the edge of the world, and the river flowed more and more rapidly in a deeper and narrower current toward a cleft between two rugged giants that promised to swallow the water and all that might swim in its depths or float upon its surface.

Tall, steep hills rose from either side of the swift current, their sides covered with flaking molds of an exotic shade of rose-pink, mingled here and there with lavender and purple. Rocks, not hidden beneath a coating of fungus, protruded their angular heads from the hillsides. The river valley became a gorge, and then little more that a cañon, with beetling sides that frowned down upon the swift current running beneath them.

The small flotilla passed beneath an overhanging cliff, and then shot out to where the cliffsides drew apart and formed a deep amphitheater, whose top was hidden in the clouds.

And across this open space, on cables all of five hundred feet long, a banded spider had flung its web. It was a monster of its tribe. Its belly was swollen to a diameter of no less than two yards, and its outstretched legs would have touched eight points of a ten-yard circle.

It was hanging motionless in the center of the colossal snare as the little group

of tribefolk passed underneath, and they saw the broad bands of yellow and black and silver upon its abdomen. They shivered as their little craft were swept below.

Then they came to a little valley, where yellow sand bordered the river and there was a level space of a hundred yards on either side before the steep sides of the mountains began their rise. Here the cluster of mushroom rafts were caught in a little eddy and drawn out of the swiftly flowing current. Soon there was a soft and yielding jar. The rafts had grounded.

Led by Burl, the tribesmen waded ashore, wonderment and excitement in their hearts. Burl searched all about with his eyes. Toadstools and mushrooms, rusts and molds, even giant puff-balls grew in the little valley, but of the deadly red mushrooms he saw none.

A single bee was buzzing slowly over the tangled thickets of fungoids, and the loud voice of a cricket came in a deafening burst of sound, reechoed from the hillsides, but save for the far-flung web of the banded spider a mile or more away, there was no sign of the deadly creatures that preyed upon men.

Burl began to climb the hillside with his tribefolk after him. For an hour they toiled upward, through confused masses of fungus of almost every species. Twice they stopped to seize upon edible fungi and break them into masses they could carry, and once they paused and made a wide detour around a thicket from which there came a stealthy rustling.

Burl believed that the rustling was merely the sound of a moth or butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, but was willing to take no chances. He and his people circled the mushroom thicket and mounted higher.

And at last, perhaps six or seven hundred feet above the level of the river, they came upon a little plateau, going back into a small pocket in the mountainside. Here they found many of the edible fungoids, and no less than a dozen of the giant cabbages, on whose broad leaves many furry grubs were feeding steadily in placid contentment with themselves and all the world.

A small stream bubbled up from a tiny basin and ran swiftly across the plateau, and there were dense thickets of toadstools in which the tribesmen might find secure hiding-places. The tribe would make itself a new home here.

That night they hid among inextricably tangled masses of mushrooms, and saw with amazement the multitude of creatures that ventured forth in the darkness. All the valley and the plateau was illumined by the shining beacons of huge but graceful fireflies, who darted here and there in delight and—apparently—in security.

Upon the earth below, also, many tiny lights glowed. The larvæ of the fireflies crawled slowly but happily over the fungus-covered mountainside, and great glow-worms clambered upon the shining tops of the toadstools and rested there, twin broad bands of bluish fire burning brightly within their translucent bodies.

They were the females of the firefly race, which never attain to legs and wings, but crawl always upon the earth, merely enlarged creatures in the forms of their own larvæ. Moths soared overhead with mighty, throbbing wing-beats, and all the world seemed a paradise which no evil creatures roamed in search of prey.

And a strange thing came to pass. Soon after darkness fell upon the earth and the steady drip-drop of the rain began, a musical tinkling sound was heard which grew in volume, and became a deep-toned roar, which reechoed and reverberated from the opposite hillsides until it was like melodious and long-continued thunder. For a long time the people were puzzled and a little afraid, but Burl took courage and investigated.

He emerged from the concealing thicket and peered cautiously about, seeing nothing. Then he dared move in the direction of the sound, and the gleam from a dozen fireflies showed him a sheet of water pouring over a vertical cliff to the river far below.

The rain-fall, gentle as it was, when gathered from all the broad expanse of the mountainside, made a river of its own, which had scoured out a bed, and poured down each night to plunge in a smother

of spray and foam through six hundred feet of empty space to the swiftly flowing river in the center of the valley. It was this sound that had puzzled the tribefolk, and this sound that lulled them to sleep when Burl at last came back to allay their fears.

The next day they explored their new territory with a boldness of which they would not have been capable a month before. They found a single great trap-door in the earth, sure sign of the burrow of a monster spider, and Burl resolved that before many days the spider would be dealt with. He told his tribesmen so, and they nodded their heads solemnly instead of shrinking back in terror as they would have done not long since.

The tribe was rapidly becoming a group of men, capable of taking the aggressive. They needed Burl's rash leadership, and for many generations they would need bold leaders, but they were infinitely superior to the timid, rabbitlike creatures they had been. They bore spears, and they had used them. They had seen danger, and had blindly followed Burl through the forest of strangled things instead of fleeing weakly from the peril.

They wore soft, yellow fur about their middles, taken from the bodies of giant slugs they had slain. They had eaten much meat, and preferred its succulent taste to the insipid savor of the mushrooms that had once been their steady diet. They knew the exhilaration of brave adventure—though they had been forced into adventure by Burl—and they were far more worthy descendents of their ancestors than those ancestors had known for many thousand years.

The exploration of their new domain yielded many wonders and a few advantages. The tribefolk found that the nearest ant-city was miles away, and that the small insects would trouble them but rarely. (The nightly rush of water down the sloping sides of the mountain made it undesirable for the site of an ant colony.)

And best of all, back in the little pocket in the mountainside, they found old and disused cells of hunting wasps. The walls of the pocket were made of soft sandstone with alternate layers of clay, and the wasps had found digging easy.

There were a dozen or more burrows, the shaft of each some four feet in diameter and going back into the cliff for nearly thirty feet, where they branched out into a number of cells. Each of the cells had once held a grub which had grown fat and large upon its hoard of paralyzed crickets, and then had broken a way to the outer world to emerge as a full-grown wasp.

Now, however, the laboriously tunneled caverns would furnish a hiding-place for the tribe of men, a far more secure hiding-place than the center of the mushroom thickets. And, furthermore, a hiding-place which, because more permanent, would gradually become a possession for which the men would fight.

It is a curious thing that the advancement of a people from a state of savagery and continual warfare to civilization and continual peace is not made by the elimination of the causes of strife, but by the addition of new objects and ideals, in defense of which that people will offer battle.

A single chrysalis was found securely anchored to the underside of a rock-shelf, and Burl detached it with great labor and carried it into one of the burrows, though the task was one that was almost beyond his strength. He desired the butterfly that would emerge for his own use.

He preempted, too, a solitary burrow a little distant from the others, and made preparations for an event that was destined to make his plans wiser and more far-reaching than before.

His followers were equally busy with their various burrows, gathering stores of soft growth for their couches, and later—at Burl's suggestion—even carrying within the dark caverns the radiant heads of the luminous mushrooms to furnish illumination. The light would be dim, and after the mushroom had partly dried it would cease, but for a people utterly ignorant of fire it was far from a bad plan.

Burl was very happy for that time. His people looked upon him as a savior, and obeyed his least order without question. He was growing to repose some measure

of trust in them, too, as men who began to have some glimmerings of the new-found courage that had come to him, and which he had striven hard to implant in their breasts.

The tribe had been a formless gathering of people. There were six or seven men and as many women, and naturally families had come into being—sometimes after fierce and absurd fights among the men—but the families were not the sharply distinct agreements they would have been in a tribe of higher development.

The marriage was but an agreement, terminable at any time, and the men had but little of the feeling of parenthood, though the women had all the fierce maternal instinct of the insects about them.

These burrows in which the tribefolk were making their homes would put an end to the casual nature of the marriage bonds. They were homes in the making—damp and humid burrows without fire or heat, but homes, nevertheless. The family may come before the home, in the development of mankind, but it invariably exists when the home has been made.

The tribe had been upon the plateau for nearly a week when Burl found that stirrings and strugglings were going on within the huge cocoon he had laid close beside the burrow he had chosen for his own. He cast aside all other work, and waited patiently for the thing he knew was about to happen. He squatted on his haunches beside the huge, oblong cylinder, his spear in his hand, waiting patiently. From time to time he nibbled at a bit of edible mushroom.

Burl had acquired many new traits, among which a little foresight was most prominent, but he had never conquered the habit of feeling hungry at any and every time that food was near at hand. He had to wait. He had food. Therefore, he ate.

The sound of scrapings came from the closed cocoon, caked upon its outer side with dirt and mold. The scraping and scratching continued, and presently a tiny hole showed, which rapidly enlarged. Tiny jaws and a dry, glazed skin became visible, the skin looking as if it had been varnished with many coats of brown shellac. Then a malformed head forced its way through and stopped.

All notion ceased for a matter of perhaps half an hour, and then the strange, blind head seemed to become distended, to be swelling. A crack appeared along its upper part, which lengthened and grew wide. And then a second head appeared from within the first.

This head was soft and downy, and a slender proboscis was coiled beneath its lower edge like the trunk of one of the elephants that had been extinct for many thousand years. Soft scales and fine hairs alternated to cover it, and two immense, many-faceted eyes gazed mildly at the world on which it was looking for the first time. The color of the whole was purest milky-white.

Slowly and painfully, assisting itself by slender, colorless legs that seemed strangely feeble and trembling, a butterfly crawled from the cocoon. Its wings were folded and lifeless, without substance or color, but the body was a perfect white. The butterfly moved a little distance from its cocoon and slowly unfurled its wings. With the action, life seemed to be pumped into them from some hidden spring in the insect's body. The slender antennæ spread out and wavered gently in the warm air. The wings were becoming broad expanses of snowy velvet.

A trace of eagerness seemed to come into the butterfly's actions. Somewhere there in the valley sweet food and joyous companions awaited it. Fluttering above the fungoids of the hillsides, surely there was a mate with whom the joys of love were to be shared, surely upon those gigantic patches of green, half hidden in the haze, there would be laid tiny golden eggs that in time would hatch into small, fat grubs.

Strength came to the butterfly's limbs. Its wings were spread and closed with a new assurance. It spread them once more, and raised them to make the first flight of this new existence in a marvelous world, full of delights and adventures—Burl struck home with his spear.

The delicate limbs struggled in agony, the wings fluttered helplessly, and in a little

while the butterfly lay still upon the fungus-carpeted earth, and Burl leaned over to strip away the great wings of snow-white velvet, to sever the long and slender antennæ, and then to call his tribesmen and bid them share in the food he had for them.

And there was a feast that afternoon. The tribesmen sat about the white carcass, cracking open the delicate limbs for the meat within them, and Burl made sure that Saya secured the choicest bits. The tribesmen were happy. Then one of the children of the tribe stretched a hand aloft and pointed up the mountainside.

Coming slowly down the slanting earth was a long, narrow file of living animals. For a time the file seemed to be but one creature, but Burl's keen eyes soon saw that there were many. They were caterpillars, each one perhaps ten feet long, each with a tiny black head armed with sharp jaws, and with dull-red fur upon their backs. The rear of the procession was lost in the mist of the low-hanging cloud-banks that covered the mountainside some two thousand feet above the plateau, but the foremost was no more than three hundred yards away.

Slowly and solemnly the procession came on, the black head of the second touching the rear of the first, and the head of the third touching the rear of the second. In faultless alinement, without intervals, they moved steadily down the slanting side of the mountain.

Save the first, they seemed absorbed in maintaining their perfect formation, but the leader constantly rose upon his hinder half and waved the fore part of his body in the air, first to the right and then to the left, as if searching out the path he would follow.

The tribefolk watched in amazement mingled with terror. Only Burl was calm. He had never seen a slug that meant danger to man, and he reasoned that these were at any rate moving slowly so that they could be distanced by the fleeter-footed human beings, but he also meant to be cautious.

The slow march kept on. The rear of the procession of caterpillars emerged from the cloud-bank, and Burl saw that a shining white line was left behind them. No less than eighty great caterpillars clad in white and dingy red were solemnly moving down the mountainside, leaving a path of shining silk behind them. Head to tail, in single file, they had no eyes or ears for anything but their procession.

The leader reached the plateau, and turned. He came to the cluster of giant cabbages, and ignored them. He came to a thicket of mushrooms, and passed through it, followed by his devoted band. Then he came to an open space where the earth was soft and sandy, where sandstone had weathered and made a great heap of easily moved earth.

The leading caterpillar halted, and began to burrow experimentally in the ground. The result pleased him, and some signal seemed to pass along the eight-hundred-foot line of creatures. The leader began to dig with feet and jaws, working furiously to cover himself completely with the soft earth. Those immediately behind him abandoned their formation, and pressed forward in haste. Those still farther back moved more hurriedly.

All, when they reached the spot selected by the leader, abandoned any attempt to keep to their line, and hastened to find an unoccupied spot in the open space in which to bury themselves.

For perhaps half an hour the clearing was the scene of intense activity, incredible activity. Huge, ten-foot bodies burrowed desperately in the whitish earth, digging frantically to cover themselves.

After the half-hour, however, the last of the caterpillars had vanished. Only an occasional movement of the earth from the struggle of a buried creature to bury itself still deeper, and the freshly turned surface showed that beneath the clearing on the plateau eighty great slugs were preparing themselves for the sleep of metamorphosis. The piled-up earth and the broad, white band of silk, leading back up the hillside until it became lost in the clouds, alone remained to tell of the visitation.

The tribesmen had watched in amazement. They had never seen these creatures before, but they knew, of course, why they

had entombed themselves. Had they known what the scientists of thirty thousand years before had written in weighty and dull books, they would have deduced from the appearance of the processionary caterpillars—or pine-caterpillars—that somewhere above the banks of clouds there were growing trees and sunlight, that a moon shone down, and stars twinkled from the blue vault of a cloudless sky.

But the tribesmen did not know. They only knew that there, beneath the soft earth, was a mighty store of food for them when they cared to dig for it, that their provisions for many months were secure, and that Burl, their leader, was a great and mighty man for having led them to this land of safety and plenty.

Burl read their emotions in their eyes, but better than their amazement and wonderment was a glance that Saya sent to him, a glance that had nothing whatever to do with his leadership of the tribe. And then Burl rose, and took the two snowy-white velvet cloaks from the wings of the white butterfly. One of them he flung about his own shoulders, and the other he flung about Saya. And then those two stood up before the wide-eyed tribesmen, and Burl spoke:

"This is my mate, and my food is her food, and her wrath is my wrath. My burrow is her burrow, and her sorrow, my sorrow.

"Men whom I have led to this land of plenty, hear me. As ye obey my words, see to it that the words of Saya are obeyed likewise, for my spear will loose the life from any man who angers her. Know that as I am great beyond all other men, so Saya is great beyond all other women, for I say it, and it is so."

And he drew Saya toward him, trembling slightly, and put his arm about her waist before all the tribe, and the tribesmen muttered in acquiescent whispers that what Burl said was true, as they had already known.

Then, while the pink-skinned men feasted on the meat Burl had provided for them, he and Saya went toward the burrow Burl had made ready. It was not like the other burrows, being set apart from them, and its entrance was bordered on either side by mushrooms as black as night. All about the entrance the black mushrooms clustered, a strange species that grew large and scattered its spores abroad and then of its own accord melted into an inky liquid that flowed away, sinking slowly into the ground.

In a little hollow below the opening of the burrow an inky pool had gathered, which reflected the gray clouds above and the shapes of the mushrooms that overhung its edges.

Burl and Saya made their way toward the burrow in silence, a picturesque couple against the black background of the sable mushrooms and the earth made dark by the inky liquid. Both of their figures were swathed in cloaks of unsmirched whiteness and wondrous softness, and bound to Burl's forehead were the feathery, lacelike antennæ of a great moth, making flowing plumes of purest gold. His spear seemed cast from bronze, and he was a proud figure as he led Saya past the black pool and to the doorway of their home.

They sat there, watching, while the darkness came on and the moths and fireflies emerged to dance in the night, and listened when the rain began its slow, deliberate dripping from the heavy clouds above. Presently a gentle rumbling began—the accumulation of the rain from all the mountainside forming a torrent that would pour in a six-hundred-foot drop to the river far below.

The sound of the rushing water grew louder, and was echoed back from the cliffs on the other side of the valley. The fireflies danced like fairy lights in the chasm, and all the creatures of the night winged their way aloft to join in the ecstasy of life and love.

And then, when darkness was complete, and only the fitful gleams of the huge fireflies were reflected from the still surface of the black pool beneath their feet, Burl reached out his hand to Saya, sitting beside him in the darkness. She yielded shyly, and her soft, warm hand found his in the obscurity. Then Burl bent over and kissed her on the lips.

(The end.)

Some Man!

by Stephen Kaye

WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

IN a quarter of the town he had always instinctively avoided, but whither he had been drawn by the lure of *finocchio,* a certain Italian dish, Lane Hamlin gets in a fight at the Dragon, defending from unwelcome attentions a girl who seems as out of place there as he is. He cleans out the resort to such good purpose that the exploit of an unknown hero is played up in the next day's papers. But Hamlin is only concerned with the identity of the veiled woman who would appear to be Ella Falk Richards, but a call at the home of Jay Richards, well known financier, elicits the information that Mr. Richards and his daughter are away in Europe. Meanwhile, John Lawton, Hamlin's man of affairs, apprizes him of the fact that a Chinaman was wounded so severely by a knife in the fracas that he has died and suggests that Hamlin seek the assistance of the McGrail Detective Agency in finding a method of defending himself from the unjust charge of murder which is certain to be lodged against him. So on the suggestion of Barbara Alden, at the agency, he disguises himself and calls on Seeley Gray, a wealthy man, who is out to do both Jay Richards and John Lawton. Gray sets Hamlin to watching the Richards residence, but before he leaves Hamlin sees the big man who was the aggressor at the Dragon coming up the Gray stoop. So he contrives to linger and, concealing himself in a closet, overhears Gray's conversation with the big man, Morrell, who admits that a companion, Frayne, was the fellow who stabbed the Chink, and that Miss Richards had gone to the Dragon to protect a friend, Miss Larrabie, who had been lured away for the purposes of the gang. Following Morrell's departure Hamlin starts to leave himself and is backing cautiously out the front door when he sees reflected in the polished glass the figure of a policeman on the opposite side of the street. His arms are folded and he is watching Hamlin's rather stealthy exit.

CHAPTER IX.

A MATTER OF THE HEART.

HAMLIN could not afford to risk questioning by the officer. Therefore, without turning, he pressed the button of the door-bell at his side.

Almost instantly, it seemed to Hamlin's rather strained senses, the servant opened the door. The latter's eyes were wide with astonishment, but they immediately kindled warmly when Hamlin thrust a bill toward him.

"I didn't see you when I went out a few minutes ago, George," he grinned; "so I'll make it up to you now. I've dropped a glove — somewhere. Up-stairs, perhaps. Will you take a look?"

George looked. He returned, his face wearing an expression of mystification.

"Can't find any glove, sir. You couldn't have lost it here. What puzzles me, sir, is how did you get out without me seeing you?"

Hamlin's grin grew wider. "I didn't intend to mention it, George, because those things have a psychological effect upon one. I came down some time ago. You were standing at the door, George—sound asleep!"

The man started, looked incredulous, and rubbed his eyes. Then he reddened, guiltily.

"You won't say anything to Mr. Gray, sir?" he pleaded. "I *have* been feeling a little out of sorts all morning; and maybe I *did* doze for just a minute, sir—just a minute, begging your pardon. You won't mention it to Mr. Gray, sir?"

"Certainly not!" grinned Hamlin. He turned to go down the steps and saw the policeman slowly sauntering toward a corner, apparently satisfied.

Hamlin went in the opposite direction,

hailed a taxi, and was whirled toward the office of the McGrail Detective Agency.

The Hamlin who arrived there was not the Hamlin who had left the place some time before. A change had come over him—he felt it. His easy-going attitude toward life had suddenly changed to an intense eagerness to take a hand in what was going on around him—particularly in the activities relating to Seeley Gray, Morrell, and Miss Richards.

Deep within him a note of discord had been struck, arousing a passion that was new to him. He had fought many times, merely for the love of fighting, and never with definite animosity. He had possessed the instinct to fight; he had loved the violent physical action that fighting had brought; the jarring impact of blows, delivered with intent to do injury; the sheer matching of his strength and skill with his fellow man. And he had indulged that passion whenever opportunity offered. Since his talk with Lawton had occurred he knew that the desire to fight was inherent, a passion bequeathed him by his father. The mystery was no longer a mystery; he would never wonder over it again.

Contact with Seeley Gray and the subsequent discovery of the financier's connection with the big man of the Dragon—Morrell—had brought a change in the character of the passion that had gripped him all his days. Added to the passion was contempt for both men, and hatred, which until his meeting with Gray, he had never felt.

When he reached the door of the McGrail office he was grinning mirthlessly, his muscles, his mind, his heart, tingling with eagerness, with sheer delight over the prospect of a fight with Gray and Morrell.

And yet he betrayed no outward sign of this. When he opened the door and stepped inside he looked no different than when he had entered through the same door some time before. Miss Alden was sitting in a chair at the desk, and she wheeled to face him, her eyes widening a little when she saw who it was.

Hamlin was certain that anxiety over the outcome of his visit to Seeley Gray agitated her; for he noted that her face was a trifle pale, that her lips were pressed tightly together, and that her eyes were eloquent with an interrogative light. He decided that her voice quavered a little when she said, rather faintly:

"Well?"

"I didn't get much out of Gray;" reported Hamlin. And he detailed his conversation with the financier.

Miss Alden's disappointment was obvious.

"Is that all?" she asked when Hamlin paused.

He smiled. "Did you expect Gray to outline, to a mere detective, his plan of campaign against Lawton and Richards?"

"And yourself—don't forget that," she reminded him. "No," she added, answering his question; "I did not. But I hoped that he might say something that would indicate what his plans are."

"I think he will do nothing definite until he discovers if Richards is really in town. What do you think?"

"About Gray's conviction that Mr. Richards has not left New York? I really do not know, Mr. Hamlin."

"Hammond," corrected Hamlin. She reddened—the first blush he had seen on her face; and he decided it added much to her attractiveness.

"Morrell, however," Hamlin added, "claims to have seen Miss Richards."

"Morrell?" Miss Alden looked puzzled. "Who is Morrell?"

"I hadn't got to that," grinned Hamlin. "Morrell is the big man who accosted Miss—I should say the veiled lady—in the Dragon. As I was leaving Gray's house I saw the big man about to enter. I slipped into a room that adjoins the library and overheard Gray and the big man talk. Gray called him Morrell. And Morrell declares the woman he accosted in the Dragon was Miss Richards. Morrell's confederate, a man called Frayne—who is the man who was with the girl in the Dragon—claims to have seen Miss Richards standing at a window of her father's residence."

"What was this man Morrell doing at Gray's?" Miss Alden was watching Hamlin intently.

"Gray employs him, it seems. At least

it appears they are working together in this deal. We're not getting anywhere," added Hamlin. "Here is what I overheard."

He detailed the conversation carefully, for he had a vivid recollection of it. And when he reached the point where Gray rebuked Morrell for his murderous designs, Miss Alden gasped audibly.

"That is terrible!" she exclaimed. "You say this man Morrell declared Mr. Richards was using his—Morrell's money; or money left to Morrell by his mother?"

"That is what I gathered."

Miss Alden drew a deep breath. "You didn't find out who Morrell intends to—er—kill, did you?"

"I inferred that he meant Miss Richards," answered Hamlin. "Her father, too, it appears. And I believe he is quite capable of it."

"Well," said Miss Alden, after a period of silence; "you certainly succeeded in learning something of importance. Of course you don't intend to follow Gray's instructions and search the Richards home for Miss Richards. That won't be necessary, you know. If Miss Richards were in town we would certainly know it, for Mr. Richards has every confidence in this office. Also, if Mr. Richards and his daughter were in town Mr. Lawton would know it."

"I intend to find Miss Richards," declared Hamlin quietly. "You must admit that I have an interest in the young lady, aside from my admiration for her."

"Mr. Lawton says there is no one there except a man named Labrue—who used to work for Mr. Richards in the West many years ago—and a girl named Larrabie, a servant. And Mr. Lawton assures me the man, Labrue, is an old-time gunman—a person who is not to be trifled with."

"I'll try to keep out of his way, Miss Alden."

"You mean that you intend breaking into the house?"

"If there is no other way. I intend to find Miss Richards—if she is in town. And if the veiled woman is not Miss Richards I intend to discover why she is masquerading as Miss Richards, and why she enters the Richards residence."

"This office never violates the confidence of a client, Mr. Hamlin."

Hamlin grinned. "What about Gray's confidence?"

Miss Alden reddened again; then she smiled.

"That is quite different."

Hamlin laughed. "The ethics of this business are rather confusing to me, I admit. I don't pretend to understand. But I am going to get into the Richards home somehow."

"I forbid it!" There was a frown on Miss Alden's brow; her voice was cold, with a vigorous snap in it.

"That means I shall have to resign, I suppose," smiled Hamlin. "For I shall get into the Richards home to-night. I have enjoyed my brief engagement with the McGrail Agency, I assure you. And I am particularly pleased to have been able to supply you with information of a certain sort—which is rather in the nature of a Chinese puzzle to me."

He was smilingly removing the badge from his vest as he talked. He suddenly realized that Miss Alden was sitting very rigid, watching him with worried, regretful eyes.

"Just a moment, Mr. Hamlin," she said as he looked at her. "Let us not be rash. You have done me a great service. Incidentally you have rendered the same service to yourself and to Mr. Lawton. I am sure you will be able to help us—and yourself—in other ways. At the least by remaining with us you will succeed in keeping the police at a distance. And, considering the matter carefully, I can really see no harm in your going to the Richards home to search it for Miss Richards. But it will not be necessary to make forcible entry, and thus run the risk of bringing the police down upon you—to say nothing of Labrue, who always carries a gun where he can get it instantly.

"Mr. Lawton has a key to the Richards residence. If you will arrange to meet him and tell him what you want, he will give you the key, and also a note to Labrue—which will make it unnecessary for Labrue to kill you."

"And my resignation?"

"Will not be accepted just at present. You remember," she smiled; "that I did not ask for it. And I can readily understand how you feel about wanting to see Miss Richards." Miss Alden was regarding him steadily, calmly, and he thought a bit speculatively.

"What will you do if you happen to find Miss Richards?" she questioned. "Understand, I do not believe you will find her; I do not believe she is in town. I rather adhere to the notion that some clever adventuress is masquerading as Miss Richards in the hope, or with a deliberate intention to defraud some one. But I am rather curious to know what you would do if you should happen to meet her?"

"I shall ask her to make a written statement describing what occurred at the Dragon on the night she visited it."

"Which statement would be valueless in the event that the woman is merely impersonating Miss Richards."

"I'll have to take that chance, I suppose."

Miss Alden's gaze was unwavering as it met Hamlin's.

"Why not make sure of it?" she suggested. "Arrest her. If she is Miss Richards she will not object to having her identity known, and if she is a fraud she will have to confess."

"I shall do nothing to inconvenience the lady," smiled Hamlin.

"Gallant," breathed Miss Alden. Her tone was lightly sarcastic, but Hamlin saw a gleam of approval far back in her eyes. She had wonderful eyes. Hamlin had noticed them before, of course; but they were more expressive than he had thought, and he searched them, keenly enjoying the approval in them. He wondered if his loyalty to the veiled lady was wavering—if the lapse of time was taking the romance out of his meeting with her. That, or the passion he had felt for her was fickle, evanescent. Certainly something was happening to him—or had happened.

For the look into Miss Alden's eyes had thrilled him; had brought a flush to his face and a swelling sensation somewhere inside him, much like that which had assailed him that night in the Dragon, and which had remained with him since, until now.

Miss Alden, calm, with unperturbed gaze, evidently suspected nothing of the state of his feelings, for she smiled faintly, impersonally, seemingly having not noticed the flush on his face.

And now, as she watched him, it seemed that her smile grew slightly mocking.

"It is quite evident that the wonderful veiled lady has made an impression on you," she said.

To Hamlin's surprise, her voice was gentle, as though she intended it to soften the effect of the mockery on her lips. Hamlin knew nothing of women, but he hazily realized that Miss Alden was taking the sting out of her words and her smile because she was aware that he was serious. And Hamlin was serious, though not in the way Miss Alden thought.

He was beginning to doubt; beginning to realize that he had done a foolish thing in permitting himself to believe he had fallen in love with a woman whose face he had not seen. He was conscious at this instant of the fact that about the only interest he had in the veiled woman was in finding her and obtaining from her a statement which would exonerate him from blame for the knifing of the Chink at the Dragon.

Also, Hamlin was aware of something else—that he had known Miss Alden only a few hours, and that he was already in love with her. It seemed incredible; but he remembered that Lawton had warned him.

He felt that Miss Alden must see the confusion that descended upon him; and he realized that if he remained in the office with her longer he would inevitably betray the state of his feelings. That iron self-control he had always preserved in moments of stress and danger—the cold, calm, steady grip he had always maintained upon his passions—had somehow slipped from him. In Miss Alden's presence he was conscious of a demoralization which seemed to verge upon panic.

Miss Alden seemed to know it, too, for she sat there watching him, still calm and unperturbed; her clear, steady eyes glint-

ing with amusement—a sympathetic amusement, as though she wished him well, but could not resist laughing at him. She said quietly, as though she were discussing a lately constructed branch of the subway, the lace on a new frock, or the progress of the prohibition movement—or any mundane subject that is as far from love as the the North Pole from Broadway:

"I have been thinking of what you told me about the veiled lady, Mr. Hamlin. It seems incredible that you should fall in love with her without seeing her face."

Hamlin essayed a smile, which proved a failure. Still, he did not retreat, obstinately persisting in his loyalty to the unknown: "That seems to be the fact, though."

"But I always supposed love to be something—er—spiritual. That is, I thought it must find its being in something that lies in the eyes—character or soul, or something of that nature."

"I believe that has been the theory," admitted Hamlin.

"And you have set out to disprove it. Is that it? Oh, don't!" she mocked. "Some of the old and tried lovers will be sure to visit their wrath upon you. Or you will regain consciousness one day and discover that you are not in love at all."

Hamlin's flush deepened.

"There are signs of character in poise!" he defended. "In the set of one's head and the way one walks."

"But what if Miss Richards—or the veiled lady—admitting Miss Richards and the veiled lady are one—should happen to prove to be a maiden lady with less physical and spiritual charm than you imagine Miss Richards possesses? What then?"

Hamlin grinned faintly. At which Miss Alden smiled broadly.

"Ah!" she reproved. "I see that would make some difference. Would it?"

"I believe it would," admitted Hamlin. "I concede I have formed an idea of the veiled lady's appearance. Perhaps if she does not approach that mental picture I submit I should very likely change my mind about loving her."

To his astonishment, now that she had forced him to confess to entertaining disloyal thoughts, Miss Alden said gently:

"I believe all men are fickle."

"Do you mean that has been your experience?" laughed Hamlin.

"I do not!"

Miss Alden's chin went up and her eyes flashed resentfully. A new color came into her face, a telltale flush, betraying passion—the only passion, Hamlin believed, she had so far exhibited.

"That has been my observation—from a distance, of course." She gazed defiantly at him, and Hamlin somehow got the impression that her passions had ben aroused over the confession he had made—that he would not remain loyal to Miss Richards if she did not at least approximate the ideal he had formed of her appearance.

She was disappointed in him, chagrined because, perhaps, she thought he ought to show devotion to his ideal until he discovered, for a certainty, that she was not what he thought her to be.

She was not consistent, of course, for she had been leading him to make that sort of a confession—had been deliberately inviting him to make it. And now that he had confessed, she was betraying indignation.

Hamlin felt a pulse of satisfaction. Did Miss Alden's mingled indignation and embarrassment mean that she was interested in him? Or had she merely dramatized herself—her imagination placing her in Miss Richards's position, where she experienced the emotions that Miss Richards felt—assuming Miss Richards knew of Hamlin's attitude—and that she keenly sensed the disappointment Miss Richards would feel, if Miss Richards cared at all.

The hypothesis fascinated Hamlin. He saw immense possibilities in it. For one thing, even if his deductions were wrong, the verbal tilt had revealed a new side to Miss Alden's character. She had betrayed a lively imagination, warm and generous impulses, and a vast capacity for sympathy—human traits that seethed under the cold, calm, unperturbed exterior she had presented until this minute. And may she not have exhibited one other human, though essentially primitive, emotion—that of jealousy?

Of course, Hamlin did not know, and to consider it would mean a confession of

conceit; and he laughed as he put the thought out of his mind.

"It isn't funny," Miss Alden surprised him by saying. "According to your story of what happened the night you went to the Dragon—of how the veiled woman looked at you; how she mentioned your name, and—and ran a hand through your hair in the cab—it is quite possible that she admires you.

"And I think you are doing her an injustice by discussing her at all. I hope that when you meet her you will discover that she more than fulfils your expectations of her appearance; that she will exceed them. And then I hope that she will have nothing to do with you."

"I assure you that I expect no better treatment from her—that I deserve nothing better, Miss Alden," said Hamlin in all seriousness, astonished at the vindictiveness of the lady's voice. "At any rate, I am going to try to see her. I shall report to you to-morrow morning."

Miss Alden did not answer.

When Hamlin went out she was standing beside her desk, her back to him.

CHAPTER X.

THE ANTECEDENTS OF MORRELL.

HAMLIN had not taken more than half a dozen steps down the hall when he heard Miss Alden's voice:

"Mr. Hammond!"

Hamlin turned. Miss Alden was standing in the open doorway, calmly watching him.

"Mr. Lawton is at the phone," she said shortly.

Lawton greeted him with:

"Well—they didn't get you yet—eh?" And at Hamlin's low laugh, Lawton went on:

"Where are you going to sleep to-night? I suppose you know that you can't get into your apartment—they'd nab you in a minute. Take a cab and come to my rooms at the Halstead. There's damn few people know I have rooms here. Come right up without saying anything to anybody. Second floor, No. 26. Hustle!"

Hamlin turned from the telephone to see Miss Alden watching him. Again she was calm and self-possessed, and she smiled slightly at the serious expression of his eyes.

"Presumably you will want to wash between now and morning," she said. "You had better take that bottle with you—the one with the stain on it, you know. And please be careful. You are not to forget that you can do this office and yourself an inestimable service by not falling into the hands of the police."

"I shall do my best, Miss Alden."

Hamlin's bow and smile indicated profound respect for the lady; and she rewarded him with a bright smile on her own account as he closed the door.

A quarter of an hour later he was in Lawton's rooms at the Halstead. Lawton offered him a cigar, watched him light it, lit one himself, and then drew a chair up close beside him.

"I've got a confession to make to you, Lane." Lawton was very serious. "I don't know whether you've guessed it by this time, but I purposely sent you to the McGrail Agency."

"To see Miss Alden, I suppose?" hazarded Hamlin.

Lawton's smile was huge, but a trifle forced.

"No; not for that purpose alone. I wanted you to have a hand in the game Seeley Gray and his crowd are playing against Richards, myself—and you."

"Why didn't you tell me that before I went to McGrail's?"

"I wanted you to see Miss Alden first. If I had put this thing up to you before you had seen that young woman, you would have laughed at me. I would not have been able to show you how serious the situation is. You've never been a wolf at business, you know, Lane; and I had to do something unusual in order to arouse your interest."

"You've done it."

"You saw Seeley Gray? Miss Alden told me you had gone to his place."

Hamlin related what Gray had said, and Lawton scowled.

"It was damn little, wasn't it? He gave

you no hint of how he was going to attack us?"

"He merely said he though Richards and his daughter had not left New York; and he wants me to find them."

"He's had some one watching Richards then," said Lawton. "And he's right—Richards and his daughter are in New York!"

"So Morrell said."

A startling change came over Lawton. He had been keenly interested in listening to Hamlin; but it had been a quiet interest, and he had betrayed no excitement. At Hamlin's pronouncement of the name Morrell, however, Lawton's muscles contracted; he rose from his chair and stood rigid, his hands clenched, his jaws clamped, his eyes blazing as he looked at Hamlin.

"Morrell!" he repeated. "Where in hell did you see him?"

Hamlin related the conversation between Gray and Morrell in the former's library, and when he concluded Lawton clamped his jaws tighter and began to walk back and forth in the room.

Hamlin watched him, dimly realizing that there must be some unexplained significance in Morrell's savage resentment for Richards and his daughter. He meant to ask Lawton what it all meant, but it was evident that Lawton would tell him presently. For Lawton's brows were drawn together in a terrible frown, and he undoubtedly was laboring under some strong emotion.

At last he sat stiffly down in the chair he had previously vacated and looked steadily at Hamlin.

"Then Morrell was the big man you slugged in the Dragon?" he said.

Hamlin nodded.

"I wish you had killed him!" said Lawton savagely.

"I've been expecting it," he went on, after a silence. "Lane, I've got to tell you another story. The time has come when you've got to know.

"Richards, your father, myself, and a man named Link Morrell were joint owners of a mine near Lanon, New Mexico." He smiled swiftly as Hamlin shot a swift, surprised glance at him. "Link Morrell was this Morrell's father—the son's name is Luther.

"Link Morrell was a handsome devil. The four of us prospected together, and we didn't know until after we'd located the mine that Link Morrell was an outlaw, a professional killer who had outraged every law of decency in the land.

"About a year after we'd begun to take some dust out of the mine, Link decided he'd sell out to the rest of us. We weren't getting much ore—just enough to keep our grubstake coming regular—so we bought Link out, the four of us signing an agreement to that effect.

"Link disappeared; we heard later that the reason he'd been eager to sell out was that the law was crowding him pretty close. He was gone about a year, and then he showed up again, bringing a woman with him. He told the rest of us that she was his wife.

"She was, too. She was mighty pretty. And refined, for that section of the country, in those days. She wasn't very tall, but she was graceful, and she knew how to carry herself. We boys didn't see a heap of her, but there wasn't one of us that didn't fall right in love with her. I reckon Richards was hit hardest. He was square, though, Richards was, and he didn't go to mooning around Morrell's place.

"Morrell seemed to go straight for a while after he came back; and then he began to mix up with a bad bunch. He grew coarse—drinking heavy and raising hell generally. There was a report around that he'd beaten his wife more than once, but no one could find out. Her name was Della, and we all got into the habit of calling her that.

"Of course there was nothing we could do; Della was Morrell's wife, and he had a right to beat her as long as she didn't complain, and as long as none of us boys didn't see him doing it. You understand we couldn't go over to Morrell's place and interfere.

"Reports of Morrell's carrying on came to us for a year or more. We saw Della growing thin and pale, like she was worrying about something; but still we couldn't

mix in, and when we'd met her she wouldn't talk.

"Morrell was getting worse and worse. When he'd been with us he'd made some pretense of being a man—hiding some of his mean traits, so they weren't so raw. But toward the last he'd got to be a roaring, swaggering bully.

"And then it happened. Morrell rode over to our camp one night. He was in a mean mood. About a week before we'd struck a vein that was panning out big. We'd tried to keep it quiet, but it got out in some way, and Morrell heard of it. He got off his horse at the door of our shack, and said he'd come to take his share of the gold we'd got out of the mine.

"Lane, your dad was standing in front of the shack when Morrell rode up. Your dad was a right positive man, a natural leader, and we always let him do the talking when any talk was necessary.

"And that night he talked to Morrell. He'd got like the rest of us, so that he hated Morrell for what Morrell was reported to be doing to his wife. And he cut Morrell rather short, telling him that he'd sold out once and that ended it.

"There'd never been any love lost between your dad and Morrell. Morrell had seen your dad sling a gun once or twice, and he'd got jealous, I reckon. Anyway, they had words that could mean but one thing.

"There was only your dad and myself and Richards staying at the shack. Your dad had left you and your mother back in Lanon. So there was no one to interfere. Richards wouldn't, and I wouldn't, because both of us knew what would happen if Morrell went for his gun.

"But I reckon I won't forget that picture. Morrell had come to a point within half a dozen steps of your dad. He was puffed up like a blow-snake, and his eyes were blazing with hate. There'd been a time when Morrell had been able to control himself, but he'd outlived that time, and there was no mistaking that he intended to kill.

"Your dad didn't seem to mind Morrell much. He was that cool you might have thought Morrell was asking him about a trail to town, and that he'd told Morrell and was waiting for him to move on. That was just it, too. He *had* told Morrell to move. He'd just said, in that quiet, slow way of his:

"'I know what you're after, Morrell. Get going!'

"Your dad's voice must have stung Morrell, for he reached for his gun. He got it, too. But he was a fraction of a second too late. Morrell went for his gun before your dad did, but your dad put two bullets into him before Morrell's gun showed above the holster.

"It was a clean kill and justifiable. Your dad had to do it. And the sheriff saw it the way we did, so there was no aftermath in that way.

"Richards broke the news to Della Morrell. He said afterward that she didn't seem to grieve much, and I don't wonder, for it turned out that Morrell *had* been in the habit of beating her.

"Well, we had peace for a while. In about a year Richards married Della. And then, to sort of make Della feel independent, Richards, your dad and myself gave her a share in the mine—the share Morrell wanted. Maybe we was sort of conscience-stricken—I don't know. But she got a share.

"Then, about a year later, Della presented Richards with a daughter. Della called her 'Ella,' sort of abbreviating her own name, I reckon. And she added her family name, 'Falk.' The kid always called me her uncle.

"Things went swimming for a while—maybe two years. Ella had grown to be a sizable girl, and Della and Richards were happy as two kids going to a circus. Richards had built a dandy house in Lanon, close to your dad's.

"Then things began to happen again. First, your mother died. She'd been away to a Denver hospital, and you hadn't seen her for a couple of years—that accounting for you not remembering her. Then there was an accident at the mine, and your dad got killed.

"And following close upon that there came a woman to Richards's house in Lanon. She said she was Morrell's wife—

that he'd married her at a little town in Lincoln County. She had a boy with her. He was about seven or eight—maybe a little more—and the thing looked bad for Della.

"Richards was dead set on getting all the angles of the affair, and so I went down to Lincoln County and did some investigating. There was nothing to the woman's claim. She'd never been married to Morrell. She confessed afterward that she'd heard Morrell's name mentioned in connection with the mine, and she'd come north to get a stake if she could.

"She didn't get it; but she hung around, talking mean things about Della. And her kid was just as mean. He looked like Morrell and acted like him. He was a scowling, sneering, impudent coyote, with the soul of a rattler. He'd steal, lie, sneak!

"Della hated him; but not more than the rest of us hated him, I reckon. Of course the kid had no claim on Della—or on any of us, for that matter. But when Della took sick, and the doctor Richards got for her told her there wasn't any hope, she made a will, leaving everything she owned to her daughter Ella.

"And I reckon that at the last minute she must have had an impulse of pity, or something like it, for she specified in the will that in case Ella died before young Morrell, the boy was to inherit everything.

"Richards kicked like the devil; but in the end the will stood, and was probated after Della died.

"After Della went Richards lost interest in the country. And so did the rest of us. We sold out and came East. That was about eighteen years ago.

"About two years since a man came to my office. I knew him at sight. It was Luther Morrell. He is the living image of his father, and he inherited his father's character. I'd outgrown my Western ways, and so I didn't shoot him when he got insulting—I just knocked him down. He went away, swearing he'd get even. He'd got a copy of the will and showed it to me, and I could see from the devil's eyes of him that he meant harm to Ella.

"For a while he dropped from sight. Now he has turned up again, and is working with Seeley Gray against Richards and myself. You say Gray warned him not to drag his personal affairs into whatever is coming off; and I believe Gray meant it. But what Morrell said to Gray indicates trouble. Morrell has brought his rattlesnake soul here and he means harm to Ella Richards."

"It was fortunate that I dropped into the Dragon the other night." Hamlin's face was grave.

Lawton looked hard at him. "You were mighty lucky to get out of there alive, Lane. The day Morrell came to my office he told me he'd found out that your dad killed Link Morrell. For some reason or other he has decided to make a martyr out of his dad, and he seems to think he can avenge him by murdering you. That's what made me knock him down, Lane."

Lawton watched Hamlin keenly, apparently searching the latter's face for signs which would indicate that this news had affected him. But when he could detect no emotion of any kind, either in Hamlin's face or his manner, a slow, admiring grin appeared on his lips and his eyes glowed.

"Not a bit different!" he said. "Lane, you're just like your dad!" He sighed. "Sometimes I wish we'd never left the West; that this thing could be pulled off out there, in the old days. It would be mighty simple then. But now it's different.

"There's laws here, and they've got to be observed. But there's always the plea of self-defense, Lane—don't forget that. And if it's necessary, and Morrell gets you into a corner—"

His pause was eloquent.

Hamlin smiled with straight lips.

"I wasn't thinking of Morrell," he said. "A fight between men is perfectly legitimate, according to the old code—which is the code of yesterday and to-day and to-morrow. But if he is meditating evil to Miss Richards—"

"That makes it different—eh?" interrupted Lawton. "I sort of forgot that you've fallen in love with her."

"I don't know about that," rejoined Hamlin soberly. "You see, I've rather re-

vised my feelings. I'm in doubt. I think I did stretch things a little by thinking I was in love with a woman whose face I'd never seen. And perhaps I was a little vain in even thinking about it."

"I've heard that a few minutes alone with Barbara Alden has made more than one man revise his opinion of other girls," said Lawton slyly. "She *has* got a way about her, hasn't she, Lane?"

"You're a hypocrite, Lawton," grinned Hamlin.

"*And* a prophet," added Lawton gently. "Lane," he went on enthusiastically, "she's even got under the hide of an old hard shell like me. And when she can do that, there's no limit to what she could do to a young man—like you."

"Lawton, the lady doesn't like me."

"Bah!" Lawton's mouth was open. He was ready to laugh. But he stifled it. The effort crimsoned his face, made his throat swell. He was fighting mightily for suppression of the mirth that was in him.

"You mean she told you that, direct?"

"Intimated it. I'd been talking about Miss Richards; I'd told Miss Alden I was in love with Miss Richards. She didn't seem to like it."

"No—she wouldn't!" declared Lawton. "Every woman thinks that a man makes a mistake by falling in love with any woman but herself. Looks like you don't know a heap about women, Lane!"

"Who does?" grinned Hamlin.

Lawton scratched his head and looked blankly at Hamlin.

"Now you've got *me* guessing," he confessed. He narrowed his eyes at Hamlin. "So you're wanting to go to the Richards home to-night? And Miss Alden told you to come to me for a key, and a note to Labrue? Well, you can have them. And it's likely you'll find Miss Richards in—she's been staying there right along, in spite of that man Frayne watching the house."

"Is Jay Richards in New York?" questioned Hamlin.

"He's never been out of New York," answered Lawton slowly. "Gray's got the correct information. And we've got to keep Gray guessing until we find out what he intends to do. As long as he merely suspects Richards has not left town he'll not try to start anything. But I'm afraid that if he can find Richards he'll attempt abduction—or something worse.

"The Seeley Gray gang is desperate. Richards has got them where the skin is short, and he's been showing signs of wanting to make them squirm. It's a long story—concerning control of the B. Q. and S. Railroad. If they could get rid of Richards about the fifteenth of the month—next month—when the directors of the B. Q. and S. meet—they'd be able to run things to suit themselves.

"And they're desperate enough to try to get rid of him. It's been done, and will be done again—just as long as there's men like Seeley Gray and his gang in the world.

"Richards has got more than money—he's got personality, brains, and ability to control men. He's had the directors of the B. Q. and S. eating out of his hand for years. And he's been delivering the goods, too. He's made a paying proposition out of a rank failure. And now that he's done it, this gang of pirates wants to get control of it. And if they could get him out of the way for a while they'd do it.

"That's why Richards pretended to leave for Europe. He wasn't exactly certain of what the Gray gang meant to do, and he wanted them to show their hand. So far they haven't done so. They don't actually know that Richards is in New York—they're only guessing.

"From what you've told me, they know Ella Richards is here; but the fact that they've seen her doesn't prove that Richards is here, too.

"But if they'd find out for sure, they'd make him come out of cover—if they didn't try to do him some injury which would keep him away from the directors' meting."

"Then it is important that Miss Richards be kept out of any position which would compel her to confess that her father is in New York?"

"Thinking of that Dragon incident, eh? Well, they would make it hot for her, for a fact, if they got her on the witness-stand.

And Richards loves her so well that he'd come out of hiding sure if that happened, and tell them all to go plumb to hell! At the same time, if the police get hold of you, Miss Richards will have to tell what she knows about the Dragon deal."

Hamlin grinned grimly. "The police haven't got hold of me yet, Lawton."

Lawton threw a worried glance at the other. He cleared his throat.

"Bosh!" he said. "Don't be a damn fool, Lane. If the police go to crowding you too hard, you'd better give yourself up. Don't get an idea you can fight the police!"

Hamlin smiled and got up.

"While you are writing that note to Labrue I'll be getting this stain off my face," he said. "And I'll slip into one of the few suits that I so providentially left in one of the sections of your wardrobe when I was here with you a few months ago. They will come in mighty handy now."

"You'd better not change," advised Lawton. "That stain on your face and those dark glasses and the race-horse clothes change your appearance so that the devil wouldn't know you if he didn't look at you pretty steady. What do you want to change for?"

"Vanity, perhaps," laughed Hamlin. "Naturally, having fallen in love with Miss Richards, I want to make an impression when I meet her. Miss Alden said I looked 'Frenchy' in this outfit."

"Just like his father," muttered Lawton as he watched Hamlin go into another room. "Nothing disturbs him. He's a human iceberg, except when he's in love. And then he's impulsive as—as any fool—the darned cuss."

CHAPTER XI.

UNVEILED.

AFTER dark, having dined with Lawton in the latter's rooms, Hamlin descended to the street floor, boldly passed through the hotel lobby and out to the sidewalk. Apparently no one paid any attention to him, and Hamlin reflected upon the ironic truism: "The safest refuge for the hunted is among those who know him."

However, Hamlin had not made himself conspicuous, for he had mingled in the crowd in the lobby as much as possible while making his way toward the street, and once on the sidewalk he moved rapidly, turning a corner into a side street. At a short distance from the corner he hailed a taxi. A few minutes later, following his directions, he was set down within a block of the Richards residence.

Evidently Morrell had obeyed Gray's instructions regarding Frayne, for as Hamlin walked briskly toward the house he saw no one who might have been watching the place. He was careful to keep a vigilant lookout for any one who might be trailing him, and when he finally reached the steps that led to the door of the house there was, apparently, no one in sight.

As he stood awaiting an answer to his ring he reflected upon the events of the past few days, deciding that at least he had succeeded in escaping the monotony that had ruled his days.

Lawton's story had impressed him deeply, though from the man's manner in the past Hamlin had gathered there had been some reservations in his frequent references to the elder Hamlin.

Miss Richards, he supposed, had got her spirit and manner from her mother. Certainly, judging by her wonderful poise, and her bravery in standing in the doorway of the Dragon to watch him fight his way toward her, she had betrayed evidences of her early training.

In the midst of his reflections Hamlin became aware that Labrue was standing in the doorway watching him. Hamlin was certain it was Labrue, for now that he had been told of the man's earlier connection with Richards, he had no difficulty in observing the signs of previous ruggedness that lurked all over him. He had thought on the occasion of his other visit that the doorman had a strong face for a servant.

Labrue was as stoical as ever, however. Hamlin gave him the note Lawton had written, and Labrue smiled and stepped aside, permitting Hamlin to enter. Then he closed the door.

"Miss Richards is at home, sir," he said. "I'll ask her if she'll see you."

Leaving Hamlin to stand in the hallway, Labrue vanished. He returned presently, smiling faintly, and told Hamlin Miss Richards would receive him in the drawing-room. And an instant later, following Labrue, Hamlin was confronting the woman of the Dragon.

To his astonishment, Miss Richards was arrayed as she had been on the night of that startling adventure. She wore the brown suit, the brown hat with its drooping plume—brown also; brown shoes; and the identical veil which had covered her face then was concealing it from him now.

There was about her, too, the same admirable poise. Hamlin could think of only one word that would describe her—thoroughbred. And once again, despite the doubts that he had expressed to Miss Alden and to Lawton, Hamlin experienced the thrill that had seized him on the night he had seen her at the Dragon. Again romance was imminent; again the fragrance of her presence brought its intoxication.

"You will pardon me for receiving you in this manner, Mr. Hamlin," she said quietly. "I just this moment came in." She motioned to a chair, adding: "Won't you please be seated."

She was fumbling at the veil as she spoke, with the same delicate grace which has been peculiar to woman throughout the ages; and Hamlin did not remove his gaze from her as he dropped into the chair, so eagerly did he follow the movements of the fingers that were undoing the veil. He wondered, though, remembering what she had said about having just entered, how she had done that without his seeing her, considering that he had carefully inspected the street in the vicinity and had seen no one—not even an automobile. He supposed, however, that she was like other women, that a "minute" was a mere figure of speech and might mean anything from half that time to several hours.

Occupied with these subconscious thoughts, Hamlin saw the veil come off, exposing her face to the light from the even glow coming from recessed points around her. And then Hamlin felt the blood slowly mount to his face, staining it with a warm flood. Disappointment, huge and vast, assailed him as he looked at her; and that romance for which he longed, and which had seemed so close to him for the past few days, flew with dark wings into the limbo of lost illusions.

The girl who stood before him, the veil of romance dangling from her fingers, was not the vision of beauty he had thought her. As a matter of fact, she was not ugly, but in her face was none of that spirituality for which Hamlin searched, and about which he had dreamed. The eyes that gazed into his were rather small. They were assertive eyes—even belligerent, certainly defiant. Her nose was rather too long, thin, and slightly drooping. Her mouth was large and her chin square and prominent; the skin of her face was the dead, pasty white that denotes distress of the respiratory system.

She seemed to note Hamlin's disappointment, much as he tried to conceal it, and her lips were set with a challenging hostility that was pitifully humorous.

Hamlin sensed little humor, though. In fact, he felt rather tragic.

"Miss Richards," he said, "I want to thank you for what you did for me."

"What I did?"

"For taking me home that night."

She smiled. "Oh, yes—I remember. That was my duty, don't you think—after what you did for me?"

"Some women wouldn't have had the courage to linger in the vicinity of a place like the Dragon after what happened. You were very brave, Miss Richards. Things were rather jumbled, for me, and I don't seem to remember exactly what did happen after I got to the door. That is why I have come here. An inmate of the Dragon was stabbed during the fight, and the police are charging me with it. Of course you have seen the papers?"

"I have seen them. It isn't true, of course, about the stabbing. You didn't do it. I was on the sidewalk, watching you through the half-open door. I saw you fight your way there; saw you knock one of the Chinese down in the hallway. When you opened the street door to come out—I have an impression that you were already out—I saw a man leap on the prone China-

man and stab him. He was a slender man; the one who was with the big man at the table when you interfered."

"Frayne," interposed Hamlin.

"I do not know his name, but I could identify him, if necessary."

"That is what I came to talk to you about," said Hamlin, gravely. "The police are after me, and of course when they catch me, as they will sooner or later, I must have some defense. But since the affair at the Dragon I have discovered that it isn't convenient for you to be identified with what occurred there. You understand, of course."

Miss Richards inclined her head. "It isn't fair to you," she said, hesitatingly.

"It happens to be policy, though. You see, Miss Richards, my money is involved with that of your father and Lawton's, and I intend to do nothing that will jeopardize it. The police can't prove that I did that stabbing. I have discovered that the stabbing of the Chinese was a frame-up, engineered by the man Frayne and the big man who is called Morrell. But despite that, if the police catch me, it will take some time for them to bring the case to trial, for I will have it delayed as long as possible. I know lawyers in this town who could delay the millennium if they could drag it into court. And by that time the necessity for secrecy will be over."

"That is gallant of you," smiled Miss Richards—with relief, Hamlin believed.

"I want to warn you, though," he went on, soberly, "that the men who are opposing your father are dangerous. Morrell especially. This morning I overheard him making threats against you. You evidently don't remember the man—perhaps you have never heard of him. In that case, I suggest that you have a talk with your father, or with Mr. Lawton.

"I think that is all, Miss Richards."

Hamlin got up. Miss Richards murmured her thanks, and Hamlin bowed to her and walked through the reception-room toward the front door. Labrue had taken his hat, and when Hamlin discovered that the man was nowhere to be seen, he halted, deciding he would have to wait until Labrue returned.

Hamlin's hat was lying on a small table in the reception hall, and when he saw it he smiled, grasped it, and started toward the door. With a hand on the knob he heard a smothered scream that seemed to come from the room he had just vacated.

Hamlin paused, listening expectantly. And when he heard a commotion, such as might be made by some one struggling, he wheeled and started back, his first thought being that perhaps Miss Richards had fainted.

He moved quickly to the drawing-room door, aware that he would be in an embarrassing position in case he had not correctly interpreted the sounds—to see Miss Richards struggling in the arms of Luther Morrell. Morrells' big hands were at her throat. He had bent her over so that her face was toward his, and his own was hideous with passion—with malignance that could mean nothing but murder.

CHAPTER XII.

ASSAULTING AN OFFICER.

HAMLIN made no sound as he leaped toward the big man.

Morrell, however, seemed to have a presentiment of the presence of some one coming toward him. He turned his head at about the instant Hamlin saw him; held Miss Richards rigid for an instant; she looking up at him with the terror of death in her eyes. Then he dropped her and clawed at a hip-pocket, his eyes blazing with hate and baffled rage.

Hamlin did not hesitate. It rather increased the cold fury that had seized him. Morrell had got the gun out—an automatic — when Hamlin reached him; and Hamlin's fist, with the weight of his body behind it, struck Morrell's jaw. Hamlin's eagerness, however, had led him to strike a trifle too soon, and the fist merely grazed Morrell. The force of the blow was so great, though, that it staggered the big man, loosening his grasp of the pistol, which thudded dully to the heavy rug on the floor.

Hamlin was still in motion. The force of the blow had sent him off balance, and

he plunged half a dozen feet away from Morrell before he could regain his equilibrium. And then he was after the big man again, silent, implacable.

Morrell, too, had been moving. It was evident that he had depended upon the pistol. That gone, and apparently realizing that he had no chance with Hamlin in a fist fight—remembering his experience in the Dragon—he darted toward the rear of the house, Hamlin after him.

On his way through the dining-room, Morrell overturned a chair, and Hamlin, following closely, fell over it. He was up again instantly, saying nothing, but hearing Morrell's triumphant curse as he fled.

The delay, however, had permitted Morrell to escape. When Hamlin reached the kitchen, the rear door, wide open, yawned before him. Morrell had evidently entered through it.

Hamlin did not pause. The door opened into a dark court, with the shadows of buildings to increase the blackness of the place, but Hamlin caught the outlines of the steps as he leaped, and he landed lightly on the stone flagging of the courtyard.

At first glance there seemed to be no exit from the court; but a gleam of light from a distant electric sign on the roof of a building disclosed to Hamlin a narrow passageway that seemed to lead between the Richards residence and the one adjoining. He ran toward it, gaining it just in time to see Morrell's huge hulk outlined against the dim light from a street-lamp.

Hamlin was through the passageway in an instant, and when he reached the sidewalk he saw Morrell not more than fifty or sixty feet from him, walking swiftly toward Riverside Drive.

It was evident that the other did not expect Hamlin to follow him, for he had slowed considerably by the time he reached the corner. But on looking back, and seeing Hamlin, he quickened his pace, disappearing almost instantly. When Hamlin reached the corner Morrell was running on the sidewalk close to the buildings. Opposite this section of street was a stretch of sunken parkway, dottel here and there with lamps that gleamed futilely in the darkness; and behind them the sheen of other lights from across the river.

Hamlin's rage still held. He meant to punish Morrell for the attack on Miss Richards. He was in the grip of a passion that must be satisfied—a savage lust to come into physical contact with this prowler from the West who warred on women.

Half-way down the block he saw Morrell slacken his pace. He was now within a dozen feet of the man, having gained on him since turning the corner. He saw Morrell look back again, and again break into a run. And Hamlin now divined why the other had slackened his pace. The blue uniform of a policeman caught Hamlin's gaze; the light from a street-lamp gleaming on the brass buttons. He was a big man, and was standing on the sidewalk at the corner, looking toward Morrell and Hamlin.

Hamlin, however, did not hesitate. He saw Morrell walk up to the policeman; heard his voice as he spoke to the officer:

"That's Lane Hamlin—wanted for murder!"

The words did not stop Hamlin's rush. He had no concern over what might happen to him; his one thought was to punish Morrell. He leaped for Morrell, evading a blow from the patrolman's night-stick by a matter of inches, missed his swing at Morrell, and felt the patrolman's grip on one of his arms; heard the words:

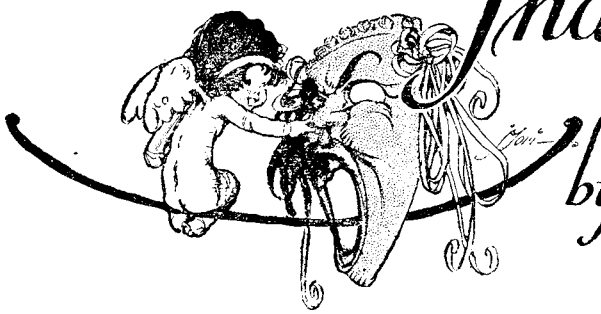
"None of that, now, or I'll bounce me club off your bean!"

He swung the club at Hamlin's violent movement, his arm swishing through empty space as Hamlin ducked and struck. Hamlin's blow in savage retaliation came upward from the hip—a full, sweeping, crushing swing that caught the patrolman on the point of the jaw. The officer made no sound as he fell, sinking in an inert heap.

An instant later the officer was alone—a lax, crumpled figure on the sidewalk. For Hamlin was speeding after Morrell, who had turned to run toward the sunken parkway. And Morrell had almost reached the iron rail that skirted the roadway when Hamlin caught him. With a flying tackle like that he had employed in the fight in the Dragon, Hamlin landed on his prey's back.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

How Do They Get That Way?



by Berton Braley

THERE was a slump in business at the Reynolds Department Store.

It was the sort of trade dulness which struck thousands of other merchants throughout the country, the reaction from a two years' orgy of spending, a holding off for lower prices by a public fed up on profiteering and at last awakened to revolt.

"Ho, hum!" yawned Delia Dean as she stood behind her attractive display of Filigree Biscuit and desultorily polished her already gleaming cocoa boiler. "It's a sad life. Here I am all dressed up as a demonstrator and nobody to demonstrate to. Can it be that the eager populace of this thriving metropolis had the merits of Filigree Biscuit so thoroughly demonstrated by yours truly last year that no one remains ignorant of the delicious quality of the soda biscuit—not to mention Honeycomb Flakes and Blissful Buns—that are as tasty as candy and as sustaining as beefsteak? Can it be? I wot not. But what am I to wot, if that's not what?"

"Business," said the floor manager of the grocery department, "is on the blink, that's what!"

"That," conceded Delia, "is evident. But let us take counsel together as to why business is on the aforesaid blink. And perhaps we can hit upon some scheme, plan, system, manner, or fashion of removing business from what you so aptly call the blink and putting it upon the wave of prosperity."

"I don't know what we could figure out," the floor manager said. "Our advertising man has been running page ads in all the papers, our prices have been cut to the limit—but the folks don't come."

"I'll whisper something in your coral ear," Delia promised. "In spite of my requesting information as to why there wasn't anybody to demonstrate to, I think I know. The secret is—people are sleeping off a spending jag—it's the only kind allowed by the present laws. They are 'off that stuff.' It's about time. And profiteering is through, finished and concluded. In the mean time even fair prices don't bring the customers in. What they need is a lil bracer—something with a kick in it, a good, honest, healthy but unusual kick. I shall mull over the matter, and perhaps evolve a suggestion that has merits."

"Mebbe so," commented the floor manager, "but everything so far tried has been a dud."

"Well, let me ruminate," Delia replied, "I have ideas now and then. And when I'm in form I sling a mean inspiration."

The floor manager moved away as two women paused at Delia's table and accepted

ner offer of Filigree Biscuit and creamy cocoa. They finished the beverage and the wafers and drifted on to the fancy grocery counter. Delia washed the plates and cups in the small dish-pan that stood on the little stove back of the table, and her white brow was wrinkled in cogitation beneath her bronze hair.

> "And as in uffish thought she stood,
> The Jabberwell, subdued and tame,
> Came lightly as a ton of wood
> And burbled forth her name.

"—which same name is, an' I be not mistaken, Delia Dean."

Delia grinned a welcome and shook hands cordially with the young man who had so lightly tossed off his parody of "Jabberwocky."

"Hel-lo, Ed Broderick!" she exclaimed. "Whither from, and whereunto bound?"

"From New York by way of Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, and St. Louis, with a lot of tank towns interspersed and interpolated in between," Broderick detailed, "and bound at the moment—oh, most tightly bound, to this here, now, city. I'm traveling ahead of the 'Rosy Princess,' or rather I was ahead of it, but it's caught up to me. Or rather, again, I came back to it because the manager summoned me by wire. How is business by you, Delia?"

"You ask a question which observation should make unnecessary," Delia answered. "Look around you. See anybody much? No. Well?"

"Business is rotten for the 'Rosy Princess,' too," confessed Broderick. "That's why I came back. We're playing here a week and we started last night with two hundred dollars in the house—and this is usually a good show town. So I'm supposed to dope out a stunt that 'll bring out the reluctant public unreluctantly with their two dollars in their outstretched hands."

"Thought of anything?" asked Delia.

"Nothing that is epoch-making or box-office filling," answered Broderick. "The advance stuff I spread in the local papers slipped over about all my ideas of clever press stunts, involving chiefly the lovely leading lady—and she is lovely and a regular fellow, too—but it doesn't seem to have awakened a flicker in the hearts of the local devotees of theaterdom."

"Eddie," said Delia, "I owe you for one or two hunches you've given me in the various times we've met hither and yon and elsewhere on the road. Maybe now I've got a hunch for you. And it won't do Filigree Biscuit any harm either."

"Spill it," said Broderick. "Your ideas are seldom wholly without interest."

"I thank you for your enthusiasm," Delia smiled. "Well, why not get your leading lady to demonstrate biscuit here with me during the week, say from two to five except matinée days? I can teach her a little of the proper chatter or let her read her own lines and she—"

"Oh, Lady of Sapient Wisdom, I bow. I bow." Broderick inclined in solemn obeisance. "I'll inform the universe that you have spoken an ample esophagusful. But—will the store stand for it?"

"I don't think the advertising manager of this outfit ever overlooks any reasonable bets. And not now, when the business boom is spelled with a 'u' instead of two 'o's.' Go up and consult with him, Eddie, while I regale a few customers I see brewing in the distance with some Filigree cocoa, and conversation. On your way—and make it snappy!"

Broderick gave her a smart salute that he had learned when he was one of the headquarters troop in the Seventy-Seventh, and obeyed.

When Broderick said that Miss Vivian Harcourt, prima donna of the "Rosy Princess" was a lovely lady and a regular fellow he was paying her deserved tribute. She had beauty, brains, and a sense of humor. That the whole company loved her goes to show that she didn't hog the spotlight or her scenes. She didn't have to, because her youth, vivacity, grace, and charm made your blood beat faster the moment she stepped on the stage. Also she could sing, which is not true of all musical comedy prima donnas.

She took Broderick's suggestion that she act as demonstrator for Filigree Biscuit in the Reynolds store with excellent spirit; indeed, she remarked that she thought it would be a lark. And thus it came to pass

that Vivian Harcourt, dressed in the nattiest suit she owned, was greeted by Delia Dean at the Filigree demonstration-table the next afternoon at one thirty.

"Now," said Delia when the amenities were concluded, "I'll just slip this apron on you, and you can take your stand behind the table. The biscuits are arranged on plates, as you see, and you simply offer them to customers who come near enough to hear you. I'll show you how to manipulate this cocoa-boiler, and I'll do the dish-washing so you can devote all your attention to demonstrating.

"Of course I have a line of conversation I hand out with the biscuits, but you needn't bother with that. When people begin finding out who you are you'll have your hands full serving them. I may say that—as you've doubtless guessed—Mr. Broderick is making no effort to keep your identity secret. Though he hasn't told anybody but the city editors of four papers so far. Well, I believe he or the advertising manager has also mentioned the matter to every clerk in the store."

"I'm afraid then," Miss Harcourt laughed, "the secret may leak out."

"It might," conceded Delia. "Secrets like that do seem to get around."

For perhaps an hour after Vivian Harcourt arrived at Delia's table she had no more than the usual patronage, but by that time people in the store began drifting in increasing numbers toward the grocery department, and in another hour they were coming in from the street. The later arrivals, urged by curiosity aroused from the stories in the papers, comprised a large percentage of men.

By five o'clock Miss Harcourt and Delia were both almost overwhelmed. Crowds besieged the table for the privilege of getting a Filigree sample, a cup of cocoa, a smile and a word or two with the star of the "Rosy Princess."

It had always been the policy of the Filigree company not to have their demonstrators personally sell goods, but Delia, on this occasion, broke that rule. A girl was brought over from the cashier's desk to make change while the eager multitude almost fought each other for the chance to buy biscuits from the added feature of the bill—Vivian Harcourt.

The charm that could get itself over the footlights to a theater audience worked even more potent magic with customers in the Reynolds store. Women went away gurgling their delight at "such a sweet girl—just like any other nice young woman," and men finally tore themselves from her presence ejaculating, "Oh, peaches, I've gotta see her in that show."

And every so often the advertising manager sauntered in, looked over the crowd, and went away again beaming. For the curiosity seekers, once in the store, were filtering through other departments, and business showed decided signs of picking up.

It was half an hour after closing time before the crowd had all been disposed of, and Delia and Miss Harcourt had time to talk.

"Believe you me, Miss Harcourt," Delia commented, "you registered success. And the way you handled 'em—oh, lady, lady, I'd swear you'd been born a demonstrator. That extemporaneous patter of yours was as good as I've ever heard. How do you do it?"

Vivian Harcourt laughed as she laid aside her apron.

"Miss Dean—"

"Delia."

"Delia, I wasn't born a demonstrator, but I was made one."

"How come, Miss Harcourt?"

"Vivian."

"I thank you. How come, Vivian?"

"I was demonstrating Dunkell's Cocoa six years ago when Eddie Broderick came along, got acquainted in that smooth and unabashable way of his, learned the story of my life and got me a walking lady part in the 'Purple Peony.' I was a good demonstrator, too. I wasn't such a very good walking lady, but when I got a chance to dance and they found out I could sing—well, that's how come I'm here with the 'Rosy Princess' and letting Eddie coax me into a highly undignified but apparently successful press agent stunt. Do you think that is a secret the papers might be trusted with?"

" We'll trust them with it and see," said Delia. " Here's Eddie now, with Gus Villard, our advertising manager."

" Oh, Eddie," Delia called to him, " you ought to mention the fact that Vivian was once a demonstrator heretofore."

" It's been mentioned in all the organs of publicity to which I have access," said Eddie. " You fail to do me due honor when you imagine I'd overlook such a bet."

" Miss Harcourt, may I present Mr. Villard, the advertising manager of Reynolds? He's my co-conspirator in this bit of enterprise."

" It was bully of you to help us out, Miss Harcourt," said Villard. " And I want to thank you, Miss Dean, for the idea. I hope," he turned again to Vivian, " that the work didn't tire or bore you too much."

" After the small house I played to last night," Vivian answered, " packing them in as I did here was a relief. And it's lots of fun."

" That being settled," remarked Broderick, " I suggest that all four of us adjourn to the Boissart grill and have dinner. Whadyuh say?"

" Le's go," replied the girls in one voice.

There was eight hundred dollars in the house when the chorus sang the opening number of the " Rosy Princess " that night, and half the men there went home convinced that they had been singled out for a special smile by Vivian Harcourt. And it is a commentary on the art of Miss Harcourt that half the women thought they had an individual glance from her, too. And because the " Rosy Princess " was a good show, with plenty of snap and sparkle, that audience went out ready to boost the star, the chorus, the tenor and everybody else in the company.

" S. R. O. to-morrow matinée and evening," whispered Eddie Broderick to Vivian when she was waiting for a cue back-stage, " but I think you'd better play the Reynolds the rest of the week, just the same."

" Of course," agreed Vivian. " I've even promised Delia to get up in the middle of the night and be at the store to-morrow from ten to one."

" Noble lady," laughed Broderick.

" Oh, Eddie," Vivian called back over her shoulder as she moved toward the wings, " bring that nice Mr. Villard and Delia to supper at the hotel after the curtain, will you? Do you think you can get him—them, I mean?"

" Oh, yes, I can get him—them, I mean. He—them; they're both in the house. Together."

It was lucky that Delia liked Broderick and enjoyed talking to him, for at supper neither Miss Harcourt nor Villard seemed to have eyes or ears for the other half of the party. Whenever a remark was addressed to either of them by any one else they looked up as if startled, made some vague reply, and continued their conversation where it left off.

" Let 'em rave, let 'em rave," suggested Broderick after three or four fruitless attempts to make talk general; " we seem to have initiated something, you and I. Vivian is always enthusiastic over new men—that's temperamental, I guess, but I've never seen her quite like this."

Reynolds's grocery department did the biggest morning business in its history the next day, and the number of men who offered to do their wives' household shopping was probably the largest in the city's chronicles. And once they were in the store, of course, every department began to feel the result. Villard's former advertising was telling, and confronted with the real values on Reynolds's counters the patrons opened their purses almost as of old.

And Eddie Broderick's prophecy of S. R. O. proved good not only for that day, but for the rest of the week. Those who saw Miss Harcourt at the demonstrator's table wanted to see her on the stage, and those who saw her on the stage wanted to meet her at the demonstrator's table.

" It's a bracer with a double kick, this idea of yours," said the floor manager three days later. " We get them coming, and Miss Harcourt gets them going."

" Well, she certainly has Villard going," Delia observed. " He's taken her to lunch, dinner, and supper every day and every evening, and this morning he went over to the hotel and had breakfast with her."

" Well, I don't blame him," replied the floor manager, " if I weren't a married man

and had the salary Villard has I'd be doing the same. She's a peach."

"Correctly stated," Delia agreed. "But what is more natural? Hasn't she been a demonstrator? She had a fine start. Look what I might be if I'd used demonstrating as a take-off for a stage career instead of my life work—Heaven forbid!"

"Don't you like demonstrating?" the floor manager queried.

"Sure, I like it. For if I didn't like it I wouldn't do it, and I love it. But it isn't such a passionate devotion that I want to be handing out Filigree Biscuit over a table when I'm eighty. I expect to get married some time and when I do I plan to do all my demonstrating over a kitchen-table for the benefit of my husband—and any other members of my family that we may acquire. These feminists may talk their brilliant heads off, but I'm here to state that business isn't a career for a woman; it's a way of spending your time without wasting it until somebody holds up a wedding-ring for you to jump through. Yep, a bachelor girl's life is all right; but a bachelor woman of forty—let them do it as can't find something else."

On Saturday noon Eddie Broderick came into the Reynolds store and asked Delia to lunch with him.

"Those be welcome words," quoth Delia. "I had just discovered that I have enough money when I pay my hotel bill to buy me a cup of coffee and a roll at a white front restaurant. And I am not one of those sylphlike creatures who toy with coffee and a roll with any ladylike delicacy. Me, I like food—regular food with calories in it. Will you buy me lots of calories, Eddie?"

"I'll buy you all the calories you can use, not to speak of vitamines. I feel the need of both myself, being, as it were, in a state of weakness induced by shock."

Delia put up her apron and turned out the fire under her cocoa-boiler. She went to the cloak-room and returned with her suit jacket, a squirrel stole, and a smart little hat. Broderick's eyes surveyed her admiringly.

"Delia," he said, "I don't understand why you needed any assistance in bringing folks to Reynolds store."

"Well, you see," Delia replied, "though my maidenly charm and seductive loveliness may be all you intimate, I am only a demonstrator. And demonstrators who are pretty—as I have been informed I am, and as I sometimes admit I may be—are not unusual. You may have noticed that good looks are not exactly a handicap in getting a demonstrator a job. Nor, speaking generally, in getting a girl any job.

"Therefore, since being a demonstrator, even a good looking demonstrator, is nothing uncommon, I do not in a large city like this automatically attract crowds that have to be handled by the reserves.

"Now, if my name were outside the store in electric lights, and they were running special stories about me in the papers, I might be as big a hit as Vivian. But they aren't, so I'm not. I trust I make myself clear."

"Speaking of Vivian," Broderick said, when they were seated in the Boissart grill, "you sure have got me into something."

"Meaning which?" asked Delia.

"Meaning the shock I mentioned a few moments ago."

"Elucidate, elucidate," Delia commanded. "This innuendo gives me no inkling—not a scintilla of an inkling what you are talking about."

"Well, the shock is this—Vivian has given the manager two weeks' notice and when we get to Minneapolis and St. Paul we ain't gonna have no star."

Delia grinned. "Why," she said, "that ought not to be any shock."

"No shock!" half shouted Broderick. "Why, she's a star—and we planned to keep her for the season. And now she goes and busts up the whole thing by quitting. I may not be an expert in shocks, but shell shock has nothing on this. And the manager's blaming me for introducing them."

"And so now you're passing the buck to me because I suggested the stunt that led to their being introduced," said Delia. "You see, I know what you mean when you say 'them.' I could have told you three days ago that you'd lose your star, even if neither Villard nor Vivian knew it. I could tell by the way they looked at each other."

"You might have slipped me a hunch, at least," Broderick rejoined reproachfully.

"Yes, and what good would it have done you? You'd simply have worried and fretted and stewed about it and run round in circles trying to beat Cupid—and they'd have got engaged just the same."

"Well," Broderick complained, "I should think he might at least have let her finish the season."

"Does *she* want to finish the season?" Delia asked.

Broderick chuckled.

"Delia, she's as crazy as any little ingénue you ever saw. She's babbling about vine-covered cottages and about baking biscuit in her own home, and when I talked about completing the season she asked me what kind of a honeymoon I thought it would be to have a husband traveling with a show while his wife did eight performances a week. 'Besides,' she said, 'Gus can't leave his business that long.' And when I suggested that she wait and get married *after* the season she simply told me I didn't know what it was like to be in love and shooed me out of her dressing-room. And that's that."

"And she's quite right, too," said Delia. "I think Gus would let her go back to the stage later, if she wants to, but—well, what kind of a honeymoon do you think it would be for me if I demonstrated Filigree Biscuit while I was on it?"

"All right, all right," Broderick conceded, "but that stuff doesn't get me out of this difficulty. Where am I going to get another *Rosy Princess?* All the people that are any good are under contract and can't be signed up this late. And a new star probably couldn't get up in the part if we hired one."

"How about the understudy?" asked Delia.

"She's pretty and she can sing—she's done very well on two nights when Vivian couldn't play—but, dog-gone it, she hasn't the name."

"Make her one—or something just as good," suggested Delia. "What's a press agent for?"

"Say, have a heart. Lookut what this press agent stunt has done already. Oh, I admit it worked like a charm as far as business is concerned, but it's lost me a star."

Delia pondered for a few moments before she spoke.

"I have it!" she said at last. "At least, I think I have it. You go to Gus and say, 'Here, you're marrying my star and disrupting the company—you've got to make up for it.' Where he comes in is this. You'll send Vivian's understudy to Minneapolis immediately. Gus Villard will get her a job clerking in one of the Minneapolis stores. Under another name than the one she uses now. Make it a nice stage name, if you like."

"I don't precisely get—"

"You will, Eddie, you will. Miss Understudy goes to Minneapolis and gets the job. When you arrive there with the company Miss Vivian Harcourt quits you. You are frantic for a successor—what will you do? Her understudy is ill. You and the manager are up in the air. Discussing your quandary you wander into the store where Miss Understudy is employed. You are attracted by her beauty and charm. You talk to her—find she's crazy to go on the stage, that she has been a great admirer of Miss Harcourt and that when in New York last winter she was so struck with the 'Rosy Princess' that she actually learned the lines and the songs and has been practising them ever since.

"Inspiration! You will try her in the part. You do. She makes good. Result—columns of publicity and Minneapolis breaking down the doors to see her. Am I right or am I wrong?"

Broderick was enthusiastic. "It sounds great," he admitted. "I think you've saved my life again, Delia. Anyhow, I think we'll try that stunt—it can't do any harm. But—"

"But what?" Delia asked.

"But suppose she goes and marries the chief floor walker or the owner of the store?"

"Listen," Delia replied. "Most of my schemes are insured against any ordinary slip up, I think, but, believe you me—even Lloyd's wouldn't take a chance on insuring you against Cupid."

Gas--Drive In

by E. J. Rath

Author of "Good References," "Elope If You Must," "Once Again," "Too Much Efficiency," etc.

CHAPTER XX.

STRATEGY.

SHE led him cautiously across the floor of the loft toward the rear of the mill, guiding him through the litter of rubbish that lay as an accumulation of years. They came to a window that contained no sash.

"I'm certain they don't know about this one," she whispered. "They're watching the front,of course."

He leaned out into the darkness for a survey.

"Looks like too much of a drop," he said. "Beside, we'll land in the pool."

"No. There's a tree; a big willow. There's a limb that comes close. See if you can reach it."

He groped outward and managed to touch a branch with his hands.

"You shouldn't risk it, with those things on your wrists," he told her. "Isn't there a rope here?"

"We haven't time to hunt for one. I've got to risk it. If I can get astride that limb I can work my way along. Hurry!"

He straddled the window sill, gripped it with his knees as though he were on horseback and signaled for her to come. It was awkward work, handling a big girl whose wrists were manacled in front of her, and the haste and silence that were demanded made it doubly difficult. The strength of his arms astonished her, as they lifted her free of the sill and held her poised for an instant. She groped for the branch with her legs, then told him to lower her.

Once she was fairly astride the limb of the willow, he released her and she sat poised above the dark pool, in a precarious state of balance. Then, with her chained hands to assist her, she began hitching her way toward the trunk of the tree.

"Don't start yet," she cautioned him. "It won't hold both of us."

He watched her, breathless, until she had passed from his sight in the darkness. Only the steady agitation of the foliage at his finger tips told him that she was still making progress.

"All right," came her voice, guardedly.

Even with his hands free, he found the route of escape a disconcerting one, and, as the limb swayed beneath his weight, he marveled that she had been able to accomplish the transit. Presently he reached her and found her still astride the limb, steadying her body against the tree.

"I'm afraid I'll need more help," she said.

They were some twenty feet above the earth, and how they contrived to reach it without a fall he was not afterward certain. They scrambled, slid and clung, Vivian almost helpless. Once her body swung wholly clear of the tree, supported only by his hand grip. Instinctively she flexed her knees to break a fall, but his fingers dug into the flesh of her arms like steel hooks and held her fast. And then they were standing at the foot of the tree, where she swayed in his arms for an instant, fighting for breath.

The contact of her body thrilled him; it swept from his mind all memory of the mill, the police, the flight—everything but the woman who had pleaded with him to help her. His arms tightened about her almost unconsciously.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for March 5.

"You're safe now," he muttered.

She lifted her head and looked up at him, their faces close in the darkness. A temptation was overwhelming him. As if sensing it, she stirred in his arms and released herself.

"Good work, Richard," she said, softly. "Now for the Asteroid."

But as they crept around the rear of the mill, picking their way in the darkness, he was not thinking of the Asteroid. His mind was in a strange state of exultation, wherein dwelt but a single thing. His breath had come back to him, but his pulse still raced furiously. He had made a wonderful discovery concerning Richard Hunter.

It was she who took the lead as they got clear of the mill, striking off at a tangent that carried them through a clump of trees and eventually brought them to the roadside, where the Asteroid stood. He followed, his feet touching earth, perhaps, but his head in another world.

"Drive!" she whispered.

She moved awkwardly as she tried to climb into the seat, her hands being of no assistance to her, so he lifted her and swung her over the side, depositing her on the cushions.

"He manages me as though I were a baby," she was thinking. "He has a grip like a grizzly. Back there under the tree—" She forced herself to stop thinking, when she became aware that the blood was glowing in her cheeks.

As Hunter started the motor the exhaust belched a series of shots. They heard a sharp cry from the man who was standing outside the garage. As the Asteroid rolled forward, the big door of the mill swung wide and three men came running out, the figures silhouetted against the light. One of them raised his arm and a yellow flash cut the night. If the bullet came near, they did not hear it, for the Asteroid was roaring deep defiance.

"The back road," she said, as she looked over her shoulder.

But he was already on the road that led through the village and there was no time to turn back.

"They're getting into their car," she told him, as she still watched behind. "They'll be started in a second or two."

"Let 'em catch us," he answered, with a grim smile, as he settled back in his seat and focused his eyes on the dark road.

Main Street was alight and alive as they passed through Galilee. It was still trying to figure what had happened when the Asteroid was a mile beyond it. There had been a terrifying noise, two gleaming eyes of light, a hurricane of dust—then nothing.

"Not too fast," she cautioned him.

He turned his head long enough to give her a glance of astonishment. She laughed, in memory of another ride. Then she shook her head seriously.

"I mean it. We mustn't get wrecked now. And beside, they can't hold anything like this pace."

He relaxed his foot a bit, but still kept the car moving beyond any speed their pursuers were likely to reach.

"Where now?" he asked, when they had been traveling for several minutes.

"I've no idea. What do you suggest?"

"Well, if we keep on, we'll pass my place. How about that?"

She shook her head.

"That will be the first place they search," she said. "You've told them who you were, and they'll have your place located in no time."

"I've got a few hundred acres of woods. We could hide easily enough."

"But I don't *want* to hide. I want to get away!"

"Away where?"

"Anywhere, for the present. Just away."

"All right. We'll go away," he said cheerfully.

"I wonder what happened to Charley," she said, after a brief silence.

"He probably got lost in the excitement."

"I hope so. But Charley won't have any trouble, anyhow. I'm not worrying about him. He's innocent of anything."

Hunter was wondering if the girl at his side was innocent, too. Somewhat curiously, he was conscious of the fact that he did not care. She thrust her arms forward until the dash light fell on her wrists and studied the handcuffs with a new interest.

"They're a callous lot of brutes," he said, savagely.

She glanced up at him with an odd expression, but said nothing. She wondered what Richard Hunter would say if he knew the truth.

The Asteroid coughed huskily, missed a shot, then coughed again and began to slow down.

"Almost out of gas!" she cried, sharply. "What stupidity!"

He looked at her as he brought the car to a stop. The abrupt change in her manner shocked him.

"I don't know that it is particularly stupid," he said. "I didn't know what we were expected to do when we started. There's a two-gallon reserve, so we're not stranded."

He stepped out and walked around to the rear, to turn the cock that controlled the reserve supply. As he stepped back into the driver's seat she was digging nervously at the floor boards with her heels.

"Two gallons won't take us far," she said, in an annoyed tone. "This car eats gas."

"How far do you want to go?"

"I want to get out of the State, anyhow."

"It's quite a distance to the line," he admitted, as the Asteroid picked up speed.

She turned to glance behind her, her forehead wrinkled into a frown of exasperation.

"Tell you what we'll do," he said, brightening. "There's a five gallon can standing in my garage—full. We'll turn in when we come to the place and get it."

"And be caught, like jack rabbits in a drive," she said, bitterly. "There's only one way in and out of your place, I believe. I suppose there's no help for it."

"Cheer up," he advised.

She looked at him quickly, was about to speak, then changed her mind and relapsed into moody contemplation of the road ahead. All she thought about now was escape. Having made a beginning, she would see it through, so long as there was breath in her body. She wanted to get far, far away from Galilee Corners; she hoped that she would never see the place again. She had started out to make a fool of the law and there was nothing to do now but go on with it to the end. It made her genuinely angry to realize that only a few dregs of gasoline stood between herself and captivity.

They turned in at Hunter's place and drove directly to the garage. She moved restlessly in the seat as he went inside to fetch the can and a funnel. Then she turned and fairly glared at him as he unscrewed the filler cap from the tank, fumbled and dropped it, and began groping for it in the darkness.

"For Heaven's sake, hurry!" she exclaimed.

"I beg your pardon for being clumsy," he answered, stiffly, as he began pouring gasoline into the tank.

When he finished the task and screwed the cap back into place, he started the motor again and headed back toward the circular drive in front of the house.

"We've lost seven or eight minutes, at least," she said, glancing at the clock on the dash.

"Not more than five, I'm sure."

"I'm counting from the main road and back to it. It 'll be eight minutes, perhaps nine."

"Have it your own way."

All the hostility of their encounter in the library seemed to have come between them again. He felt that she was bitterly unreasonable, and he could not understand. From the exalted moment at Galilee Corners he was dropping again into a mood of perplexity and resentment. Yet he was determined that he would not lose his temper. He would make allowances for her; it was natural, of course, that she should be anxious and greatly disturbed in mind. All he had to do was to look at the handcuffs and understand.

And yet he was conscious of sharp disappointment in the change that had come over her. Not half an hour ago she had been in his arms, clinging to him, dependent on him—a glorious woman in distress. Now she was aloof again and curtly critical—the shop boss in breeches.

They reached the stone gateway and turned into the main road.

"I dare say they're ahead of us now," she said. "But there's nothing to do but go on."

"So you insist on being a pessimist," he remarked, forcing a laugh.

"When I choose to be, Mr. Hunter."

He glanced swiftly at her, but checked a question. Back at the Corners she had called him Richard—twice. Now he was "Mr. Hunter" again. All that seemed to have been gained was lost. The formality of her speech angered him: he felt that there was something deliberate and intentional about it. It did not soothe his mind when he realized that the change hurt him—hurt him for the reason that dawned upon him with blinding suddenness as they stood for a breathless moment under the willow tree at the Corners.

"Assuming the possibility that they're in front of us," he said, rallying his speech, "shall we drive slowly or fast?"

"Fast, of course. If we're going to run into trouble, let's get it over with."

After that he devoted his attention to the road, which in these stretches was unfamiliar to both of them. It could not be negotiated as rapidly as they wished, although Hunter had the consolation of feeling that they were doing at least as well as any other car could do. For several miles they rode in silence, Vivian dividing her attention between the road ahead and the road behind, for she did not know from which direction they might encounter trouble.

She knew that she had offended Hunter, and she was not certain whether she was sorry or glad. In a pinch she conceded that he had done wonderfully well, but there were some things that she could not forget. One of them was her letter. She could never forgive him that—after he knew that she wanted it. At the same time, she was keenly aware that she did not hate him as she wished she might. She was not certain that she hated him at all, and that aggravated her mood against him. The whole flood of her emotions was so filled with bewildering cross currents that she was helpless to find a clear passage that led her anywhere.

The Asteroid began coughing again, "galloped" for a hundred yards, then stopped.

"Now, what the devil!" he exclaimed.

She was out of the car, tugging furiously at the hood fastenings with her manacled hands.

"Don't sit there!" she cried. "Help me get this hood up. Quick!"

He obeyed her.

"Light!" she commanded. "Turn on the spotlight and tilt it in here. Get a flash lamp, if you have one."

She spent a minute experimenting with the carbureter, working as rapidly as her handicap would permit.

"Gas line is choked," she said. "Probably dirt in the needle valve. Here—you've got to do this job. I can't use my hands. Ever take a carbureter off?"

Hunter shook his head.

"Well, you've got to take this one off. Get the tools. Hurry."

He obeyed readily, but there was growing resentment in his soul at the manner she assumed.

With unfamiliar fingers he began the task under her direction, first disconnecting the rods that controlled the spark and gas from the driver's seat, then the gas line itself, and then beginning on the heavy bolts that clamped the carbureter to the intake manifold. She told him what tools to use, what screws to loosen first, taking him step by step through the whole journey, until finally he straightened up with the carbureter in his hands. But she was not patient about it. Often she berated him for clumsiness.

"Please remember that this is a new job to me," he reminded her.

"That's nothing. I'm telling you what to do. Don't try to do it the way you think it ought to be done; do it the way I tell you." She rattled her handcuffs impotently and scowled at his efforts.

"There! I told you the wrench would slip if you held it that way. The other way; yes— I've heard men say they knew something about mechanics; they seem to think it's their special field— The other way with that wrench, I said! Are we going to be here until morning?— I never drove a car until I knew something about

one. Easy there! If you shear the head off that bolt we're finished— That's better, but don't be so *slow!*"

So it ran until he held the carbureter under her eyes. He endured all she said without a word in reply.

"Now take it apart, so we can get at the needle valve," she said. "I'll show you how to do that."

She showed him, and he marveled at the fact that everything she told him proved to be exactly true. But each moment his anger arose steadily at the torrent of impatient criticism and comment. When he had the contraption sufficiently opened up for her to examine, she held it close to the spotlight and looked.

"See that dirt in there? Wipe it out. Take a chamois; don't use that cotton waste. Dirt! Do you ever strain your gasoline? Do you dump any old thing that comes along into the tank?"

He made no answer, but cleaned the thing as he was bidden.

"Now put it together again," she ordered. "The screws are on the running-board, if you haven't knocked them off. Oh, Heavens! If I only had my hands free!"

He stopped work abruptly and looked at her.

"If you had your hands free I'd ask you to put them up, save for the fact that you're a woman," he said.

She eyed him for an instant, and her face flushed slowly.

"Ignorance hardly excuses clumsiness, Mr. Hunter."

"Nor does clumsiness excuse bad manners," he remarked, evenly. "If you want me to finish this job I'll expect you to be civil. It makes no difference what your opinions may be as to my abilities; you'll oblige me by keeping them to yourself. Otherwise, I'll sit down and we'll wait here for the police."

Her face was fiery now and her lips were trembling with anger.

"You wouldn't dare," she said, contemptuously. "Go ahead and finish that job—and be quick about it."

He laid the carbureter on the running-board and stepped closer to her.

"I've taken enough of that kind of talk, Miss Norwood. I don't want to hear any more of it. You'd better understand that I mean that."

Despite the defiance in her eyes, she know that he was in dead earnest. But her temper was riding high and her pride was lashing it. She would not yield.

"Go to work!" she said, sharply.

He thrust his face close to hers and his voice was savage:

"Another word like that and I'll kiss you."

She fell back as though he had struck her. Instantly he was ashamed of himself. He would have given worlds to banish that look of contempt from her eyes. He stood there miserably for an instant, trying to summon an apology to his lips.

"I'm sorry," was all he could mumble, and he turned away from her to resume his task.

For several minutes he worked in feverish silence. He was aware that she was slowly pacing the road, near him, probably with an eye to what he was doing. But he could not bring himself to glance toward her. She could think anything she liked of him now, he thought; she would be justified. But— Well, he had not lied to her. He would have kissed her. He knew it. Of course, it would have been the end; but he'd have done it.

"I beg your pardon for what I said," he told her, when the silence became unbearable.

"And I beg yours, Mr. Hunter—for what I said."

There was not a trace of anger in her voice.

"Try to forget it," he added. "I wouldn't think of doing such a thing."

Did he hear a suppressed laugh?

Somehow, he finished the job, and called to her. She bent her head close to his, under the hood of the Asteroid, and examined the work. Her hair was brushing his cheek; her shoulder was touching his. He had the same primal impulse that gripped him when they stood together under the willow tree.

"Looks good to me," she said, with a nod. "See if the motor starts."

It started.

"Fine! Richard, you're a real mechanic. Let's go!"

He was "Richard" again! A small thing, perhaps, but it spurred him. He closed the hood with a slam, tossed the tools into the bottom of the car, seized her in his arms and swung her into the bucket seat.

She uttered a protest as he whipped off his coat, drew it around her shoulders and buttoned it.

"I'm not a bit chilly."

"Keep still," he commanded.

"But you—"

"Will you keep still? There! We can't get your arms through the sleeves, but it's better than nothing."

"But now you'll be taking cold."

"Vivian! Did I tell you to keep still?"

There was a soft sound of mirth in the darkness.

"Very well, Richard. I guess it's your turn to boss a job."

"Seems to me one of us is always bossing the other," he grumbled. "Is it going to be that way forever?"

"Forever?" she echoed. "I'm afraid I can't see so far ahead."

"I can."

The Asteroid was in flight again, but it was several minutes before Vivian remembered to glance over her shoulder. She had forgotten the pursuers.

CHAPTER XXI.

AT THE INN.

FOR miles, it seemed, they followed the dusty trail, the two gleaming eyes of the Asteroid casting their glare far ahead. Neither was in the mood to speak. Vivian was huddled down in her seat, grateful for the warmth of the coat; for while the air was not chilly, it was decidedly cool as the speed of the car created the semblance of a gale.

Occasionally she looked at him, with speculation in her eyes. They were friendly again, and the fact pleased her. Should she take advantage of it? She wondered if she dared to ask for her letter. Impulse urged her to make the final cast; caution laid a check upon her. Better one thing at a time, she told herself; for they were not yet clear of the law.

Abruptly he began to slacken speed, and she saw that his eyes were searching for something. The Asteroid presently came to a stop. Instantly all her anxiety returned. She glanced behind them.

"Why are we stopping?" she exclaimed.

He switched on the spotlight and began spraying its white beam along the roadside.

"Ah. I thought so," he murmured. "Vivian, I want to show you something."

The ray of light had come to a rest, focussed on a spot almost opposite to where the car stood, panting. There was a lettered sign, attached to a post.

STATE LINE

"Read the news," he commanded.

She read it and laughed aloud.

"We've won!" she cried.

"A trick, if not the game," he assented.

"The game!" she insisted. "Let's claim it, anyhow. Please—*please* don't be so conservative. You ought to be cheering."

Hunter laughed.

"I wanted you to see," he said, as he started the car. "I never cheer until the victory is clinched."

"But isn't it?"

He looked at her, then shook his head.

"Not at all. There's a lot to be won yet," he said.

They had crossed the State line.

"Good-by, troubles," she said, with a wave of her manacled hands.

"Don't be too sure. Something else may go wrong with the car."

"Pessimist! Suppose it does? We've left the law behind, haven't we?"

"They can extradite, you know."

"Pooh! Let's not worry until they begin. Are you sorry you helped me, Richard?"

"Don't talk foolish. You know better."

"I'm afraid I do," she admitted. "I was nasty about the carbureter, Richard. It wasn't your fault. I lost my temper; and when I do that I'm always sorry afterwards. But I was worried about things."

"I don't wonder," he said, glancing at the handcuffs.

"Oh, not these so much. Other things."

"Can I help?"

She seemed doubtful.

"Perhaps—some time," she answered.

He merely nodded.

The Asteroid ran on through the night. Once he thought that she had fallen asleep, but when he bent closer to make sure he found her eyes bright and alert, meeting his glance.

"The first job is to get those things off your wrists," he said.

She lifted her hands and examined the steel bands.

"How, Richard?"

"I'll try it myself—if you'll superintend."

"Willing to risk another mechanical job, with me as boss?"

"I'll risk it."

She rattled the handcuffs and smiled.

"They're a joke—now," she said.

"Are they? Better not forget who first started laughing at locksmiths."

That roused her out of all playfulness. She stiffened in her seat and hid the chained hands under her coat. She must not forget that they were adversaries. But she did not give him the look he deserved. She was afraid to risk it.

"I—I would like to get them off," she said. "If you think you can—"

"I'm not Houdini, remember."

"I don't need Houdini. All I need is a good, teachable mechanic. And you're teachable."

"I've learned a lot in the past few hours," he admitted. "Want to hear the lesson?"

"School's not open yet," she answered, watching the road.

There was still no sign of dawn in the East as he suddenly swerved the car from the main road and drew up in front of a building.

"There's no use in riding all night," he said, as he stopped the Asteroid. "This is a road-house. We've got to get your hands out of those things, and then it wouldn't be a bad idea to eat. Are you hungry?"

"Worse than that—starved." She glanced up at the darkened building. "But are you sure we can get in?"

"We'll try."

He was out of the car and was banging on the panels of the front door. For several minutes he kept it up, occasionally using his feet as an alternative to fists.

"A light in an up-stairs window," called Vivian. "You've roused somebody."

He continued to hammer until he heard fumbling with a chain on the other side of the door. And then he was facing a sleepy-eyed man in a tattered dressing-gown.

"Hey? What's the row?" demanded the inn-keeper, staring uncertainly at the figure on the porch.

"Customers," said Hunter.

"A grand hour. It's four o'clock, almost. This is a respectable—"

"Shut up! Do you think I don't know it? Why do you suppose—"

The inn-keeper, peering closer, interrupted him.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Hunter."

Hunter scowled. He had no idea that inn-keeper's memories were so excellent. Yet what difference?

"Certainly," he answered, promptly. "I want—rooms."

"Come in. There's one, I think—"

"Only one?"

"Ain't that enough? Seems to me, at four in the morning—"

"With you in a minute," said Hunter.

He turned and went back to the car.

"All right," he said to Vivian. "Come."

He helped her out of the bucket seat and led her across the porch. They entered and the inn-keeper closed the door behind them. Then he showed the way to a room that served as an office, switched on a light and fetched a register from behind a desk.

As Hunter lifted a pen, he glanced toward the girl. She stood watching him, her hands concealed beneath his coat. What was there to do? The inn-keeper recognized him, called him by name, beyond all question identified him. And there he was, at a very strange hour of the morning—with a lady. The matter of the handcuffs was urgent. It could not be dealt with in public.

" Richard Hunter," he wrote.

And then, beneath it:

" Mrs. Richard Hunter."

The inn-keeper examined the register, nodded, reached for a key and led the way out into the hall again.

" Don't forget the tool kit," whispered Vivian, as she followed Hunter.

He hurried out to the car and returned with a bundle in his arms.

" Traveling light," remarked the proprietor, as he started up-stairs.

They followed him, Vivian bringing up in the rear. On the second floor he unlocked a door, swung it open and reached for the light switch. The illumination disclosed a very ordinary apartment with the customary furniture.

" Is this my room?" asked Vivian, as she stepped inside.

" Sure," said the inn-keeper, with a grin.

He retreated into the hall and closed the door.

" But where's your room?" she asked, turning to Hunter.

" There was only one," he explained. " So I got it—for you. But that isn't important. There's a job to be done. I'll be wanting breakfast before I need a room."

She glanced about her and nodded. The place was at least as luxurious as her room at Galilee Corners. There was a washstand, a couple of chairs, a bed. She was in no mood to be fastidious.

He unbuttoned the coat and slipped it from her shoulders.

" Let's get organized, so we can work," he said, briskly.

He dragged the washstand to the center of the room and placed a chair on either side of it. Motioning her to a seat, he unrolled the tool kit and began searching for files. She eyed her pet collection, but refrained from identifying herself as the collector.

" I think you'll find the smaller files sharper," she said. " These cuffs are made of pretty hard stuff, I imagine."

Her hands were resting on the washstand, in front of her, as he seated himself opposite.

" It looks like a manicuring job," she commented, with a smile.

" Probably the first ever done under such circumstances and at such an hour," he said. " But we'll try our luck, anyhow."

" Do you think he suspected anything—the hotel man?"

" What is there for him to suspect? Of course not."

" I had an idea he knew you."

" He does. That makes it safer. Is anything worrying you?"

" Hunger, Richard; that's enough, isn't it? Go ahead."

He chose a file that seemed to be suited for the task, then reached for one of the hands that lay before him. He selected a spot where the steel band seemed to be thinnest, but she advised a place nearer to the lock. They argued this problem of mechanics for a minute and finally he yielded. As the file bit through the nickel plating she sighed restfully and began to wonder if a convict spending his last hour in prison had the same joyful sense of imminent freedom.

She also wondered if he intended to hold her hand for the duration of the job. It seemed to her that he could work to better advantage if he held her wrist, or the handcuff itself. But she abstained from any immediate suggestion, deciding that he was entitled to proceed with the work in his own way, at least until his method might prove a failure. There was a wiry, masterful grip in his fingers for which she had acquired respect; she remembered when that same grip, sinking into the firm flesh of her arm, was all that held her suspended as they made the descent from the willow tree, back at the Corners. She was certain that the marks of it would be visible if she rolled up her sleeve. Now, with her hand clasped in his, she found that instinctively she was returning the pressure of his fingers.

She studied the top of his dark head as he bent over his task and wondered idly what his thoughts might be. What had he meant by the lesson he wanted her to hear? She asked herself the question by way of attempting a pretense that she did not know. Deep down she recognized it as a pretense. Clashing emotions disturbed her. This man was her official enemy; in the nature of things it could not be otherwise.

He had stolen a letter that meant the world to her. But it was treacherously easy to forget that he was an enemy. It was rather comfortable to feel the grip of his hand; there was something so steady, reassuring, safe in the firm pressure. And, enemy though he was, there was that lesson. Would she hear it?

"I wonder," she mused, "why a woman likes to rumple a man's hair."

"That's one of the world's mysteries," he remarked. "Go ahead."

She gasped and her face went red in an instant.

"Oh, please! Did I say that out loud?"

He nodded, without looking up. She was grateful to be spared his glance, for she was in a rare moment of confusion.

"I—I didn't realize. It was very stupid of me. I didn't know I was addicted to oral thinking. I—" She was floundering. "What made me think of it is that your hair is already rumpled, from the wind."

"I see. Well, you can unrumple it, if you like."

"I was just thinking about *some* women," she insisted, desperately.

"You said 'a woman,'" he reminded her.

"And I couldn't, anyhow, with my hands like this. It—you couldn't go on working."

"Oh, it can wait till your hands are free, I imagine."

She was becoming exasperated over the trick her tongue had played.

"I haven't the least desire to touch your hair," she said. "You shouldn't have said that you heard me. It—it was like trespassing on my thoughts."

"But there was no sign warning me off."

"Don't let's discuss it, please. Besides, you can't *unrumple* anything."

"Why, certainly you can."

"There's no such word."

"But there's such a *thing*, so why can't there be a word for it? Anything that can be rumpled can be unrumpled."

"Now that," said Vivian, as she began to recover poise, "is absolute nonsense."

"Prove it."

They argued the question for five minutes and got nowhere, except to reach a footing where the rumpling and unrumpling of hair became a problem of the abstract, rather than a specific project.

It was a very annoying incident, she felt. It was threatening the wall of antagonism that properly belonged between them and which she was finding it difficult to guard. The wall must be maintained at all hazards. Anything that burrowed under it, or scaled it, or sought to go around it was dangerous. Hence she believed herself thrown upon the necessity of building her wall stronger and higher.

The file cut very slowly.

"You'll do much better if you take hold of the handcuff," she said. "Beside, my fingers are cramped."

He released the hand and readjusted his work. She flexed her fingers to sustain her contention.

"If you wriggle I can't work, Vivian."

"Well, my fingers are cramped."

She felt that it would be better if he called her Miss Norwood, but the mere matter of names was too peurile to discuss. Beside, he might remind her of something, if it came to names.

"You won't have to endure the discomfort very long," he said, reassuringly.

"I'm not so sure," she answered, ungraciously, as she examined the groove in which the file was cutting.

"I'll work faster."

He speeded up, the file slipped from the groove and struck her wrist smartly, leaving a red line.

"Stupid!" she cried, snatching her hand from him.

He laid down the file and looked at her steadily.

"Don't start that again," he warned her.

"You hurt me."

"And I'm sorry. But there's no need for you to talk to me as though I were your hired man."

She chewed her lip and flushed. Yet she felt a certain sense of satisfaction in it, for the wall was going higher.

"If you'd put something in underneath the handcuff, to protect my wrist, it wouldn't happen," she said.

"I hadn't thought of that. I'll find something."

He hunted about the room, while she sat there, all impatience, eying the cut that he had made in the metal and thinking it all too small. Nothing seemed to answer his purpose. Presently he picked up the coat that had sheltered her, and felt in a pocket.

"Please remember I'm waiting," she said.

"I'm not likely to forget it," he answered, shortly. "Here's something. We'll see if this will do."

He had found some papers in the pocket and was folding them into a wedge of several thicknesses. Inserting one end between her flesh and the steel band, he drew it through until it served as a guard for her wrist. Then he went to work again with the file.

The tool cut through at last, but the steel band would not spread as he attempted to bend it with his fingers.

"A cold chisel," she suggested.

He found one in the kit and she twisted her arms about so as to bring the severed part of the handcuff on the edge of the washstand. Into the narrow aperture he began forcing the blade of the chisel. The shiny circlet yielded under the pressure. Presently it was wedged wide enough for her to slip the hand free.

"Half done," he said cheerfully.

She was staring with wide eyes at something that lay on the floor. He looked to see what held her fascinated. The paper wedge had fallen at her feet as she withdrew her hand from the manacle, had unfolded itself and was lying scattered. And there was a crumpled envelope, with the words in a corner:

Personal and Confidential.

For an instant she was incapable of speech. Then:

"My letter!"

He stooped and reached for it. She had her foot on it in a flash.

"It's mine, I tell you. Give it to me!"

He had a corner of it between his fingers. She threw her whole weight on the remainder of the envelope. He looked up, his glance almost as hostile as her own.

"Will you let me have it?" she cried. "If you dare—"

He seemed to loose his balance and lurch against her, so that she was forced back a pace. When he arose the letter was in his hand.

CHAPTER XXII.

BREAKFAST.

FOR an instant he thought she was about to lay hold of the hammer that rested on the washstand. But if she felt an impulse to violence, she managed to curb it.

"Give me my letter," she said, trying to control her voice.

For answer, he slipped it into a hip pocket.

"Let's tackle the other handcuff," he said, seating himself.

She stood glaring.

"My letter, Mr. Hunter."

"I thought you'd claim it," with a nod. "Come; let's get busy."

"You know from the first it was mine!" she cried, hotly.

"Why didn't you ask for it, then?"

"Because—" She hesitated. Why hadn't she? She seemed suddenly bereft of reasons.

"Let's get that other bracelet off," he suggested. We can talk about the letter afterward."

For an instant she hung back, studying him. Then, with her lips tight and her eyes dangerous, she seated herself and held forth her wrist. He began work. For a while he was encouraged to believe that she would let him finish the task in peace, but it was impossible for her to keep silence.

"I still demand my letter," she said.

"Then perhaps you'd care to tell me how it came to be in my car."

"*Your* car?"

"I found it there," he observed, glancing up at her.

"*Your* car?" she repeated, scornfully. "Why, it's no more yours than the letter. And I believe you've known it from the beginning. They're mine—both mine—the car and the letter. They were stolen from me. Do you hear?"

He did not act as though the declaration astonished him. Nor did it. For several days he had suspected the existence of a bar sinister on the escutcheon of the Asteroid. But whether it belonged to Mr. Winston Ross or to the lady of Galilee Corners he was not certain. Of course, if she now said it was hers he would accept her word. But there was so much to be explained that he did not know how they would make a beginning.

"It's *my* car, I tell you!" she exclaimed.

"I've no idea of disputing your statement," he said, his voice calm.

For an instant she was taken aback. Denial of her ownership would have been a less surprising answer.

"I imagine you think I stole it," he added.

"I don't say so."

"But you have a certain private opinion, of course."

"I think it is a strange thing," she said slowly, "for a person to buy a car—particularly a car like that—without knowing something about where it came from."

"It may be careless. I don't know that it's strange," he mused. "I told you how I came to buy it. Do you believe me?"

She did, but she was not ready to acknowledge it. He still had her letter.

"For days I've been hunting that car," she said. "From the very hour that it was stolen."

"Why didn't you claim it when you first saw it?"

She made no answer.

"Had you ever notified the police, or advertised for it?" he asked.

"I should say not!"

"Isn't there something odd about that?"

"I chose my own method of finding it," she said.

"An original method, I admit."

"Well, I found it, Mr. Hunter. Didn't I? Do you think it has been any joke for me? Do you think I've enjoyed running a repair shop and living in an attic? Do you think I've enjoyed all the fights and the misunderstandings and what people have been saying about me? Do you think I did it for fun?"

Her voice rose as she shot the questions at him, too rapidly for any attempt at reply.

"What did I care about the car?" she demanded. "Nothing. Anybody can have the car. I'm done with it. You're welcome to keep it, Mr. Hunter. All I've wanted, from the very beginning, was my letter."

"It seems to me the police might have helped, even there."

She made a gesture of impatience.

"You don't understand. You *can't* understand. I couldn't go to anybody about that letter. I—" Her voice faltered momentarily. "Oh, give it to me. Give it to me —at once!"

He was watching her face closely, trying to read some thought that she guarded with vigilant jealousy.

"It must be a rather important letter, Vivian."

"Important! It's the most important letter in the world!"

She spoke with such a curious emphasis that he continued his study of her, as though she were an abstruse problem.

"Why, if that letter went astray I'd die!" she cried.

"Then I'm glad I found it."

"Give it to me."

He did not answer immediately. He was running events in swift review, still groping for an explanation. It was her letter; he no longer had doubt of that. But its contents were assuming a phase that gave him vague and anxious concern. Indeed, anything that related to Vivian Norwood was giving him more concern than he would have believed within the bounds of possibility.

"Keep the car—keep it. I give it to you!" she exclaimed, passionately. "All I want is my letter."

He shook his head slowly.

"I don't want your car, Vivian. I couldn't accept it."

"My letter, then!"

"Let's see if we can get breakfast," he said, abruptly.

"The letter!"

"We'll talk about it at breakfast."

"No! I tell you—"

She paused, dismayed at the sheer impotence of language. She searched his face,

with anger and alarm in her glance. He could be stubborn, she knew too well. And when he was stubborn, all the pleading in the world could not move him—nor threats. Why did he want her letter? He admitted it was hers. Why had he put it back in his pocket? Why was he goading her so?

"Just hold your wrist still a minute longer."

She had forgotten all about the task in hand, but not Richard Hunter. His fingers ached from gripping the file and the nearing finish of the job was welcome. Presently the file cut through and an instant later he had spread the steel band far enough to set her free.

"I'll go down-stairs and see how soon they can feed us," he said.

He was gone for several minutes. When he returned to the room Vivian was bathing her wrists in cold water. The freedom of her hands exhilarated her, but she was in no mood for conciliation.

"The boss and I had to wake up the cook," he said. "But we're promised something to eat in a little while. By daylight, anyhow."

He pointed toward the window.

"The dawn's beginning now," he added. "Lord, but I'm hungry. Aren't you?"

But she refused to be interested either in the dawn or in the promise of a breakfast.

"My letter, please," she said, in a grave voice. "Really, Mr. Hunter, it is a serious matter to me—very serious."

Not only her words, but her manner, disquieted him. Was it really so bad as that? The letter was growing heavier in his pocket. There seemed now to be something sinister about it. He had seen her angry and keyed to a far higher tension, but he had never seen her so earnest.

"I hope you haven't been doing something foolish about your property," he said.

She glanced at him in astonishment.

"What do you mean exactly, Mr. Hunter?"

"You spoke of some water power rights in the West, if you remember. I believe Mr. Ross deals in such matters."

"How did you know that?" she demanded.

"I made inquiries."

"So you have been looking up Mr. Ross, have you?"

He nodded. She stared at him doubtfully for an instant, then laughed.

"Still obsessed by the idea that you have a sort of guardianship over me, Mr. Hunter?"

"I don't—not yet. It's an ambition."

He watched to see how she would take that. An outbreak would not have surprised him. But she received the announcement with every evidence of calm, perhaps a faint suggestion of disdain. Her manner did not hearten him. If he had been able to read thoughts he might have felt less like a man going slowly to his doom. For her thoughts were not angry. Rather it gave her a satisfying thrill to be assured that her interests stood so high with him. She needed no guardian, she told herself; but if matters ever came to that there might be worse ones than Richard Hunter. It pleased her to know that he had been concerning himself in the affairs of Winston Ross, but she masked the feelings.

"Are you merely teasing me about my letter?" she asked. "Because I don't think that would be a very generous thing to do."

"God forbid, Vivian. I've never teased you."

"Then give me the letter or give me a reason."

He could not give her a reason, yet he would not give her the letter. He knew she must think him childish, but he clung desperately to the thing that seemed to establish a bond.

They were falling into an argument that was veering off into the ethics of the affair, when there came a knock at the door, followed by the appearance of the inn-keeper himself. The array of tools, on the wash-stand and on the bed, caught his eye and puzzled him. He stared from Hunter to Vivian, and then at Vivian's breeches. But whatever he thought he kept to himself.

"Want your breakfast down-stairs?" he asked.

Hunter glanced at Vivian. She nodded.

"Well, whenever you and your wife are ready I guess I can start you off," he said, and disappeared.

"Did—did you hear what he said?" she gasped.

"I heard him. He's probably a bit rattled. We got him up too early, I imagine."

There was a look of doubt, almost of alarm in her eyes, and he could see the rising crimson in her cheeks.

"You—didn't—tell him—"

"I never said a word to him," he interrupted, hastily.

He did not dare to tell her what he had written on the register. And yet what else could he have done? They had to be together, somewhere, in order to get the odious steel bands off her wrists. He had made the best of the situation, forced upon him by the fact that the proprietor of the road-house remembered him as an occasional customer. He even owed it to the girl as a matter of protection. But had he protected her? He was not certain. In any event, he was not prepared to explain matters to her—just yet.

"Ready for breakfast?" he asked.

She followed him down-stairs. At the farther end of the dining-room, by a window, there was a table set for them. He drew back a chair for her, then took the place opposite.

"Now, my letter," she said, holding forth her hand.

"Let's wait a bit, Vivian."

"No. I—"

The inn-keeper appeared, carrying a tray. He placed two heaping dishes of strawberries on the table.

"Out of my own garden," he said. "Your wife will like 'em."

He shuffled out again. The crimson that had faded from Vivian's cheeks was returning. She bit her lip and frowned.

"I think it might be well for you to explain to him," she said.

"Let's eat," he observed. "I thought you were starving."

"It's—so embarrassing, Mr. Hunter."

There was a fragile quality in her voice.

"Let's eat," he urged.

Then her thoughts went back to the letter.

"I don't wish to eat," she said. "But don't let me stop you. Enjoy your breakfast."

"But I thought you wanted—"

"My letter."

Again the inn-keeper came into the dining-room. This time he was bearing a pitcher of cream.

"Finest cream in the county," he explained, as he put the pitcher on the table. "You see if it isn't. I'll leave it to your wife."

Vivian whirled in her chair.

"I'm *not* his wife!" she said, sharply. "Will you please remember that?"

"You're— Huh?"

The inn-keeper backed away a step, coughed and stared. He wiped his mouth with his hand. He glanced at Hunter.

"Ah—oh," he said, and backed away another step.

Vivian had turned to the window again, her lips tightly compressed. The thing was getting past endurance.

"You might see if the eggs are ready," suggested Hunter, and he made a significant motion with his head.

"Eggs? Oh, sure." The inn-keeper roused himself. "Yes, yes; I'll see about the eggs. I—ah—why, no offense, young lady."

There was an angry quiver of Vivian's shoulders.

The master of the road-house regarded Hunter with a knowing eye and winked impressively.

"'Sall right; 'sall right," he said, cheerfully, as he began a retreat. "No offense, ma'am. Anyhow, you'll find that's good cream."

There was a minute of heavy silence after he disappeared. Vivian sat with her eyes averted. Her fingers were drumming nervously on the table.

"I'm sorry he was so stupid," said Hunter.

"Oblige me by not mentioning the matter again. It was for you to have explained to him, not I."

He knew it, but how could he explain? He remembered what he had written in the book.

"Cream on your strawberries?" he asked.

"I don't care to eat."

"Oh, come now."

She shook her head firmly.

He fell to begging, for he knew that she was half famished. But she had turned herself into a Gibraltar of stubbornness. She would do nothing without her letter. How unreasonable she could be, he thought. It did not occur to him that perhaps she reversed the opinion. Unquestionably she would sit there and starve before she would yield an inch. It wasn't fair, he protested; it wasn't playing the game. It was putting him at a disadvantage.

"I do not wish to eat," she repeated, with cold decision.

Suddenly he reached into his pocket. What else was there to do? He could not see her starve. He drew forth the letter and laid it on her plate.

For several seconds she did not seem to be aware of what he had done. Then she withdrew her gaze from the window and glanced down. A cry escaped her.

"Richard! You dear!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LETTER.

SHE stared at the letter with unbelieving eyes. She read and reread the address. She turned it over and examined the sealed flap. She flexed the envelope in her fingers, to feel the contents. She hugged it to her breast. She laid it against her cheek. She fairly mothered it.

"Oh!" she cried, her eyes bright with excitement and joy. "Oh, Richard, how happy I am! I'm safe—at last. Safe!"

He watched her gloomily. Her manner confirmed all his suspicions. Whatever the letter contained, it was something dangerous. Well, it was out of his hands now; he would never know.

"I was so upset; so worried," she said. "But now— Oh, now I'm the happiest woman in the world."

The gaiety of her manner did not awaken a response in him. He glared at the letter. It was no longer merely mysterious; it had become hateful. He wished that she would put the thing out of sight; it seemed she would never be done fondling it and caressing it with her eyes. It was all very well to be "Richard" again, but it signified nothing. He had seen her in swift changes of mood before.

She placed the letter on the table, beside her plate, and smoothed it carefully with both hands.

"Now let's eat!" she exclaimed joyfully. "I'm a ravening wolf."

A minute later she glanced at him with a merry smile.

"The strawberries are wonderful, Richard. What? You're not eating?"

He was not, but he felt that he ought to make a pretense. His appetite seemed to have gone with the letter. He castigated himself for being a temperamental idiot, but it was a stubborn fact that he seemed to have lost his desire for breakfast. He was not in the least proud of the mood into which he had plunged himself; he felt that probably she regarded him as juvenile and absurd. But he was in a deep pit of pessimism. In God's name, why did she leave the letter lying there before his eyes?

"You'd better destroy the thing before it makes any more trouble," he growled.

"Why, Richard! What a thing to say."

"I merely suggested it."

"But what an awful suggestion. Destroy my dear, long lost letter?"

She began fondling the horrible thing again, before his eyes. He knew that she was torturing him, and it amazed him to discover that she could act so cruelly.

"Why should I destroy it?" she asked, searching his face.

"Because I'm so afraid of the thing, Vivian."

He spoke so earnestly that she smothered her desire to laugh at him.

"But I'm not afraid of it—any more. Why should you be?"

"There seems to be something evil about it. I am afraid it will harm you. I know that sounds foolish. I can't explain the feeling exactly."

She studied the envelope again.

"You don't think I'd write an evil letter, do you, Richard?"

"I don't mean that, either," he answered, cursing himself for clumsiness. "Of course not. But you might write a letter that would bring grave consequences."

"That's what I did," she nodded.

"Unwittingly, of course," he said, hastily.

"Um-m. I'm not so sure about that part."

She wondered how far she ought to punish him; how much he would really endure.

"Aren't the strawberries delicious?" she exclaimed.

"Are they?"

"Oh, come Richard. You *must* eat."

He knew that she was mocking him now.

"You see," she said, after a little pause, "I don't destroy it because it may have to go into the mail."

"The mail!" he echoed, in dismay.

"That's what letters are written for, Richard. I haven't decided yet. That is, I did decide, but I may want to reverse myself. I'm a changeable person."

"I don't believe it," he said, fiercely.

"No? I had an idea you were convinced of it. Thank you for not believing it—even though I should mail the letter."

He gave her a black look.

"Oh, for the love of Heaven do *something* with it!" he cried. "Here!"

He tossed a little book of stamps across the table.

"How nice of you," she said, smiling, as she opened the little book and selected a stamp. He watched her as she moistened the gum and then carefully placed the stamp in the upper left hand corner, pressing it firmly with her thumb until it adhered.

"Think," she mused. "It's been for weeks and weeks without a stamp. It couldn't go anywhere, because it was broke. It didn't have a cent to its name, poor thing. It must have been like being in a trance, where you can understand everything that's going on, but you can't move or even speak. But now—now it's alive again. Queer what a difference a little thing like a stamp makes. Letters without stamps are pitiful things."

He sat there in agony.

"Shall I mail it for you?" he asked, desperately. "There may be a box here."

She laid the letter on the table again and became thoughtful.

"I think I'll wait a little, Richard. It's a rather serious matter, you know. Why, if that letter had gone astray—"

She ended the sentence with a shudder.

He could stand no more of it. She would set him mad if she kept this up. There she sat—dear, lovable, desirable above all things—yet wilfully tearing his heart out with her badinage. He arose abruptly from the table and strode across the room, where he stood staring through a window. His senses seemed to be numbed. Almost he forgot the letter in his misery. He found himself wondering, in a trivial way, why people in a state of agitation almost invariably cross a room and stare out of a window.

Vivian sat watching him. There was a strange look in her eyes—amusement, mischief, pity—perhaps something far more than pity.

"Richard," she called.

He turned and stared at her.

"Come back here and sit down. I want to talk to you."

He went to the table and seated himself.

"I'm afraid I've upset you," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't bother, thanks. I'm all right."

He managed a smile, but it did not lighten his face.

She picked up the letter and held it poised in her fingers. She seemed to be trying to decide something.

"What do you suppose is in this letter?" she asked.

"I've no right to suppose anything. It's your letter—or his—not mine."

"Never mind your right to suppose anything. What *do* you suppose?"

He supposed many things in a confused way, but he did not try to put them into words. Even his imagination was out of focus. All he sensed was the fact that his suppositions were sinister. He felt that, in some way he could not explain, she was in danger.

"I shall not try to guess," he told her.

She looked as though she were disappointed.

"I think I shall open it," she said, suddenly.

He watched her as she ran a finger under

the flap and loosened it. He saw her draw forth a folded sheet of note-paper. He could even see a firm, plain signature—"Vivian Norwood." He dared not look for more, but averted his glance.

She read the letter, slowly. Once he ventured a look at her face, but it told him nothing.

"Richard, I want you to read it," she said, holding the letter toward him.

He stared incredulously.

"Yes," she said, gravely. "I want you to understand—everything."

"You—you expect me to read it?"

"Yes, please."

And then, in a flash, came to him a new fear. He was afraid to read it. He wanted to remember her, just as she was. He wanted to know nothing that might tarnish the memory. It mattered no longer what the letter contained. He would not suffer it to destroy an image. No; he would not read it.

"Thank you, Vivian," he said. "I'd rather not."

"But I wish you to."

He shook his head.

"Richard, I insist. I'm very anxious to have you read it. I won't be satisfied with anything less."

Her face was as grave as his own, and it filled him with a foreboding.

"I prefer not to read it, Vivian. It's—well, you know it's marked 'Personal and Confidential.'" He tried to add a laugh.

"Richard," she said, "you and I are stubborn people. But this time I'm going to try to be more stubborn than you. I ask you again to read it. You owe me that much. You are thinking some strange thoughts about this letter—and me. I demand that you read it."

"No, Vivian. And don't misunderstand my thoughts. Because I shall always think of you—"

He broke off with a gesture, as though he had said too much.

"Read it, or I may seal it again and mail it," she said.

Mail it? Would she do that? He stared at her with fresh alarm in his eyes.

"Read it!" she commanded, and she thrust the letter into his hand. "Richard, if you never do another favor for me—and you've done *so* many—I want you to read that letter."

He hesitated, glanced down at it, then shrugged.

"If it makes you happy, I'll read it," he said.

It began in a very ordinary way—"My Dear Mr. Ross." But as he read through the first page, and then the second, his grip tightened on the paper, his jaw set itself into harsh lines and his face became drawn and old.

> So I have decided to accept the offer with which you honor me. I will marry you.
>
> VIVIAN NORWOOD.

He looked up at her and she saw misery in his eyes.

CHAPTER XXIV.

VIVIAN DECIDES.

HE drew breath grimly and denounced himself for a weakling. The earth was tottering, but he would show her that he could lose gamely. He would take it standing up, like a man.

He folded the letter and handed it to her, with a bow. He had never seen her so lovely. Why had she put him to the torture? Why had she not told him before it was too late?

Then he remembered the inn-keeper's register. What a horrible thing he had done! She must never know. Was there any way to guard it from her?

"Thank you for letting me see the letter," he said, abruptly.

"Now you can understand, Richard."

"Yes; I understand. I hope you will always be very happy, Miss Norwood."

"I have another name," she reminded him, with a faint smile.

"I'd forgotten—Vivian." He laughed without mirth. "I'll always wish for your happiness."

"Thank you, Richard. I expect to be happy."

"I want you to present my congratulations—to Mr. Ross," he added. "He is most—fortunate."

She gave him a strange look.

"Do you really think that, Richard?"

"Can you doubt it?" he demanded, almost roughly.

He reached across the table, seized her hand, then released it abruptly.

"I'm not so certain," she mused. "It depends upon what good fortune really is."

"That's it," he said, and pointed to the letter.

She looked at the letter, as though with fresh curiosity.

"I wanted you to know what was in it," she said, slowly. "I wanted you to understand why I couldn't tell anybody about it. There are some things that are not easy to discuss. I wanted you to know why I couldn't dream of having such a letter go astray."

"Of course. I understand fully."

"There were times when I thought I'd never get my letter, Richard."

"I'm very sorry that I added to your suspense. It was—well, rather brutal of me."

"No. You didn't understand, of course. And you were entitled to think it was all very queer. No; I'm grateful to you, because really you found it for me."

"In that case, I'm glad I have been of service."

"You've really been dear about it, Richard."

He felt that it would be easier if she were not so kind to him. The very nearness of her was pain. She was not his, never would be—never could have been. But his heart was calling for her, and he could not still the cry.

"I wonder what I ought to do with it now," she said, after a pause.

"The letter, you mean?"

She nodded.

"Mail it, of course."

She looked up at him with curious eyes.

"Mail it? Really?"

"What else? It was written to be mailed."

She was studying the letter again.

"It was dated so long ago," she mused. "Wouldn't it seem odd to mail it now?"

"Not necessarily. It carries your answer. That's the important thing."

"I suppose that's true. Yet I wonder, after all this delay, if it wouldn't be better to write another letter."

"What's the need of it? What more could you say?"

Their glances met gravely. He could not understand the doubt that seemed to be in her mind. Why bother about the trifles of detail? The answer was the big thing. He knew that if he were Winston Ross he would be on his knees in gratitude for such a letter, whether it came early, or late, or when, or how.

"You may need another envelope," he said, trying to fill the silence. "I'll see if we can get one here."

"No; not yet, Richard."

"It seems to me it has been delayed long enough."

"Perhaps. And yet—"

Still she wavered. It was so unlike her, he thought. Where was all the old crisp decision that had seemed to be an inseparable part of her nature?

As for Vivian Norwood, there was a puzzling question in her mind. Was he really so stupid as he seemed to be? Couldn't he understand *anything?* Well, if he couldn't, he deserved to be tortured.

"You think I ought to mail it?" she asked.

"I think you owe it to Mr. Ross."

"As a matter of fairness, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"That seems a reasonable view." Then suddenly: "Tell me, Richard. Do you really think he is a fortunate man?"

"Good God!" he cried. "Don't you know it?"

Her gray eyes watched him steadily.

"It seems to me that all depends on how you look at it," she said. "I think there are two different ways. He might be fortunate to get it, or he might be even more fortunate not to get it."

There was something almost like anger in his glance.

"Vivian! Don't talk nonsense. I—I can't stand much more. I can't explain—now. Why, any man in the world would be lucky to get that letter!"

"That's a beautiful thing for you to say, Richard."

"I—"

He was tempted to say other things, but checked himself when he realized the futility of it.

"Without being vain about it, Richard, I'm going to accept your view. But I'm afraid Mr. Ross won't agree with it."

"What the devil has he to do with it?" he demanded roughly.

"Why, this," she said quietly. "He's going to be unlucky."

He stared at her in dull fashion for several seconds.

"You mean—" Then the words stuck.

"I mean that Mr. Ross is not going to get the letter."

She was not looking at him now. Her glance seemed to be fixed on the document that had again become a wanderer.

"You—you're not going to mail it?" he whispered.

She shook her head.

"But I don't understand. Why?"

"Richard Hunter, you're a queer person," she said, lifting her eyes. There was laughter in them. "Do you *want* me to mail this letter?"

"No! But you *ought* to mail it."

"I don't understand you at all," she went on. "I suppose all this shows the difference between a man and a woman, but it seems rather silly. You don't want me to mail it, but you insist that I ought to mail it. You've been sitting here, making beautiful arguments to show me why it simply must be mailed. You've given me a lot of high moral reasons for mailing it. You've tried to force me to mail it. And I think you're quite stupid, and very silly, and tremendously pig-headed. Now, listen to *me,* Richard Hunter."

She was tapping her knuckles on the table.

"I don't want to mail that letter. Can you understand that? I don't *want* to. And I *won't!*"

Somehow, he still failed to grasp the significance, although, in all conscience, she was sufficiently vehement about it.

"But—why?" he asked blunderingly.

"Because," she answered sweetly, "I have changed my mind."

"About everything?"

"Oh, not everything. I'm not quite so bad as that. But about marrying Mr. Ross."

Slowly he got out of his seat and stood leaning across the table. Things that had blurred his vision were passing away. He seemed to feel the earth swaying again, but it gave him a wild sense of exaltation.

"When did you change your mind?" he asked slowly, trying to keep his voice steady.

"One minute after I lost the letter."

The answer came in a surprisingly small voice. She was dying to see how he took it, but she would not raise her head.

"Vivian!" His voice seemed to thunder at her.

"Yes, sir?"

"Stand up."

"Yes, sir."

Very meekly she stood up.

"Look at me."

"Why—yes, sir."

She managed to look at him. He had stepped around the table and was very close to her. How tall he seemed! And there was something in his eyes almost terrifying. But she would not let it frighten her; far from it. She would be meek, perhaps, but she would not be overawed. No; she would even mock him before she would let him see that she had suddenly become afraid.

"Vivian Norwood, you—"

"What can I do for you, sir?"

Then she was in his arms, clinging to him. It seemed to him that an age had passed by and a new one begun before she raised her head and looked at him. She lifted her lips bravely and kissed him.

"Must I mail the letter now, Richard? Do you think—"

He stopped the foolish question as it ought to have been stopped.

"You—you said my mouth was too big," she gasped.

"I don't remember."

"Richard! But you did!"

"Then I lied."

There was a small, wavering laugh.

"But, Richard—"

"I love you," he interrupted. "I think I ought to tell you that."

"Yes. It's—it's only fair that you should. But why did you keep my letter?"

"Because I love you. Why did you torture me for a solid half-hour?"

"Because I love you."

"That's a preposterous reason, Vivian."

"So is yours, sir," she retorted. "And —you're crushing me, Richard."

"I'm sorry. I—"

"Stupid! I wasn't *complaining*. I was only *telling* you."

They were still standing by the table, breakfast scarcely touched, when the innkeeper made another appearance.

"'Sall right," he declared amiably. "'Sall right. I'm just bringing you your coffee. I think your wi—I mean the young lady—"

There was a violent signal from Hunter and he hastened out of the room, chuckling and nodding his head, as though he understood a great deal more about the matter than they did.

The appearance of their host had brought Richard Hunter back into the world again. There was a worried look in his eyes. A certain thing had suddenly begun to assume enormous importance. He did not know whether he dared explain. Yet there must either be an explanation, or—

He seized Vivian by the shoulders and stared steadily into her eyes.

"I've got myself into trouble," he said.

She looked at him mockingly.

"And it's going to last you all your life, Richard," she said.

"I don't mean that. Something else. Vivian, will you stand by me?"

"By you, and even for you, Richard." She was still teasing him.

"I'm serious. Will you see me through —to the finish?"

That sobered her a little.

"Now, what in the world do you mean?" she asked. "Tell your troubles to me, my dear."

"I'm not sure I can—just yet. But you'll see me through?"

"What a foolish question. You saw *me* through, didn't you? Of course I will. I'm amazed that you should ask. I'll see you through *anything*."

"Right now?"

"Now or any other time, Richard."

They shook hands on the compact gravely. Then, with a burst of enthusiasm and gratitude, he seized her in his arms and crushed her until she was breathless.

"Come on!" he cried, taking her hand and dragging her toward the door.

"Where?"

"To get out of trouble."

In front of the inn he fairly tossed her into the Asteroid, still standing where they had left it in the dark hours. But now there was a sun above the horizon, already melting the cool mists.

The innkeeper appeared on the veranda.

"We will be back soon," said Hunter, urging Vivian toward the car.

"Richard, where are we going?"

"To a town I know. It's not far."

"But why?"

"Vivian, are you for me or against me?" he demanded.

She snuggled over against his shoulder and sighed.

"Drive on, Richard. But not *too* fast. I think speed fiends are positively criminal."

CHAPTER XXV.

GASKETS AND OBEDIENCE.

THE Asteroid was standing in front of a rambling old house on a shaded side street in a pleasant little town. Two persons were coming down the walk from the house; two persons in breeches, but one of them was a girl. As they reached the gate she turned and waved her hand to an old gentleman who watched them from the porch. He waved in answer. They climbed into the Asteroid and drove away.

"It was bad enough," said Vivian, "to get the town clerk out of his bed, although he did not seem to be very much surprised. But when it came to hauling a nice old minister out of his morning dreams, I felt positively ashamed, Richard. Can you imagine what he thinks of *me*—in these things?"

"What he thinks isn't important. He married us, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes. He even had me promising to obey before I realized it. It was a very

old-fashioned ceremony, Richard. I was tricked into promising more than I meant. You'll never take advantage of it, will you?"

He laughed at her, and she pinched his arm until he begged for mercy.

"But did you see his wife?" she exclaimed. "I mean when you put the ring on my finger?"

She lifted her hand and examined an odd-looking circlet that hung loosely on the third finger. It was a thing that had never been turned out by a jeweler. It was fashioned of copper, and between its flat surfaces was a thin band of asbestos packing.

"A gasket for a spark plug!" she cried, and then rocked in mirth.

He grinned kindly at the contrivance.

"I've heard of brides being married with a piece of string around their fingers," she said. "But never a gasket. Lucky thing, Richard, I had my working clothes on, or we'd have had no sort of ring at all. You hadn't any. Will you ever forget their looks when I fished that out of my breeches pocket and offered it to you? They were shocked, Richard."

"They didn't understand what a beautiful significance it had," he told her.

"Marrying a garage boss with a gasket!" She rocked again.

Presently she was examining the circlet with new interest.

"Richard, you've given me a beautiful idea. There *is* a sentiment about it—and don't you dare laugh. Do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to take that gasket to a jeweler. I'm going to have him make me a gold ring. And right in the center of the band, all the way around, there's going to be a fine thread of copper—copper out of that gasket. It will be beautiful, and odd—and it will still be the ring I was married with. There! How's that for an idea?"

"Great! But if we should need a gasket before we get home—"

She boxed his ear.

"Well, where now?" she asked, after an interval of silence.

"Back to the inn."

"Are your troubles over?"

"All over, Mrs. Hunter."

"You're a queer person," she mused. "You really had me believing you were worried about something. And then it turned out you were simply afraid I might forget to marry you, or change my mind, or something like that."

"I was worried. You wait and see."

"Now you're becoming mysterious again. I think it was bad enough to be dragged off before a town clerk and a minister at sunrise, Richard Hunter, without tantalizing me about other things."

"I never dragged you. You were glad to go."

"You'll pay for that, sir. But I'm going to tell people that I was dragged."

"Tell 'em whatever you like. I've got you for keeps, and that's all that counts."

At the roadhouse they climbed out of the Asteroid and went inside. The innkeeper greeted them with a puzzled look.

"You told me you were caved in for want of food," he said, "and then you hardly touched your breakfast. Instead, you go out for a ride."

Vivian and her husband exchanged glances.

"Well, we promise to do better," said Hunter. "Now bring us a new breakfast."

The innkeeper accepted the order with a nod of resignation.

"Anything you say, Mr. Hunter. Is there something special you'd like? Perhaps the young lady—"

"The who?" demanded Hunter.

"Why, her. The young lady," and the host pointed.

"Are you speaking of my wife?"

"Your *wife?*"

"Certainly. My wife."

The innkeeper looked in bewilderment at Vivian.

"His wife," she said smilingly.

For a moment the host stared at them.

"But first you say— And then she says— And then you both say—" He was mumbling his thoughts as he tried to arrange them. "Anyhow, 'sall right, Mr. Hunter. I'll go order your breakfast. But damn if I understand *anything.*"

Richard led her into the office, over to the desk, and reached for the register. She

stood in wonder as he searched for the page.

"Have a look at this," he said, pointing.

She looked, then up at him.

"Well, sir?"

"What else was there for me to do, Vivian?" he began. "In the first place, this man knew me. And then, coming in at such a queer hour, and in such a queer way, with such a queer job to do—and you—"

She was laughing at him.

"Richard, you don't know how funny you look. You look like a little boy who you look. You look like a boy who has been caught teasing the cat, or stealing the jam."

"But don't you see, dear—"

"I see many things, Mr. Hunter. But principally I see a gentleman who felt very sure of himself."

She made him a mock curtsy.

"But you don't understand, Vivian."

"Ah, yes I do."

"There was only one room—"

She snapped her fingers.

"Oh, *that!*" She snapped her fingers under his nose. "I'm thinking of a gentleman who had such great confidence in his charms that he knew the lady would marry him even before he asked her."

He caught at her hand and began protesting, but she refused to listen.

"Sublime assurance, Richard. Oh, I love it!"

"Will you stop teasing me?"

"Why, you colossal egotist, I'm going to tease you all the rest of your life. Why in the world do you suppose I married you? Come—you are about to suffer your first domestic breakfast."

They were back in the dining-room, waiting for the arrival of the coffee.

"Well," he grumbled, "that explains why I hustled you off to the parson."

"Had you no better reason than that? Am I a poor girl, merely married to save her name? Come, now, Richard; that doesn't suit me at all. Man, dear, pay me compliments! Do you think I'm a shop boss by nature? Do you think I'm always a woman in breeches? Richard, you don't know what an awfully feminine person you've married. I'm frivolous and I'm silly. Sometimes I'm known to cry. I'm fond of it. Richard, unless you give me a lot of beautiful reasons for dragging me into this marriage I'll cry all over my plate—right now!"

After a while she told him she wanted to do some telephoning and borrowed money for the tolls. It seemed a century before she returned.

"Well, we're forgiven, Richard," she reported. "Harrison accepts me."

"You told him?"

"Why not? Oh, you're reaping the married whirlwind, Mr. Hunter. Your wife is asserting her rights. And more news: I called up the Corners and had Charley on the wire. He's not under arrest. It seems some other detectives found Randall, somewhere else, and now they've no use for me, or Charley, or anybody. And they never chased us any further than the village. And all the scoldings I gave you were entirely unnecessary, except as a sort of preparation for your future career.

"And still more news, Richard: Sally is at the Corners. She's my maid. She had a notion I needed her and she came against orders. And Myrtle called to see Charley, and she saw Sally and—well, you can imagine. And Charley and Myrtle are parted forever and ever. Oh, it's absolutely true. And Charley likes Sally. And when I had Sally come to the phone and asked her if she liked Charley, she dropped the receiver and ran away. So *that's* settled."

Richard looked at his wife dazedly.

"What's settled, Vivian?"

"Why, you see, when Charley and Sally are married—"

"For the love of Heaven! Is *that* the way you plan things?"

"Oh, I plan—I planned one thing—"

She paused and regarded him with a speculative glance.

"Richard, I'm in trouble. Will you stand by me to the finish?"

"Stop making fun of me," he said.

"Will you see me through *anything?*" imitating his voice.

"Stop it!"

"Very well. I'll confess anyhow. You know those handcuffs?"

He nodded.

"I put them on myself."

"No!"

"I did, Richard. I had to. It was the only way I could make you rescue me."

For an instant his stare was a blank one. Then came a slow grin.

"Vivian, you're a schemer and a plotter."

"I am, sir. I do my best. In fact, I'm quite brazen about it when it comes to getting a husband."

He sat in bewildered admiration, watching her. This wife of his fascinated him, amazed him, baffled him—and he loved her for it.

"Am I forgiven, Richard?"

"We'll see about that later. But first I'm going to punish you."

She led him a chase, but he cornered her at last.

"Punish me often, Richard," she whispered. "It's the only way to make me obey—and I promised to."

Presently he began talking about a honeymoon.

"Honeymoon!" she cried. "Why, it's begun. This is it."

"Here?"

"Why not? A honeymoon can be anywhere. It isn't the place that counts; it's the people. Besides, I rather like it here. And what's more, we don't have to do any more writing in the hotel register."

"We've kept faith with the register," he admitted.

"Yes, dear, we have. But—"

She became suddenly serious.

"But what?"

"I was thinking how dangerous it is to write things—some things. I wrote to a man that I'd marry him—and I didn't. Then you wrote that I was married to you—and I wasn't. But I am. After this, Richard, I'm going to let you do the writing."

(The end.)

For Ways That are Dark

by Clements Ripley

LING FOH took the dice in his gnarled, yellow fingers, rolled them, twisted them, and with a sudden "Heh!" spun them into the blue bowl.

"He who loses to-day may win to-morrow," observed the banker as he picked up Ling Foh's stake.

Ling Foh said nothing. He bowed ceremonially with his hands tucked into his sleeves and drifted out into the fog which swirled up the narrow street. If he saw the tombs of his ancestors in faraway Yunnan spin away into the blue bowl with the dice he made no sign.

Fifty years in America had not been overly kind to Ling Foh, and now he desired

to go home. A certain stiffness of the joints in the chill mornings and a tremor of the hands as he lighted his long pipe told him that if he wanted to lie by his forefathers the time was none too long. And of all things in the world he desired this. Also should he be able to reach Yunnan before his time came there would be the son, whom he had never seen, to put the roast pork and the dried duck on his grave and to see that all matters were properly and decently attended to. These things he had saved for and labored for. The expensive passage to China was almost a reality when the dice betrayed him.

Slowly he ascended the steep, narrow street, his hands tucked into his sleeves, and his head bowed. Reaching a certain house with a ladder on the outside he climbed it with the ease of long practise. Jutting out from the second story was a piano-box fastened to the outside wall. This had been the home of Ling Foh for the past ten years, a rental of twelve cents a week.

For a time he sat motionless except to refill the tiny bowl of his pipe, which burned out after two or three puffs. The situation called for much thought. Poverty was a natural state with Ling Foh and one to be accepted with philosophic calm, for the dice and lotteries were treacherous, and fortune seldom smiled in his direction. But to lie in a foreign land, in an untended grave was a different thing. Centuries of overcrowded misery have taught the Chinese stoicism in the things of this world. Cold, hunger, and disease are misfortunes to be born with patience. But to howl forever in the dark about an untended tomb is a fate to overturn the most stable calm.

So thought Ling Foh as he knocked the ashes from his pipe for the twentieth time and, taking his dipper-shaped violin between his knees, played the song of the Eight Sages of the Bamboo Brook. For perhaps an hour he played, and then, laying aside the instrument, he drew a ragged quilt about him and slept.

Eight hours later Ling Foh rose, climbed down his ladder, and took his way to the shop of Wan Li, whose sign assures the wayfarer that "Here sell man clothes—woman clothes." He bowed himself in, and was greeted with due ceremony.

"And to what auspicious happening," asked Wan Li, after the proper compliments had passed and the tea, as yet untasted, had been set out, "may be ascribed this exalted visit of my venerable elder brother to my wretched hovel?"

"A word has come to my miserable ears," replied Ling Foh, "that my venerable uncle desires to return to China."

Wan Li was on the alert on the instant. This might be a request for a loan, to be refused with many and complicated expressions of regret, or it might be business. Cautiously he confirmed Ling Foh's supposition.

"I, too," continued Ling Foh, "would lay my wretched bones beside those of my exalted ancestors, and would have my incredible pig of a son place the money in my mouth and lay me to rest, face downward, so that the spirit may not return.

Wan Li assented gravely, remarking that a due decorum was necessary in these things.

At last Ling Foh unfolded his plan. For thirty dollars he would provide Wan Li with a passage to China.

Wan Li considered. Fifty dollars was the price of a ticket. Ling Foh's offer was a saving of twenty. How he intended to do it was not a matter for question. What Ling Foh bargained to do he would do to the letter.

"Twenty-five," said Wan Li. Ceremony was dispensed with. This was business.

It took nearly an hour. At the end of that time an agreement was reached for twenty-six dollars and seventy-five cents. Then Wan Li raised his tea to his lips and drank. With the utmost formality Ling Foh followed his host's example and straightway departed, for the tea-drinking was the signal that the business was concluded and the interview at an end.

From Wan Li's shop Ling Foh took his way to the house where he presided over the kitchen. There he found his employer, somewhat irritated by the delay in getting breakfast.

"I go now," he informed her.

"But Ling Foh," she protested, "you

can't go now. You've just come, and you haven't even cooked breakfast."

"I go now," he repeated impassively. "My second uncle, he sick. I go. Bimy maybe get well. Come back."

Long experience had taught Mrs. Weston the futility of arguing with Ling Foh as to his comings and goings. She sighed wearily.

"Well," she said at last, "I suppose you'll go anyway. When are you coming back!"

Ling Foh considered carefully. "My second uncle, he get well maybe Fliday," he announced. "Come back Fliday. So-long."

With his hands tucked into his sleeves he pattered out again into the fog. Ling Foh had a busy day ahead of him.

At ten o'clock that night he climbed wearily up the ladder to his piano-box. There was no music to-night, for Ling Foh was tired. But before he slept he counted over twelve hundred and eighteen dollars and thirty-two cents. Ling Foh had sold thirty-eight passages to China.

Dawn found him at the wharves, inspecting an ancient fishing-schooner. She had, it is to be hoped, seen better days, but no one could have guessed it from her appearance. A marine underwriter would not have classed her as a risk. He would have said she was a certainty! Her seams, patched and tarred as they were, gaped yawningly above the water-line. What might be below could only be guessed, but it needed no expert to pronounce her unseaworthy. Ling Foh was apparently satisfied with the result of his inspection, for he sought the owner.

"S'pose maybe sell boat," he suggested. "How much?"

The owner scratched his head and pondered. He had intended scrapping her, and was even then appraising the canvas and scarred deck planking.

"What 'll you give?" he countered at last.

"You say," replied Ling Foh impassively.

"What you want her for?"

Ling Foh looked out over the bay. He made no sound, but every line of his bent, twisted body and wrinkled face said plainly that questions as to his use of the vessel were distinctly out of order.

"Suit yerself," shrugged the owner. "If it's dope she's carried plenty before now."

Ling Foh lifted one corner of his mouth ever so slightly. The man grinned.

"I thought so," he said. "You want to watch your step on that, though. Dope is pretty chancey stuff to handle these days. But prob'ly you got a new system," he added inquiringly.

"Maybe so," assented Ling Foh noncommittally.

"H-m! Well now, for the schooner, she's in fair condition for her age, and—"

"Clack," asserted Ling Foh suddenly, pointing.

"Well, yes," the other admitted, "she has got a small crack there, but a little oakum would fix that up O. K. Now she's got a good set of canvas on her. That canvas cost—le' me see—"

"Lotten," suggested Ling Foh, quietly but with great distinction.

"Rotten nothing. That canvas is in good shape. Take a little patching maybe, but it's good canvas."

"Lotten," insisted Ling Foh. "Maybe so come wind. Bang! No got." He paused expectantly.

"That canvas 'll stand up under any wind you'll get around here," asserted the owner. "Her planking's good, and she's got good sticks in her. I wouldn't sell her only I'm going out of business. Lacking a little patching she's as good a schooner as you'll find on the bay. I tell you what I'll do. I'll let you have her for a thousand, cash money."

He stood back with the smile of one who has done a generous thing and doesn't care who knows it. Ling Foh smiled pityingly.

"Clack," he announced. "Lotsa clack. Sail lotten. Maybe so come wind. No walkee. All same no good. Go bottomside wateh. Fo'h hunled dollah."

"Eight hundred."

Ling Foh smiled blandly.

"No got. You talkee me eight hunled dollah. No good. Schoonel no good. Five hunled dollah topside plice."

The owner swore, spat into the bay, refused to drop his figure a cent, and finally sold the schooner for five hundred and twenty dollars.

Friday Ling Foh repaired to Mrs. Weston's kitchen as he had agreed. There he prepared breakfast and served it. Then he washed the dishes, put everything in order, and appeared at the door of the living-room, where his employer sat.

"I go now," he announced.

"But, Ling Foh," protested that lady, "I can't let you go now. You've just been away for five days."

"I go now," he reasserted. "I go China. Catchee pay."

Mrs. Weston was far too astonished to argue. Ling Foh had been a fixture in her kitchen for seven years and this abrupt departure took her off her feet.

"Catchee pay," he suggested again. "Catchee six dollah."

Silently she counted out the money.

"But, Ling Foh," she gasped at last, "why do you want to go back to China? Haven't you been treated well here? You can earn so much more here than in China."

"All lite," said Ling Foh gaily, "I go."

Mrs. Weston sighed hopelessly. Ling Foh had been the autocrat of her household for so long that it gave her a lost feeling to contemplate taking over the reins of government. She knew that argument would be fruitless. Ling Foh would smile and agree, but once he had made his decision it was unshakable.

"Well, if you must, you must, I suppose," she said wearily, "but I wish before you go you'd tell me how to make that sauce you serve with meats."

Ling Foh's face lighted up. A compliment to his cooking was the surest way to win his regard. Then he frowned, as one in deep thought.

"All lite," he said at last, "you makee this way: Take some kin' bean, b'long China. Takee lil piece loast po'k. All chop up, lil bits pieces. Cook topside stove long time, bottomside long time. All lite. Finish."

It finished Mrs. Weston. While she was still puzzling over topside stove and bottomside stove Ling Foh bowed and departed.

That night an ancient and disreputable schooner slid silently down the bay under a light shore breeze and turned north along the coast. It carried such persons of importance as Wan Li, Mock Hen, the dentist, who cured toothache by pounding the offending tooth with a mallet to kill the black worm that was gnawing at its roots, and Huan Kik, the priest, who had brought with him one of the smaller josses and was even now setting out the tea for the tiny paper horse with which every well-tended joss is provided in case he should decide to make a journey. In all there were forty-five aboard, for at the eleventh hour Ling Foh shipped four coolies who were to be allowed to work their passage across.

Ling Foh himself acted as sailing-master, and navigated by some obscure system of his own. The sea has no terrors for a race whose forefathers invented the compass and sailed their crazy junks up and down the Eastern Hemisphere a thousand years before Columbus was born.

On the evening of the third day the disreputable craft, leaking at every seam, nosed her way into Puget Sound, slid quietly into a sand-bank, and stuck fast. Ling Foh went overside and waded ashore.

Sam McCorkle, in charge of the Bureau of Immigration at Seattle, picked up the telephone.

"Bureau of Immigration," he barked. "McCorkle speaking."

A droning singson came over the wires.

"What wassat? Don't get you. Make it louder."

The drone was repeated.

"I can't make anything out of it," said McCorkle. "Sounds like the feller's talkin' Chinese. What? Make it louder."

Again the singsong, but this time he distinguished the words, "China boy."

"By gorry, it is Chinese," said McCorkle. "Get that chink that runs the elevator, somebody. Let this feller talk to him—hey!" he shouted into the phone. "Hold the line. Holdee line. Savvy?"

A minute later the Chinese elevator-boy entered, picked up the receiver, and turned to McCorkle.

"He say got China boy. Lotsa China boy. Papeh no got," he interpreted.

"Oh, he has, has he?" said McCorkle. "Ask him where."

The interpreter poured a torrent of sound into the mouthpiece. Presently he turned to McCorkle again.

"Ten mile up-Sound," he translated. "Got boat. Boat stuck. No walkee. Lotsa China boy."

McCorkle was a man of action. Moreover, he knew every sand-bank and shoal in the Sound. It took less than a second for his mind to reach the logical conclusion. Some one had tried to smuggle a cargo of Chinamen into the United States and had gone aground off Point Green.

Two hours later a government tug came alongside the schooner. Ling Foh bowed with all due ceremony as the white men came aboard.

"Who's in charge here?" roared the first man over the rail; no less a person than McCorkle himself.

Ling Foh smiled genially and tucked his hands into his sleeves.

"No got," he said. "All gone."

"Gone where?"

"No savvy. Melican man all gone. Lun away."

"Oh, they ran away, did they," commented McCorkle grimly. "Never mind, they won't get far. We've got their schooner—such as it is," he added, eying the ancient craft contemptuously. "Where did you come from?"

"Come flom China."

"I thought so. Where are your papers?"

"No got," said Ling Foh genially. "No savvy, papeh. What kin' papeh you wantchee?"

McCorkle explained urgently what sort of papers were necessary to allow a Chinaman to enter the United States. Ling Foh blandly assured him that he didn't understand, and when McCorkle became exasperated took refuge in an abysmal ibnorance of English. "No savvy" was the burden of his song, and he sang it endlessly.

McCorkle demanded information as to how they had come. Ling Foh was delighted to enlighten him.

"Come flom China," he asserted. "My second uncle, he *compradore*—coolie foreman—long time big ship, come flom China. He say: 'You come United State.' He say: 'Bling lotsa China boy. You catchee me six dollah. All China boy catchee me six dollah. I fix all lite.' We stay long time bottomside big ship. Last night come Melican man. Got lil schooneh. He say: 'You come topside schooneh. Come 'long me.' He say: 'I take you United State. No wantee damn papeh. I fix all lite.' We go topside schooneh. Schooneh stick bottomside. No walkee. Melican man lun away. What you think that?" He smiled happily, as if inviting McCorkle to help him enjoy the joke.

It was an old story to the immigration official. This was only one of the numerous methods of smuggling Chinamen into the country. A tramp steamer touching at a Chinese port would take aboard a number of Celestials. A few miles off the American coast it would be met by a small boat, and the Chinamen transferred, to be later landed at some isolated spot, taught a certain amount of English, and gradually brought into the cities.

Ling Foh's repeated assertion, "papeh no got" was strictly true. Every vestige of evidence that his charges had ever been in the United States had been carefully destroyed, and a search of the vessel revealed no document of any kind allowing one or forty-five Chinamen to enter this country. After five days, the necessary legal formalities having been concluded, they received a visit from McCorkle. For a better understanding he brought a Chinese interpreter along with him.

"Tell 'em," said McCorkle, "that the authorities have decided to send 'em all back to China. Tell 'em they leave tomorrow."

The interpreter sang up and down the scale, droned along for a moment in a flat monotone, and stopped. Ling Foh, his wrinkled face bland as ever, rose to reply. McCorkle shifted from one foot to the other as the interminable oration went on. At last it closed with a bow of resignation.

"What's he say?" asked the immigration official.

"He say: 'Can happen.'"

McCorkle permitted himself a grin.

"Glory be, he didn't protest," he said.

Lonesome Ranch

by Charles Alden Seltzer

Author of "Riddle Gawne," "Square Deal Sanderson," etc.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHY DEVIL HALTED.

THERE was a smile on Allison's face when he turned his back on the Two Bar ranch-house and headed Devil into the northern distance. He had come unheralded and unwelcome, and was going away unregretted. But he was not so sure of the last, and his smile was a reflection of the grim irony that dwelt in his heart over the wrecking of his hopes—hopes that might have been realized had Creighton not permitted his jealousy to drive him to the insane attack the night before.

It seemed evident to him that Eleanor had at last decided in favor of Creighton—that she had finally found herself. Unwittingly, Creighton had influenced Eleanor to a decision by provoking Allison's attack on him. But what sort of a man was it who would repeat such a tale to the woman he loved and whom he hoped to win? Early this morning he had pitied Creighton; he now pitied Eleanor. For he knew she was too fine and noble to be happy with a man like Creighton.

Creighton would destroy all her warm, broad impulses; he would drag her down to his own level, and then reproach her because she had surrendered to him. Yet she had done her own choosing, and Allison could find no blame in his heart for her. He told himself that he was riding out of her life, and that he must forget her.

But as he rode his heart was heavy, his eyes somber, and his face seamed with lines that had not been in it that morning. His thoughts persisted in dwelling upon her; he kept seeing her as she had sat on her horse while talking with him that morning, trying heroically to suppress her emotions. What emotions had she suppressed? He was not certain.

It had seemed to him that she regretted doing what she had done; that she had been hoping he would deny being to blame for what had happened to Creighton; and yet the fact that she had discharged him indicated fault in that theory.

His dream had been a pleasant one, full of high hopes and the promise of happiness. He was not so sure that he had ever seriously expected her to look upon him as he had hoped she might, for he knew she had spent much of her life in the East, where she had come in contact with men who must have impressed her more deeply than he would impress her with his rough mannerisms, his ignorance, and many other shortcomings that must make him seem ridiculous when compared with the smooth, finished product of civilization—men like Creighton, for example. And yet he could not deny that deep in his heart had lurked a wish that she might see some good in him, that she might see in him some signs—

His thoughts broke off abruptly, and he laughed shortly.

He was yielding to sentiments that could

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not alter the fact of his defeat; they had squirmed, like serpents, from under the stern repression that governed him all his days; and if he did not scotch them, they would embitter him. And so, filling his lungs with the keen air that swept to him from over the plains, he rode onward, accusing himself with gentle expletives.

"Shucks!" Allison mused. "You wasn't seriously expectin' she'd want you! You've been a dreamin' an' a hopin'—that's all! You've been gettin' vain—an' conceited! Why, I reckon she wasn't even thinkin of you! She's been raised a lot different. Men that she's talked to—savin' they don't wear the riggin' I'm runnin' around in—have been real guys.

"Eastern men don't all size up like Creighton. If she's makin' a mistake it wasn't because there wasn't real men there for her to choose from. I reckon men is the same everywhere—some that don't measure up, an' some that do. Devil," he said aloud, "we've been strayin' from the trail. An' now we're goin' back to it—forgettin' what's happened."

But Eleanor's face persisted in remaining before him. And he fell again into his former deep ruminations; so that after a while Devil loped the trail without direction. It was only when Devil halted and refused to go on, despite a gentle kick in the ribs, delivered involuntarily, that Allison came out of his meditation. He slipped out of the saddle and went forward. A dozen feet ahead of him lay the body of a man.

He knew the motionless figure to be Creighton, even before he dismounted. He was lying where he had fallen when Lally had shot him—face down, his arms flung wide.

A pistol—Eleanor's—lay near him.

Before Allison stopped at the man's side he gazed swiftly about. There was no sound, no movement, no sign of life. Allison's examination was rapid. At its conclusion his lips were straight and grim. There was an abrasion on the top of Creighton's head—probably caused by a fall. The shot had been fired from behind.

The deed had been committed within the last half-hour—Allison was sure of that. For Creighton's body was still warm, and the blood from the wound in his back had not started to congeal. He was still alive.

Allison's rapid examination had told him that, for he had felt the faint beating of the man's heart. Allison stood erect. The story of the tragedy was written in the hoof-prints that met his gaze. He saw that the two riders had come from the north; that they had fled southward.

The broken leg of Creighton's horse and the gopher hole with the earth pawed up around it were mute evidences of the accident. He saw where Creighton had run just before the bullet struck him; he saw where Creighton's assailant had stood when he had done the shooting.

However, though he yearned to punish the perpetrators of the crime, he knew that if he expected to keep Creighton alive he would have to get him to the Two Bar at once, leaving the apprehending of the would-be murderers to the future. There was little he could do for Creighton. The Two Bar, he estimated, was not more than seven or eight miles distant, and if he could get Creighton there in time Eleanor might be able to save him. Loma was too far away.

He worked fast. He drew Devil close, lifted Creighton gently in his arms, placed him face down over Devil's shoulders, climbed into the saddle, drew the inert body toward him so that the man's shoulders rested on his arms—and then sent Devil forward at a rapid lope.

CHAPTER XXIII.

UNDER SUSPICION.

IT was not until Allison had covered half the distance between the ranch-house and the spot where he had found Creighton that he understood his efforts would not save the man. The color had been slowly leaving Creighton's face, until now it was a dull, ghastly white.

Creighton would die before they could reach their destiantion. Convinced of that, Allison yielded to a grim pity that swept over him, halted Devil, and for an instant considered leaving Creighton here and

riding on alone to tell Eleanor what had happened, to save her the shock she would be sure to suffer should he come in with the man's dead body.

However, he rode on again, for there might be still a slender chance for the man, and he did not want to deny it to him. He would do his best to save Creighton for Eleanor.

When he reached the ranch-house he rode up to the rear porch, dismounted, lifted Creighton gently down, and stood erect. His own face was nearly as white as Creighton's, for he dreaded Eleanor's grief when she should see his pitiful burden. He was rather astonished at the silence that greeted him, for he had expected somebody would be out before this to inquire his errand.

Certainly Eleanor must have told them of his departure, and since the windows of the ranch-house offered an unobstructed view of the plains—especially in the direction from which he had come—some one must have seen him.

But no one appeared in the doorway—which was open. There came to his ears no sound which would tell him that any living being was within. He swung around and looked into the corral, to see that three horses were missing. His lips were set with disappointment as he decided that Mrs. Norton, Hazel, and Eleanor must have gone riding.

He stopped, to take Creighton up and carry him into the house—intending to do what he could for him—when he saw that it was ended.

Creighton was dead.

"I'm sort of glad she ain't here," was his thought as he leaned over and closed the fixed, staring eyes. "I won't have to do any explainin', an' I won't have her eyes to remember—like they will be."

That thought, however, was merely the expression of an impulse which had moved him. He knew he would have to stay—that it was his duty to stay in order that he might do the explaining he shrank from. So he seated himself on the edge of the porch to wait.

A little later, while he was staring eastward, dejectedly watching the featureless skyline, he saw two ponies—the piebalds—swing around a corner of the stable and come toward him.

The ponies bore Hazel and Mrs. Norton. His eyes glowed with emotion when he saw them. Curiously, the ponies had trotted into his vision from the spot where, some time before, he had received his dismissal.

He got up, feeling rather relieved to know that he would not have to tell Eleanor his tragic tidings. Mrs. Norton, matured and experienced, and not—as she had told him—liking Creighton, would bear the shock of his death with less emotion. She could break the news to Eleanor later.

As he stood erect, facing away from the porch, he heard a slight sound behind him, and he wheeled swiftly, to see Eleanor standing in the kitchen door, looking at him.

Startled, amazed, his face flushing with an inward embarrassment over the scare she had given him, he stood silent. She had evidently not seen Creighton's body, which was lying in an angle of the porch, close to the wall of the house; for he saw nothing but surprise in her eyes as they met his.

"You?" she said breathlessly. "You?"

"I reckon it's me, ma'am," he answered grimly.

"Why," she said, her voice leaping with emotion—an exultation which puzzled him—"I thought—"

"Thought I wasn't comin' back," he said, supplying what he imagined were the words she had been about to speak. "I though I wasn't comin' back either." He paused, his face paled; he could not meet her eyes, to see in them the horror that would dawn when he told her about Creighton.

"But you see, ma'am," he blurted out, "I found Creighton."

"Found Creighton! Why, what do you mean?"

She took one step toward him. He saw her gaze go to the rigid bulk on the porch floor; heard her catch her breath, saw her face blanch and her eyes close. She swayed, held tightly to the door jambs.

"Dead?" she cried with a curious mixture of dread inquiry and astonishment.

He expected that she would go to Creighton, and he was prepared for the wild passion which would seize her upon the realization of her bereavement. And he was amazed when she shrank back against one of the door jambs and covered her face with her hands, making no sound.

Allison watched her in grim curiosity until he became aware that Mrs. Norton and Hazel had dismounted at the corral gates and were coming toward them. Hazel came first; behind her was Mrs. Norton, her eyes alight with startled inquiry.

"What has happened to Creighton, Allison?" she said.

"He's dead, ma'am—killed. I found him on the trail about seven miles out toward Loma. His horse had throwed him, I reckon. Creighton's got a lump on his head, where he landed; an' the horse has a broken leg. Some one had shot the horse. It wasn't Creighton, because his gun ain't been fired. It's Miss Lane's gun, I reckon."

He laid the pistol on the edge of the porch, and watched while Mrs. Norton went over hesitatingly and gazed down at Creighton. He was silent until she again looked at him steadily, inquiringly.

"Creighton was shot in the back," he went on. "Looks like there'd been two men. They met him—after he'd took his fall. Likely they shot his horse. There's hoof-prints all around, showin' just how it happened. I didn't have time to follow them, bein' in a hurry to get Creighton where some one could help to save him."

He glanced curiously at Eleanor, who still stood motionless, her hands over her eyes. He considered she was withholding her grief until he should be gone. For the first time since her arrival he glanced at Hazel.

She was standing near the edge of the porch, watching him steadily, a passionate hostility in her eyes.

Mrs. Norton, too, was watching him keenly; she seemed to study his eyes, seemed to be probing them.

"Creighton fell, you say?" said Mrs. Norton. "The fall didn't kill him."

"I reckon not, ma'am. I'm figurin' he'd got over the fall when he was shot. It was the bullet that killed him."

"Did you see him killed, Allison?"

"No. But I reckon I'd have heard the shootin' if I'd been payin' attention to my business. I was sort of ridin' along, dreamin'. I didn't hear anything. But when I got to where Creighton was layin' I saw he hadn't been down long."

Hazel had been violently, though secretly, signaling to her mother; and now Mrs. Norton went to her. Both withdrew to a point some distance from Allison, and whispered, while Allison steadily watched Eleanor.

She had not moved, though he saw that her hands were clenched tightly over her eyes as though she were trying to repress some terrible passion that had seized her. Over Allison as he watched her stole a strange conviction—a conviction that all of them believed he had killed Creighton. He felt that was why Eleanor refused to look at him, and why Mrs. Norton and Hazel had withdrawn to whisper. He slowly stiffened.

Into his eyes came a chill that told of the cold mockery the conviction had aroused. It seemed to him that their eager willingness to accuse him without evidence indicated that all along they had doubted him—that their professions of friendship and respect had been false, hypocritical.

He straightened, smiled saturninely, and spoke to Eleanor. But his voice did not betray his disappointment; it was low, gentle, regretful.

"If you're thinkin' that I had anything to do with Creighton gettin' shot, ma'am, you're a heap mistaken. I ain't denyin' that I didn't like Creighton. But any shootin' that I've done in my life ain't been done from behind."

Eleanor removed her hands from before her eyes and looked at him. It seemed her gaze was searching his for signs that he was telling the truth. But he saw doubt in it a light that told him she was wondering if he could be guilty. Bitter derision for his hopes and expectations was in the faint smile that curved his lips.

He heard Hazel's voice close to him.

"You quarreled with him last night, Allison," she said. "You don't deny that?"

She was standing in front of him now,

hostility unmistakable in her flashing, scornful eyes. In her manner was none of that admiration he had seen there the night before—the adulation, the mute worship which he had noted and deplored. It was plain that her convictions of his guilt were deeply and firmly settled. The change in her was startling.

"I reckon I ain't denyin' it, Miss Norton."

"You can't—of course—because I was there when it happened. And I heard you threaten him!"

He looked at Eleanor; saw that her eyes were flashing with scornful accusation and contempt—walked to the edge of the porch and gazed gravely at her, though with an eager wistfulness that affected her strangely indeed.

"Ma'am," he said softly, "it sure does look pretty bad for me. Me an' Creighton had words last night, an' I spoke sort of strong to him. Hazel Norton was there. I'm wonderin'—you knowin' how much I knew of what was between you an' Creighton—if you think I shot him?"

She did not answer, but stood there silent, amazed, for she had not known of the quarrel; though with Hazel's revelation had come the stealthy thought that if Allison were guilty the quarrel might have provided a motive for the deed.

She didn't want to believe him guilty. Ever since she had been standing there her heart had protested against accepting the thought; for it had seemed to her that if he had killed Creighton he would not have brought the body back for her to see. Her faith in him was strong—even now that there seemed to be a motive; even though the meager evidence against him pointed to his guilt—and there was in his eyes as he stood there a steady directness, a serene glow of innocence lurking back of the eager wistfulness.

And yet, when she remembered how she had seen Hazel leaving the bunk-house—the light extinguished lest she be discovered—she felt she could no longer trust him. He had lied to her about his relations with Hazel, protesting only the morning before that she was only a "kid"; and yet he had met her clandestinely, with such secrecy that he had thought it necessary to extinguish the light in the bunk-house.

If he could play the hypocrite once, he could not be trusted; and though she didn't want to believe him guilty of murdering Creighton, she could not doubt—"

"Do you think I shot him, ma'am?" he asked again.

"I—I don't know, Allison," she answered hesitatingly. "Oh, I don't know what I think!"

"I reckon it's mighty plain, ma'am," he said gravely.

He bowed to her, smiled stiffly at Mrs. Norton and Hazel, said he would ride to the outfit to have them "look out" for Creighton, and walked toward the bunk-house, the metallic clinking of his spurs the only sound that marked his progress.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE ACCUSATION.

THE silence that followed Allison's disappearance into the bunk-house continued for some minutes. Eleanor had turned so that she faced the wall of the house; she was leaning against it, sobbing, her shoulders moving convulsively. Mrs. Norton stood where she had been when Allison had started to walk away; her lips were tightly compressed and her eyes glowed with pity as she watched Eleanor.

Hazel was watching the open door of the bunk-house, her eyes large with remorse, her lips quivering suspiciously. Mrs. Norton was the first to move. At a sharp sound that greeted her ears she turned, westward, to see two horsemen coming toward the ranch-house. They were not more than two or three hundred yards distant and were moving rapidly.

Mrs. Norton quickly walked to the porch, crossed it, and placed two comfortnig arms around Eleanor.

"There, there, Eleanor," she said. "It looks bad, for a fact, but he may not be guilty after all. There was something in his eyes which seemed to say that he thought we were all crazy to think he would

do such a thing. Dry your tears; there are two men coming!"

Eleanor wheeled swiftly, hopefully. She was conscious of a wild wish that whoever was coming would be magically possessed of evidence which would prove Allison innocent.

But when she saw that the men were Bolton and Lally she shrank back against the wall near the door and placed both hands over her breast in dismay and dread. The appearance of Bolton and his deputy at such a time indicated that they had knowledge of what had happened. And they were not friendly to Allison.

She saw Bolton's little, ferretlike eyes roving around as he rode toward them—taking in the corral, the piebald ponies, and Devil, who was standing near a corner of the ranch-house, where Allison had left him, the bridle rein trailing the ground in front of him.

When Bolton and Lally pulled their horses to a halt near the edge of the porch, Eleanor was conscious of a venomous, triumphant glow in the sheriff's eyes. She saw his gaze go to Creighton's body; saw him smile with hideous mirth, his lips repulsive with a grim satisfaction. He looked from Creighton's body to Eleanor, and it seemed to her that his eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

"I see you know what's happened," he said, his voice loud, seeming to leap from his lips.

"Waal, this man Creighton was murdered not more than two hours ago. Me an' Lally was headin' for hyar. Whar's Allison?"

"Did you witness the—the murder, Mr. Bolton?" asked Eleanor haltingly.

"I reckon we witnessed it!" boomed Bolton. "Me an' Lally was comin' hyar. When we got to a timber grove about seven or eight miles north of hyar we heard shootin'. We was aimin' to find out what it was all about, an' who was doin' it. An' we did! Whar's Allison? Hyar's his hoss!"

"Did Allison—" Eleanor paused. She could not ask the question in that manner—directly—even though she knew, from Bolton's persistence in inquiring about Allison, that Allison was involved in the murder. The savage truculence in Bolton's voice proved that.

"Yes!" he bawled at her brutally. "Allison!" He fixed his little eyes on her—they seemed to glance with ghoulish glee as he spat out his next words: "Allison done the shootin'. We didn't rush him because we wanted to see what the coyote was goin' to do with the body. We followed him hyar!"

"Are you sure he did it, Bolton?"

"Didn't I tell you once?" he sneered.

He leaned forward and peered at her, the burning, insulting intensity of his gaze causing a deep color to surge into her face.

"Haw, haw!" he laughed. "I reckon I see it now! It ain't Creighton—eh? It's Allison! You ain't carin' a heap for Creighton; it's what's goin' to happen to Allison that's botherin' you now! Whar's Allison? We're aimin' to rope him an' take him back to Loma for trial!"

Though she now had no doubt of Allison's guilt, and though her resentment for what he had done was so deep that it had suddenly destroyed every other emotion or passion she had felt for him, she did not intend to tell Bolton where he might be found.

But at that instant she saw Bolton's eyes widen; saw him stiffen; heard him exclaim sharply.

Following his gaze, she saw a dozen riders swing around a corner of the stable and come toward the ranch-house, their horses in a slow lope. She knew the riders as Two Bar men.

Her gaze left the riders quickly, however, and went to the bunk-house.

Allison, seeming to crouch a little, had stepped out of the bunk-house door and was walking toward the ranch-house.

CHAPTER XXV.

"I RECKON THAT ENDS IT."

ALLISON had gone to the bunk-house for his neckerchief, which, in the stress of the few minutes preceding his departure that morning, he had forgotten.

He had found it, hanging from a nail near the bunk he had occupied, and though he had tied it around his neck and knew there was nothing more belonging to him in the bunk-house, he stood for some time beside the table, where the night before Hazel had sat, gazing around at the things that had become familiar to him.

Standing there, somberly reviewing the events of the day, he heard Bolton's voice, sonorous, blatant, inquiring for him. And in that instant, for him at least, the mystery of Creighton's death was explained.

He went to a window, peered through the muslin curtains, and saw Bolton and Lally at the edge of the porch. As they had not passed the bunk-house on their way to the ranch-house, he knew they must have reached the Two Bar from the Loma trail; and there was little doubt in his mind that their horses had made the hoof-prints he had noted near the dry arroyo just before he had started for the Two Bar with Creighton's body.

When he had examined the wound in Creighton's back he had known that the man had been shot only a short time before he himself had reached the spot; and he was now certain Bolton and Lally had killed him. If that were the case, the two men must have been close to him when he had been scanning the surrounding country for signs of the murderers; and his eyes gleamed with comprehension when he remembered the timber grove close to the spot where Creighton had been killed.

While watching Lally and Bolton from behind the curtain of the window, noting Bolton's belligerent manner, his sweeping gestures; listening to his voice, truculently repeating, "Whar's Allison?" it became plain to him that Bolton was charging him with the murder.

He thought he knew what was in Bolton's mind. Bolton intended to take him into custody, but not to Loma. If he were fool enough to surrender to the man, it would be very easy for Bolton and Lally to murder him, later to explain that he had resisted and that they had been forced to kill him.

There would be little else for them to explain, for they were officers of the law, and Allison's mere word, unsupported, would mean little, opposed to theirs.

Any word that he might utter in the presence of Eleanor and the others would be futile. He was convinced that while he had been examining Creighton near where he was shot, Bolton and Lally had been watching him from some covert in the vicinity. If they were not guilty they must have seen the man who fired the shot, and knew it was not he.

But he could not convince Eleanor of that. Nor did he intend to surrender to Bolton and Lally.

Circumstances, aided by Bolton's cunning, were leaving him no choice. He took out his pistol, inspected it carefully, dropped it back into the holster, made certain that it came smoothily upward at his slightest pull; tightened the rawhide thong at the bottom of the holster—and stepped out of the door of the bunk-house.

He heard behind him the rapid beating of hoofs, and knew the outfit was coming in. But he did not turn, for he was not more than a hundred feet from where Bolton and Lally were standing. He noted that at his appearance Lally had slid from the saddle, and was now standing near Bolton, watching him.

Bolton had ceased talking. As Allison continued to walk toward the ranch-house, Bolton began to edge away from Lally—Allison could see how he moved his left hand, hanging at his side, toward the deputy, as though signaling him to increase the distance that stretched between them.

The men of the outfit had halted. Allison could hear their voices behind him, and at his left, toward the corral. Some of the men were running.

"A rukus!" said one, his voice high-pitched with excitement.

"Lordy!" breathed another, awe in his voice. "I wouldn't have missed *this*. Dave Bolton an' Lally! An' the boss seein' red!"

Still another voice behind Allison whispered to him hoarsely:

"I'm achin' to butt in on this, boss. Say the word!"

Allison turned the palm of his left hand backward, as a signal for the volunteer not to interfere. And at that sign the

other's voice came again, sharply, warningly:

"Get out of the way, you damned fools! You're in line!"

And suddenly the sound behind Allison ceased, and he was alone, walking toward Bolton and Lally.

The women, seemingly aware that tragedy impended, had vanished. Save for the horses belonging to the two men, the piebalds at a distance near the corral gate, and Devil, calmly standing near a corner of the ranch-house, Bolton and Lally had the big space between the house and the corral fence to themselves.

And they were using the space. Bolton had moved slowly away from Lally until there was now at least twenty or thirty feet of distance between them—and both men were increasing it every instant, Lally edging toward the house, Bolton moving toward the corral.

Allison's eyes gleamed with derision at the old and time-worn trick. The mere fact that the men were moving apart in that manner indicated they anticipated violence, that they had discussed the possibility and had made plans to kill him at his first aggressive movement.

When Allison, moving slowly forward, reached a point not more than ten feet from the men—and a little nearer Lally than Bolton—the sheriff's voice boomed into the premonitory silence that had fallen:

"Allison, you halt right whar you are! We're aimin' to have a talk with you!"

"Get goin'," retorted Allison.

There was a trace of contempt in his voice; in his eyes. His gaze was not on Bolton, nor was it on Lally. He seemed to be staring at a point directly between them—as one stares between the eyes of another—an all-seeing, unblinking, steady and concentrated gaze that gave wide radius to his vision. He could see both Bolton and Lally without appearing to look at either of them.

"I'm intendin' to!" declared Bolton loudly. "We don't want no gun-play. We represent the law, an' our intentions is peaceable!

"Now, listen hyar! Thar's been trouble between you an' me; but I don't want no man hyar to think I'm doin' this because of that trouble. I'm representin' the law; an' I'm hyar to arrest you for the murder of that man Creighton. I'm expectin' you to come peaceable, but I'm warnin' you that you've got to come—dead or alive!"

If he expected his blustering, threatening manner would intimidate Allison, he was mistaken.

Allison had not moved. He was still staring between the two men, his head lowered a trifle, so that he could watch their hands, while both his own were hanging in seeming carelessness at his sides.

"Bolton," he said, his voice vibrant with contempt, "you sound hollow, like an empty barrel that's bein' pounded with a club. You ain't foolin' me none. You're a liar! Flash your gun!"

Lally's hand moved first, swift as a streak of light. And yet, before the hand could grip the holster it sought, fire leaped from Allison's side.

Lally grunted, stood erect as Bolton's gun roared. Bolton's bullet went into the ground at his feet, while Bolton stood, huge astonishment in his eyes, gazing downward at the gun that was falling from his loosening fingers. Allison's second shot, following the first so closely that the reports seemed to blend, had struck the sheriff in the chest before his own weapon could be snapped to a level.

Fell a flat, dead silence.

Lally plunged forward, going down gently, on his side, like a man ready for sleep and seeking a comfortable place to lie. Bolton stood for an instant, one hand pressed tightly to his chest, his eyes gleaming with a strange mixture of amazement, incredulity and foolish embarrassment. Then he pitched forward, face down in the sand of the level. One hand moved slightly, the fingers straightening. Lally did not move at all.

Allison turned; faced his audience. Men were draping the corral fence; others were coming slowly around a corner of the ranch-house near him, a tall man emerged from behin[illegible] post at the corral gate; several others more timid than their fellows, were walking toward Allison from some of the distant outbuildings. And in the kitchen

door of the ranch-house were Eleanor, Mrs. Norton, and Hazel. They were standing close together, staring curiously, fearfully out.

Nobody spoke except the tall man, who had been watching the fight from behind the gate-post. He whispered to a man who stood near him, and though his voice was low, it shattered the deep silence with a dull resonance that carried to them all:

"Gawd!" he said, awed. "*Fast?* I never seen nothin' like it!"

Allison's pistol was still in his hand. A faint, bluish-white smoke drifted thinly up from its muzzle. But the smoke was not thinner than the cold smile on his lips as his gaze went to Eleanor, standing in the doorway. He did not look at Mrs. Norton or Hazel; his eyes sought Eleanor's, held them.

He saw them waver, droop; her body shrank, a shiver ran over her.

"I reckon that ends it," he said at last, his voice low and vibrant.

He walked to where Devil stood, drew the reins over the animal's head, swung into the saddle, and rode away, no sound breaking the silence—except the rapid beating of Devil's hoofs.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HEADED EAST.

ACCOMPANIED by Jim Allen—who was the reliable man Allison had designated as having the ability to take his place as foreman—Eleanor approached Gordon's ranch.

She was seated beside Allen in the buckboard, and behind her, cleverly and securely strapped to the vehicle with strong ropes, were various packages, suit-cases, a traveling-bag, a trunk, and a miscellany of other articles, all representing Eleanor's effects.

A month had passed since the double killing at the Two Bar; a month of lonesomeness so profound that Eleanor shuddered at the mere recollection of it.

Two weeks before the buckboard had made another trip, to Laskar, where the railroad stretched its iron rails eastward. Mrs. Norton and Hazel had been the passengers, and Jim Allen had done the driving. Mrs. Norton and Hazel had told Eleanor they could no longer endure the inconveniences of life at the Two Bar, though, they assured her, they were reluctant to go away and leave her. Still they had gone.

Eleanor had not made the trip with them. This was the first time she had gone anywhere since Allison had left, for she had lost interest in the country, and in the ranch.

Jim Allen was addicted to long silences, and had not made a good companion during the ride from the Two Bar. As for that, Eleanor herself had felt very little like talking; though when they came in sight of the Gordon ranch-house she began to take some interest in her surroundings.

It loomed before her, invitingly big and peaceful. Unlike the Two Bar dwelling, it was set near timber, which provided a welcome shade. The river was close, and the fringing green of the brush that followed its course appealed to her. If the Two Bar surroundings were as beautiful as this, life there would have been more endurable.

But she doubted that. The beauties of nature could not still that strange yearning in her heart—a hunger to see again the big, gentle man—yes, gentle, despite the things he had done—who had ridden into her life like a romantic figure of the imagination, only to ride out of it again, to disappear as mysteriously as he had come.

When the buckboard reached the fence enclosing the big pasture where Gordon kept his favorite stock, she saw a figure on the big gallery of the ranch-house, watching. And when the buckboard came to a stop Gordon stepped forward to help her down.

She had always liked Gordon; she trusted him as she might have trusted her own father; and when she was forced to place an arm around his neck to keep from falling, she left it there for an instant, hugging him affectionately. Jim Allen, without asking her consent, was unhitching the horses from the buckboard.

Before she realized it she was sitting in a big easy chair on the gallery, and Gordon was standing beside her, his hands on her shoulders, peering into her face.

"Where's all the baggage goin', Eleanor?"

"East," she said.

"Visit?"

"No, Mr. Gordon. I am going to stay in the East." She nibbled at her lips to conceal the agitation that suddenly assailed her at the deep gentleness of Gordon's voice. It reminded her strongly of Allison!

"I have found that I can't stand it at the Two Bar any longer. I *must* go away. And I came to see you to ask if you will sell the place for me."

"Got tired of it—eh?" he said. "Well, it must be lonesome over there now."

"Very," she answered, a catch in her voice.

He seated himself in a chair and drew it up so that he faced her.

"H-m!" he said. "It's too bad. I was hoping you'd stay—that you'd like it. What's this I hear about Allison not bein' guilty of killing Creighton?"

She gulped; her face paled, and she pressed her lips tightly together. "If I had only known," she said in a low, regretful voice. "Why, Mr. Gordon," she went on, her voice tragically earnest and her eyes eloquent with emotion, "I—I wouldn't speak to Allison when he left. And he looked at me so appealingly, as though he were asking me to have faith in him! And two hours after he left a man named Amos Carter came. He said Allison was innocent!"

"I heard somethin' of it—not much. What did Carter have to say?"

"Carter likes Allison, Mr. Gordon. It seems that when Allison first came to Loma, Carter recognized him—having heard of him because of something Allison had done in Lazette—something about some cattle-thieves. Carter had heard Krell talking about me, and had seen Krell changing the date on a letter you wrote to me.

"And Carter had been in a store in Loma when Allison and Bolton fought over me. Allison whipped Bolton—with his fists. Carter said he knew Bolton would seek to be revenged for the whipping. So he watched Bolton, and on the day Creighton was killed, Carter had followed Bolton and Lally toward the Two Bar.

"According to Carter, he was hiding in some timber near where Creighton was killed, and saw Bolton and Lally talking with Creighton. Then suddenly, without any apparent cause, Lally shot Creighton.

"Just after they killed Creighton they saw Allison coming. They hid in the timber until after Allison began to ride toward the Two Bar with Creighton. After an interval they followed Allison, to meet him at the Two Bar and charge him with murdering Creighton. Carter delayed his appearance at the Two Bar, fearing Bolton and Lally would kill him if they discovered he had witnessed the murder."

"And you thought Allison had killed Creighton?"

"Yes. Oh, I know I should have had faith in him—he was so considerate, so manly; and he trusted me so much!"

"H-m! Sort of a queer way to repay him—believing what men like Bolton and Lally said about him. I reckon you can't be grieving such an awful lot about him."

"But I *am*, Mr. Gordon. I—I love him!" Her lips were visibly trembling.

"That's why you're wanting to sell out and go away?" he asked with gentle mockery.

"Ah, Mr. Gordon; I have been so lonesome! If I thought there was a chance that he would come back, I believe I wouldn't mind so much. But I didn't *look* at him when—just before he left, he was standing there looking at me so wistfully. I saw the question in his eyes, asking me if I had faith. And I didn't look at him—I—I couldn't! And I know he will never come back!"

"He didn't tell you where he was going?"

She shook her head; she was staring straight ahead into the southern distance.

Gordon got up. He walked to the end of the big gallery, stood there in silence for a few minutes. There was a gentle, shrewd smile on his face, though Eleanor did not see it, for she was facing in another direction.

"I reckon you'd better go back to the Two Bar, Eleanor," he said.

"I shall never go back!" she declared positively.

"Next season is going to be a Jim Dandy, Eleanor."

"I—I don't care. I couldn't stand it."

"You could go to raising horses, Eleanor—for a change. There's money in horses."

"I won't raise horses!"

"It would sort of take your mind off of things," he went on quietly. "Now, take my stock—in the pasture there. I'm raising some mighty fine horses. Take that big black, for instance. He's a hummer. No marks on him; he's black all over. Got a black soul—maybe; a devil of a horse."

At the word "devil" she glanced at the corral. Close to the near fence of the pasture stood a magnificent black horse, head raised, ears erect, seeming to look directly at her.

She got to her feet, trembling, craning her neck forward. Her hands were tightly clenched, and while Gordon watched her she leaped off the gallery and ran to where the black horse was standing.

The big black whinnied as she came close; and she halted and pressed both hands to her breast; then turned and cried out excitedly to Gordon:

"It's Devil! It's Devil!"

And then she gasped; her eyes grew wide with wonder and joy and amazement. For Gordon had vanished. Standing in the open doorway of the ranch-house, a glow in his eyes that rivaled hers, was Allison.

From the dark interior Gordon watched the meeting; watched how Allison reached her before she had come half of the distance back to the gallery; and grinned foolishly when he saw something that he had no right to see.

But Gordon heard nothing, for by the time the two had reached the gallery he had slipped out the back door and was grinning his foolish grin as he walked to the stable.

"You heard me!" she charged after a time.

"Gordon *would* have it," he confessed. "He'd seen you comin'."

"You were here all the time!" she declared, blushing. "And you knew—afterward—that Amos Carter had seen. You knew—I knew. And you wouldn't come."

"I couldn't—not knowin' whether I'd be welcome," he said, smiling gently at the reproach in her eyes. "I was hopin'—an' waitin'. But I'm tellin' you somethin' that even Gordon didn't know. I was goin' to the Two Bar to-morrow."

"To-morrow would have been too late—if I hadn't decided to stop here on my way to Laskar," she said, shrinking from the possibility that possibly he might have missed her.

"Jim Allen had orders," he laughed, craft in his eyes. "I got word to him, figurin' you might want to light out. Jim had orders that if that happened he was to drive right here."

"That's why he unhitched the horses!" she said, remembering.

Then her eyes grew eloquent with self-reproach.

"You'll forgive me—won't you, Allison?" she said.

"I reckon there ain't a lot to forgive; but whatever it is, I do," he vowed, recklessly.

"There is—much. It's about Hazel. Oh, Allison, I was so disappointed in you!" She dropped her eyes from his, and gently patted the back of his hand, which was lying on the arm of his chair. "I—I thought you were being unfaithful to the girl you told me about."

"Which was you," he grinned hugely.

"Are you sure you meant me, Allison—that there is no other girl?"

"Sure!"

She sat looking at him, faint tints of color coming and going in her cheeks; while his eyes, gentler now than they had ever been when they looked into hers, told her something of his hopes and his fears, and reminded her of the triumph that now plainly was his.

And then, because they had so much to say to each other, and because mere words, no matter how cleverly linked together, always fail to express emotions that in such times are so sweetly solemn—they sat very close, watching the peaceful world basking in the white sunlight, dreaming of the new world which they would enter together.

(The end.)