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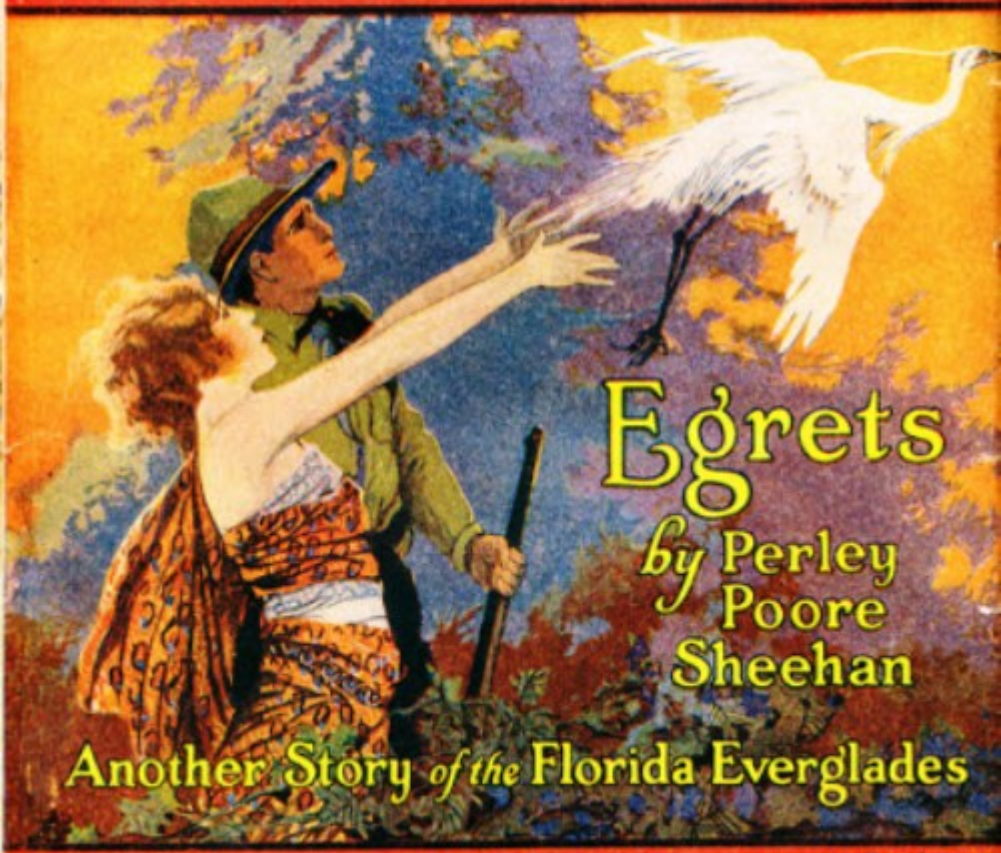

Egrets

by Perley Poore Sheehan

Another Story of the Florida Everglades

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CXXXIV — CONTENTS FOR MAY 21, 1921 — NUMBER 2

ONE NOVELETTE

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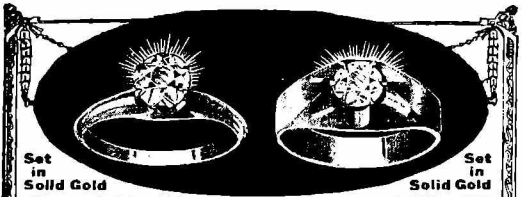

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CXXXIV SATURDAY, MAY 21, 1921 NUMBER 2

Egrets

by Perley Poore Sheehan

Author of "The One Gift," "The House With a Bad Name," "Up-Stairs," "We Are French," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A CHANCE TO DIE.

KENWOOD, rowing a light skiff, headed from a small creek into a wide lagoon. As he did so there was a double report from a thicket of coco-plums on the farther side, and a hail of buckshot smote the water and bushes about him. With the slightest possible delay, he had dropped his oars, seized his rifle and fired in return. He did this artistically—two quick ones, then with leisure as he lay in the bottom of the skiff and emptied his magazine.

The Audubon man had warned him that he would have a chance to die down here.

A little while before, all had been silence—a trackless region under the sun, at an hour of the day when few things were stirring. But now there was a sudden change. While the shots still crashed and echoed, there came from the wet forest that shrouded the creek and overhung the edges of the lagoon a tumult of shrieking—cries that were almost human, but of human creatures gone mad; then a whirring in the treetops like the first gust of a tropic storm, and a myriad birds had taken wing.

These were egrets mostly, in the full glory of the mating season — pure white, their shoulder-plumes decking them like bridal veils. But all the birds were white—flintheads, ibis, heron of other breeds. Most of the birds flocked straight up, then swung far around in a fluttering circle, glistening in the bright sunlight like extra large snowflakes. But the egrets did not follow them. Up into the air went the egrets only a little way, then they were dropping back again with hearts intent—so one would have said—on those precious nests.

Kenwood had no eye for this, but the cries were so many calls for help, demands for vengeance.

Still with that fighting calm of his, he had put down his rifle and jerked his skiff back to cover. He reloaded while he watched, meanwhile going over the geography of the region in his head and trying to guess which way the marauders had come, which way they were likely to take in getting away—if they did decide to get away.

Perhaps, instead, they would try another attack.

Never had the plume-hunters been so active. The season was short. This was one of the last big rookeries left in America. Up North—in some scented, shadowy shop on Fifth Avenue, where jeweled women smoked their cigarettes and spent fortunes on trifles—it had been decreed that

the plumes of the egret should be worn again. The word went forth.

The word went forth from Crossman chiefly. Crossman was the head of the world's greatest feather trust—the plume syndicate unlimited. Crossman had wild men working for him in the middle of South America, shooting parrots with blow-guns; he had cannibals killing birds of paradise in New Guinea. Those were Crossman's men who had just fired at Kenwood, and Kenwood knew it.

Kenwood had seen Crossman once, and the vision of Crossman returned to him now as he looked out across the lonely lagoon.

Crossman was a large man, gray and sad, about sixty, with a pointed beard and large pale eyes. It was reported that he had accumulated almost fabulous wealth. His offices were the most luxurious that Kenwood, at any rate, had ever seen—spacious and gray, but also sad, like the man who occupied them.

It was in these offices that Kenwood had seen Crossman. Kenwood had gone to see Crossman in a mere matter-of-fact way to request him to keep his men clear of this particular Florida rookery.

"I am sure"—so Crossman had said—"I am sure, Mr. Kenwood, that I do not know what you are talking about."

"I've been appointed warden down there," Kenwood had replied.

"I congratulate you."

"And I just wanted to tell you that if any of your men do try to shoot up those egrets they'll have to shoot me up first."

That was about all of the interview—all that came back to Kenwood now, at any rate—as he fanned his oars in the dark-brown water of the creek and peered through the branches out across the glistening mirror of the lagoon toward the opposite bank.

The only trace of his recent assailants over there was the faint, disappearing streak of blue smoke that lingered, stratified, in the hot, moist air. In almost every direction there lay a hundred miles of swamp, a land of mystery, of weird haunts and queer traditions. He had come to love it—the vast peace and the abysmal solitude of it. Of life in a land like this he had dreamed while fighting in Europe—first in the Foreign Legion for France; then again for France in the Escadrille Lafayette; and after that in the A. E. F.

The end of the war had found him twenty-five years old and tired of life—wishing that he had been killed early in the game like most of his friends; and yet, glad that he wasn't—simply for fear that death, after all, should prove to be merely a continuation of life. It was in this state of mind that he had accepted the position offered him by the Audubon Society. It was that chance of getting potted that had rather appealed to him.

The Audubon man had been frank about it. The chance was there. According to the records of the society, bird-wardens in this part of the world never lasted very long.

Kenwood cautiously worked his skiff back up the creek through an overhanging tunnel of growing things. Great branches hung close to the water weighted by their own foliage and by an added tonnage of ferns and mosses, orchids and air-plants. Through a hedge of giant ferns he entered another channel that scarcely any but a Seminole would have seen. But he had learned much during his month of solitude in the neighborhood of the rookery. He had always been a woodsman to some extent.

He was in a water-trail that would bring him around toward the head of the lagoon, where he would have a chance of stalking his enemy on foot—if the enemy still happened to be lingering about, which Kenwood doubted.

There were two of the enemy at least—those reports had come from guns of different calibers. But perhaps there were more. This was almost like making his way through No Man's Land in the dark. It was dark enough here—almost like being underground, the overtopping jungle was so thick. It was a wonderful place for an ambush. No wonder that the mortality among bird-wardens had always been high when word had come from Crossman that there was a demand for plumes!

It was the haunted quality of this aquatic

jungle that had appealed to Kenwood from the first. It was different from any jungle he had ever known, and he had traveled a good deal in his time—in Mexico, where his family owned property; in Hawaii, where he had friends. The white birds he had come to guard were like ghosts in the forest shadows. But there were other ghosts — ghosts of his dead predecessors, perhaps; specters of those lurking bush-whackers who wanted to make a ghost of himself. And still something else—something which he could never quite define.

It was a presence he sometimes felt—a presence compounded of the loneliness and silence, the heat and the perfume, the glaring sunlight of the open spaces and the shadows of the forest; all this, and the fact that this was one of the first parts of America ever to be trod by a white man and yet still so wild and empty, as if the country were under a spell.

A train of thought like this was in his mind now—a subconscious train of thought—even while he was considering the imminent possibility of having to shoot some one or getting shot himself.

He raised his eyes. He saw a face.

CHAPTER II.

AS ANOTHER CRUSOE.

THE face was there, and then it was gone. It was gone so quickly that for a time Kenwood had a queer sensation of having seen something unearthly—an illusion in any case. He had always believed in ghosts and fairies to some extent. Perhaps most men do, whatever they may say about it. But he had been on his guard against such beliefs since coming to this place. They were apt to turn out to be too real.

He had again dropped his oars and seized his rifle. He had done this with the speed of all his expectant nerves. But having done this he made no further move. He peered. He listened.

The skiff responded slightly to the springy pressure of the reeds and other water-growth into which he had pressed it. He could hear the scrape of the soft leaves along the planks. From back in the direction of the rookery came the sound of returning birds, and their voices told him that the birds were certain that there was no further cause for dismay.

But this message from the birds merely added to Kenwood's uncertainty. By this time he could understand the birds almost as if they were so many children—his own; and he guessed that if there had been another stranger in the vicinity they would have warned him of the fact. Had he been "seeing things," after all?

The face had disappeared, but he could still see it. His sight of it had been but a flash, and yet it had been like a flash on a photographic plate. There it was in his brain — colored to the life and sharp in every detail.

It had been a girl's face—the face of a girl who was young and ardent and touched with wonder—finely featured and deeply tanned. A Seminole girl? he asked himself. But she couldn't be a Seminole girl. Her eyes were blue. Or were they blue? Or had he seen any girl at all?

He had. He found her "sign" on the bank of the slough, there where she had been standing. It was the imprint of one small bare foot. He looked at it much as Crusoe must have looked at the footprint on the shore of his island.

Who was she? Where had she gone? How did it come that she had been there at all, and where had she gone to? What did she have to do with those unseen plume-pirates who had fired at him?

But Kenwood did not remain still. He was too much of the highly specialized fighting-man for that. He scouted a little up and down the bank of the slough and back into the jungle until the water stopped him. The whole place was so thick that even a deer would have had some difficulty in moving about in it without making a noise; but the girl was gone. More than that, except for that one imprint where she had stood, she had left no trace. The swamp had taken her into its engulfing secrecy as completely as if she had been a dryad.

Kenwood circled the lagoon.

His bushwhackers had been real enough

—two of them, and one of them barefooted. Woodrats, probably. He was familiar with the type—outlawed swampers of the sort he saw hanging about the nearest settlement when he went in for stores. He found their trail, going and coming, across a wet island from another of the innumerable waterways of the region—trails that might lead anywhere, off into the maze of the Everglades, off into the even wilder water-tangle of the Ten Thousand Islands. They had come. They had taken their shot at him. They had gone. They would probably come again.

But there was the beginning of a secret satisfaction somewhere deep in Kenwood's heart. It was pretty certain that they had not taken the girl with them. It was certain that she had not been with them on their bushwhacking trip. She must still be here in the woods.

He would have to find her. It was part of his business. Perhaps he could use her as some sort of a witness. Perhaps, even, she could be made some sort of a hostage.

But Kenwood knew he was fooling himself.

It was the memory of her face that was uppermost in his mind—a piquant face, an innocent face, so boyishly tanned, with that look of wonder in the eyes!

He was still as watchful as a panther on the hunt; but the whole country had gone as if deserted. The birds over in the direction of the rookery were silent again. The last of them had come fluttering home in the sunlight like bits of paper whirled by the wind. A soft breeze lifted from the south, still warm and heavily fragrant but just tepid enough to hint that the day was on the decline.

He lit his pipe, cautiously, watchful ever against surprise; and suddenly became aware, with a touch of astonishment one would have said, of the loneliness of his surroundings. It had never occurred to him before—not in any unpleasant sense. The feeling of loneliness was not altogether unpleasant now, but one that gave him cause for reflection. It was almost like that feeling that had come to him from time to time when he was still flying a fighting-plane over enemy land. Then when he had shut off his engine there had been the same sort of silence—the same impression of silent ambush.

"It was the sight of that girl that makes me feel like this," he observed, half-aloud. "Or did I see a girl?"

This filled him with a desire to look at that footprint again, and he returned to where he had seen it. He came to the place and prepared to feast his eyes, also his brain.

There was no footprint.

Here it might have been. Here it must have been. But where he was sure he had seen the footprint there was nothing but a blurred impression in the earth such as might have been made by a heavy body having been rolled there. A bear sometimes rolled and left an impress like that. But what bear would have come where the scent of a man was still so rank?

No answer.

After searching the neighborhood again and finding nothing but his own undisguised "sign," he sought his skiff. Caution had become second-nature to him, long ago; but he was more cautious than ever now. His situation had been dangerous enough while he was in possession of all his faculties. It would be dangerous indeed if he was going to be haunted by visions.

By a roundabout route he gradually headed back toward camp.

To any man with nerves less steady, or one less accustomed to the associations of violent death, Kenwood's camp would not have been an appealing place. Almost any one would have said that it was the most ghostly place in this whole ghostly wilderness.

A quarter of a mile or so back from the cypress-strand where the white birds nested there was a broad island—low-lying like all the islands in this land of swamps—this covered for the most part with a jungle of cabbage-palm and broad-leaved growth, but with a small area of pine in the center of it. It was in the center of the pine land that the camp was established—an open-front shed with a corrugated iron roof.

The man who had established the camp had died a violent death, according to all

reports. So had most of his successors. As to just how many successors there had been there was no definite record. Men had come and men had gone—bird-wardens like Kenwood, fugitives from justice, alligator-hunters, itinerant moonshiners, all the male flotsam of the great swamp-country. As may be imagined, none of the tenants of the camp had ever gone far in an effort to render it beautiful.

Toward the front of the shack with the iron roof there was a sort of open hearth raised on stilts to a little more than waist-high—a blessing to any cook used to squatting to his work over a camp-fire on the ground. At the back of the shed was a raised sleeping-platform — a precaution against such times as the island should be flooded.

But as Kenwood came up to the front of the shack he was again aware of a feeling that he was bereft of some part of his senses — a feeling that the country was haunted—that he was again in the presence of that dryad he had seen—or her handiwork, at any rate.

The sleeping platform had been covered with a scattering of lilies and orchids. Kenwood slowly removed his hat. Then for a moment he felt a trifle giddy.

CHAPTER III.

RED MAGIC.

IT was like a hint, out of nowhere, that there was something in life after all—something else than weariness and battle. It was as if this wilderness that had already stifled so many lives had drawn aside its veil and had said:

"See! I am not so terrible after all."

He had seen—or thought he had seen—the face of a girl—a girl who was young and comely and as if of his own race. And who but a creature such as this could have paid him this tribute of flowers? The flowers were fresh. They were unwilted. It was evident that they had just been collected—spider lilies, white and diaphanous, from the open prairies; sprays of pink and fragrant orchids from the cypress; other orchids, fragile, complex, and mysterious, such as he had seen only in the heart of the deepest swamp.

Was there a poison concealed in them? A blue-headed snake, perhaps!

Again he surveyed the country as he had come to know it. It was a country empty and wild.

It was all marsh and slough, for miles around, devoid of settlement; cypress-strand and jungly hammock; wide acres of smiling turf, brilliant with flowers and butterflies, and yet these, as often as not, a disguise to gluttonous quagmires, fathoms deep; there were other acres of table-rock, but these pitted with sink-holes, like open mouths, capable of swallowing a yoke of oxen; but mostly a country covered with forest — a forest overgrowing unmapped streams, shrouded with gray moss, meshed with thorny creepers, throttled by strangling figs, yet interspersed with glades of pine and palm.

> A savage place! As holy and enchanted
> As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
> By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

He was making his coffee next morning, just before sun-up, after a night of dreams. The pitch-pine fire curled and flared on the cook-shelf, adding its pleasant smell of burning resin to the smells of camp and forest. The air was still wet to the point of saturation. The trees were dripping. The world was still blue and gray, yet with a rosy flush overhead to tell that the day would be fine. Now and then an owl still hooted, but the larks and the mocking-birds were awake. Their music was like a counterpart to the sparkle of the dew.

There was a song in Kenwood's heart—the first breath of song that had been there for a long time.

Still winter up in the North, but here in the South the spring had come. It was the mating-season. Those bridal-clad white birds over in the cypress that he had come to guard at the behest of the Audubon Society were not the only birds that were aware of the season's portent. The very call of the owl was a mating-call. Up in the pinkness of the rising sun two hawks were screaming as they chased each other in the age-old mimic combat of courtship.

And Kenwood, lately so discouraged with life, so uninterested in whatever else life had to offer him, found himself smiling at the orchids he had rescued from his sleeping platform and installed beside him in a can of water.

The water in that other can over his small, hot fire came to a boil. He cast a handful of ground coffee into it. The resultant fragrance—even more than all the other sweet smells about him—may have awakened in the back of his mind some atavistic cravings for a home of his own and a mate of his own.

But this was still war, not peace.

He cast up his head and listened. He had heard the report of gun—far off, this time, perhaps a couple of miles to the southeast.

Nonetheless, this was his business. He set his barely prepared coffee to one side. It would have to wait. Without loss of time he knocked out his fire and covered it with earth. He caught up his gun and started off.

He scouted around in the vicinity of the rookery, at first—there in the misty cypress-strand where the birds had had their nesting city for countless years. Now to this city they would come, again to some other, yet again to some distant nesting-place as yet undiscovered of man—perhaps in far-off Honduras, beyond the Gulf of Mexico. But even to Honduras the enemy—man—had followed them. Back now—a remnant of them, at least—to this bird-town of a rookery that Kenwood had been sent to guard. Kenwood found the rookery undisturbed.

Almost, he had decided to return to his camp. There was an attraction there which he was hardly ready to confess, even to himself. Breakfast, to be sure; and yet something else—the orchids and the lilies, the spectral presence of her who had brought them, the possibility that she should appear again.

But duty bade him to persist yet a little while in his search. Some one had fired a gun in dangerous proximity to the bird-reserve. It would be better to find out who the trespasser was—issue a warning, should a warning be needed.

It wasn't long before he discovered that this whispered counsel from his heart was good.

He had brought his skiff out of the thickest of the woods to the edge of a small meadow or bit of prairie, which in turn was but the first of a chain of prairies across which he could look far; and he sat there long gazing out under the rising mists in search for smoke or other sign of possible interlopers. Then he had uttered an exclamation which was half curse, half cry of pity.

Over there on the edge of the prairie, some fifty or sixty yards from where he sat in his skiff, he had seen a flutter of white in a myrtle-tree, then a short, tumbled flight, and a wounded egret was panting on the ground unable to get any farther.

Kenwood, taking his rifle with him, left his skiff and ran toward it in response to some impulse of help. But he saw that his intended kindness was apt to make matters merely worse. He himself was the enemy, man; and such the wounded bird seemed to regard him. It sought to hide in the bushes. Finding that its efforts in this direction were hopeless, it turned to fight—or beg a truce, perhaps, for the sake of the nestlings in the cypress.

Once or twice it went "*Ah-h! Ah-h!*" as a stricken human being might have done—its slender bill open and raised in defense, sheer anguish in its eyes. One of the gossamer plumes from its shoulder was draggled. There was a splotch of red on its breast.

Kenwood stood there debating with himself. Should he kill the bird and end its suffering? He saw that possibly the wound it had already received might not be fatal; but this was the jungle law—that no wounded thing should continue to live. Long before night a snake or a wildcat would finish the job if he did not. And yet it was almost as if he were back in France and this were some wounded comrade. He half-raised his rifle.

As he did so he heard a breath of sound from just back of him. It was a sound he did not recognize as a voice at all. For all he knew in that first fractional moment of time it was a mere emanation of sound

from his own brain—something imagined, merely; and yet it brought him around as quickly as a shouted command would have done. And there was the girl again.

There was no doubt about her, this time; at least, he told himself that there wasn't; no doubt as to her physical reality; this, even while she lost none of her dryad-like impressiveness.

She had glided past him. Indian or white?—he was still in doubt. But there was a hint of magic — wild magic — red magic—as she murmured something in a strange language; to the bird, apparently; for the bird had looked at her with distracted eyes—there was no doubt of this; not in Kenwood's mind—and the bird had as if shown recognition and relief.

The bird had again uttered its "*Ah-h! Ah-h!*" but with a different inflection in it, this time. It seemed to say: "Thank God!"

The bird made no effort to escape or fight as the girl knelt beside it and gathered it into her arms.

CHAPTER IV.

"MEERITA"—I. E., MERCY.

"SEMINOLE!" said Kenwood.

To himself he said it. The girl's attention was concentrated on the wounded bird. She crooned. She did not turn her head.

She was dressed like a Seminole—like such Seminole women as he had seen in previous years at Palm Beach and Miami: later, at Fort Myers. She wore the sleeved but abbreviated tunic of blue figured calico and the long skirt of the same material. The two garments did not meet. There was a zone of bare, golden-tinted skin between the two.

Yet the color of her skin was almost like those tints of russet-gold in her hair. Was there ever a Seminole with hair like that? Her hair was coiled high on her head. Kenwood looked at it, dazedly, as the girl continued to kneel; and there crept or flashed through his mind all sorts of stories that he had heard about the dwellers in this part of his own, his native land.

There were stories that this was a part of the ancient, lost Atlantis; or that the first dwellers in Florida were Atlanteans who escaped when that continent was submerged; that they were yet blood-brothers to the earliest Egyptians, and likewise to the builders of the lost cities of Yucatan.

A far fetch, all this, from the little wet prairie in southern Florida, and yet indicating the whiff of magic the girl had brought with her—for Kenwood as well as for the wounded bird. It was a touch of magic that seemed to have spread to all nature. The world was still misty-moist, but it had gone a dazzling pink in the rising sun. From this pinkness there emerged a dreamlike landscape of palm-clusters and domed forest.

But among the primitive dark races of the Pacific, Kenwood had seen an occasional golden-haired girl. And such a phenomenon would be no stranger here in Florida, where conquest had followed conquest, race followed race, now emerging, now carrying out the work of extermination.

And had the girl's eyes been blue? Blue they were.

With the bird still coddled in her arms she had turned and looked at him—blue eyes, wide open and wide apart, with lashes and eyebrows but little darker than her tan; a nose that Kenwood called lovely, but which an enemy would have called a snub; a wide mouth that was both generous and strong.

It was a look almost of challenge that the girl had given him, and he had started forward with a gesture of appeasement; but again she had turned her back on him, with concentrated interest was again nursing the egret.

She seemed to be speaking to it. At the same time her hands were busy. She straightened the shoulder-plume. She seized a handful of wet grass and laved the blood from the creature's breast.

Kenwood knelt at her side. She did not draw away from him. Neither did she look at him again right away. So far as she was concerned he might as well have ceased to exist. At least, that was the implication of her attitude. He watched her for a while, slightly embarrassed, somewhat at a loss,

feeling that touch of chagrin that any man is apt to feel in the presence of a girl who ignores him.

But she hadn't always ignored him, he told himself with a glint of rebellion.

His rebellion was quickened, if anything, by the obvious change for the better which was taking place in the egret. Not only had the bird wholly recovered from its recent pain and panic; it seemed to be recovering from its wound as well.

Kenwood had seen a lot of this sort of thing where his fellowmen had been victims of violence. There was no telling where the sphere of the spirit ended. There was no telling what was not possible in a healing way when one spirit acted upon another. Whoever the girl was, and whatever she was, she was a marvelous nurse. Yet wasn't there a hint of witchcraft in this as well?

For a second or more she bowed her face over the glistening white back of the egret, as she pressed her lips to it as a young mother might have kissed her child—as she did this, the early sunlight fell upon her through the mist-screen, and it was as if she were sprinkled with drops of rainbow—and then, still kneeling, she sat back on her heels and held the bird up in her two hands.

She spoke a word or two of coaxing command, while the egret arched its slim and graceful neck and peered away in the direction of the rookery.

"*Ah-h! Ah-h!*" said the egret.

There was a scrambling flight, a swish of wings, and it was gone.

Kenwood and the girl had continued to kneel where the bird had left them. Their eyes met, soberly at first. Kenwood was sober—sober to the core of him, as with one having just beheld a miracle. But he saw a creep of added color under the fawnlike complexion of the girl; then he saw her smile, first with the eyes, afterward with her lips, but still with reserve, a perfect modesty, some fright.

"That was wonderful!" he said. "Do you speak English?"

She did not answer him immediately; but it seemed clear to him that she had understood. She shook her head slightly. She looked away from him—first into the distance, as if trying to follow her recent bird-patient, then at the ground close at their side, where a spider-lily was unfolding with almost startling speed in response to the first touch of the sun.

Kenwood also saw the lily. It gave him an inspiration. He reached over and plucked it. He offered it to the girl.

"Won't you acept this," said he, "as a token of my deep regard and gratitude?"

The girl pretended not to have heard him; but he saw that fresh creep of subdued pink about her throat; he noticed the increased depth of her breathing as her scant bodice rose and fell. He noticed many things about her—something of sadness, something of heart-hunger. Or perhaps he was overpoetic.

"You understand me; don't you?" he asked.

This time she answered him. There was a certain alertness in the way she turned. It was just as if she had duly reflected over the whole situation and decided that there was no use for further concealment.

"Yes!"

That was all. The word had not come easily. He could see that. She had spoken it as any foreigner might have done—any foreigner with a voice as soft as hers.

"Why did you run away from me when I saw you yesterday?" Kenwood asked.

No answer. Maybe she was connected in some way with those bushwhackers after all. No, she couldn't be. She put out a shy hand with another smile and took his proffered lily.

"I looked for you yesterday," he said, "but I couldn't find you; I couldn't find you until I went to sleep, and then I found you in my dreams."

He spoke to her softly and gently—gentling her, getting her used to the sound of his voice, somewhat as if she had been a timorous colt or any other untamed animal panicky of human contact.

Again she spoke, also softly and slowly. She was practising her English.

"My—name—is—Meerita." She put the accent on the first sylable.

"I am glad to have met you, Meerita; and I repeat that I think you are wonderful

—that it was wonderful the way you cared for that bird."

"You like him—bird?"

"Yes. That is what I am here for—to protect those birds over there. Bad man shoot birds, me shoot him. You savvy?"

She "savvied." She smiled at his use of the pidgen-English current among the whites and the Seminoles of Florida.

"What's your name?"

"Kenwood—George Kenwood."

She obviously made an effort of memory. She quoted his own words of a little while ago: "I am glad to have met you—Meester George Kenwood." But he had never heard such music thrown into any speech. Her voice was a lullaby. It was like drops of water falling into a pool. She added a bit of information which she seemed to think would interest him: "Meerita—that in your language means Mercy!"

While the echo of this declaration was still tumbling through his brain like an echo of music, he saw a slight change of expression come into Meerita's face. It was as if she had heard something inaudible to himself—something that did not alarm her precisely, but which recalled her to other scenes. In an instant she was on her feet. She took a few gliding steps in the direction of the myrtle-tree.

And she was gone.

CHAPTER V.

PORRU, THE CHARMER.

SHE was gone as completely and utterly as she had been gone that other time. Her going was so unexpected that it was a full minute before Kenwood could bring himself to realize that she was gone. When he did realize it, it was all he could do to realize, in turn, that she had been there. Still, there was no doubt about it. There was the impress in the grass where she had knelt with the bird in her arms. Amid the pink blossoms of the myrtle a tiny white plume still lingered to tell him of the passage of the bird. There was the broken stem of the spider-lily with the sap still oozing from it. The flower was gone.

And yet the whole incident was such a mixture of reality and unreality that he was left in something of a daze.

He called:

"*Meerita!*"

The name sounded so sweetly to him that he repeated it, softly. The word meant Mercy. It struck him that there was a symbolism about this. There was still mercy in the world. He laughed a bit ruefully. And he had come to this God-forsaken world to find it! He went serious again. There was a voice inside of himself telling him that he, after a fashion, had been shot as the egret had been shot and that this girl might cure him as well.

There was no following her trail this time either, even had he felt inclined to do so. He had followed her trail a little way, enough to assure him that she was human. Somehow, he needed the assurance. There was enough magic about her as it was. There was magic in this part of the world.

Kenwood had been brought up by a Kanaka nurse. From her he had learned that ghosts by preference throng certain regions more thickly than others—certain islands of the South Seas, for example. In some of those islands the ghosts would fairly come and drag you out of bed. This land of southern Florida was like that—too steamy, hot, and fragrant for ordinary men, but a haven for the disembodied and those who assumed bodies on occasion only.

Was the girl like that?

He wasn't through with this magical phase of the business—not even when the sun was up and he made his way back to his camp and his abandoned coffee.

He had started his fire again on the cooking-shelf. His interest was intense on his work. His appetite was keen. But so were all his senses. And, like most dwellers in the woods, he was watchful also over other senses than his own—conscious of the cries and movements of all the small creatures in the surrounding woods, these serving as so many watch-dogs for him in case interlopers should be about.

Yet, an aged Seminole man emerged from the forest on the further side of the pine-island where the camp was located. He paused there for a few minutes looking across at the young man under the shed.

The young man did not see the visitor; or, if he did, he paid no attention to him.

The old Seminole — barefooted, bare-legged, dressed in nothing but a short kilted shirt and the handkerchief bound about his brows like a turban—began a leisurely stroll in the direction of the shed. Apparently he made not the slightest effort at concealment. Only, now and then, he stopped and stood absolutely still. At such times he did almost completely disappear. There was a protective coloring in the many horizontal stripes of which his shirt was sewn—a protective coloring that a zebra or tiger might have envied. Then again he would resume his stroll—straight forward toward the shed, ever in full view, yet still unseen, unsuspected.

Not even the birds had noticed him seemingly. The warblers and bluebirds, the nonpareils and the cardinals, the larks, the thrushes and the mocking-birds, went on with their carnival.

The old man carried a gun across his breast in the hollow of his arms. He came from a race that had once fought some of the best generals of the United States to a standstill. He was still an outlaw, more or less, in the eyes of the chiefs at Washington. He and his kind had never forgiven those chiefs the wrongs they had done to Osceola and Osceola's kin. Here in this young white man so blind and deaf to possible danger was a representative in some measure of those chiefs.

And yet there was no enmity in the old man's face.

So far as expression went, and features also, his face might have been the bronze mask of some old Greek philosopher and poet. Even the color of it was no darker than might have been the face of a Greek who had spent his life in the sun.

A very fine old gentleman, for all he was dressed in nothing but a shirt! Yet savage in many of his aspects. In the rim of his right ear were perhaps half a dozen small gold rings. At first appearance his white hair was cropped short, except for his long earlocks, which were like those of an Orthodox Jew—there were those who would have said that here was a member of one of the Lost Tribes; but as the old gentleman turned his head it might have been noticed that his handkerchief-turban only partly concealed two small, tightly plaited scalp-locks.

He was not more than twenty feet from Kenwood when he stopped finally, and it seemed even then that Kenwood would never see him. The old man smiled slightly as Kenwood lifted the hot coffee-can from the fire and, having burned his fingers, softly swore. It may have been this outbreak on Kenwood's part that caused the visitor to break his own silence. It was all right for a visitor to enter a camp without noise and without fuss. But it was not etiquette to overhear the secret speech of a man.

The Seminole spoke softly—in a hesitant but perfect English—and with a touch of humor even.

"You—eat—late."

There had been that pause between each word, as if each word required an effort of the memory and the will. So the girl Meerita had spoken a while back, also with that same softness and melancholy of intonation. More than one man has said that the Seminoles have the sweetest voices in the world. They have no other music to speak of—just their voices, when speaking, being sweet enough. So Kenwood must have thought now. There was that start about him and that look in the eyes that indicated the swift expectancy that Meerita had returned. Then, for the first time, he had seen the old man.

"Hello," he said. "I eat late. So much the better. You come and eat with me."

Kenwood had heard before of this gift that most Indians have of appearing unawares, but, nonetheless, there drifted back into his thought the whiff of unearthliness and romance which had been there when he was in the presence of the girl, which had been there even before he saw the girl, from the time that he had first come into these woods.

It was like a premonition of adventure. In any case, he knew that the visitor was not there without a purpose. His eyes dwelt for a moment on the gun the old man carried. It was a curious instrument, with a double barrel. One of these barrels served as a shotgun. The other was a rifle.

For just a passing moment it occurred to Kenwood that the two shots that had been fired at him on the preceding day might have come from a gun like this.

But he raised his eyes to the old man's face, and he dismissed this suspicion as unworthy. The old man met his gaze with a benignant smile.

"You are—Meester Kenwood," the old man announced.

Kenwood's thought fled to the girl. Who else could have told this visitor his name?

"Yes," Kenwood said, offering his hand.

The visitor put out his own right hand. It was slim and shapely.

"Me," he said; "I am Porru." He thought a space, still smiling slightly as he released Kenwood's hand from his slender fingers. "What you call—a man—he who can tame—" He cast his bright eyes about him. He saw a small kingsnake sliding across the root of a near-by pine. He made a motion toward it—a motion which was filled with a certain majesty and priestcraft, so to speak. The snake paused and turned with lifted head in an attitude of inquiry.

"You mean a snake-charmer," cried Kenwood, delighted.

"Charmer," said the old man quietly, still with that air of smiling dignity about him. "Porru—in your language, the Charmer. You understand?"

"I understand."

"I charm bad man—like snake. He say—he kill you."

CHAPTER VI.

THE OTHER VOICE.

THAT was manifestly one of the reasons that Porru had come to see Kenwood. He had come to give him a warning. But all the time that Porru lingered there—with the patience that took no count of minutes or hours—a patience to which only the ancient of days, whether of races or men, ever attain—Kenwood was aware that he was being scrutinized, studied. There were times even when he felt as the young kingsnake might have felt as it paused in its journey across the pine-root and looked back. These were times when he felt as if he was not altogether master of himself—when he felt as if he were subject to an alien, albeit friendly will.

He shook himself together.

After he and the old Seminole had eaten together and drunk fresh coffee, Kenwood brought out a new pipe, which he loaded and presented to his visitor, holding the fire for him until the Charmer got it started.

Porru puffed noisily—this was to show that the tobacco was good and was duly appreciated; but he had blown the first few long puffs in the direction of the sun. That was in the nature of an oblation. This was manifestly one who would tell no lies.

So Kenwood also held his peace. That his life was threatened was no important piece of news. He had been apprised of that already by the shots that had been fired at him.

What did Porru know about the girl—the girl Meerita? What was Porru's relationship to her?

"Maybe," said Kenwood at last, referring to the bad man Porru had mentioned; "maybe I will shoot him first."

Porru smiled with his brilliant old eyes. But he was silent. He himself was as if held under the spell of many questions. Time and again as old Porru smoked and Kenwood made a pretense of giving all his own attention to his camp duties—to cleaning his gun, to hanging his blankets in the sun, to chopping up a fresh supply of lightwood—Kenwood was aware that the old man's eyes were again upon him, that the old man was still scrutinizing him, studying him—and doing this in the light of knowledge and problems which as yet, to Kenwood himself, were all unknown.

To break the silence so hard for a white man to bear, Kenwood spoke again.

"Where is your camp, Porru?"

"There"—and Porru sliced with his hand straight out in front of him.

"Far?"

"Not far. Each night—I see your fire."

"How long have you been there?"

"I come—before you come. I wait—for you."

"For me?"

Porru did not answer this question. Per-

haps it was because he had answered it already. Perhaps it was because he was already engrossed in what he would have to say when he returned to that camp. He had paid no attention to Kenwood's start of surprise at thus learning that there was another camp so near—that since his advent here he had continued to live, so to speak, by grace of this old Indian.

"Nothing hurt you," said Porru, out of the depths of his meditations. He got up from the log where he had been sitting. He straightened himself. He cast a glance up through the treetops. With his gun in his arms like a nursling he strode slowly away.

Porru's camp was an old one, deserted by the Seminoles long, long ago, but very ancient. It was a medicine camp—a camp whither men still came in solitude when in need of talking to the Great Spirit: for the Great Spirit—Hesukatemeesee, the Big Man—had favored this particular place, so it was said when his children were still building their mounds in the country roundabout.

The camp was located on a higher island than the one occupied by Kenwood; and the island may have been a score of acres in extent; but it was so perfectly hidden that no white man had ever seen it—not even during the long Seminole wars. An aquatic jungle surrounded it—pond-apple and cypress, pop-ash and elder, depths of water-hyacinth where turtles and moccasins, garfish and alligators lurked.

The island itself would have appeared to most men—as it had appeared to Kenwood—as merely a darker core in the green twilight of the swamp; for it also was thickly overgrown. Only the infrequent gusts of orange and lemon bespoke its presence, and these in the wild scents of the swamp were like an almost human breath. Bay and bustic, huge rubber-trees, live-oaks larger yet, and all of these hung with the aerial gardens of fern and orchid, walled it about and roofed it, and made of it what the Indians had always considered it: a sort of woodland cathedral.

Through the shadows of it flashed cardinals and humming birds, gaudy woodpeckers larger than crows, jays and nonpareils.

Mostly it was a place of silence. But now and then one of the giant woodpeckers would rap out a sound like that of a carpenter driving a nail, or a panther would whistle, or a fawn would bleat. And at certain times of the day there was always much bird-song. Or, especially when it was going to rain, the tree-toads would fife a tune like the advance of a regiment.

Now, as Porru the Charmer returned from his visit to Kenwood, the silence appeared to be greater than ever. Porru himself made no sound. His walk was leisurely, as is usual with his kind. At each step he raised his foot high. There was no splash when he walked through the water. No twig snapped when he went through the thick places. And it was as if even the small wild things knew something about the tragedy that was in his thought. There was not even the small rustle of a running lizard, or the still smaller sound of a crawling snake. Snakes and lizards remained where they were and watched him pass.

Then Porru himself stopped and listened.

A second or two, and the silence near him was broken by a small, falsetto vibrancy a little to one side of him and on a level with his head. That was the subdued call of a single tree-toad. But there was no answering call. And it wasn't going to rain.

"*Henkis-tuntos!*" the old Indian muttered—an omen.

Porru slowly turned his head.

There was a tiny verticil in the bark of a small oak-tree there, where a branch had died and dropped away many years ago, and in the center of the verticil was a small, round cavity like a tiny window. Leaning on this window looking out at him was the tree-toad—a little green face with a wide-smiling mouth and large golden eyes.

Porru and the tree-toad looked at each other for a time in silence. Then Porru spoke.

"O Welatuku—little brother of a tree-toad—would it help matters if I carried the girl away?"

No answer.

"Is the young *yot-hotkee*—the young white man—over yonder indeed he whose advent has been foretold?"

He had barely asked this second ques-

tion before the tree-toad puffed its white throat. The throat vibrated. And Porru had again heard the voice of his omen.

CHAPTER VII.

FOREORDAINED.

THERE were half a dozen *chukos*, or Seminole houses, in the secret camp to which Porru made his way—houses without walls, thatched with palm, the floors of them a sort of raised platform of split cypress logs. And, although this camp was so little used, the earth of the clearing had been so packed by generations of bare or moccasined feet that it was as hard and clean as cement. Under a thatch in the center of the camp a fire burned brightly, fed by a number of long, radiating logs. On the logs, near the fire, were a number of kettles. And these were attended by a woman.

The woman was old. She was dressed as the girl, Meerita, was dressed when Kenwood saw her. There were many beads—of different blues, pale and dark—about her neck, and her abundant gray hair was neatly twisted into a knot on the top of her head.

She turned with a quick smile. From the edge of the clearing Porru had murmured her name:

"Estékenee!"—that is, Horned Owl.

She studied his face, but neither of them spoke for a while. But Porru also had smiled. They had been married for many years. Their love was perfect.

Porru seated himself on one of the logs near the fire, and there Estékenee placed one of the kettles in front of him, giving him a hand-carved, wooden ladle. From the kettles there arose the fragrant steam of a cornmeal soup flavored with pumpkin and bay. Porru was hungry—for he had made but a pretense of eating at the white man's camp. To have eaten then would have spoiled his vision—his inner vision—and he needed it all. But even now he took his time.

He gazed off into the jungle for a space while he slowly stirred the contents of the kettle.

"Where is Meerita?" he asked.

"She went again to see the white birds."

"She should be careful. The plume-hunters are beginning to foregather."

"True!"

"Black Ibis shot yesterday—"

"At the white youth?"

"Yes."

"I would—would that Black Ibis had killed him."

"Estékenee! What is this you are saying?"

"It is true! This white youth is he whom we have feared. I could see it in your face."

"It was foreordained. Already they have looked at each other."

"But it means death! Everything has foretold that their mating will be a funeral."

"The Big Sleep takes us all," said Porru weakly. "We are all but spirits anyway. What matters it—a day or so longer—ere we turn our faces to the west?"

"But she is white—white!" cried Estékenee softly, with a catch in her throat. "How do we know—that when she dies she will not go—to a land—where we cannot follow?"

Estékenee, kneeling near her man, bowed her gray head. Porru put out one of his fine hands and touched her head lightly.

"Lo," he said, "thus it ever is with the children of the Great Spirit. They receive His gifts; to Him they would render nothing in return. Do you remember, almost twenty years ago, when we found the little maiden? We were childless. We had begged this gift of one we could love. We found the young white woman. Don't you remember? She was like a wounded egret, and she had come close to the home of the egrets, and her child was like an egret nestling—so tiny, and pink, and clad in down! We asked of the Great Spirit His mercy for the child when the white mother died, and to us He granted what we asked — mercy! Meerita!"

"I cannot see her die! I cannot see her die!"

"It were better that she die than that she become the wife of Black Ibis."

"I would not have let Black Ibis take her."

"He might have taken her anyway as he threatened to do—and tried to do—at the last Greencorn Dance—and as he would have done had it not been ordained already that she should become the wife of a youth of her own people."

"But we have reared her a Seminole."

"And I have kept the writing her white mother gave me. I have taught her the white language."

"She might have married some other Seminole youth than Black Ibis. They are kind. They are comely. They make good husbands. We have made her a Seminole and yet for a Seminole girl to marry a stranger is death. This is the only death we have to fear. Porru—my Porru—it is not yet too late. We will carry the maid elsewhere. We will wed her to one of our own people."

"Where can we carry her that the hand of God cometh not?"

"You talk like that! You have no heart! For the last three moons she has been making a present for you—"

"Hark!" whispered Porru. "I hear her coming."

"And she knows nothing yet?"

"Nothing, beloved!"

It was plain that there was no thought of tragedy in Meerita's mind as she came running into the camp. There is generally more exuberance among Indians than white people ever suspect.

"Father! Little old Father Porru!" she cried joyously, and she came forward to where Porru sat and threw her arms about his shoulders.

Estékenee concealed her barely mastered grief under a guise of anger.

"Let your father eat his *sofsky*, my little egret," she commanded. "And you—go wash yourself, dress your hair—"

She would have said more, but Meerita seized her and kissed her, as well. No white child ever dominated her parents more than this white girl dominated these foster-parents of hers who were red. These were the only parents she had ever known. What did it matter if the other Indians did sometimes call her the egret-girl—*entygee-fushotkee!* She knew that by some miracle of nature she was fairer than they—fairer than these parents of hers. What mattered that?

But it had begun to matter. For the first time in her life Meerita had looked on a white man. His name was Kenwood. There was a delicious stir in Meerita's heart at a whisper that had reached her—it was a whisper out of space—out of the pink mists of the morning—out of the perfume and the bird-song, and all the maddening disquiet of this mating season—a whisper that said:

"He is fair, but so are you!"

There was something of all this in her exuberance now, although she had always been exuberant. No wonder that it made the heart of old Estékenee bleed to think that the betrothment of this child meant death. As it was with the egrets, so it would be with the human egret, Meerita—and no warden there!

This part of her thought made old Estékenee gasp. No warden?

Yes; there was a warden—the same! If this white youth named Kenwood had been sent to guard the feathered egrets, why could he not be counted on to guard that infinitely more precious egret who was Meerita? Red medicine was strong. But white medicine was stronger. Let a red man break the law—even Hesukatemeesee, his laws—and the red man sickened. White men had always broken every law; yet they multiplied and prospered.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GREAT-SERPENT.

ONE would have said that Kenwood himself was conscious of some brooding, slowly tightening coil of circumstance that was winding him about. It was like Fate. It was something to remind him of stories he had heard here and there about the presiding genius of this part of Florida—a sort of swamp-god—something that the Indians called the Great Serpent.

The Great Serpent was here in fancy, if not in fact—fascinating, lethal, very beautiful, patient, with all the time in the world and all the power in the world to work its will. It was a fancy born of the lulling

quiet, the empty horizons, the ever present but hidden danger. For Kenwood now knew better than any man that he held a position where death stalked him as the hunter stalks the chamois.

And curiously, all this was associated in his mind with his thought of the girl, Meerita.

She was hardly ever absent from his thought. She herself was as the spirit incarnate of this country he had come to love. Like it, she was beautiful, mysterious, wild. She was an egret. She was an orchid. Sometimes in his dreams he even associated her with the Great Serpent—as if she herself were the Great Serpent in human form.

He corrected this conception when he was awake. True, she fascinated; she was Fate. But she was the girl to nurse the wounded spirit of a man as she had nursed that wounded bird. It was Crossman, that gray man, rich and sad, up there in his scented offices on Fifth Avenue, who was the Great Serpent of this country—Crossman, engaged in the business of murder for greed, reaping a profit from the blood of the innocents.

"I must see her again," said Kenwood to himself on the day that followed Porru's visit.

All morning he had scouted through the woods. There was no trace of plume-hunters. There was no smoke on the horizon. The day was redolent of safety. He had bathed and shaved. He took the path that Porru had taken—out across the pine-island, down into the slough, across this and over into the jungle beyond.

But the camp was deserted when he came to it. He composed himself to wait. There was evidence enough that it hadn't been deserted for good. A few more or less human hens were pecking about the clearing. The fire still burned—smokeless—at the center of the radiating logs, and on the logs were a number of kettles that simmered an invitation to all who would to come and eat.

Presently Kenwood looked about him. He was possessed by a curious feeling. He felt again as if he were in the presence of some great and lordly being. Was it Fate? The jungle, as if leaned over to look down upon him. He felt very small. Was there anything in all that talk about the Great Serpent?

He thought of Crossman. He thought of the girl.

Men develop queer hints of clairvoyance occasionally when they have been long alone in the woods.

But it wouldn't do for him to let this feeling of the weird get the better of him. If he did, a fine bird-warden he would make!

He started off to explore a little. He followed the trail opposite to the one that had brought him to the camp.

Here he was in a tunnel made by massed tangles of dew-flowers that had clambered over bush and tree. The trail was next in the sunlight where a field of Spanish bayonets grew lush—each plant a collection of daggers to protect the waxen flowers, the flowers themselves of an almost killing fragrance. There followed a succession of halls and temples, dark and warm, under the forest cover, these as if lighted by the red lamps of the scarlet-flowered air plants.

In spite of himself, Kenwood found himself walking with a certain breathlessness. The feeling persisted that something watched, that something impended, and that this something was luring him on. But he would not turn back.

The trail ran down and around a sort of knoll, and Kenwood had guessed that there was a boat-landing down there, when his guess was substantiated by a glimpse of open water. But at the same time he had seen Meerita standing there.

"Meerita!" But he had only breathed her name inaudibly.

He was stifled by the feeling that something was wrong, as yet he didn't know what. He looked at the girl. He looked at her surroundings.

The shadows were thick in this part of the woods, but it was lighter where she was with the reflected light of the water. On either side of her were high rushes and, beyond these, a widening vista of hyacinth in bloom, all shining green and light purple.

Then he had seen something else—something that for the moment seemed to explain all that he had glimpsed and felt—something that touched him with awe and held him where he was.

It recalled the small kingsnake that Porru had charmed. It recalled the way the kingsnake had reared its head and stared. Only, this could be no snake. It was too monstrous. It was the image of a snake with a head as big as a barrel—a glittering green presence rising from the hyacinth over there just beyond where Meerita stood.

Then the thing had disappeared, and Kenwood flung himself down the trail and had taken Meerita in his arms.

His whole attention was concentrated on her alone—in that first blurred rush of seconds it was at any rate. As he felt his arms close about her, he was aware that she made no effort to escape. It was as if she had known that he would be there. She turned slightly and looked up at him. Her face was pale. Her eyes were brilliant. Her lips were parted in a suffocated smile.

Her lips were still smiling when her throat caught with a convulsive little sob. She was like a child who had been badly frightened.

"What was it?" he asked.

"*Estak-wunayu!*" She faltered the words in Seminole. She repeated them in English: "The Great Serpent!"

His mind was telling him that he knew what her answer would be. At the same time his mind was telling him that the thing could not be. His eyes were searching again for the apparition. It was gone. His eyes saw nothing but the sun and shadow, the pale-purple and shining green of the hyacinth.

Yet there was Meerita against his breast, light and palpitant, still frightened. Kenwood's arms closed about her a little tighter. He tried to laugh.

"There's not even a moccasin in sight," he said; "nor a turtle, nor an alligator."

"It was *Estak-wunayu*," she repeated with bated breath.

"Me think so," he said playfully, "you *hajo*—you clazy!"

She managed to smile; but it wasn't much of a smile. She still looked up at him. There was a somberness in the depths of her eyes. It surprised him and touched him that she still made no effort to escape from his arms.

"You saw it, too?" she asked.

"There was nothing there."

"You saw it, too?"

"And what if I did?"

Her voice was a fluttering whisper, awed and reverent.

"*Estak-wunayu*—the Great Serpent—he is the messenger of death!"

CHAPTER IX.

BETTER THAN WORDS.

THERE was a silence, then this silence was thrilled into fragments by the call of a thrush. The call was like a signal. Other birds chirped in with trill and warble. Again two hawks were reeling overhead screaming at each other with savage joy. It was as if they said:

"To-morrow we all die. Love while ye may!"

Meerita had turned slightly and was looking away in the direction of the hyacinth, absorbed. Kenwood could feel the slight shiver that ran through her body. He found himself breathing in time to her breathing. Her breathing was quick, suggestive of inner tumult, for all this had happened very fast. The birds were right. However absurd that Indian myth the girl had mentioned, and however impossible this specter they thought they had seen, death was imminent, here was life!

Nothing seemed certain—not to Kenwood, at least—except that here he was in the midst of a wilderness with this girl in his arms. He tried to enlarge his vision, but he could bring into his consciousness nothing but the substance of her—her form, her color, her warmth and her fragrance; this, and then an overwhelming sense that she was destined to him and that he was destined to her. Come death early, or come death late—it would make no difference so long as they should be together.

"There was nothing," he said with the purpose of comforting her. "People often think that they see things."

She accepted the information demurely. She as if digested it. She took her time about it. She looked down. Kenwood looked at the texture of her hair. It was all he could do to keep from touching it

with his lips. Her hair was so fine and clean. The smell of it was like the sweet, faint pungency of burning cypress. Her hands were against his breast. He noticed how small they were. The mystery of her was greater than it had ever been.

Again she was looking up at him. "You think so—we no see him—the Great Serpent?"

He explained the nature of hallucinations. He brought all the ingenuity of his scientific, white-man's mind to the explanation. Here in the swamps folks were seeing snakes all the time. They allowed themselves to become steeped in superstition. But while he was saying all this his thought was elsewhere. He was thinking how beautiful she was. He was thinking that she was white. He was thinking what a wonderful wife she would make for any man be he ever so great and rich.

All the time that he was talking to her—and thinking of something else—Meerita's eyes were on his face. The somberness had left the depths of them. There was a glow there instead.

"What do you think?" she asked him softly.

"What I'm telling you," he went on with his discourse. "And even if we did see something rear up out there among the hyacinth it was nothing but an old tree-trunk, half water-logged and covered with water-grass. I've seen it before. You know—when some old 'gator goes rooting along the bottom—"

But again he was thinking how lovely she was. Her pallor was gone. Her lips were a tender pink. Her teeth were small and white.

"What do you think?" she queried again.

This time he fell silent. His eyes were on hers. He answered her question—but silently, saying silently that which he wouldn't have dared to say aloud.

"You are lovely. You are white. I thought the world was empty, but now I know that it is full and overflowing. I love you."

Aloud he said:

"Come away."

It was she who led the way. They had walked for a considerable distance before Kenwood noticed that they had left the trail by which he had come. It was a trail that led up into some part of the island he had not hitherto seen. He heard a humming. He remarked a perfume different from any he had hitherto noticed. He saw a great dome of white flowers ahead of him shimmering in the sunlight. The trail bore sharply up a sudden slant. Here the prehistoric dwellers in this place had built themselves a mound. On the summit of the mound was an ancient moringa-tree in bloom with bees and humming-birds all about it.

Kenwood saw Meerita's eyes light up with a look of adoration.

The tree was a fit object of adoration, Kenwood thought, especially when they had come up and were standing under the droning white cascade of its widespread branches. She let this beauty creep in upon him for a while.

"I come here," she said, "when I want to know—when I am sorry—when I am glad. Now I am glad. Now I want to know."

"What do you want to know, Meerita?"

"I want to know what you think—what you feel—what you say—in there"—she put one of her small hands over his heart—"you know—when you talk about the Great Serpent."

The droning of the bees and the heavy perfume of moringa bloom was about them.

"I don't believe in death signs," said Kenwood.

She smiled slightly.

"I am not afraid to die," she said in her soft voice; "not if the thing you say in there is true—if what you say in your heart is true."

"What did I say in my heart?"

"You know."

"What?"

"You say it."

With a sudden impulse Kenwood lifted his two hands to the sides of Meerita's head. He left them there, touching her softly.

"I said in my heart," he declared softly, "that I love you, and I do—I do."

"Then I am not afraid to die."

"Why should you die?"

"Together we see the Great Serpent."

"But, Meerita—"

"And I am of the Seminoles. You are of the *yot-hotkee*."

"You also are white—as white as I am," said Kenwood.

"So you said in your heart. So my own heart it has said." There was a tiny subdued sob in Meerita's voice. "And here under the Spirit Tree I hear it again: 'You are white! You are white! You are all the same as George Kenwood!' But I am Seminole. No Seminole girl marry a white man. You understand? Kill her. Kill him. I think so—that is why—you and I we see the Great Serpent."

His hands moved slowly and caressed her temples. She pressed against him. Her own hand came up to his face with a touch that was soft and electric as he kissed her forehead. He kissed the curved and drooping fringes of her eyes. He was breathing deeply. So was she.

"No one will hurt you while I am here," he said. "And when I go away from here we'll go together."

"Like egrets?"

"I do not understand."

"Indians say this: Two lovers die—you understand—all same you and me—then they become egrets—and like that they live and know what love is—until they fly away to the west."

"Who told you all this?"

"Blind Heron, the medicine-man."

Kenwood closed his eyes and tried to think. As he did so, he felt Meerita draw sharply back from him, utter a name in Seminole.

CHAPTER X.

BLACK IBIS.

As Kenwood turned he saw an Indian he had never seen before. He stood also under the wide arch of the tree. He was not much older than Kenwood's self. And Kenwood's first movement was one of welcome. It was followed by a quick reflex of caution.

"Black Ibis!" Meerita translated the name she had spoken.

Black Ibis was unlike any Seminole that Kenwood had ever seen. It was not only that he was six feet tall, heavy, and dark. The greatest difference lay in the expression of his face. He was sullen. His head was down. He was looking out of the tops of his eyes. As he stood there in his striped shirt, his bare legs braced far apart, he suggested a mad bull. He was a picture of dull rage.

"Hello," said Kenwood.

Black Ibis gave no answer. He stood there unbudging.

Into Kenwood's thought there came a glint of what Meerita had said about the Great Serpent—the death sign. Kenwood had left his own rifle in Porru's camp—a polite way of indicating that he had been there and intended to return. Did the death sign of the Seminoles work as swiftly as all that?

Black Ibis was armed. He carried a heavy, modern rifle in his two hands, pendant in front of him. The index-finger of his right hand was on the trigger now. It occurred to Kenwood that should the notion occur to Black Ibis to use his rifle he could do it at an instant's notice. A fleeting thought. And Kenwood's eyes had traveled to the Seminole's belt where a foot-long butcher-knife hung in a leather sheath.

"In a pinch," said Kenwood to himself, "I might get to that knife—if he didn't stop me with his rifle first."

Was Meerita reading his thoughts now, as she had done a while ago? She spoke up—in English—out of politeness, doubtless, to the white man who was present.

"How is your mother, Black Ibis? Is she well?"

The Indian did not answer. He kept his sullen eyes on Kenwood with a deepening scowl.

"The lady asked you a question," said Kenwood softly. "Why don't you answer her?"

"*Holowaugus!*"

Black Ibis spat the word out. It was a vulgar Seminole word—rendered vulgar by overuse among the whites. It meant "no good," but it was the nearest thing to an oath the language contained.

Again Meerita sought to save the situation.

"Me think so Black Ibis littla bit dlunk," she said with a gaiety that was more than a little strained. "Me think so, Black Ibis dlink laughing water—"

"*Tayee!*" he commanded hoarsely. "Enough!"

Kenwood felt a glow of heat in his breast. It was like a forge-fire responding to the bellows. But he saw that it was a good time to control himself. Meerita had spoken the word. Black Ibis was drunk.

"What you want?" asked Kenwood.

The Indian stared at him with brooding insolence.

"Me want you go," he said.

"Why?"

"Me no like! You *holowaugus* to hell!"

"You go back to camp, Meerita," said Kenwood softly.

"Her no go! You go!"

The girl turned to Kenwood with a frightened smile. It was her look, more than anything else, that told Kenwood that the situation was dangerous, that warned him to be more than ever on his guard.

"What right have you to tell me to go?" asked Kenwood quietly.

"Her no go! You go!" Black Ibis repeated as the girl made a movement to leave.

"By what right—"

"Her my *haligee*—her my wife!"

The girl's eyes told Kenwood that the statement was a lie. Even so the statement was a stab to him. It was monstrous, but it cast a lurid flash on the possibilities of the future.

"Me big hunter," said Black Ibis. "You savvy? Me kill *juswuhutke*—"

"Oh!" came a gasp from Meerita. "He say he shoot egrets."

"All same you!" said Black Ibis. "All same her!"

The brown and sinewy hands that held the rifle were trembling.

There is one sound than which no sound will ever be more thrilling to the dwellers of the South. To them it is what the roaring of the lion is to the denizens of the African bush. It is familiar, yet it is never commonplace. To him who hears it for the hundredth time it is all the same as it is to him who hears it for the first time; and to him who hears it for the first time there comes the same quickening of the pulse, the same tensing of nerve and muscle, the same recognition of danger as if his experience had been full of such sounds.

Kenwood had heard the sound the first day he had come to the little pine-island where his camp was located—the whir of a full-grown Florida rattlesnake—upward of seven feet in length—with the girth of a python. He had listened to the music of the rattles then with a species of fascination—as to death-music from which he was safe—like that fascination with which one listens to a roaring flame.

He heard a whir of rattles now. But at the same time some sort of message reached him from Meerita—a message for him to hold himself in readiness.

"*Chitto-micco!*" he had heard her cry just before the sound began, and he had recognized the Seminole word for rattlesnake.

Kenwood held steady.

Not so, Black Ibis. No Seminole will kill a rattlesnake—or any snake—unless driven to do so. An armed truce. The Seminoles walk barelegged through the rattlesnake country. Few are bitten. But it must have roused Black Ibis's wonder that a snake should have intruded itself here, most of all that it should be showing anger. He whirled.

Before he could discover his mistake—that there was no snake—that this was a mere trick that the daughter of the Charmer had learned—Kenwood had flung himself forward, had snatched the Indian's rifle.

Black Ibis made a single pawing gesture. The sound of rattles had stopped. Black Ibis let out a grunt of rage. He slid his knife from its sheath with a movement that was as deadly smooth and swift as a tiger's might have been. But he saw that he was too late.

Kenwood had backed away, swinging the muzzle of the rifle around and he held the Indian covered.

"Stop," he said, "or I kill!"

Again Kenwood had his vision of the Great Serpent—the giver of the Big Sleep. Perhaps there was more than most men thought in these old Indian stories, after all.

"Come on, Meerita," said Kenwood; "we'll go back to camp—and Black Ibis can follow us there—and get his gun—when he is sober."

"Me think—"

And Meerita had tried to jest, but she broke down with a little sob. They were passing through a tangle of wild orange-trees, and the trees were in flower. Black Ibis and the moringa were far behind them. The camp was just ahead.

Kenwood paused and looked down at her. His own heart was heavy—on her account it was. His thoughts were troubled. He disguised all this, and was more successful than she had been.

"It was wonderful the way you imitated that rattlesnake," he said. "You almost had me frightened. Savvy? Br-r-r! Flighten!"

She laughed a little, but the tears came.

"Me think," she said with desperate courage, "you better go. Black Ibis, he is bad! He will kill you."

He kissed her. "When I go, you will come along."

"If you die," she cried in tumult, "then I come along. But I want you to live! I want you to live!"

(To be concluded NEXT WEEK.)

The Man with the Bad Eye

by Robert Shannon

A CHILL mantle of loneliness was upon Mr. Rufus Tibbs.

Except for the dapper young clerk behind the counter, Rufus was alone in the box-like little lobby of the New Era Hotel. It was the dusk of a soft spring evening in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

From his seat in a leather rocker, Rufus directed a dreary gaze through the plate-glass front of the hotel. His beady, close-set eyes failed to sight a face or a figure that was familiar. Even the smell of the town, which he had been drawing up all day in his beak of a nose, was an alien thing.

In disgust, he threw away his black cigar and wiped his wide-slitted mouth with a handkerchief. The tang of tobacco smoke was acrid and bitter in his mouth. During his last four years of seclusion he had lost his taste for perfectos. Life, itself, seemed off key. He could see the interior of a drug-store across the street. Four great, up-standing men were partaking of ice-cream soda.

The clerk, having finished his mysterious business with the register, came out from behind his desk, crossed to the window, and looked upon the outer world.

"Going down to the Auditorium tonight?" he inquired, affably, of the guest.

"Anything comin' off?" It was a suspicious query; yet it was tinged with a note of hope.

"Community singing bee. Five hundred voices. Great stuff!"

An eye, the glitter of which had brought the pallor of terror to better men than the hotel clerk, grew listless and dull. The flower of hope withered and died. Something strangely like a great sorrow trembled in the voice of Rufus Tibbs.

"Son," he asked, "what made you think I'd want to go to a singin' bee?"

The round, innocent eyes of the youth rested upon the seamed face, the black Prince Albert coat on the stubby figure, the white necktie, and the almost ministerial soft hat that rested on the beetling brow. He suspected nothing.

"Well, if you don't care for singing there's always the movies," he said, amiably. "There's a symphony concert at Osage Hall and an art exhibit from New York down at the big hotel on the other side of the street. The Tulsa Fashion Show opens to-morrow, and—"

Rufus lifted a tired hand.

"That's enough. I ain't interested in them things. But tell me, does Pond Cree Dave or Smiling Dick Burke or Gentleman Joe ever drop up this way?"

The clerk shook his head. "I never heard of any of those gentlemen," he said.

"Ever hear of Sandy McGee or Buck Malloy or a one-eyed half-breed named Howlin' Dan Bolliver?"

"Before my time, I guess. I just come out here from Indiana a year ago."

It was not easy to understand why such famous names, even so, were unknown. "Thunder! I'll bet you"—Rufus shot it out as a challenge—"I'll bet you never even heard of me—Rufus Tibbs?"

"Sorry," he murmured, shaking his head.

A desire to talk—to talk of himself—came upon Rufus. The impulse was born out of a silence that had been forced and protracted.

"In the place I just come from," he said, "the chaplain give me a book with a story in it about Rip Van Winkle. Ever read it?"

The clerk assented.

"That's me. I come back around here and everybody I know is gone. It took 'em twenty years to forget *him*, but I ain't seen a soul to-day that remembers me, an' it's only been four years."

His auditor dropped, with a friendly air, into the chair beside him. "What was your line, sir?" he asked.

"I was a bad man. I was a rootin', tootin' son-of-a-gun from the Panhandle. There wasn't a man livin' that was faster on the draw. I could draw a pair of shootin' irons before you could bat your eye. Some said I was a quicker man than Silver City Pete. It was a natcheral gift, backed up with years of practise. I'd been dealin' poker and whipped a gun out before the last card I dealt hit the table."

A mild form of horror shuddered through the clerk. "It's a wonder you didn't shoot some one," he said, reprovingly. The Tibbs countenance darkened with a spasm of pain.

"I did."

"You mean—you mean you killed a man?"

"No, not exactly. I sorta missed him. It went right through his left ear. That was always my failin': I shot a little high and to the left. Always did—from a boy. If it hadn't been for that one weakness—"

Rufus sighed and ran his fingers meditatively between the buttons of his vest.

"I used to think it was my irons that wasn't true, and I kept changin' 'em; but it was something lackin' in me. It was something up here." He tapped his forehead. "The bullets wouldn't go where I sent 'em.

"I've pointed a gun just as straight at a man's head as I'm pointin' my finger at you now, and they wasn't more'n eight or ten feet away. I'd pull the trigger, and every time I'd shoot high and left.

"If it hadn't been for that I'd been one of the men that nobody around here would ever forget. Say—I might even been hung. I had a nerve like steel, an' my eye was as mean as the worst of 'em. In a way my life's been blighted. It got so, in late years, that they didn't even take the trouble to dodge, most of 'em."

Here the clerk, who had been listening, aghast, interposed a moral question.

"You surely didn't want to shed human blood, just to prove your marksmanship," he objected. "Why didn't you shoot at targets?"

"I did," Rufus assured him. "I practised all the time, out in the open. It warn't any use. I got a kink in my make-up that makes me shoot high and left."

"But it was for a murderous design," the young man insisted. "I can't understand it."

"It was the time and the place," Rufus explained. "I never shot *at* a man in cold blood. But you know how it is. There's more or less shootin' where there's gamblin' and drinkin'. I never pulled a gun on a man in my life but what he reached first for his.

"The last man I shot at was this here Sam Briggs. He come into the casino down at Shamrock and got himself loaded up on red-eye. He butted into a game where I was dealin' and we had words—savvy? I never made a move till he pulled out his six-gun. I guess I never made a faster draw in my life than I did that night. Just as I pulled the trigger he moved his head and I nicked his ear.

"It was the first time I ever hit a man in my life, and it was the first time I ever been arrested. The sheriff got me a half-hour afterwards."

The clerk observed that the case seemed to be a clear one of self-defense. Rufus waved the fact away as though he were tossing a card across a table.

"They framed me up," he asserted. "Swore I pulled first, and they made the jury believe it. Assault with intent to kill—four years. I didn't mind the sentence so much as I did the insultin' manner the judge had. 'Tibbs,' he says, 'it's a shame to send a man up that's as poor a hand with a gun as you are. You ain't really dangerous to the State, but you're annoyin'. They tell me you've shot out more panes of glass than any man in Oklahoma, and that the only man that's really safe in the room when you're shootin' is the one you're shootin at. Some day you're goin' to kill a bystander by accident and we'll have to hang you. You're goin' to be four years older when you're a free man again. That's all.' Them was the words that broke my spirit."

And, as though to prove his shattered strength, he sunk his chin onto his chest and lapsed into moody silence. It is a solemn thing to listen to the heart story of a failure. The clerk, touched, held his tongue until Rufus himself was forced to speak.

"I still got a couple of hundred dollars what I had when I went in," he said. "There don't seem to be but one thing to do, and it goes against the grain like sin; but I'll have to do it. The whole country's settlin' down. Me and the men I used to work with are out of date. We're back numbers. I had my chance to be one of the most notorious men in the country, but that's all in the past. No use cryin' over spilt milk.

"I'm goin' some place farther west where they don't know me, and turn over a new leaf. I'm goin' to make a new start an' get a job."

"Perhaps you could get something here in Tulsa," the clerk insinuated, sympathetically. Rufus shook his head morosely.

"Too many memories," he said; "memories sweet and memories bitter. I'm leavin' it all behind."

The speech was fraught with prophetic sincerity. Six months later, with the book of life open at a fresh page, Rufus was beginning to find a balm for his hurts. In the first flush of his liberty he had opened his heart to the readiest man, and by so doing had given himself the impetus of the spoken work.

The Tulsa confession had given him the spur; had sent him into new fields. Following his outburst to the hotel clerk he became as taciturn as an oyster. He was a sphinx; he was a clam. Secret sorrow had sealed his lips. For aught anyone in Lone Pine, Wyoming, knew, he might have sprung, without a past, from some fathomless void. In his silence and secrecy, and his soft-spoken demeanor, he was, perhaps, the meekest man in town.

It was his cherished belief that the Rufus Tibbs of pyrotechnic Oklahoma had ceased to exist. The old flamboyancy, the garrulousness of other days, the ancient egoism, apparently, was extinct.

To the naked eye the metamorphosis seemed complete. A few odd volumes of

classics, acquired Heaven knows where, had given his mind new and weighty problems for grapplement. Ancient worlds and peoples, opened up to him for the first time, became vividly interesting. He read for long stretches, until his eyes became tired, and, without knowing it, he took on some of the ineffable quaintness of the scholar.

After forty, however, reformations are seldom thorough. Lifelong habits of thought and action leave faintly traced paths in the mind that are not erased within short spaces of time. For one thing, he still packed his gun, swung high in a holster on his left breast under his coat.

Not being versed in psycho-analysis, he was not aware of the connection between his present employment and his blasted career. Without knowing the why of it, he had sought and found employment that was bound by a thread to his unregenerate days.

Lone Pine, while not large, was prosperous. Messrs. Myers and Ryan operated therein a mercantile establishment which served a trade territory of forty square miles. For the modern rancher they carried a line of necessities up to and including such bulky implements as farm tractors. For the modern rancher's wife they ranged their stock upward from go-carts to diamonds. In the intermediary field they maintained an assortment which, according to their advertisements, met every need of man and beast.

Much of their stock was valuable—and portable. Hence Rufus. Silks, jewelry, and the like were too valuable to leave unguarded. A few weeks before the advent of the Oklahoman into Lone Pine, some one had driven a motor truck into town, jimmied a flimsy window at the back of the store, and later vanished out into the far-stretching pall of the night. The value of the loot was near five thousand dollars.

All of which leads up to and explains why Rufus Tibbs, with his noisy yore, had the opportunity of settling down into an occupation that was all silence and solitude. He became a night watchman. From eight o'clock at night until seven in the morning he was charged with the duty of guarding the interior of the establishment.

His time was his own. He had promised his employers that, if necessary, he would do and die in their behalf. The manner of his hypothetical demise was left purely to his own invention.

The first few nights hung long and lonesome on his hands. There had been a tension in the air, and his hand had leaped to his holster a dozen times at the sound of a mouse behind a packing case. His own steps echoed hauntingly through the place, and he fell into the habit of peering into the shadows flung from masses of goods piled high on counters and shelves.

Behind the wire netting of the cashier's cage were a few chairs, a flat desk, and a safe. A single oil lamp set on the desk and turned low furnished a dim radiance in the place. After some nights had passed, he grew used to the vigil, and found it not at all unpleasant to sit with his feet propped up on the desk, reading by his lamp.

His ear had become accustomed to the slight, unexpected noises of the night, and, after a time, he scarcely heard them. Plutarch's Lives engaged his attention, and he marveled vastly at the sturdy character of the men who lived in those days. Unschooled in history, the great past unfolded before him for the first time, and the pageantry of it enthralled him. Altogether, he was quite content. The owners of the store when they departed for their homes in the evening found him preparing to open his book. When they arrived back at the store in the morning they frequently found him deep in its pages, with the light extinguished and his chair pulled over to a window that he might have the advantage of the early sunlight.

Then, one night, his eyes gave out. The type blurred before him and he had to put down the book. A week passed and there was no improvement. He consulted the only optician in town. The resultant examination was thorough and painstaking. Rufus was seated in a chair ten feet away from a large lettered card.

"Read the top line, please."

"S, Z, H, K, L, Y, O, T—"

"Now cover your right eye and read with the left only."

"S, Z, H, K—"

"That will do. Now with the right, please."

"S—"

"Go on."

"I can't. They're mixed up."

The eye man smiled and fixed a pair of optician's spectacles with removable lens upon the bridge of Rufus's nose.

"I can't see at all with these."

The expert deftly removed the left lens and slipped another one into its place. "Better?" he asked.

It was much better. Successively interchanging the lenses, however, finally achieved perfect results.

"You read much?"

"I'm a heavy reader," Rufus admitted.

"You've strained your eyes and you need glasses. We can fix you up right away. In addition to the strain you have a pronounced myopic condition—"

A sudden fear that it might be serious gripped the patient. "It won't stop me from readin', will it, doc?"

"No. You have a hypermetrophia of the left eye. You've probably had it for years without knowing it. Your vision doesn't focus an image properly. It probably wouldn't make any real difference in your life, but you might as well have it corrected."

Rufus did not entirely comprehend the nature of his infirmity.

"I'll try to make it clear to you," the optician offered. "Do you see that doorknob?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's not where you think it is. It's a little lower and to the right of where it seems to your sight to be. You don't see objects in their correct position. For instance, if you shot at a man you'd probably miss him—"

A new eagerness crept into the voice of the questioner.

"If I shot at a man, doc; if I aimed right smack dab at his head, which way would the bullet go?"

"Why, it would go high and a little to the left."

"And my eyes have been this way for years?"

"Most likely."

"You think you can fix 'em—so I could shoot straight."

"The easiest thing in the world. I can fit you with glasses right now that will absolutely correct your vision."

Fifteen minutes later Rufus Tibbs strode down the Main Street of Lone Pine with his head erect, and, perched on the bridge of his high-arched nose, a pair of gold-plated spectacles that glistened magnificently in the sunlight. Appended from one side was a thin gold chain that terminated in a hook over one ear; a precautionary device to save them in the event of their being dislodged.

So far as he could tell, the world looked much as it ever did—viewed materialistically. Deep satisfaction and a feeling that was akin to a haunting regret mingled in his bosom.

In retrospect he was living over certain poignant episodes in years gone by. If he had known, if he had suspected his true state of vision— Resolutely, he put aside such reveries. The past was dead. In all probabilities he would never at any time in the future be called upon to exert his talent on the lightning draw. Never again, most likely, would his right forefinger curl around a trigger with intent to kill. A still, small desire for another trial, another chance, urged itself upon him; but he knew in his heart of hearts that he was through. Before him the future stretched away into a dim vista of clean-handed years of peace and respectability.

That night he fell upon his Plato with renewed energy. It was easier to read now. The type was clear and bold, and he wormed his way through the pages without any strain whatever. As he read, he followed the line with his forefinger.

The light at his back fell softly upon the printed page. A spring hinge in the chair enabled him to lean back comfortably. He read:

> Cæsar was born to do great things, and had a passion after honor, and the many noble exploits he had done did not now serve as an inducement to him to sit still and reap the fruit of his past labors, but were incentives to go on, and raised in him new ideas of still greater actions, and a desire of new glory, as if the present were all spent.

He closed the book over a marking finger and gazed to the metal ceiling, thoughtfully. In a way, he had been like Cæsar, himself. He had not, of course, achieved any great exploits, but there had been in him the same restless desire for great actions and glory.

It was as though the thing had been written for his benefit. Although he had not finished the biography, he was aware of the ominous, downward trend of it. Cæsar, he knew, was going to pay the penalty for overreaching himself.

"I might have done the same thing myself if I'd had glasses in them days," he told himself. "I might have conquered and all of that, and been famous; but in the long run I'm better off, I guess."

He read avidly for another hour.

"But reaped no other fruits from it than the empty name and invidious glory."

People were always the same, Rufus opined. He removed his spectacles, wiped them with his handkerchief and placed them on the desk, carefully. Yes, sir—there had been bad men in those days, even as in his own. There had always been the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak.

He philosophized. The same desires, the same passions, and the same actions marked the man of two thousand years ago as characterized his descendants of to-day. It was the same plowing under of all that was flesh. The whole process and business of life seemed strangely futile. Yet, there was that little spark of the inexplicable in man that flamed through the ages and gave some vague justification to all of his feeble efforts.

His mind drifted far from all that was mundane and close at hand. A soft noise behind him reached his ears, but he was too engrossed in his reflections to turn his head.

"Up with 'em!"

It was a hoarse, commanding voice.

"Up high—and keep 'em high!" Mechanically, Rufus obeyed.

The intruder swung around before him; a hulking figure of a man with the lower part of his face concealed behind a handkerchief knotted behind the head. In his hand he grasped a well-directed revolver of blue steel.

Something sickened within the philosopher. It was not fear. Instead, it was the chill despair of failure that swept over him. Again he had fallen short of his possibilities.

His mind had soared from his job. Had he been on the alert it would have been childishly easy to have thwarted the robber. With all of the circumstances against him he could have beaten the man to the pull of the trigger, and with his new glasses—he did not even have them *on!*

"What do you want?" he asked, helplessly.

The eyes above the mask gleamed maliciously.

"What do I want? Say! D'ye think I come in for a can of sardines?"

However fast Rufus may have been in his highly specialized form of manual dexterity, he was gifted with no like agility of mentality.

"No, I suppose not," he said, thoughtfully.

The stranger swept a swift glance around the store.

"Alone?" he growled.

Rufus nodded.

"Got the combination of the safe?"

"No."

"Where do they keep the diamonds?"

"In there." Rufus inclined his head toward the big steel box.

The other paused to consider the situation. "I suppose I might as well tie you up and stuff a gag down your neck," he said, slowly. He hesitated again. "Maybe it 'd be better to knock you over the head and throw you over in a corner. Keep 'em up!" He waved his gun slightly and advanced a step, but there was a hint of indecision in his manner.

With a quick motion the man reversed the revolver in his hand, clubbing it with his strong fingers clutched around the barrel. If, at that moment, Rufus had been wearing his spectacles it would have been over in an instant. Before the robber could possibly have restored his own weapon to the normal firing position, his potential victim could have flashed out his

own gun and planted a shot wheresoever he willed.

Apparently it was not to be. Rufus knew too well what the result of such a move would be were he to attempt it, relying on his old baffling eyesight. A wild shot; a return a moment later from the other and he would lie crumpled in his chair.

Still, the bandit hesitated. He had not expected to find a watchman in the place. Like Rufus, he thought slowly.

"I don't know exactly what to do about you," he admitted, as he spun his revolver in the air and caught it neatly by the handle. His eye caught sight of the book on the table and shifted back again to the worried countenance of the little man who sat before him, with his feet still on the desk.

Then came a glimmer of recognition into his eyes. A certain tense nervousness seemed to drop from him, and a faint crinkle of many lines appeared at the outside corners of his eyes, as though he were smiling behind the mask.

"Well! Well!" he exclaimed. "What you doin' here, cull?"

Rufus blinked. "I'm the night watchman," he said.

The other snorted. "So you're the night watchman, are you? A fine bird for a job like that—you!"

There was no mistaking his meaning. It was an insult in tone, substance, and delivery. It is one thing to rob a man. In a way and after a certain code, it is one of the things that has a place in the conduct of men, one to another. But to insult him at the same time—there you have something which lies without the bounds of ordinary and conventional crime.

To insult a man when he is in a position to resent it is not without a certain flair of sportsmanship. To insult him when he is helpless is, well—it reveals the character of the insulter. A dark, futile flush spread over the rugged features of the insulted.

"Are you looking for trouble?" he demanded, forgetting for a moment his unhappy plight.

A mocking laugh was his answer.

"This is rich," the other chuckled in amusement; in vindictive glee. "I suppose somebody killed the cat and they put you in here to watch for mice. Say—are you a regular watchman, gun and everything?"

The eyes of Rufus Tibbs beaded a straight line, squarely to the spot where the bushy eyebrows of his tormentor met. His heart, as he gazed, beat angrily against the holster strapped over his breast. The coordination of thought, impulse and action was, theoretically, perfect. He could have, in the split of a second, translated the thing which was in his mind into action. If it had happened fifteen minutes earlier; if he had been surprised when he was reading it would have meant another fee for the coroner.

His visitor swung a heavy leg across the desk and half sat on it.

"I guess this is goin' to be an easier job than I looked for," he said, with nasty significance. "I'm goin' to tell you somethin', Tibbs. I'm goin' to clean out this dump, and I'm goin' to do it right. What's more, I'm goin' to make you help me. I got an automobile outside, and you're goin' to help me load it up—understand?

"You don't know me, but I know you. I got your number. You're just a little runt that thinks he's bad—but you ain't. You're kinda quick on the trigger, but you couldn't hit the side of a house with a shotgun. I guess you lose your nerve when you pull a gun and get to shakin' so much that you nearly drop your gun. Howsomever, that don't signify.

"What does is this: if you pull a gun on me I'll kill you dead, and I'll get away, too. Furthermore, if you behave yourself, and do what I tell you, I'll go off and leave you alone to go on with your readin'."

He flicked the book contemptuously with the end of his weapon. "Get me?"

Rufus bored the speaker with a vain stare, hoping for a clue to his identity.

"Where did you know me?" he asked.

The masked head jerked southward. "Back there. I knew you when you was just a cheap little four-flusher, doin' a lot of loud talkin' and settin' yourself up to be a bad man. I hear you been doin' some time in stir, too."

A thought that the man might have known him in prison fleeted through the smaller man's mind. Even so, he was unable to account for the animosity of the other. None of his prison mates, so far as he could recall, bore him any animosity. There was only one enemy he had ever had; a man with whom he had exchanged bitter hatred. That man was Sam Briggs.

The man with the weapon caught a sudden change in the expression of Rufus. "What you lookin' like that for?" he demanded.

A smile, wolf-like in the manner of the lips drawn back over the teeth, preceded the reply.

"I just happened to get a glimpse of your ear," Rufus said, with a strange softness. "I just happened to see a nick in the left one that I put there a few years ago. Howdy, Briggs?"

"You're wise, are you?" It was a leer of contempt. "Put a mark on me, did you? Well, I'm goin' to even that up tonight. I'm goin' to bump you off, Tibbs. I'm goin' to clean out this joint, and then I'm goin' to put your light out. I'd do it right now, but I want to give you a little time to enjoy the sensation of thinkin' it over."

The words seemed to make something inside of Rufus Tibbs numb. It was the end. He felt it, and he believed it, and for a moment he nearly broke under the strain. Then, from somewhere in his being, from some source with which he was not thoroughly acquainted, a cold pride rose up and took possession of his faculties. Without any great effort he was able to manage a smile.

"Yes, that's like you, Briggs," he said. "You always was yellow. It'd be just like you to shoot down a man in cold blood when he didn't have a chance to come back at you."

The murderously inclined one snapped his fingers impatiently.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he said. "I was just throwin' a scare into you. I didn't mean that. You got the combination of this safe. Come through with it and I'll let you off. Word of honor."

For the first time in his life Rufus became subtle. The loosely handled weapon of the other was tempting him, luring him on. If he could succeed in restoring his spectacles to his nose—

"Suppose I did have the combination, Briggs; and suppose I turned it over to you; how would I know that you wouldn't go ahead and put out my light? You know yourself that I ain't got no reason to trust anything you say or do."

In the thick brain of Sam Briggs crafty thoughts were chasing each other in circles. His threat had come from the depth of the heart. He earnestly wished for its fulfilment, yet he realized it might complicate his exit from the environs of Lone Pine. Also, there was no especial advantage in having murder added to his record. A streak of caution in his nature began to sway his plan.

"I ain't such a bad fellow, Tibbs," he laughed, with an effort at geniality. "I guess, maybe, I was a little hasty in what I just said. You see, you and me ain't lost no love for each other, but I guess there ain't no sense in goin' too far with things.

"Natcherally I got some hard feelin's toward you. It ain't exactly pleasant to be shot through the ear—"

"Nuther is it pleasant to spend four years in prison walls for the same," Rufus interjected.

"Exactly. I'm willin' to call it quits on that score. I come into this here town to do a little peaceable job, and I wasn't figurin' on findin' you. I got the upper hand, though, and I mean to use it. You kick in with the combination and I'll tie you up. You won't be none the worse thought of."

He paused, expectantly. With all the guile of which he was capable he had set out a proposition which, to him, seemed thoroughly sound.

"You don't need to keep your hands up in the air," he said, affably. "I guess you got too much sense to try to pull a gun on me—a man's that's got such a bad eye for shootin' as you have."

Slowly, with the surge of a great joy in his heart, Rufus lowered his arms, flexed them at the elbows, and spread his fingers wide apart, drew them together and con-

tracted them several times against his palms.

With his right hand he gingerly picked up his spectacles, and with his left he lifted his handkerchief which lay beside them.

"Wearin' glasses now, eh?" Briggs spoke with an assumption of friendliness, calculated to take away the sting of his lethal threat of a few minutes previous. His gun hand, however, did not relax.

Rufus held his glasses to his lips, breathed on them and held them up between his eyes and the lamp as he polished them with the handkerchief.

"Yes, sir—I found out I had trouble with my eyes. Got to readin' here at nights, and I guess the light wasn't very good. Ever read much, Briggs?"

By tacit agreement, both seemed to be avoiding the main theme. Like two business men discussing the weather when their wits are at combat on a totally disassociated topic, the enemies dropped, for a moment, into social amenities.

"Can't say that I ever done much readin', Rufe," Briggs admitted.

"That's unfortunate," Rufus said sympathetically. "Still, you'll have twenty-five years or so to take it up, where you're goin'."

"Where I'm goin'? Say—"

Rufus Tibbs calmly gave a final gloss to each lens and, with the utmost nicety, adjusted the spectacles with his left hand, from which, also, dangled the handkerchief. Just for an instant the white cloth was between his breast and the eyes of the robber, but in that instant his right hand slid behind the pendant fabric with the swiftness of a striking serpent.

A hot spurt of flame darted out, a roar reverberated throughout the store, a puff of smoke rose in the air, and the hand that had held the menacing blue steel dropped limp and bloody.

"The reason I missed you back in Oklahoma was because I had bad eyesight," Rufus remarked. "I got my eyes fixed up here in Lone Pine, Briggs, and I can shoot the eye out of a fly by candle light, now."

The wounded man shook his dripping hand.

"You crossed me!" he grated.

"I'll tell you about that, Briggs," Rufus said, thoughtfully. "I might have deceived you a mite about my intentions, but I didn't cross you. I meant to pot you right along. But what you did to me back there in Oklahoma—that was dog-gone yellow. You pulled a gun on me first and then you went in court and swore I drew on you. You framed up on me, and you sent me up for four years.

"I suppose I ought to kill you, now. Always thought I would if I got the chance. Guess I won't, though. Guess I'll just send you up to the pen and let you get started in on your readin'. Greatest thing in the world to give a man an education."

Rufus glanced at the little clock that was ticking on his desk.

"Guess that shot 'll raise somebody in a few minutes," he said. "An' speakin' of shootin', you shore hurt my feelin', Briggs, by sayin' I was a poor shot. I'm goin' to convince you I'm right."

Gently, he reached over and removed the other's hat.

"Now, you just set here in the light, and I'm going to back up to the other end of the store. I want you to set steady, and don't move your head, 'cause I won't be responsible if you dodge. Steady, now!"

Backing away cautiously, Rufus Tibbs placed the length of the store between them. The form of Briggs was silhouetted with sharp distinctness in the murky halo of light from the oil lamp.

An expert revolver shot had no necessity for aiming. He fixes his eye on the target and does the rest by instinct.

Rufus waited a moment and then fired.

"You'll look better, now, Briggs," he called back. "You got the right ear marked like your left one."

"Tibbs," said Mr. Ryan, later, "that was a fine piece of work you put over. I didn't know you had it in you. Always thought you was a sort of bookworm. I guess if you'd have put in your time roughin' it around you'd have been a regular gun-fighter, eh? Guess this is the first mixup you ever been in, eh?"

"Briggs is the only man I ever shot in my life," Rufus admitted.

The Blind Spot

by Austin Hall and Homer Eon Flint

A "DIFFERENT" SERIAL

CHAPTER X.

MAN OR PHANTOM?

IT was Hobart who came to first. His voice was good to hear. It was natural; it was sweet and human; but it was pregnant with disappointment: "We are fools, Harry; we are fools!"

I could only stare. I remember saying: "The Blind Spot?"

"Yes," returned Hobart, "the Blind Spot. But what is it? We saw him go. Did you see it?"

"It gets me," I answered. "He just vanished into space. It—" Frankly I was afraid.

"It tallies well with the supplements. The old lady and Jerome. Remember?"

"And the bell?" I looked about the room.

"Exactly. Phenomena! Watson was right. I just wonder—but the bell? Remember the doctor? 'The greatest day since Columbus.' No, don't cross the room, Harry, I am a bit leary. A great discovery! I should say it was. How do you account for it?"

"Supernatural."

Fenton shook his head.

"By no means! It is the gateway to the universe—into Cosmos." His eyes sparkled. "My Lord, Harry! Don't you see! Once we control it. The Blind Spot! What is beyond? We saw Chick Watson go. Before our eyes. Where did he go to? It beats death itself."

I started across the room, but Hobart caught me with both arms: "No, no, no, Harry. My Lord! I don't want to lose you. No! You foolhardy little cuss—stand back!"

He threw me violently against the wall. The impact quite took my breath. On the instant the old rush of temper surged up in me. From babyhood we had had these moments. Hobart settled himself and awaited the rush that he knew was coming. In his great, calm brute strength there was still a greatness of love.

"Harry," he was saying, "for the love of Heaven, listen to reason! Have we got to have a knock-down and drag-out on this of all nights? Have I got to lick you again? Do you want to roll into the Blind Spot?"

Why did God curse me with such a temper? On such moments as this I could feel something within me snapping. It was fury and unreason. How I loved him! And yet we had fought a thousand times over just such provocation. Over his shoulders I could see the still open door that led into the street; the heavy fog was hanging through the opening; out of the corner of my eye I caught the lines of a form stepping out of the shadows—it crossed the room and stood beside Hobart Fenton. It was Rhamda Avec!

I leaped. The fury of a thousand conflicts—and the exultation. For the glory of such moments it is well worth dying. One minute flying through the air—the old catapult tackle—and the next a crashing of bone and sinew. We rolled over, head on, and across the floor. Curses and execrations; the deep bass voice of Hobart:

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for May 14.

"Hold him, Harry! Hold him! That's the aye! Hold him! Hold him!"

We went crashing about the room. He was the slipperiest thing I had ever laid hold of. But he was bone—bone and sinew; he was a man! I remember the wild thrill of exultation at the discovery. It was battle! And death! The table went over, we went spinning against the wall, a crash of falling bookcases, books and broken glass, a scurry and a flying heap of legs and arms. He was wonderfully strong and active, like a panther. Each time I held him he would twist out like a cat, straighten, and throw me out of my hold. I clung on, fighting, striving for a grip, working for the throat. He was a man—a man! I remembered that he must never get away. He must account for Watson.

In the first rush I was a mad man. The mere force of my onslaught had borne him down. But in a moment he had recovered and was fighting systematically. As much as he could he kept over on one side of me, always forcing me toward the inner room where Watson had disappeared. In spite of my fury he eluded every effort that I made for a vital part. We rolled, fought, struck and struggled.

I could hear Hobart's bass thundering: "Over! Over! Under! Look out! Now you've got him! Harry! Harry! Look out! Hold him, for the love of Heaven! I see his trick. That's his trick. The Blind Spot!"

It was like Hobart tearing through center in the days of old. We were rolled clear over, picked, heaved, shoved against the front wall. There were three! The great heaving bulk of Fenton; the fighting tiger between us; and myself! Surely such strength was not human; we could not pin him; his quickness was uncanny; he would uncoil, twist himself and throw us loose. Gradually he worked us away from the front wall and into the center of the room.

We knew his game now, both of us. He was working us toward the inner room and his cursed Blind Spot. He would throw us into the abyss. We were all in rags and tatters. I was torn and bleeding. The tense face of Hobart, his veins standing out, his muscles bulged, all as flitting as vision. The Rhamda twisted. We went whirling around, the three of us rolling over—through the door.

Could any mere man fight so? Hobart was as good as a ton; I was as much for action. Slowly, slowly in spite of our efforts, he was working us toward the Blind Spot. Confident of success, he was over, around, and in and under. In the spin of a second he went to the aggressive. He fairly bore us off our feet. We were on the last inch of our line; the stake was—

What was it? We all went down. A great volume of sound! We were inside a bell! My whole head buzzed to music and a roar; the whir of a thousand vibrations, the inside of sound. I fell face downward; the room went black.

What was it? How long I lay there I do not know. A dim light was burning. I was in a room. The ceiling overhead was worked in a grotesque pattern; I could not make it out. My clothes were in tatters, and my hand was covered with blood. Something warm was trickling down my face. What was it? The air was still and sodden. Who was this man beside me? And what was this smell of roses?

I lay still for a minute, thinking. Ah, yes! It came back. Watson—Chick Watson! The Blind Spot! The Rhamda and the bell! Surely it was a dream. How could all this be in one short night? It was like a nightmare and impossible. What was this smell of roses? I raised up on my elbow and looked at the form beside me. It was Hobart Fenton. He was unconscious.

For a moment my mind was whirring; I was too weak and unsteady. I dropped back and wondered absently at the odor of roses. Roses meant perfume, and perfume meant a woman. What could—Something touched my face—something soft; it plucked tenderly at my tangled hair and drew it away from my forehead. It was the hand of a woman!

"You poor, foolish boy! You foolish boy!"

Some place I had heard that voice; it had a touch of sadness; it was familiar; it was soft and silken, like music that might

have been woven out of the moonbeams. Who was it that always made me think of the moonbeams? I lay still, thinking.

"He dared; he dared; he dared!" she was saying. "As if there were not two! He shall pay for this! Am I to be a plaything? You poor boy!"

Then I remembered. I looked up. It was the Nervina! She was stooping over with my head against her. How beautiful her eyes were! In their depths was a pathos and a tenderness that was past a woman's, the same slight droop at the corners of the mouth, and the wistfulness; her features were relaxed like a mother's—a wondrous sweetness and pity.

"Harry," she asked, "where is Watson? Did he go?"

I nodded.

"Into the Blind Spot?"

"Yes. What is the Blind Spot?"

She ignored the question.

"I am sorry," she answered—"so sorry. I would have saved him. And the Rhamda; was he here, too?"

I nodded. Her eyes flashed wickedly.

"And—and—you— Tell me, did you fight with the Rhamda? You—"

"It was Watson," I interrupted. "This Rhamda is back of it all. He is the villain. I would hold him. He can fight like a tiger; whoever he is, he can fight."

She frowned slightly; she shook her head. More than ever I noted the sadness and the wistfulness; her beauty was unlike any other; her eyes, so black, were for all that soft; in their depths lurked pity and tenderness—a great longing. I wondered vaguely what it was; who was she?

"You young men," she said. "You young men! You are all alike! Why must it be? I am so sorry. And you fought with the Rhamda? You could not overcome him, of course. But tell me, how could you resist him? What did you do?"

What did she mean? I had felt his flesh and muscle. He was a man. Why could he not be conquered—not be resisted?

"I do not understand," I answered. "He is a man. I fought him. He was here. Let him account for Watson. We fought alone at first, until he tried to throw me into this Thing. Then Hobart stepped in. Once I thought we had him, but he was too slippery. He came near putting us both in. I don't know. Something happened—a bell."

Her hand was on my arm; she clutched it tightly; she swallowed hard; in her eyes flashed the fire that I had noticed once before, the softness died out, and their glint was almost terrible.

"He! The bell saved you? He would throw you into the Blind Spot! He would dare!"

She looked up and about the room, as if she too would essay a test with the Rhamda. "He would dare!"

I lay back. I was terribly weak and uncertain. This beautiful woman! What was her interest in myself?

"Harry," she spoke, "let me ask you. I am your friend. If you only knew! I would save you. It must not be. Will you give me the ring? If I could only tell you! You must not have it. It is death—yes, worse than death. No man may wear it."

So that was it. Again and so soon I was to be tempted. Was her concern feigned or real? Why did she call me Harry? Why did I not resent it? She was wonderful; she was beautiful; she was pure. Was it merely a subtle play for the Rhamda? I could still hear Watson's voice ringing out of the Blind Spot: "Hold the ring! Hold the ring!" I could not be false to my friend.

"Tell me first," I asked. "Who is this Rhamda? What is he? Is he a man?"

"No."

Not a man! I remembered Watson's words: "A fantom!" How could it be? At least I would find out what I could.

"Then tell me, what is he?"

She smiled faintly; again the elusive tenderness lingered about her lips, the wistful droop at the corners.

"That I may not tell you, Harry. You could not understand. Would that I could."

Certainly I could not understand her evasion. I studied and watched her—her wondrous hair, the perfection of her throat, the curve of her bosom.

"Then he is supernatural."

"No, not that, Harry. That would explain everything. One cannot go above Nature. He is living just as you are."

I studied a moment.

"Are you a woman?" I asked suddenly.

Perhaps I should not have asked it; she was so sad and beautiful, somehow I could not doubt her sincerity. There was a burden back of her sadness, some great yearning unsatisfied, unattainable. She dropped her head. The hand upon my arm quivered and clutched spasmodically; I caught the least sound of a sob. When I looked up her eyes were wet and sparkling.

"Oh," she said. "Harry, why do you ask it? You are the only man who has ever guessed. A woman! Harry, a woman! To live and love and to be loved. What must it be! There is so much of life that is sweet and pure. I love it—I love it! I can have everything but the most exalted thing of all. I can live, see, enjoy, think, but I cannot have love. Your humblest maiden is a queen beside me. You knew it from the first. How did you know it? Would that I were woman. Your life is beautiful. How did you know? You said— Ah, it is true! I am out of the moonbeams." She controlled herself suddenly. "Excuse me,"—she said simply. "But you can never understand. May I have the ring?"

It was all like a dream—her beauty, her voice, everything. But I could still hear Watson. I was to be tempted, cajoled, flattered. What was this story out of the moonbeams? Certainly she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Why had I asked such a question?

"I shall keep the ring," I answered.

She sighed. A strange weakness came over me; I was drowsy; I lapsed again into unconsciousness; just as I was fading away I heard her speaking: "I am so sorry!"

CHAPTER XI.

BAFFLED.

WAS it a dream? The next I knew somebody was dousing water down my neck. It was Hobart Fenton. "Lord," he was saying, "I thought you were never coming to. What hit us? You are pretty well cut up. That was some fight. This Rhamda, who is he? Can you figure him out? Did you hear that bell? What was it?"

I sat up. Hobart was bathing my face. We were both in tatters. Hobart had washed my hands.

"Where is the Nervina?" I asked.

"The who?" He was bewildered. "Oh, I guess she's down at the café. Thought you had forgotten her. Wasn't her mate enough? It might be healthy to forget his Nervina."

He was a pretty sight; his clothes were ribbons; his plump figure was breaking out the seams. He regarded me critically.

"What do you think of the Blind Spot?" he asked. "Who is the Rhamda? He put us out pretty easily."

"But the girl?" I interrupted. "The girl? Confound it, the girl?"

It was some time before I could make him understand; even then he refused to believe me.

"It was all a dream," he said; "all a dream."

But I was certain.

Fenton began prodding about the room. I do not believe any apartment was ever so thoroughly ransacked. We even tore up the carpet. When we were through he sat in the midst of the débris and wiped his head.

"It's no use, Harry—no use. We might know better. It can't be done. Yet you say you saw a string of incandescence."

"A single string; the form of Watson; a blur—then nothing," I answered.

He thought. He quoted the professor: "'Out of the occult. I shall bring you the proof and the substance. It will be concrete—within the reach of your senses.' Is that not what the doctor said?"

"Then you believe Professor Holcomb?"

"Why not? Did we not see it? I know a deal of material science; but nothing like this. I always had faith in Dr. Holcomb. After all, it is not impossible. First we must go over the house thoroughly."

We did. Most of all, we were interested in that bell. We did not think, either of us, that so much noise could come out of

nothing. It was too material. The other we could credit to the occult; but not the sound. It had drowned our consciousness; perhaps it had saved us from the Rhamda. But we found nothing. We went over the house systematically. It was much as it had previously been described, only now a bit more furnished. The same dank, musty smell and the same suggestive silence. We returned to the lower floor and the library. It was a sorry sight. We straightened up the shelves and returned the books to their places.

It was getting along in the morning. Hobart sailed at nine o'clock. We must have new clothing and some coffee; likewise we must collect our wits. I had the ring, and had given my pledge to Watson. I was muddled. We must get down to sane action. First of all we must return to our rooms.

The fog had grown thicker; one could almost taste it. I could not suppress a shudder. It was cold, dank, repressive. Neither of us spoke a word on our way down-town. Hobart opened the door to our apartment; he turned on the lights. We had always kept a small outfit with which to warm up a light lunch. We both of us did a deal of night work and often made hot coffee as morning approached.

In a few moments we had our hot, steaming cups. Still we did not speak. Hobart sat in his chair, his elbows on the table and his head between his hands. My thoughts ran back to that day in college when he had said: "I was just thinking, Harry, if I had one hundred thousand dollars, I would solve the Blind Spot."

That was long ago. We had neither of us thought that we would come to the fact.

"Well," I spoke, "have you got that hundred thousand dollars? You had an idea once."

He looked up.

"I've got it yet. I am not certain. It is merely a theory. But it's not impossible."

He had a pretty solid head on his fat body. He had no use for sophistry; he was too material, too wedded to bolts and pistons. I was interested.

"Well, what is it?"

He took another drink of coffee and settled back in his chair.

"It is energy, Harry—force. Nothing but energy—and Nature."

"Then it is not occult?" I asked.

"Certainly it is. I did not say that. It is what the professor promised. Something concrete for our senses. If the occult is, it can certainly be proven. The professor was right. It is energy, force, vibration. It has a law. The old doctor was caught somehow. We must watch our step and see that we are not swallowed up also. Perhaps we shall go the way of Watson."

I shuddered.

"I hope not. But explain. You speak in volumes. Come back to earth."

"That's easy, Harry. I can give you my theory in a few short words. You have studied physiology, haven't you? Well, that's where you can get your proof—or rather let me say my theory. What is the Blind Spot?"

"In optics?"

"We'll forego that," he answered. "I refer to this one."

I thought a moment.

"Well," I said, "I don't know. It was something I could not see. Watson went out before our eyes. He was lost."

"Exactly. Do you get the point?"

"No."

"It is this. What you see is merely energy. Your eye is merely a machine. It catches certain colors. Which in turn are merely ratios of vibration. There is nothing to matter but force, Harry; if we could get down deep enough and knew a few laws, we could transmute it."

"What has it to do with the occult?"

"Merely a fact. The eye machine catches only certain ratios of energy. There are undoubtedly any number of ratios; the eye cannot see them."

"Then this would account for the Blind Spot?"

"Exactly. A localized spot, a condition, a combination of phenomena, anything entering it becomes invisible."

"Where does it go to?"

"That's it. Where? It's one of the things that man has been guessing at for

the ages. The professor is the first philosopher with sound sense. He went after it. 'Tis a pity he was trapped."

"By the Rhamda?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Who is he?"

Hobart smiled.

"How do I know? Where did he come from? If we knew that, we would know everything. 'A fantom,' so Watson says. If so, it only strengthens our theory. It would make man and matter only a part of creation. Certainly it would clear up a good many doubts."

"And the ring?"

"It controls the Blind Spot."

"In what way?"

"That's for us to find out."

"And Watson? He is in this land of doubt?"

"At least he is in the Blind Spot. Let us try the ring."

He struck a match.

It was much as it had been in the restaurant, only a bit more startling; the blue faded, the color went out, and it became transparent. For a moment. There was an effect of space and distance that I had not noted before, almost marvelous. If I would describe it at all, I would say a crystal corridor of a vastness that can scarcely be imagined. It made one dizzy, even in that bit of jewel: one lost proportion, it was height, distance, space immeasurable. For an instant. Then the whole thing blurred and clouded. Something passed across the face; the transparency turned to opaqueness, and then—two men. It was as sudden as a flash—the materialization. There was no question. They were alive. Watson was with the professor.

It was a strange moment. Only an hour before one of them had been with us. It was Watson, beyond a doubt. He was alive; one could almost believe him in the jewel. We had heard his story: "The screen of the occult; the curtain of shadow." We had seen him go. There was an element of horror in the thing, and of fascination. The great professor! The faithful Watson! Where had they gone?

It was not until the color had come back and the blue had regained its luster that either of us looked up. Could such a thing be unraveled? Fenton turned the stone over thoughtfully. He shook his head.

"In that jewel, Harry, lies the secret. I wish I knew a bit more about physics, light, force, energy, vibration. We have got to know."

"Your theory?"

"It still holds good."

I thought.

"Let me get it clear, Hobart. You say that we catch only certain vibrations."

"That's it. Our eyes are instruments, nothing else. We can see light, but we cannot hear it. We hear sound, but we cannot see it. Of course they are not exactly parallel. But it serves the point. Let us go a bit further. The eye picks up certain ratios. Light is nothing but energy vibrating at a tremendous speed. It has to be just so high for the eye to pick it up. A great deal we do not get. For instance, we can only catch one-twelfth of the solar spectrum. We have been too much from Missouri. We believed only what we could see. Science has pulled us out of the rut. It may pull us through the Blind Spot."

"And beyond."

Hobart held up his hands.

"It is almost too much to believe. We have made a discovery. We must watch our step. We must not lose. The work of Dr. Holcomb shall not go for nothing."

"And the ring?"

He consulted his watch.

"We have only a short time left. We must map our action. We have three things to work on—the ring, the house, Bertha Holcomb. It's all up to you, Harry. Find out all that is possible; but go slow. I shall be in the offing. Trace down that ring; find out everything that you can. Go see Bertha Holcomb. Perhaps she can give you some data. Watson said no; but perhaps you may uncover it. Take the ring to a lapidary; but do not let him cut it. Last of all, and most important, buy the house of the Blind Spot. Draw on me. Let me pay half, anyway."

"I shall move into it," I answered.

He hesitated a bit.

"I am afraid of that," he answered. "Well, if you wish. Only be careful. Re-

member I shall return just as soon as I can get loose. If you feel yourself slipping or anything happens, cable."

The hours passed all too quickly. When day came we had our breakfast and hurried down to the pier. It was hard to have him go. His last words were like Hobart Fenton. He repeated the warning:

"Watch your step, Harry; watch your step. Take things easy; be cautious. Get the house. Trace down that ring. Be sure of yourself. Keep me informed. If you need me, cable. I'll come if I have to swim."

His last words; and not a year ago. It seems now like a lifetime. As I stood upon the pier and watched the ship slipping into the water, I felt it coming upon me. It has grown steadily, a gloom and oppression not to be thwarted; it is silent and subtle and past defining—like shadow. The gray, heavy heave of the water; the great hull of the steamer backing into the bay; the gloom of the fog bank. A few uncertain lines, the shrill of the siren, the mist settling; I was alone. It was isolation.

I had been warned by Watson. But I had not guessed. At the moment I sensed it. It was the beginning. Out of my heart I could feel it—solitude.

In the great and populous city I was to be alone, in all its teeming life I was to be a stranger. It has been a year—a year! It has been a lifetime. A breaking down of life!

I have waited and fought and sought to conquer. One cannot fight against shadow. It is merciless and inexorable. There are secrets that may be locked forever. It was my duty, my pledge to Watson, what I owed to the great professor. I have hung on grimly; what the end will be I do not know. I have cabled for Fenton.

CHAPTER XII.

A DEAL IN REALTY.

BUT to return. There was work that I should do—much work, if I was going after the solution. In the first place, there was the house. I turned my back to the water-front and entered the city. The streets were packed, the commerce of man jostled and threaded along the highways; there was life and action, hope, ambition. It was what I had loved so well. Yet now it was different.

I realized it vaguely, and wondered. This feeling of aloofness? It was intrinsic, coming from within, like the withering of one's marrow. I laughed at my foreboding; it was not natural; I tried to shake myself together.

I had no difficulty with the records. In less than an hour I traced out the owners, "an estate," and had located the agent. It just so happened that he was a man with whom I had some acquaintance. We were not long in coming to business.

"The house at No. 288 Chatterton?"

I noticed that he was startled; there was a bit of wonder in his look—a quizzical alertness. He motioned me to a chair and closed the door.

"Sit down, Mr. Wendel; sit down. H-m! The house at No. 288 Chatterton? Did I hear you right?"

Again I noted the wonder; his manner was cautious and curious. I nodded.

"Want to buy it or just lease it? Pardon me, but you are sort of a friend. I would not like to lose your friendship for the sake of a mere sale. What is your—"

"Just for a residence," I assisted—"a place to live in."

"I see. Know anything about this place?"

"Do you?"

He fumbled with some papers. For an agent he did not strike me as being very solicitous for a commission.

"Well," he said, "in a way, yes. A whole lot more than I'd like to. It all depends. One gets much from hearsay. What I know is mostly rumor." He began marking with a pencil. "Of course I don't believe it. Nevertheless I would hardly recommend it to a friend as a residence."

"And these rumors?"

He looked up; for a moment he studied; then:

"Ever hear of the Blind Spot? Perhaps you remember Dr. Holcomb—in 1905, before the quake. It was a murder. The papers were full of it at the time; since

then it has been occasionally featured in the supplements. I do not believe in the story; but I can trust to facts. The last seen of Dr. Holcomb was in this house. It is called the Blind Spot."

"Then you believe in the story?" I asked.

He looked at me.

"Oh, you know it, eh? No, I do not. It's all buncomb; reporters' work and exaggeration. If you like that kind of stuff, it is weird and interesting. But it hurts property. The man was undoubtedly murdered. The tale hangs over the house. It is impossible to dispose of the place."

"Then why not sell it to me?"

He dropped his pencil; he was a bit nervous.

"A fair question, Mr. Wendel—a very fair question. Well, now, why don't I? Perhaps I shall. There's no telling. But I'd rather not. Do you know, a year ago I would have jumped at an offer. Fact is, I did lease it—the lease ran out yesterday—to a man named Watson. I don't believe a thing in this nonsense; but what I have seen during the past year has tested my nerve considerably."

"What about Watson?"

"Watson? A year ago he came to me in regard to this Chatterton property. Wanted to lease it. Was interested in the case of Dr. Holcomb; asked for a year's rental and the privilege of renewal. I don't know. I gave it to him; but when he drops in again I am going to fight almighty hard against letting him hold it longer."

"Why?"

"Why? Why, because I don't believe in murder. A year ago he came to me the healthiest and the happiest man I ever saw; to-day he is a shadow. I watched that boy go down. Understand, I don't believe a damn word I'm saying; but I have seen it. It's that cursed house. I say no, when I reason; but it keeps on my nerves; it's on my conscience. It is insidious. Every month when he came here I could see disintegration. One year ago he was an athlete; to-day he is a shadow. There is nothing left of the boy but a soul. It is pitiful to see a young man stripped of life like that; forlorn, hopeless, gone. He has never told me what it is; but I have wondered. A battle; some conflict with—there I go again. It's on my nerves, I tell you, on my nerves. If this keeps up I'll burn it."

It was a bit foreboding. Already I could feel the tugging at my heart that had done for Watson. This man had watched my friend slipping into the shadow; I had come to take his place.

"Watson has gone," I said simply; "that's why I am here."

He straightened up.

"You know him then. He has not—"

"He went last night; he has left the country. He was in very poor health. That's why I am here. I know very well the cloud that hangs over the property; it is my sole reason for purchasing."

"You don't believe in this nonsense?"

I smiled. Certainly the man was perverse in his agnosticism; he was stubborn in disbelief. It was on his nerves; on his conscience; he was afraid.

"I believe nothing," I answered; "neither do I disbelieve. I know all the story that has been told or written. I am a friend of Watson. You need not scruple in making me out a bill of sale. It's my own funeral. I abide by the consequences."

He gave a sigh of relief. After all, he was human. He had honor; but it was after the brand of Pontius Pilate. He wished nothing on his conscience.

Armed with the keys and the legal title, I took possession. In the daylight it was much as it had been the night before. Once across its threshold, one was in dank and furtive suppression; the air was heavy; a mold of age had streaked the walls and gloomed the shadows. I put up all the curtains to let in the rush of sunlight, likewise I opened the windows. If there is anything to beat down sin, it is the open measure of broad daylight.

The house was well situated; from the front windows one could look down along the street and out at the blue bay beyond the city. The fog had lifted and the sun was shining upon the water. I could make out the ferryboats, the islands, and the long piers that lead to Oakland, and still farther

beyond the hills of Berkeley. It was a long time since those days in college. Under the shadow of those hills I had first met the old doctor. I was a boy then; I was a man now.

I could not but think of that day in Ethics 2b. I had doubted then, and had been a bit of a skeptic. With the clutch at my heart-strings I could now sense the truth that had weighted the wisdom of Dr. Holcomb. It was foreboding; there is not a thing on earth as terrible as loneliness and isolation. I turned into the building. Even the sound of my footsteps were foreign; the whole place was pregnant with stillness and shadow; life was gone out. It was fearful; I felt the terror clutching upon me, a grimness that may not be spoken; there was something breaking within me. I had pledged myself for a year. Frankly I was afraid.

But I had given my word. I returned to my apartments and began that very day the closing out of my practise. In a fortnight I had completed everything and had moved my belongings to the room of Chick Watson.

CHAPTER XIII.

ALBERT JEROME.

JUST as soon as possible I hurried over to Berkeley. I went straight to the bungalow on Dwight Way; I inquired for Miss Holcomb. She was a young woman, now in her twenties, decidedly pretty, a blonde, and of the intelligent bearing that one would expect in the daughter of the professor.

Coming on such an errand, I was at a loss just how to approach her. I noted the little lines about the corners of her eyes, the sad droop of her pretty mouth. Plainly she was worried. As I was removing my hat she caught sight of the ring upon my finger.

"Oh," she said; "then you come from Mr. Watson. How is Chick?"

"I did not say, Miss Holcomb. Why do you think? But it is so. Mr. Watson"—I did not like lying, but I could not but feel for her; she had already lost a father—"Mr. Watson has gone on a trip upcountry—with Jerome. He was not feeling well. He has left this ring with me. I have come for a bit of information."

She bit her lips; her mouth quivered.

"Could you not get this from Mr. Watson? He knows about the stone. Did he not tell you? How came it into your possession? What has happened?"

Her voice was querulous and suspicious. I had endeavored to deceive her for her own sake; she had suffered enough already. I could not but wince at the pain in her beautiful blue eyes. She stood upon her feet.

"Please, Mr. Wendel; do not be clumsy. Do not regard me as a mere baby. Tell me what has happened to Chick. Please—"

She stopped in a flow of emotion. Tears came to her eyes; but she held control. She sat down.

"Tell me all, Mr. Wendel. It is what I expected." She blinked to hold back her tears. "It is my fault. You would not have the ring had nothing happened. Tell me. I shall be brave."

And brave she was—splendid. With the tug at my own heart I could understand her. What an uncertainty and dread she must have been under! I had been in it but a few days; already I could feel the weight. At no time could I surmount the isolation; there was something going from me minute by minute. With the girl there could be no evasion; it were better that she have the truth. I made a clean breast of the whole affair.

"And he told you no more about the ring?"

"That is all," I answered. "He would have told us much more, undoubtedly, had he not—"

She gulped back her sorrow; she was under a brave control.

"You saw him go—you saw this thing?"

"That is just it, Miss Holcomb. We saw nothing. One minute we were looking at Chick, and the next at nothing. Hobart understood it better than I. At least he forbade my crossing the room. There is a danger point, a spot that may not be crossed. He threw me back. It was then that the Rhamda came upon the scene."

She frowned slightly.

"This Rhamda. He is the great man papa was to have for luncheon. I am afraid; sometimes I fear that papa was the victim of plain villainy. But I would not say so. Most of the time I think that he made a great discovery; this Rhamda, he holds the secret; perhaps for our own good. Somehow I am afraid of the occult. Do you blame the Rhamda?"

"To a certain extent," I answered. "He is certainly a prime factor; whether his presence that night had aught to do with the miracle or was just accidental, I cannot say. But I do know that both he and the Nervina are concerned over this ring."

She arched her eyebrows.

"Tell me about the Nervina. When Chick spoke of her I could always feel jealous. Is she beautiful?"

"Most beautiful, the most wonderful girl I have ever seen, though I would hardly class her as one to be jealous of. She is above that. She is vital and super-beauty; but she is not evil. If I would take her at her word, she is the maiden of the moonbeams; but I am not sure that I was not dreaming. Above all she wants the ring. I have promised Watson, and of course I shall keep it. But I would like its history."

"I think I can give you some information there," she answered. "The ring, or rather the jewel, was given to papa about twenty years ago by a Mr. Kennedy. He had been a scholar of papa's back in Chillicothe, Ohio, when papa taught district school. He came here often in those days to talk over old times. Papa had it set in a ring; but he never wore it."

"Why?"

"I do not know."

"How did Watson come to link it up with the Blind Spot?"

"That, I think, was an accident. He was in college, you know, at the time of father's disappearance. In fact, he was in Ethics 2b. I was attending high school. Our love was just in its inception. He came here often, and during one of his visits I showed him this ring. That was several years ago."

"I see."

"Well, about a year ago he was here again, and asked to see the jewel. We were to be married, you understand; but I had always put it off because of father. Somehow I felt that he would return. It was in the late summer, about September; it was in the evening; it was just getting dark. I gave Chick the ring, and stepped into the garden to cut some flowers. I know it was in the evening because I had such a difficulty in selecting the blossoms. I remember that Chick struck a match in the parlor. When I came back he seemed to be excited."

"Did he ask you for the ring?"

"Yes. He wanted to wear it. And he suddenly began to talk of papa. It was that night that he took it upon himself to find him."

"I see. Not before that night? Did he take the ring then?"

"Yes. We went to the opera. I remember it well, because that night was the first time I ever knew Chick to be gloomy."

"Ah!"

"Yes. You know how jolly he always was. When we returned that night he would scarcely say a word. I thought he was sick; but he said he was not; said he just felt that way."

"I understand. And he kept getting glummer? Did you suspect the jewel? Did he ever tell you anything?"

She shook her head.

"No. He told me nothing, except that he would find papa. Of course, I became excited and wanted to know. But he insisted that I could not help; that he had a clue, and that it might take time. From that night I saw very little of him. He leased the house on Chatterton Place. He seemed to lose interest in myself; when he did come over he would act queerly. He talked incoherently, and would often make rambling mention of a beautiful girl called Nervina. You say it is the ring? Tell me, Mr. Wendel, what is it? Has it really anything to do with papa?"

I nodded.

"I think it has, Miss Holcomb. And I can understand poor Chick. He is a very brave man. It is a strange jewel and of

terrible potence; that much I know. It devitalizes; it destroys. I can feel it already. It covers life with the fog of decay. The same solitude has come upon myself. Nevertheless I am certain it has much to do with the Blind Spot. It is a key of some sort. The very interest of the Rhamda and the Nervina tell us that. I think it was through this stone that your father made his discovery."

She thought a moment.

"Had you not better return it? It is really terrible, Mr. Wendel. You are a strong young man. While you still have health? If you keep it, it will only be one more."

"You forget, Miss Holcomb, my promise to Chick. I loved your father, and I loved Watson. It is a great secret, and, if the professor is right, what man has sought through the ages. I would be a coward to forego my duty. If I fail I have another to take my place."

"Oh," she said, "it is horrible. First papa; then Chick; now it is you; and afterward it will be Mr. Fenton."

"It is our duty," I returned. "One by one. Though we fail, each one of us may pass a bit more on to his successor. In the end we win. It is the way of man."

I had my way. She turned over all the data and notes that had been left by the professor; but I have never found a thing in them that could be construed to an advantage. My real quest was to trace down the jewel. The man Kennedy's full name I learned was Wudge Kennedy. He had lived in Oakland. It was late in the afternoon when I parted with Miss Holcomb and started for the city.

I remember it well because of a little incident that occurred immediately after our parting. I was just going down the steps when I looked up one of the side streets. It was flanked by fraternity houses. A few students were loitering here and there. But there was one who was not a student. I recognized him instantly, and I wondered. It was the Rhamda. This was enough to make me suspicious. But there was one thing more. Farther up the street was another figure.

When I came down the steps the Rhamda moved, and his move was somehow duplicated by the other. In itself this was enough to clear up some of my doubts concerning the fantom. His actions were too simple for an apparition. Only a man could act like that, and a crude one. I did not know then the nerve of the Rhamda. There was no doubt that I was being shadowed.

To make certain, I took the by-streets and meandered by a devious route to the station. There was no question; one and two they followed. I knew the Rhamda; but who was the other?

At the station we purchased tickets, and when the train pulled in I boarded the smoker. The other two took another coach —the stranger was a thick-set individual with a stubby, gray mustache. On the boat I did not see them; but at the ferry building I made a test to see that I was followed. I hailed a taxi and gave specific instructions to the chauffeur.

"Drive slowly," I told him. "I think we shall be followed."

And I was right; in a few minutes there were two cars dogging our wheel-tracks. I had no doubt concerning the Rhamda; but I could not understand the other. At No. 288 Chatterton we stopped, and I alighted. The Rhamda's car passed, then the other. Neither stopped. Both disappeared about the corner. I took the numbers; then I went into the house. In about a half an hour a car drew up at the curb. I stepped to the window. It was the car that had tracked the Rhamda's. The stubby individual stepped out; without ceremony he ran up the steps and opened the door. It was a bit disconcerting, I think, for both. He was plain and blunt—and honest.

"Well," he said, "where's Watson? Who are you? What do you want?"

"That," I answered, "is a question for both of us. Who are you, and what do you want? Where is Watson?"

Just then his eyes dropped and his glance fell on the ring. His jaw fell and his eyes widened.

"My name is Jerome," he said simply. "Has something happened to Watson? Who are you?"

We were standing in the library; I made

an indication toward the other room. "In there," I said. "My name is Wendel."

He took off his hat and ran the back of his hand across his forehead.

"So that pair got him too! I was afraid of them all the while. And I had to be away. Do you know how they did it? What's the working of their game? It's almighty devilish and certainly clever. They played that boy for a year; they knew they would get him in the end. So did I. He was a fine lad, a fine lad. I knew this morning when I came down from Nevada that they had him. Found your duds. A stranger. House looked queer. But I had hopes that he might have gone over to see his girl. Just thought I'd wander over to Berkeley. Found that bird Rhamda under a palm tree watching the Holcomb bungalow. It was the first time I'd seen him since that day that things went amiss with the professor. In about ten minutes you came out. I stayed with him while he tracked you back here; I followed him back down-town and lost him. Tell me about Watson."

He sat down; during my recital he spoke not a word. He consumed one cigar after another; when I stopped for a moment he merely nodded his head and waited until I continued. He was sturdy and frank, of an iron way and vast common sense. I liked him. When I had finished he remained silent; his grief was of a solid kind; he had liked poor Watson.

"I see," he said. "It is as I thought. He told you more than he ever told me."

"He never told you?"

"Not much. He was a strange lad—about the loneliest one I have ever seen. There was something about him from the very first that was not natural; I could not make him out. You say it is the ring. He always wore it. I laid it to this Rhamda. He was ever meeting him. I could never understand it. Try as I would, I could not get a trace of the fantom."

"The fantom?"

"Most assuredly. Would you call him human?" His gray eyes were flecked with light. "Come, now, Mr. Wendel, would you?"

"Well," I answered, "I don't know. Not after what I have seen. But for all that, I have had proof of his sinews. I am inclined to blend the two. There is a law somewhere, a very natural one. The Blind Spot is undoubtedly a combination of phenomena; it has a control. We do not know what it is, nor where it leads to; neither do we know the motive of the Rhamda. Who is he? If we knew that, we would know everything."

"And this ring?"

"I shall wear it."

"Then God help you. I watched Watson. It's plain poison. You have a year; but you had better count on six months. We must look up this Wudge Kennedy. He gave the jewel to the professor. But the doctor did not wear it. Not so you could notice. You had better count on half a year; the first six months are not so bad; but the last—it takes a man! Wendel, it takes a man! Already you are eating your heart out. Oh, I know—you have opened the windows; you want sunshine and air. In six months I shall have to fight to get one open. It gets into the soul; it is stagnation; you die by inches. Better give me the ring."

"This Wudge Kennedy," I evaded, "we must find him. We have time. One clue may lead us on. Tell me what you know of the Blind Spot."

"Very easy," he answered; "you have it all. I have been here a number of years. You will remember I fell into the case through intuition. I have never had any definite proof, outside the professor's disappearance, the old lady, and that bell; unless perhaps it is the Rhamda. But from the beginning I have been positive. Taking that lecture in ethics as a starter, I built up my theory. There is a Blind Spot. We have that from the professor. All the clues lead to this building. It is something that I cannot understand. It is out of the occult. It is a bit too much for me. I moved into the place, and waited. I have never forgotten that bell, nor the old lady. You and Fenton are the only ones who have seen the Blind Spot."

I had a sudden thought.

"The Rhamda! I have read that he has the manner of inherent goodness. Is it

true? You have conversed with him. I have not had the pleasure."

"He has. He did not strike me as a villain. He is intrinsic, noble, out of self. I have often wondered."

I smiled. "Perhaps we are thinking the same thing. Is this it? The Blind Spot is a secret that man may not attain to. It is unknowable and akin to death. The Rhamda knows it. He could not head off the professor. It is something that must be held from mankind. He simply employed Dr. Holcomb's wisdom to trap him; now that he has him secure, he intends to hold him. It is for our own good."

"Exactly. Yet—"

"Yet?"

"He was very anxious to put you and Fenton into this very Spot."

"That is so. But may it not be that we, too, knew a bit to much?"

He could not answer that.

Nevertheless, we were both of us convinced concerning the Rhamda. It was merely a digression of thought, a conjecture. He might be good; but we were both positive of his villainy. It was his motive, of course, that weighed up his character; could we find that, we would uncover everything.

CHAPTER XIV.

A NEW ELEMENT.

WUDGE KENNEDY was not so easily found. There were many Kennedys. About two-thirds of Ireland had apparently migrated to San Francisco under that name and had lodged in the directory. Of course Wudge was an uncommon name. We went through the lists on both sides of the bay, but found nothing; the old directories had mostly been destroyed by fire or had been thrown away as worthless; but at last we unearthed one. In it we found the name of Wudge Kennedy. He had two sons—Patrick and Henry. One of these, Hank, we ran down in the Mission. He was a great, red-headed, broad-shouldered Irishman. He was just eating supper when we called; there were splotches of white plaster on his trousers and white rims about the edge of his nails.

I came right to the point: "Do you know anything about this?" I held out the ring.

He took it in his fingers; his eyes popped. "What, that! Well, guess I do! Where'd you get it?" He called out to the kitchen: "Say, Mollie, come here. Here's the old man's jool!" He looked at me a bit fearfully. "You are not wearing it, are you, man?"

"Why not?" I asked.

"Why? Well, I don't know exactly. I wouldn't wear it for a million dollars. It ain't a jool; it's a piece of the divil. The old man gave it to Dr. Holcomb—or sold it, I don't know which. He carried it in his pocket once, and he came near dying."

"Unlucky?" I asked.

"No, it ain't unlucky; it just rips your heart out. It would make you hate your grandmother. Lonesome! Lonesome! I've often heard the old man talking."

"He sold it to Dr. Holcomb? Do you know why?"

"Well, yes. 'Twas that the old doc had some scientific work. Dad told him about his jool. One day he took it over to Berkeley. It was some kind of thing that the professor just wanted. He kept it. Dad made him promise not to wear it."

"I see. Did your father ever tell you where he got it?"

"Oh, yes. He often spoke about that. The old man wasn't a plasterer, you know—just a laborer. He was digging a basement. I was only a kid then. It was a funny basement—a sort of a blind cellar. There was a stone wall right across the middle, and then there was a door of wood to look like stone. You can go down into the back cellar, but not into the front. If you don't know about the door, you will never find it. Dad often spoke about that. He was working in the back cellar when he found this. 'Twas sticking in some blue clay."

"Where was this place? Do you remember?"

"Sure. 'Twas up on Chatterton Place. Pat and I was kids then: we took the old man's dinner."

"Do you know the number?"

"It didn't have no number; but I know the place. 'Tis a two-story house, and was built in 'ninety-one."

I nodded. "And afterward you moved to Oakland?"

"Yes."

"Did your father ever speak of the reason for this partition?"

"He never knew of one. It was none of his business. He was merely a laborer, and did what he was paid for."

"Do you know who built it?"

"Some old guy. He was a cranky cuss with side-burns. He used to wear a stovepipe hat. I think he was a chemist. Whenever he showed up he would run us kids out of the building. I think he was a bachelor."

This was all the information that he could give, but it was a great deal. Certainly it was more than I had hoped for. The house had been built by a chemist; even in the construction there had been mystery. I had never thought of a second cellar; when I had explored the building I had taken the stone wall for granted. It was so with Jerome. It was the first definite clue that really brought us down to earth. What had this chemist to do with the phenomena? After all, back of everything was lurking the mind of man.

We hastened back to the house and into the cellar. By merely sounding along the wall we discovered the door; it was cleverly constructed and for a time defied our efforts; but Jerome cut it open by means of a jimmy and a pick. The outside was a clever piece of sham work shaped like stone and smeared over with cement. In the dim light we had missed it. We had high expectations.

But we were disappointed. The apartment contained nothing; it was smeared with cobwebs and hairy mold; but outside of a few empty bottles and the gloomy darkness there was not a thing. We tapped the walls and floor and ceiling. Beyond all doubt the place once held a secret; if it held it still, it was cleverly hidden. After an hour or two of search we returned to the upper part of the building.

Jerome was not discouraged.

"We are on the right track, Mr. Wendel; if we can only get started. I have an idea. This chemist—it was in 'ninety-one—that's more than twenty years."

"What is your idea?"

"The Rhamda. What is the first thing that strikes you? His age. With every one that sees him it is the same. First a certainty of years, then a flitting notion of youth. He is elusive. At first you take him for an old man; if you study him long enough, you are positive that he is in his twenties. May he not be this chemist?"

"What becomes of the doctor and his Blind Spot?"

"The Blind Spot," answered Jerome, "is merely a part of the chemistry."

I whistled. The thing was getting devilish.

Next day I hunted up a jeweler. I was careful to chose one with whom I was acquainted. I asked for a private consultation. When we were alone I took the ring from my finger.

"Just an opinion," I asked. "You know gems. Can you tell me anything about this one?"

He picked it up casually, and turned it over; his mouth puckered. For a minute he studied.

"That? Well, now." He held it up. "Humph. Wait a minute."

"Is it a gem?"

"I think it is. At first I thought I knew it right off; but now—wait a minute."

He reached in the drawer for his glass. He held the stone up for some minutes. His face was a study; queer little wrinkles twisting from the corners of his eyes told his wonder. He did not speak; merely turned the stone round and round. At last he removed his glass and held up the ring. He was quizzical.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"That is something I do not care to answer. I wish to know what it is. Is it a gem? If so, what kind?"

He thought a moment and shook his head.

"I had thought I knew every gem on earth. But I don't know! This is a new one. It is beautiful—just a moment." He stepped to the door. In a moment another

man stepped in. The jeweler motioned toward the ring. The man picked it up and again the examination. At last he laid the glass and the ring both upon the table.

"What do you make of it, Henry?" asked the jeweler.

"Not me," answered the second one. "Never saw one like it."

It was what Watson had said. No man had ever identified the jewel. The two men were puzzled; they were interested. The jeweler turned to me.

"Would you care to leave it with us for a bit; you have no objection to our taking it out of the ring?"

I had not thought of that. I had business down the street. I consulted my watch.

"In half an hour I shall be back. Will that time be sufficient?"

"I think so."

It was an hour before I returned. The assistant was standing at the door of the office. He spoke something to the one inside and then made an indication to myself. He seemed excited; when I came closer I noted that his face was full of wonder.

"We have been waiting," said he, "for almost an hour; we did not examine the stone; it was not necessary. It is truly wonderful." He was a short, squat man with a massive forehead. "Just step inside."

Inside the office the jeweler was sitting beside a table; he was leaning back in his chair; he had his hands clasped over his stomach. He was gazing toward the ceiling; his face was a bit of a study, full of wonder and speculation. He nodded.

"Well?" I asked.

For answer he merely elevated his finger, he pointed toward the ceiling.

"Up there," he spoke. "Your jewel or whatever it is. 'Tis a good thing we were not in the open air. 'Twould be going yet."

I looked up. Sure enough. Against the ceiling was the gem. It was a bit disconcerting; though I will confess that in the first moment I did not catch the full significance.

The jeweler closed one eye and studied first myself and then the beautiful thing against the ceiling.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

Really, I had not made anything; it was a bit of a shock; I had not grasped the full impossibility. I did not answer.

"Don't you see, Mr. Wendel? Impossible! Contrary to nature! Lighter than air. A jewel, a substance hard as a diamond, solid and lighter than air. We took it out of the ring and it popped out like a bullet. Thought I'd dropped it. Began looking on the floor. Could not find it; looked up and saw Reynolds, here, with his eyes popping out like marbles. He was looking at the ceiling."

"'There's your jewel up there,' he says, 'on the ceiling.'"

I thought a moment.

"Then it is not a gem."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Not if I am a jeweler. Who ever heard of a stone without weight? It has no gravity, that is, apparently. I doubt whether it is a substance. I don't know what it is."

It was puzzling. I would have given a good deal just then for a few words with Dr. Holcomb. The man, Kennedy, had kept it in his pocket. How had he held it prisoner? The professor had had use for it in some scientific work! No wonder! Certainly it was not a jewel. What could it be? It was a solid. It was lighter than air. Could it be a substance? If not; what was it?

"What would you advise?"

In answer he reached for the telephone. He gave a number.

"Hello. Say, is Ed there? This is Phil. Tell him to step to the phone. Hello! Say, Ed, I want you to come over on the jump. Something to show you. Too busy? No, you're not. Not for this. I'm going to teach you some chemistry. No; this is serious. What is it? I don't know. What's lighter than air? Lots of things? Oh, I know. But what solid? That's why I'm asking. Come over. All right. At once."

He hung up the receiver.

"My brother," he spoke. "It has passed beyond my province and into his. He is a chemist. As an expert he may give you a real opinion."

Surely we needed one. It was against reason. It had taken me completely off my feet. I took a chair and joined the

others in the contemplation of that blue dot upon the ceiling. We could speculate and conjecture; but there was not one of us deep enough to even start a theory. Plainly it was what should not be. We had been taught physics and science; we had been drilled to fundamentals. This went back of our beginnings. If this thing could be, then the foundations upon which we stood were shattered. But one little law! Back in my mind was buzzing the enigma of the Blind Spot. They were woven together. Some law that had eluded the ken of mankind.

The chemist was a tall man with a hook nose and black eyes that clinched like rivets. He was a bit impatient. He looked at his brother.

"Well, Phil, what is it?" He pulled a watch. "I haven't much time. Have you something serious?"

There was a contrast between them. The jeweler was fat and complacent. He merely sat in his chair, his hand on his waistband, and a stubby finger elevated toward the jewel. He seemed to enjoy it.

"You're a chemist, Ed. Here's a test for your wisdom. Can you explain that? No, over here. Above your head. That jewel?"

The other looked up.

"What's the idea? New notion for decoration? Or"—a bit testily—"is this a joke?" He was a serious man; his black eyes and the nose spoke his character—work and no play.

The jeweler laughed gently.

"Listen, Ed—" Then he went into explanation; when he was through the chemist was twitching with excitement.

"Get me a ladder. Here, let me get upon the table; perhaps I can reach it. Sounds impossible, but if it's so, it's so; it must have an explanation."

Without ado and in spite of the protests of his brother he stepped upon the polished surface of the table. He was a tall man; he could just barely reach it with the tip of his finger. He could move it; but each time it clung as to a magnet. After a minute of effort he gave it up. When he looked down he was a different man; his black eyes glowed with wonder.

"Can't make it," he said. "Get a step-ladder. Strange!"

With the ladder it was easy. He plucked it off the ceiling. We pressed about the table. The chemist turned it about with his fingers.

"I wonder," he was saying. "It's a gem. Apparently. You say it has no gravity. It can't be. Whope!" He had let it slip out of his fingers. Again it popped on its way to the ceiling. He caught it with a deft movement of his hand. "The devil! Did you ever see! And a solid! Who owns this?"

That brought it back to me. I explained what I could of the manner of my possession.

"I see. It is very interesting. Something I have never seen—and—frankly—something strictly against what I've been taught. Nevertheless, it is not impossible. We are witnesses at least. There are many things that we do not know. Would you care if I take this over to the laboratory?"

It was a new complication. If it were not a jewel there was a chance of its being damaged. I was as anxious as he; but I had been warned as to its possession.

"I shall not harm it. I shall see to that. I have suspicions and I'd like to verify them. A chemist does not blunder across such a thing every day. I am a chemist." His eyes glistened.

"Your suspicions?" I asked.

"A new element."

This gem. A new element? Perhaps that would explain the Blind Spot. It was not exactly of earth. Everything confirmed it.

"You—a new element? How do you account for it? It defies your laws. Most of your elements are evolved through tedious process. This is picked up by chance."

"That is so. But there are still a thousand ways. A meteor, perhaps; a bit of cosmic dust, there are many shattered comets. Our chemistry is earthly. There are undoubtedly new elements that we do not know of. Perhaps in enormous proportion."

I let him have it. It was the only night I have ever been away from the ring. I may say that it is the only time I have ever been free from its isolation.

When I called at his office next day I

found that he had merely confirmed his suspicions. It defied analysis; there was no reaction. Under all tests it was a stranger. The whole science that had been built up to explain everything had here explained nothing. However, there was one thing that he had uncovered—heat. Perhaps I should say magnetism. It was cold to man. I have spoken about the icy blue of its color. It was cold even to look at. The chemist placed it in my hand.

"Is it not so?"

It was. The minute it touched my palm I could sense the weird horror of the isolation: the stone was cold, like a piece of ice. It was the first time I had ever had it in direct contact with the flesh. Set in the ring its impulse had always been secondary.

"You notice it? It is so with me. Now then. Just a minute."

He pressed a button. A young lady answered his ring; she glanced first at myself and then at the chemist.

"Miss Mills, this is Mr. Wendel. He is the owner of the gem. Would you take it in your hand? Tell Mr. Wendel—"

She laughed; she was a bit perplexed.

"I do not understand"—she turned to me—"we had the same dispute yesterday. See, Mr. White says that it is cold; but it is not. It is warm—almost burning. All the girls think as I do."

"And all the men as I do," averred the chemist, "even Mr. Wendel."

"Is it cold to you?" she asked. "Really—"

It was a turn I had not looked for. It was akin to life—this relation to sex. Could it account for the strange isolation and the weariness? I was a witness to its potence. Watson! I could feel myself dragging under. I had just one question:

"Tell me, Miss Mills. Can you sense anything else: I mean beyond its temperature?"

She smiled a bit. "I don't know what you mean—exactly. It is a beautiful stone. I would like to have it."

"You think its possession would make you happy?"

Her eyes sparkled. "Oh," she exclaimed, "I know it would! I can feel it!"

It was so. Whatever there was in the bit of sapphirine blue, it had life. What was it? It had relation to sex. In the strict line of fact it was impossible. When we were alone I turned to the chemist.

"Is there anything more that you uncovered? Did you see anything—in the stone?"

He frowned. "No. Nothing else. This magnetism is the only thing. Is there anything more?"

Now I had not said anything about its one great quality. He had not stumbled across the image of the two men. I could not understand it. I did not tell him. Perhaps I was wrong. Down inside of me I sensed a subtle reason for secrecy. It is a bit hard to explain. It was not perverseness; it was a finer distinction; perhaps it was the influence of the gem. I took it back to the jeweler and had it reset.

CHAPTER XV.

AGAIN THE NERVINA.

IT was at this point that I began taking notes. There is something psychological to the Blind Spot, weird and touching on to the spirit. I know not what it is; but I can feel it. It impinges on to life. I can sense the ecstasy of horror. I am not afraid. Whatever it is that is dragging me down, it is not evil. My sensations are not normal.

For the benefit of my successor, if there is to be one, I have made an elaborate detail of notes and comments. After all, the whole thing, when brought down to the end, must fall to the function of science. When Hobart arrives, whatever my fate, he will find a complete and comprehensive record of my sensations. I shall keep it up to the end. Such notes being dry and sometimes confusing I have purposely omitted them from this narrative. But there are some things that must be given to the world. I shall pick out the salient parts and give them chronologically.

Jerome stayed with me. Rather I should say he spent the nights with me. Most of the time he was on the elusive trail of the Rhamda. From the minute of our conver-

sation with Kennedy he held to one conviction. He was positive of that chemist back in the nineties. He was certain of the Rhamda. Whatever the weirdness of his theory it would certainly bear investigation. To myself it is too much of Ponce de Leon. Perhaps I might say—of the devil. But Jerome stayed with it. When he was not on the trail over the city he was at work in the cellar. Here we worked together.

We dug up the concrete floor and did a bit of mining. I was interested in the formation.

From the words of Wudge Kennedy the bit of jewel had been discovered at the original excavation. We found the blue clay that he spoke of, but nothing else. Jerome dissected every bit of earth carefully. We have spent many hours in that cellar.

But most of the time I was alone. When not too worn with the loneliness and weariness I worked at my notes. It has been a hard task from the beginning. Inertia, lack of energy! How much of our life is impulse! What is the secret that backs volition? It has been will—will-power from the beginning. I must thank my ancestors. Without the strength and character built up through the generations, I would have succumbed utterly.

Even as it is I sometimes think I am wrong in following the dictate of Watson. If I was only sure. I have pledged my word and my honor. What did he know? I need all the reserve of character to hold up against the Nervina. From the beginning she has been my opponent. What is her interest in the Blind Spot, and myself? Who is she? I cannot think of her as evil. She is too beautiful, too tender; her concern is so real. Sometimes I think of her as my protector, that it is she, and she alone, that holds back the power that would engulf me. Once she made a personal appeal.

Jerome had gone. I was alone. I had dragged myself to the desk and my notes and data. It was along toward spring and in the first shadows of the early evening. I had turned on the lights. It was the first labor I had done for several days. I had a great deal of work before me. I had begun some time before to take down my temperature. I was careful of everything now, as much as I could be under the depression. So far I had discerned nothing that could be classed as pathologic.

There is something subtle about the Nervina. She is much like the Rhamda. Perhaps they are the same. I heard no sound. I have no notion of a door nor entrance. Watson had said of the Rhamda, "Sometimes you see him, sometimes you don't." It is so with the Nervina. I only remember my working at the data and the sudden movement of a hand upon my desk—a girl's hand. I was a bit bewildering. I looked up.

I had not seen her since that night. It was now eight months—did I not know, I would record them as years. Her expression was a bit more sad—and beautiful. The same wonderful glow of her eyes, night-black, and tender; the softness that comes from passion, and love, and virtue, the same wistful droop of the perfect mouth. What a wondrous mass of hair she had! From the first I had been struck with her beauty—the lines of her face and figure—the longing that could not be suppressed—something elusive and ethereal. I dropped my pen. She took my hand. I could sense the thrill of contact; cool and magnetic.

"Harry!"

She said no more; I did not answer; I was too taken by surprise and wonder. She was so far above all women; there was such a tenderness in her eyes and such a pity. She was as the Rhamda; she was different. I could feel her concern as a mother's. What was her interest in myself. The contact of her hand sent a strange pulse through my vitals; she was so beautiful. Could it be? Watson had said he loved her. Could I blame him?

"Harry," she asked, "how long is it to continue?"

So that was it! Merely an envoy to accept surrender. I was worn utterly, weary of the world, lonely. But I had not given up. I had strength still, and will enough to hold out to the end. Perhaps I was wrong. If I gave her the ring—what then?

"I am afraid," I answered, "that it must go on. I have given my word. It has been much harder than I thought for. This

jewel? What has it to do with the Blind Spot?"

"It controls it."

"Does the Rhamda desire it?"

"He does."

"Why does he not call for it personally? Why does he not make a clean breast of it? It would be much easier. He knows and you know that I am after Dr. Holcomb and Watson. I might even forego the secret. Would he release the doctor?"

"No, Harry, he would not."

"I see. If I gave up the ring it would be merely for my personal safety. I am a coward—"

"Oh," she said, "do not say that. You must give the ring to me—not to the Rhamda. He must not control the Blind Spot."

"What is the Blind Spot? Tell me."

"Harry," she spoke, "I cannot. It is not for you nor any other mortal. It is a secret that should never have been uncovered. It might be the end. In the hands of the Rhamda it would certainly be the end of mankind."

"Who is the Rhamda? Who are you? You are too beautiful to be merely woman. Are you spirits?"

She pressed my hand ever so slightly. "Do I feel like a spirit? I am material as much as you are. We live, see—everything."

"But you are not of this world?"

Her eyes grew a bit sadder; a soft longing.

"Not exactly. Harry, not exactly. It is a long story and a very strange one. I may not tell you. It is for your own good. I am your friend"—her eyes were moist—"I—don't you see?—boy—I would save you!"

I did not doubt it. Somehow she was like a girl of dreams, pure like an angel; her wistfulness only deepened her beauty. It came like a shock at the moment. I could love this woman. She was—what was I thinking? My guilty mind ran back to Charlotte. I had loved her since boyhood. I would be a coward—then a wild fear. Perhaps of jealousy.

"The Rhamda? Is he your husband? You are the same—"

"Oh," she answered, "why do you say it?" Her eyes snapped and she grew rigid. "The Rhamda! My husband! If you only knew. I hate him! We are enemies. It was he who opened the Blind Spot. I am here because he is evil. To watch him. I love your world, I love it all. I would save it. I love—"

She dropped her head. Whatever she was she was not above sobbing. What was the history of this beautiful girl? Who was she?

I touched her hair; it was of the softest texture I had ever seen; the luster was like all the shades of night woven into silk. She loved, loved; I could love—I was on the point of surrender.

"Tell me," I asked, "just one thing more. If I give you this ring would you save the doctor and Chick Watson?"

She raised her head; her eyes glistened; but she did not answer.

"Would you?"

She shook her head. "I cannot," she answered. "That cannot be. I can only save you for—for—Charlotte."

Was it vanity in myself? I do not know. It seemed to me that it was hard for her to say it. Frankly, I loved her. I knew it. I loved Charlotte. I loved them both. But I held to my purpose.

"Are the professor and Watson living?"

"They are."

"Are they conscious?"

She nodded. "Harry," she said, "I can tell you that. They are living and conscious. You have seen them. They have only one enemy—the Rhamda. But they must never come out of the Blind Spot. I am their friend and yours."

A sudden courage came upon me. I remembered my word to Watson. I had loved the old professor. I would save them. If necessary I would follow to the end. Either myself or Fenton. One of us would solve it!

"I shall keep the ring," I said. "I shall avenge them. Somehow, somewhere, I feel that I shall do it. Even if I must follow—"

She straightened at that. Her eyes were a bit frightened.

"Oh," she said, "why do you say it?

It must not be! You would perish! You shall not do it! I must save you. You must not go alone. Three—it may not be. If you go, I go with you. Pardon my excitement; but I know. Perhaps—oh, Harry!"

She dropped her head again; her body shook with her sobbing; plainly she was a girl. No real man is ever himself in the presence of a woman's tears. I was again on the point of surrender. Suddenly she looked up.

"Harry," she spoke sadly, "I have just one thing to ask. You must see Charlotte. You must forget myself; we can never—you love Charlotte. I have seen her; she is a beautiful girl. You have not written. She is worried. Remember your love that has grown out of childhood. It is beautiful and holy. I wish to save you. Remember what you mean to her happiness. Will you go?"

That I could promise.

"Yes, I shall see Charlotte."

"Thanks."

She rose from her chair. I held her hand. Again, as in the restaurant, I lifted it to my lips. She flushed and drew it away. She bit her lip. Her beauty was a kind I could not understand.

"You must see Charlotte," she said, "and you must do as she says."

With that she was gone. There was a car waiting; the last I saw was its winking tail-light dimming into the darkness.

What did this girl mean to me?

CHAPTER XVI.

CHARLOTTE.

LEFT alone I began thinking of Charlotte. I loved her; of that I was certain. I could not compare her with the Nervina. She was like myself, human, possible. I had known her since boyhood. The other was out of the ether; my love for her was something different; she was of dreams and the moonbeams; there was a film about her beauty, illusion; she was of spirit.

I wrote a note to the detective and left it upon my desk. After that I packed a suit-case and hurried to the depot. If I was going I would do it at once. I could not trust myself too far. This visit had been like a breath of air; for a moment I was away from the isolation. The loneliness and the weariness! How I dreaded it! I was only free from it for a few moments. On the train it came back upon me and in a manner that was startling.

I had purchased my ticket. When the conductor came through he passed me. He gathered tickets all about me; but he did not notice myself. At first I paid no attention; but when he had gone through the car several times I held up my ticket. He did not stop. It was not until I had touched him that he gave me a bit of attention.

"Where have you been sitting?" he asked.

I pointed to the seat. He frowned slightly.

"There?" he asked. "Why? Did you say you were sitting in that seat? Where did you get on?"

"At Townsend."

"Queer," he answered; he punched the ticket and stuck a stub in my hat-band. "Queer. I passed that seat several times. It was empty!"

Empty! It was almost a shock. Could it be that my isolation was becoming physical as well as mental. What was this gulf that was widening between myself and my fellows?

It was the beginning of another phase. I have noticed it many times; on the street, in public places; everywhere. I thread in and out among men. Sometimes they see me, sometimes they don't. It is strange. The oppression of the thing is terrifying—the isolation; I feel at times as though I were slowly vanishing out of the world!

It was late when I reached my old home; but the lights were still burning. My favorite dog, Queen, was on the veranda. As I came up the steps she growled slightly, but upon recognition went into a series of circles about the porch. My father opened the door. I stepped inside. He touched me on the shoulder, his jaw dropped.

"Harry!" he exclaimed.

"Was it as bad as that? How much meaning may be placed in a single intona-

tion. I was weary to the point of exhaustion. The ride upon the train had been too much. I was not sick. Yet I knew what must be my appearance.

My mother came in. For some moments I was busy protesting my health. But it was useless; it was not until I had partaken of a few of the old nostrums that I could placate her.

"Work, work, work, my boy," said my father, "nothing but work. It will not do. You are a shadow. You must take a vacation. Go to the mountains; forget your practise for a short time. You must keep your health."

I did not tell them. Why should I? I promised vaguely that I would not labor so hard. I decided right then that it was my own battle. It was enough for me without casting the worry upon others. Yet I could not see Charlotte without calling on my parents.

As soon as possible I crossed the street to the Fentons. Some one had seen me in town. Charlotte was waiting. She was the same beautiful girl I had known so long; the blue eyes, the blond, wavy mass of hair, the laughing mouth and the gladness. But she was not glad now. It was almost a repetition of what had happened at home, only here a bit more personal. She clung to me almost in terror. I did not realize that I had gone down so much. I knew my weariness; but I had not thought my appearance so dejected. I remembered Watson. He had been wan, pale, forlorn. After what brief explanation I could I proposed a stroll in the moonlight.

It was a full moon; a wonderful night; we walked down the avenue under the elm-trees. Charlotte was beautiful, and worried; she clung to my arm with the eagerness of possession. I could not but compare her with the Nervina. There was a contrast; Charlotte was fresh, tender, clinging, the maiden of my boyhood; I had known her all my life; there was no doubt of our love.

Who was the other? She was something higher, out of mystery, out of life—almost—out of the moonbeams. I stopped and looked up. The great full orb was shining. I did not know that I spoke.

"Harry," asked Charlotte, "who is the Nervina?"

Had I spoken?

"What do you know about the Nervina?" I asked.

"She has been to see me. She told me. She said you would be here to-night. I was waiting. She is very beautiful. I never saw any one like her. She is wonderful!"

"What did she say?"

"She! Oh, Harry. Tell me. I have waited. Something has happened. Tell me. You have told me nothing. You are not like the old Harry."

"Tell me about the Nervina. What did she say? Come, Charlotte, tell me everything. Am I so much different from the old Harry?"

She clutched my arm fearfully; she looked into my eyes.

"Oh," she said, "how can you say it? You haven't laughed once. You are melancholy; you are pale, drawn, haggard. You keep muttering. You are not the old Harry. Is it this Miss Nervina? She was so interested. At first I thought she loved you; but she does not. She wanted to know all about you, about our love. She was so interested. What is this danger?"

I did not answer.

"You must tell me. This ring? She said that you must give it to me. What is it?"

"Did she ask that? She told you to take the ring? My dear," I asked, "if it were the ring and it were so sinister would I be a man to give it to my loved one?"

"It would not hurt me?"

But I would not. Something warned me. It was anything to get it out of my possession. The whole thing was haunting, weird, ghostly. Always I could hear Watson. I had a small quota of courage and will-power. I clung to my purpose.

It was a sad three hours. Poor Charlotte! I shall never forget it. It is the hardest task on earth to deny one's loved one. She had grown into my heart and into its possession. She clung to me tenderly, tearfully. I could not tell her. Her feminine instinct sensed disaster. In spite of her tears I insisted. It had been my last word to Watson. Come what may I would

stay with duty. When I kissed her good night she did not speak. But she looked up at me through her tears. It was the hardest thing of all.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SHEPHERD.

WHEN I returned to the city next morning I took my dog. It was a strange whim; but one which was to lead to a remarkable development. I have ever been a lover of dogs. I was lonely. There is a bond between a dog and his master. It goes beyond definition: it it roots down into nature. I was to learn much.

She was an Australian shepherd. She had been presented to me by a rugby player from New Zealand. The Australian dog is about at the head of dogdom, the result of countless generations of elimination. When man chooses for utility he is inexorable in selection. She was of a tawny black and bob-tailed from birth.

What is the power that lies behind instinct? How far does it go? I had a notion that the dog would be outside the sinister clutch that was dragging me under.

Happily Jerome was fond of dogs. He was reading. When I entered with Queen tugging at the chain he looked up. The dog recognized the heart of the man; when he stooped to pet her she wound her stub tail in an effusion of affectionate acceptance. Jerome had been reading Le Bon's peculiar theory on the evolution of force. His researches after the mystery had led him into the depths of speculation; he had become quite a scholar. After our first greetings I unhooked the chain and let Queen have the freedom of the house. I related what had happened. The detective closed the book and sat down. The dog waited a bit for further petting; but missing that she began sniffing about the room. There was nothing strange about it of course. I myself paid not the slightest attention. But the detective was watching. While I was telling my story he was following every movement of the shepherd. Suddenly he held up one finger. I turned.

It was Queen. A low growl, guttural and suspicious. She was standing about a foot from the portières that separated the library from the other room—where we had lost Watson, and where Jerome had had his experience with the old lady. Tense and rigid, one fore paw held up stealthily, her stub tail erect and the hair along her back bristled. Again the low growl. I caught Jerome's eyes. It was queer.

"What is it, Queen?" I spoke.

At the sound of my voice she looked about and wagged her tail; then stepped between the curtains. Just her head. She drew back; her lips drawn from her teeth; snarling. She was rigid, alert, vitalized. Somehow it made me cold. She was a brave dog; she feared nothing. The detective stepped forward and pulled the curtains apart. The room was empty. We looked into each other's faces. What is there to instinct? What is its range? We could see nothing.

But not so the dog. Her eyes glowed. Hate, fear, terror, her whole body rigid.

"I wonder," I spoke. I stepped into the room. But I had not counted on the dog. Her intelligence was out of instinct. With a yelp she was upon me, had me by the calf of the leg and was drawing me back. She stepped in front of me; a low, guttural growl of warning. But there was nothing in that room; of that we were certain.

"Beats me," said the detective. "How does she know? Wonder if she would stop me." He stepped forward. It was merely a repetition. She caught him by the trouser-leg and drew him back. She crowded us away from the curtain. It was almost magnetic. Now we could not hear a sound. We were both positive; and we were both uncertain. From the very beginning there had been mystery in that apartment. We could see nothing, neither could we feel; was it possible that the dog could see beyond us? The detective spoke first:

"Take her out of the room. Put her in the hall; tie her up."

"What's the idea?"

"Merely this, I am going to examine that room. No, I am not afraid. I'll be almighty glad if it does catch me. Anything so long as I get results."

But it did us no good. We examined the room many times that night; both of us. In the end there was nothing, only the weirdness and the uncertainty and the magnetic undercurrent which we could feel, but could not fathom. When we called in the dog she stepped to the portières and commenced her vigil. She crouched slightly back of the curtains, alert, ready, waiting. It was a strange thing from the beginning. Her post of honor. From that moment she never left the spot except under compulsion. We could hear her at all times of the night: the low growl, the snarl, the defiance. She was restless; it was instinct; out of her nature she could sense the strange insidious pregnance.

But there was a great deal more that we were to learn from the dog. It was Jerome who first called my attention. A small fact at the beginning; but of a strange sequence. This time it was the ring. Queen had the habit that is common to most dogs; she would lap my hand to show her affection. It was nothing in itself; but for one fact—she always chose the left hand. It was the detective who first noticed it. Always and at every opportunity she would lap the jewel. We made little tests to try her. I would remove the ring from one hand to the other; then hold it behind me. She would follow.

It was a strange fact; but of course not inexplicable. A scent or the attraction of taste might account for it. However, these little tests led to a rather remarkable discovery. Were it not that I was a witness and have repeated it many times I would not relate it. What is the line between intelligence and instinct?

One night we had called the dog from her vigil. As usual she came to the jewel; by a mere chance I pressed the gem against her head. It was a mere trifle; yet it was of consequence. A few minutes before I had dropped a handkerchief on the opposite side of the room; I was just then thinking about picking it up. It was only a small thing, yet it put us on the track of the gem's strangest potence. The dog walked to the handkerchief. She brought it back in her mouth. At first I took it for a mere coincidence. I repeated the experiment with a book. The same result. I looked up at Jerome.

"What's the matter?" Then when I explained: "The dickens! Try it again."

Over and over we repeated it, using different articles, pieces of which I was certain she did not know the name. There was a strange bond between the gem and intelligence, some strange force emanating from its luster. On myself it was depressing; on the dog it was life itself. At last Jerome had an inspiration.

"Try the Rhamda," he said; "think of him. Perhaps—"

It was most surprising. Certainly it was remarkable. It was too much like intelligence; a bit too uncanny. At the instant of thought the dog leaped backward. Such a transformation; she was naturally gentle. In one instant she had gone mad. Mad? Not in the literal interpretation; but figuratively. She sprang back; snapping, her teeth bared, her hair bristled. Her nostrils drawn. With one bound she leaped between the curtains.

Jerome jumped up. With an exclamation he drew the portières. I was behind him. The dog was standing at the edge of the room. She was bristling; defiance, hate, vigilance. The room was empty. What did she see? What!

One thing was certain. Though we were sure of nothing else we were certain of the Rhamda. We could trust the canine's instinct. Every previous experiment that we had essayed had been crowned with success. We had here a fact, but no explanation. If we could only put things together and draw out the law. I thought of Fenton. If we had only his good, sound head. He was an accumulation of data; from boyhood he had had genius for coaxing the concrete out of facts and abstractions. It was not work for a lawyer nor a detective, but for a man of science. It is hard to forget the dog and that moment. She was vicious, her whole body bristled with vibrancy and defiance. It was instinct; the subtle force that goes beyond the five senses. I was positive that she could not see; but she knew. Was it the Rhamda?

It was merely a confirmation. From the first we had been certain. The beginning

had been coincident with his appearance at the ferry. I had been waiting and not without dread for him to strike. He had interfered with Watson. I recalled that night in the restaurant. Why had he not struck at myself? Was it the Nervina? A happy thought came to me at the moment. I would try the Nervina.

With a bit of persuasion we coaxed Queen back into the library. I would again test the strange potency of the gem. I spoke to Jerome.

It was as I had suspected.

Instead of madness the dog went into an effusion of delight. It is a fact almost too remarkable to relate. What was this quality that lurked in the jewel? What was the jewel? I had taken it to chemists; not a one could tell me. The Nervina—a friend. It was true. I had always half believed; but I had still doubted. Now I was sure. It was certainly an assurance for Jerome and myself. We had a bit to go on. Perhaps we could patch up the facts and weave out some sort of discovery.

It was late when we retired. I could not sleep. The restlessness of the dog held back my slumber. She would growl sullenly, then stir about for a new position; she was never quite still. I could picture her there in the library, behind the curtains, crouched, half resting, half slumbering, always watching. I would waken in the night and listen; a low guttural warning, a sullen whine—then stillness. It was the same with my companion. We could never quite understand it. Perhaps we were a bit afraid.

But one can become accustomed to most anything. It went on for many nights without anything happening, until one night.

It was a dark night, exceedingly dark, with neither moon nor starlight; one of those nights of inky intenseness. It was about one in the morning. I had been awakened about half an hour before. By the light of a match I had looked at my watch. It was twelve thirty-five. I remember that distinctly. I cannot say just exactly what woke me. The house was strangely silent and still; the air seemed stretched and laden. It was summer. Perhaps it was the heat. I only knew that I awoke suddenly and blinked in the darkness.

In the next room with the door open I could hear the heavy breathing of the detective. That was all that there was to break the stillness, a heavy feeling lay against my heart. I had grown accustomed to dread and isolation; but this was different. Perhaps it was premonition. I do not know. And yet I was terribly sleepy; I remember that. I struck a match and glanced at my watch on the bureau—twelve thirty-five. No sound—not even Queen—not even a rumble from the streets. I lay back and dropped into slumber. Just as I rifted off into sleep I had a blurring fancy of sound, guttural, whining, fearful—then suddenly drifting into incoherent rumbling fantasms—a dream. I awoke suddenly. Some one was speaking. It was Jerome.

"Harry!"

I was frightened. It was like something clutching out of the darkness. I sat up. I did not answer. It was not necessary. The incoherence of my dream had been external. The library was just below me. I could hear the dog pacing to and fro, and her snarling. Snarling? It was just that. It was something to arouse terror. She had never growled like that—it was positive, I could hear her suddenly leap back from the curtains. She barked. Never before had she come to that. Then a sudden lunge into the other room—a vicious series of snapping, barks, yelps—pandemonium—I could picture her leaping—at what! Then suddenly I leaped out of bed. The barks grew faint, faint, fainter—into the distance.

In the darkness I could not find the switch. I bumped into Jerome. Our contact in the middle of the room upset us—we were lost in our confusion. It was a moment before we could find either a match or a button to turn on the lights. But at last—I shall not forget that moment; nor Jerome. He was rigid; one arm held aloft, his eyes bulged out. The whole house was full of sound—full-toned—vibrant—magnetic. It was the bell.

I jumped for the stairway. But I was not so quick as Jerome. With three bounds we were in the library with the lights

turned on. The sound was running down to silence. We tore down the curtains and rushed into the room. It was empty!

There was not even the dog. Queen had gone! In a vain rush of grief I began calling—and whistling. It was a flooded moment. The poor, brave shepherd. She had seen it and had rushed full into its face.

It was the last night that I was to have Jerome. We sat up until daylight. For the thousandth time we went over the house in detail, but there was nothing. Only the ring. At the suggestion of the detective I touched the match to the sapphire. It was the same. The color diminishing, and the translucent corridors deepening into the distance; then the blur and the coming of shadows—the men, Watson and the professor—and my dog. Of the men, only the heads showed; but the dog was full figure; she was sitting, apparently on a pedestal, her tongue was lolling out of her mouth and her face full of that gentle intelligence which only the Australian shepherd is heir to. That is all—no more—nothing. If we had hoped to discover aught through her medium we were disappointed. Instead of clearing up, the whole thing had grown deeper.

I have said that it was the last night that I was to have Jerome. I did not know it then. Jerome went out early in the morning. I went to bed. I was not afraid in the daylight. I was certain now that the danger was localized. As long as I kept out of that one apartment I had nothing to fear. Nevertheless, the thing was magnetic. A subtle weirdness pervaded the building. I did not sleep soundly. I was lonely; the isolation was crowding in upon me. In the afternoon I dressed and stepped out on the streets.

I have spoken of my experience with the conductor. On this day I had the certainty of my isolation; it was startling. In the face of what I was and what I had seen it was almost terrifying. It was the first time I thought of sending for Hobart. I had thought I could hold out. The complete suddenness of the thing set me to thinking. I thought of Watson. It was the last phase, the feebleness, the wanness, the inertia! He had gone down through exhaustion. He had been a far stronger man than I in the beginning. I had will-power, strength of mind to hold me if it would continue.

I must cable Fenton. While I had still an ego in the presence of men, I must reach out for help. It was a strange thing and inexplicable. I was not invisible. Don't think that. I simply did not individualize. Men did not notice me—till I spoke. As if I were imperceptibly losing the essence of self. I still had some hold to the world. While it remained I must get word to Hobart. I did not delay. Straight to the office I went and paid for the cable.

> Cannot hold out much longer. Come at once. HARRY.

I was a bit ashamed. I had hoped I had counted upon myself. I had trusted in the full strength of my individuality. I had been healthy—strong—full-blooded. In the fulness of vitality one would live forever. There is no to-morrow. It was not a year ago. I was eighty. It had been so with Watson. What was this subtle thing that ate into one's marrow. I had read of banshees, lemures and leprechaunes; they were the ghosts and the fairies of ignorance; but they were not like this. It was impersonal, hidden, inexorable. It was mystery. And I believed that it was Nature.

I knew it now. Even as I write I can sense the potence of the force about me. It has overcome the great professor. It has crushed down Watson. Some law, some principle, some force that science has not uncovered. The last words of the doctor:

"I shall bring the occult into the concrete: for your senses. You shall have the proof and the substance."

What is that law that shall bridge the chaos between the mystic and the substantial? I am standing on the bridge; and I cannot see it. What is the great law that was discovered by Dr. Holcomb? Who is the Rhamda? Who is the Nervina?

Jerome has not returned. I cannot understand it. It has been a week. I am living on brandy—not much of anything else—I am waiting for Fenton. I have taken all my elaborations and notes and put them together. Perhaps I—

This is the last of the strange document left by Harry Wendel. The following memorandum is written by Charlotte Fenton.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CHARLOTTE'S STORY.

I DO not know. It is so hard to write after what has happened. I am but a girl; and I cannot think as men do; much less analyze. I do not understand.

Hobart says that is why I am to write it. It is to be a plain narrative. Besides he is very busy and cannot do it himself. It was Harry's intention and is that of Hobart that the world shall know of the Blind Spot. There must be some record. I shall do my best and hold out of my writing as much as I can of my emotion. I shall start in with the Nervina.

It was the first I knew; the first warning. Looking back I cannot but wonder. No person I think who has ever seen the Nervina can do much else; she is so beautiful! Beautiful? Why do I say it? I should be jealous and I should hate her; it is the way of woman. Yet I do not. Why is it?

It was about eight months after Hobart had left for South America. I remember those eight months as the longest of my life; because of Harry. I am a girl and I like attention; all girls do. Ordinarily he would come over every fortnight at least. After Hobart had gone he came once only. Instead of calling personally, he wrote letters. We were to be married, and of course I resented the inattention.

It seemed to me that no business could be of enough importance if he really loved me. Even his letters were few and far between. What he wrote were slow and weary and of an undertone that I could not fathom. I had all of the girl's wild fears and fancies. I—loved Harry. I could not understand it. I had a thousand fearful thoughts and jealousies; but they were feminine and in no way approximated even the beginning of the truth. Inattention was not like Harry. It was not until the coming of the Nervina that I was afraid.

Afraid? I will not say that—exactly. It was rather a suspicion, a queer undercurrent of wonder and doubt. The beauty of the girl, her interest in Harry and myself, her concern over this ring put me a bit on guard. I wondered what this ring had to do with Harry Wendel. She did not tell me in exact words or in literal explanation; but she managed to convey all too well a lurking impression of its sinister potence. It was something baleful, something the very essence of which would break down the life of the one who wore it. Harry had come into its possession by accident and she would save him. She had failed through direct appeal. Now she had come to me.

She was very beautiful, the most wonderful girl I had ever seen, and the most magnetic. If I may follow Harry's words, she was superfeminine. Certainly she was that. A bit too wistful and of spirit to make one jealous. She did not say a word of the Blind Spot. All I knew was her wonderful beauty, and the tender delicacy of her manner.

And the next day came Harry. It was really a shock. Though I had been warned by the girl I was not half afraid until I saw him. He was not Harry at all, but another. His eyes were dim and had lost their luster; when they did show light at all, it was of a kind that was a bit fearful. He was wan, worn, and gone to a shadow, as if he had gone through a long illness.

He said that he had not been sick. He maintained that he was quite well physically. I was afraid. And on his finger was this ring of which the girl had spoken. Its value must have been incalculable. Wherever he moved his hand its blue flame cut a path through the darkness. But he said nothing about it. I waited and wondered and was afraid. It was not until our walk under the elm-trees that it was mentioned.

It was a full moon, a wonderful, mellow moon of summer. He stopped suddenly and gazed up at the orb above us. It seemed to me that his mind was wandering; he held me closely—tenderly. He was not at all like Harry. There was a missing of self, of individuality; he spoke in abstractions.

"The maiden of the moonbeams?" he spoke. "What can it mean?"

And then I asked him. He has already told of our conversation. It was the ring of which the Nervina had told me. It had to do with the Blind Spot—the great secret that had taken Dr. Holcomb. It was his duty that he had sworn to another. In the ring lurked the power of disintegration. He would not give it to me. I worked hard, for even then I was not afraid of it. Something told me—I must do it to save him. It was weird, and something I could not understand—but I must do it for Harry.

I failed. Though he was broken in every visible way there was one thing as strong as ever—his honor. He had ever that. It had always been the strong part of Harry; when he had given his word there was naught could break it. He would neither lie nor quibble; he was not afraid; he had been the same in his boyhood. When we parted that night he kissed me. I shall never forget how long he looked into my eyes, nor his sadness. That is all. The next morning he left for San Francisco.

And then came the end. A message; abrupt and sudden. It was some time after and it put a period to my increasing stress and worry. It read:

> City of Peru docks to-night at eight forty-two. Meet me at the pier. Hobart coming.
>
> HARRY.

It was a short message and a bit twisted. Under ordinary circumstance he would have motored down and brought me back to greet Hobart. It was a bit strange that I should meet him at the pier. However, I had bare time to get to the city if I hurried.

I shall never forget that night.

It was dark when I reached San Francisco. I went up by the way of Oakland and Niles and took the ferry across the bay. I was a full twenty minutes early at the pier. A few people were waiting. I looked about for Harry. He was to meet me and I was certain that I would find him. But he was not there. Of course there was still time. He was sure to be on hand to greet Hobart.

Nevertheless, I had a vague mistrust. Since that strange visit I had not been sure. Harry was not well. There was something to this mystery that he had not told me. I am a girl, of course, and it was possible that I could not understand it. Yet I would that I knew. Why had he asked me to meet him at the pier? Why did he not come? When the boat docked and he was still missing I was doubly worried.

Hobart came down the gangplank. He was great, strong, healthy, and it seemed to me in a terrible hurry. He scanned the faces hastily and ran over to me.

"Where's Harry?" He kissed me and in the same breath repeated, "Where's Harry?"

"Oh, Hobart!" I exclaimed. "What is the matter with Harry? Tell me. It is something terrible! I do not know."

He was afraid. Plainly I could see that! There were lines of anxiety about his eyes. He clutched me by the arm and drew me away.

"He was to meet me here," I said. "He did not come. He was to meet me! Oh, Hobart, I saw him a short time ago. He was—it was not Harry at all! Do you know anything about it? He said he would meet me at the pier. Why did he not come? What is it?"

For a minute he stood still, looking at me. I had never seen Hobart frightened; but at that moment there was that in his eyes that I could not understand. He caught me by the arm and started out almost on a run. There were many people, and we dodged in and out and among them. Hobart carried a suit-case. He hailed a taxi.

I do not know how I got into that car. It is a blur. I was frightened. The whole thing was unusual. Some terrible thing had occurred, and Hobart knew it. I remember indistinctly a few words spoken to the driver. "Speed, speed, no limit; never mind the law—and Chatterton!" After that the convulsive jerking over the cobbled streets, a climbing over hills and twisted corners. And Hobart at my side. "Faster—faster," he was saying; "faster! My Lord, was there ever a car so slow! Harry! Harry!" I could hear him breathing a prayer. "Oh, for a minute." Another hill; the car turned and came suddenly to a stop. Hobart leaped out.

A somber two-story house; a light burning in one of the windows, a dim light, almost subdued and uncanny. I had never seen anything so lonely as that light; it was gray, uncertain, scarcely a flicker. Perhaps it was my nerves. I had scarcely strength to climb the steps that led up from the sidewalk. Hobart grasped the knob and thrust open the door; I can never forget it. The dim light, the room, the desk and the man! Harry!

Harry! It is hard to write. The whole thing! The room; the walls lined with books; the dim, pale light; the faded green carpet, and the man. Pale, worn, shadowed, almost semblance. Was it Harry Wendel? He had aged forty years. He was stooped, withered, exhausted. A bottle of brandy on the desk before him. In his weak, thin hand an empty wine-glass. The gem upon his finger glowed with a flame that was almost wicked; it was blue, burning, giving out sparkles of light—like a color out of hell. The path of its light was unholy—it was too much alive.

We both sprang forward. Hobart seized him by the shoulders.

"Harry, old boy; Harry! Don't you know us? It is Hobart and Charlotte."

It was terrible. He did not seem to know. He looked right at us. But he spoke in abstractions.

"Two," he said. And he listened. "Two! Don't you hear it?" He caught Hobart by the arm. "Now, listen. Two! No, it's three. Did I say three? Can't you hear? 'Tis the old lady. She speaks out of the shadows. There! There! Now, listen. She has been counting to me. Always she says three! Soon 'twill be four."

What did he mean? What was it about? Who was the old lady? I looked around. I saw no one. Hobart stooped over. I began crying. He began slowly to recognize us. It was as if his mind had wandered and was coming back from a far place. He spoke slowly; his words were incoherent and rambling.

"Hobart," he said; "you know her. She is the maiden out of the moonbeams. The Rhamda, he is our enemy. Hobart, Charlotte. I know so much. I cannot tell you. You are two hours late. It is a strange thing. I have found it and I think I know. It came suddenly. The discovery of the great professor. Why did you not come two hours earlier? We might have conquered."

He dropped his head upon his arms; then as suddenly he raised up. He drew the ring from his finger.

"Give it to Charlotte," he said. "It will not hurt her. Do not touch it yourself. Had I only known. Watson did not know—"

He straightened; he was tense, rigid, listening.

"Do you hear anything? Listen! Can you hear? 'Tis the old lady. There—"

But there was not a sound; only the rumble of the streets, the ticking of the clock, and our heart-beats. Again he went through the counting.

"Hobart!"

"Yes, Harry."

"And Charlotte! The ring—ah, yes, it was there. Keep it. Give it to no one. Two hours ago we might have conquered. But I had to keep the ring. It was too much, too powerful; a man may not wear it. Charlotte"—he took my hand and ran the ring upon my finger. "Poor Charlotte, you have loved me, girly, all your life. I have loved you. Here is the ring. The most wonderful—"

Again he dropped over. He was weak—there was something going from him minute by minute.

"Water," he asked. "Water? Hobart, some water—"

It was too pitiful. Harry. Our Harry—come to a strait like this! Hobart rushed to another room with the tumbler. I could hear him fumbling. I stooped over Harry. But he held up his hand.

"No, Charlotte, no. You must not. If—"

He stopped. Again the strange attention, as if he were listening to something far off in the distance; his hollow, worn, lustless eyes grew to pin-points. He stood on his feet rigid, quivering; then he held up his hand.

"Listen!"

But there was nothing. It was as it was before; merely the murmuring of the city night, and the clock ticking.

"It is the dog! Do you hear her? And the old lady. Now, listen, 'Two! Now there are two! Three! Three! Now there are three!' There—now." He turned to me. "Can you hear it, Charlotte? No? It is strange. Perhaps—" He pointed to the corner of the room. "That paper. Will you—"

I shall always go over that moment. I have thought over it many times and have wondered at the sequence. Had I not stepped across the library what would have happened? What was it?

I had stooped to pluck up the piece of paper. A queer, crackling, snapping sound, almost inaudible. I have a strange recollection of Harry standing up by the side of his desk—a flitting vision. An intuition of some terrible force. It was out of nothing—nowhere—approaching. I turned about. And I saw it—the dot of blue.

Blue! That is what it was at first. Blue and burning, like the flame of a million jewels centered into a needle-point. On the ceiling directly above Harry's head. It was scintillating, coruscating, opalescent; but it was blue most of all. It was the color of life and of death; it was burning, throbbing, concentrated. I tried to scream. But I was frozen with horror. The dot changed color and went to a dead-blue. It seemed to grow larger and to open. Then it turned to white and dropped like a string of incandescence, touching Harry on the head.

What was it? It was all so sudden. A door flung open and a swish of rushing silk. A woman! A woman! A beautiful girl! The front door opened. And the Nervina! It was she!

Never have I seen any one like her. She was so beautiful. In her face all the compassion that a woman is heir to. For scarcely a second she stopped.

"Charlotte," she called. "Charlotte Oh, why did you not save him! He loves you!" Then she turned to Harry. "It shall not be. He shall not go alone. I shall save him; even beyond—"

With that she rushed upon Harry. It was all in an instant. Her arms were outstretched. The dimming form of Harry and the string of incandescence. The splendid impassioned girl. Their forms intermingled. A blur of her beautiful body and Harry's wan, weary face. A flash of light, a thread of incandescence, a quiver—and they were gone.

The next I knew was the strong arms of my brother Hobart. He gave me the water that he had fetched for Harry. He was terribly upset, but very calm. He held the glass up to my lips. He was speaking.

"Don't worry, sis. Don't worry. I know now. I think I know. I was just in time to see them go. I heard the bell. Harry is safe. It is the Nervina. I shall get Harry. We'll solve the Blind Spot."

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

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THE RISING SUN

A FAR, faint dawning on the edge of night,
A low earth-murmur, then a blush of light;
A bird's first call on thine adored name,
A flood of color from a well of flame;
Then earth, submissive to thy sovereign might,
Wakes, and the darkness in its westward flight
Hastens before thee, while the stars depart,
Yielding the heavens to thy wondrous art,
Flooding the zenith with transcendent hues,
The whole reflected in the lowly dews
Gemming the earth until their being yields
To thy full power, great lord of flood and fields!

Alan Brackinreed.

Gertie Pays Her Debts

by J. U. Giesy

"*TEMPORA mutantur, et nos mutamur in illis.*" That's Latin for the sage dictum that time changes and changes us along with it, or that life is just one darned thing after another, according to whether one prefers a literal or a free translation. In either case the meat of the assertion is the same. Any one can prove this for himself if he likes. Everything changes from one's view-point to his skin.

This, however, is not a dissertation on either time or its changes, save as the latter affected Miss Gertrude — otherwise "Gertie"—Bain.

Gertie contemplated making a change, which was not surprising considering its nature and the fact that she was nineteen years of age, dark-haired, blue-eyed, with a nose slightly inclined to turn up the least bit in the world, rather than at it, and a figure not apt to be overlooked, since it was well worth looking at.

Gertie Bain intended changing her estate, which was that of head, chief, or favorite manikin, as you like, for Joseph Klessinger—ladies' suits and cloaks.

She intended getting married.

While we have led up to this intent on the part of Miss Bain in a somewhat facetious manner, it is no joke. Marriage never is. Gertie herself regarded it as the biggest thing in her life. In fact, it had changed her entire outlook on existence; had substituted in it for thoughts of movies, theaters, dances, and kindred interests, outside of her employment by Joey Klessinger, others having to do with the environment of a four-room flat, which she and Terry Sullivan had their eyes on already—and its equipment with sufficient furniture to "start on," at so much down, and so much a month.

Gertrude was not going to change in one particular we may note. She was sticking to her race. She was Irish, and so was Terence. He was a shipping-clerk recently taken into Klessinger's employ, and he roomed at Gertie's boarding-house. That, indeed, is how the whole thing started. Gertie was easily the prettiest thing at the boarding-house table, and Terence had an alert hazel eye to beauty under his reddish brown hair—and a tongue for the pursuit.

Gertrude had the dreams of almost any average young woman of her age, and Terence was a well-set-up young chap, a pleasant companion, a good dancer. Two weeks after he went to work for Klessinger, and rented a room at the boarding-house, they became tacitly engaged.

This in itself made a change in Gertie; seemed in some subtle way to enhance her beauty; set a soft and slumberous luster in her eyes; a soft and at times incomprehensible smile on her lips; awoke a soft and almost brooding tenderness in her heart —a vague, impersonally sympathetic feeling toward the world. Being happy in her

contemplation of the future. she apparently recognized happiness as an inherent human right.

And it was not long until a good deal of her conversation with Terence ran like this:

"Oh, Terry, I saw the swellest imitation solid black walnut dining-room set to-day, we can get for twenty dollars down, an' do you think you'd prefer a green or a rose-colored rug?"

"Sure," Terry would grin, "you suit yourself, Gertie. 'Tis a great little home-builder you'll make, I can see."

And Gertie, frowning: "The rose is more liable to fade. Maybe we'd better get a green one."

You see Gertie had a brain and used it. It was that as well as her shape made her of more than average value to Joe Klessinger, in the selling of spring and fall and winter models, both to in and out of town trade. Someway a garment, once it was slipped onto Gertie, got all tangled up with that intangible something called "personality," and produced an entirely different effect from what it afterwards had on the corporeal materialization of — say Mrs. Packer, whose husband had made his fortune in lard. Gertie had a way of wearing even her own belongings as if she enjoyed the job, rather than as though it bored her or made her tired.

The preliminaries being as it were signed, she decided she ought to notify Joey of the impending change in the personnel of his employees and her own manner of living. She took herself to his office and rapped.

"Come in!" Joey bawled, and when he saw her: "Oh—how do you do this mornin', Miss Gertie? You're lookin' sort of rosy. Is you happy or mad?"

Joey was old enough to say a thing like that to a girl of nineteen, and he was also partially bald.

Gertie had as a matter of fact been a bit flushed over the nature of her errand, and she became even more rosy yet. "I—just wanted to tell you I'm leaving you on the first, Mr. Klessinger," she said. "I'm —going to—get married."

Joey blinked. "Well, well, now, Gertie," he declared, "I'm sorry and — I'm glad. I'm sorry you is goin' to leave us, an' I'm glad you is goin' to be happy. And —if any time, which *nebich* I ain't sayin' it should happen, you understand — you should want a job again, you got one right here any time you want it. So you're goin' to get married? Well, well—somebody is a lucky dog. I wish you both joy, Gertie, from the bottom of my heart. You been with us between two an' three years—ain't it? I'll tell the cashier to make you out a little check, for good luck."

"Oh, Mr. Klessinger!" Gertie exclaimed, and because he was really old enough to have been her father one and a half times, she bent and kissed him on the bald spot.

Joey grinned. "That tickled, Gertie," he said, "An'—you ain't been usin' lip rouge, have you, Gertie, because—my wife is always watchin' me, an' askin' me why I don't wash my head as well as my face."

Gertie laughed, assured him her labial salutation had left no trace, shook hands with him and got herself out of his office.

And that evening, in the cloak-room, where she had repaired to put on her hat and coat before starting home, she noticed the trace of tears on Minnie Andrew's face.

Minnie was a maker. That is, she helped to concoct the so-called "confections"; it was Gertie's function to exhibit to the trade. Gertie knew her by sight, and the nature of her employment, and more than that, not much else.

But she was altogether too happy those days idly to meet grief in a fellow mortal without trying to learn its cause.

"What's the matter?" she asked, following Minnie into the hall outside the cloak-room.

"I'm fired." There was a dully resentful note in Minnie's voice.

Gertie eyed her. The term Minnie had used was one with which, as applying to herself, she was totally unfamiliar. But she knew its meaning none the less.

"Tough luck," she declared.

Minnie nodded. Her lips drooped. Once more she threatened to weep. "It's worse'n that. I ain't saved a cent, an' I'm back a week in my rent. If my landlady gets wise that I've lost my job, she'll throw me out. I don't know what to do."

Gertie considered. "Ain't you got *any* money?" she finally inquired.

"I will have after I get my time, but—if I pay my rent—I won't have nuthin' much left to live on."

"Why'd they fire you?" Miss Bain asked.

"Oh—I pulled a boner—sewed a left sleeve in for a right, an' the old cat—the forewoman, of course—hopped me, an' I wouldn't take her lip. No lady would. I'd oughter slapped her face, 'stead of talkin' back. You'd a thought I'd committed murder, the way she raved."

Gertie considered again. The whole thing was as plain to her as though she had witnessed it herself—a careless bit of work, a reprimand, overly severe, perhaps—an impulsive response. Her final judgment took verbal form:

"Bunk! I know Adams. She's a good sort at heart. Go back an' tell her you're sorry."

"Apologize?" Minnie bridled. She was a light-haired—one had almost said light-headed—slip of a thing, with china-blue eyes. Retouched, her face would have made a good magazine cover. Lots of those things are drawn from models. "I'd rather see her dead. She don't need to think she can bawl me out and get away with it. I got some pride."

Miss Bain frowned. She might very well have walked away then and left Minnie to recover her senses, if she could; but she was simply too young, too happy, too full of the wine of living.

"Then come home with me," she said on impulse. "You can sleep in my room, an' your money will go farther that way, till you get another job."

"You mean that?" Minnie brightened. She was of the type easily cast down and as readily picked up. "Honest? Gee, but you're good! I oughter land a job inside a few days at most, an'—I—I'll pay you back, somehow. Where d'you live? I'll go over an' sneak out what I can of my clothes an' come up."

Gertie gave her the address of her boarding-house and left her in the street. She went home, explained matters to her landlady, and that night there was a new guest at table—a little blond creature with a ready tongue, and an equally ready laugh.

And now please do not overlook the opening paragraph of this account, wherein is set forth the changes time is wont to affect.

That first night, Gertie introduced Miss Andrews as her friend, and Terry included her in an invitation to the movies, sitting between the two girls, and dividing his attentions between blonde and brunette with an impartiality that frequently left him speaking to Minnie about the time that Gertrude made a remark.

"Terry's a fine feller, I think," Miss Andrews announced when she and Gertie reached their room, and were preparing to retire.

"So do I. I'm going to marry him," Miss Bain agreed.

"Gee!" Minnie giggled. "Then you won't have to work."

"Well—I wouldn't say that." Gertie smiled and clasped her arms about her knees. "There's work enough in keeping house, and—I suppose I'll have one or two babies."

"What!" Miss Andrews widened her china-blue eyes, then blushed. "My Gawd—how you talk!"

"Why not?" Once more Gertie Bain smiled. "I'm a woman, ain't I? And Terry's a man. Even the best families—have families, don't they? My mother had me, and yours had you, and Terry had parents, of course. What did you expect me to have—a Pomeranian pup?"

"Oh, well," Minnie shrugged. "I'll say you certainly have the luck. Some people do. To-morrow I suppose I've got to hunt a job."

How hard she hunted it is really difficult to say, but it is a fact of record that she was still in a jobless condition at the end of a week. In that particular there had been no change. Not, however, that time was failing of its customary effect, but that the thing was manifesting itself in a different direction, to be exact.

Workless Miss Andrews may have remained, but were one inclined to speak paradoxically, he might write it down, that in so far as Terry Sullivan was con-

cerned, she had certainly been getting in her work. Terry, even to a casual observer, was on the fence.

Gertie, not being blind, was heartily sick of her bargain in saddling herself with a non-supporting roommate, but had been as yet unable to bring herself to the point of throwing her into the street—the more as nothing really overt had occurred. Still it was rather in vain that she told herself over and over that Terry was no more than temporarily taken with a pretty face. She couldn't help noticing that he suddenly seemed to lose interest in the subject of dining-room sets and either green or rose-colored rugs, when she broached such matters once or twice, and it filled her with a vague unrest. A lot of the sheer joy of living went out of her demeanor in those days. The light it had waked in her eyes burned less steadily than on the day she had gone to tell Joey Klessinger she was leaving. Sometimes it was actually clouded by doubt.

And as clouds generally presage a storm, either physical or psychic—this one eventually broke.

Gertie, returning from work one evening, found herself confronted by a penciled note:

> DEAR GERT:
>
> I suppose when you read this right at first, you'll say I've played you a dirty trick. But Terry and I was meant for each other. He says so, too, and that even if he was fond of you before he met me, it's a lot better this way than if he had found it out after it was too late. We're going to be married this afternoon, and fix up a flat. Come and see us after you get over being mad at—

There followed an address. It was that of the flat Gertie and Terry had been looking at for weeks—because all this happened before the days when you didn't look at, but for a flat—or put your name on a waiting list—when things ran along in a sane and normal fashion, as some one may remember they did.

Only—Gertie was neither exactly sane or normal after she read that note. She sat down on the bed without even removing her hat. A strong and cruel hand seemed gripping her heart, squeezing it, till it struggled with one heavy throb on the heels of another—till it strangled her for breath.

Minnie and Terry were married. Terry was taking her to "their" flat. She was thrust aside, cast off, displaced by the girl she had taken in and sought to befriend when she was jobless, practically homeless, with no place to turn. Minnie had said then she would repay her somehow, and—she certainly had. She had taken Terry from her with her baby face, her clinging-vine ways, and she was going to live in the flat Gertie had mentally furnished with the imitation black walnut, set forth on a green tapestry rug.

There was nothing of the clinging vine about Miss Bain, and perhaps it was just as well for her there was not. After a time she realized that she was still wearing her hat, and took it off. But she did not go down to supper. That was too much. She didn't feel up to facing what would needless amount to a battery of eyes. Instead, she went over and opened a trunk, lifted out certain things she had been collecting against a future date—things she had meant to wear the day she became Terry's wife, and afterwards. But now—that was all changed. Though Gertie didn't think of it that way at all—time had wrought its effect. She shed a few tears over the bits of crêpe and lace and satiny ribbons, and put them back.

The next day she changed her boarding-house after she came from work. And the next day after that she went in to see Joey Klessinger again. She stood very straight, and there was a different look in her eyes than on the former occasion—a little set line about her mouth.

"Mr. Klessinger," she said, "I've come to tell you I'm not going to get married after all."

Joey was wise, and—human. He didn't ask questions. "Well, well, Gertie," he declared, smiling, "I'm glad of it. You're a fine-lookin' girl, an' you got brains. Now you wait a little an' you an' I will have a talk about something else."

Gertie had no notion of what he meant, and she didn't find out for several months. She went back and continued to exhibit

herself in different Klessinger models, and she kept scrupulously away from even the neighborhood of the flat where Terry and Minnie had settled down, on Sundays or in the evenings when she sometimes went for a walk. For say what you will, Gertie was changed, too, and she no longer cared greatly for theaters, movies or dances in those days—and even though some of the younger and unattached men in her new boarding-house took notice and invited her out for the evening on various occasions, she generally refused.

Then one day Joey sent for her, and she went to his office to find him smiling.

"Gertie," he began, after he had invited her to be seated, "it is come time for that little talk I told you we was goin' to have the last time you was in here. You see, Gertie, it is like this. In Chicago is a young *schmaliel* who owes me for a line of goods, an' he is about ready to go bankrupt, so I'm goin' to butt him out, an' I got to have somebody to look after my interests. So—I'm goin' to send you out there an' put you in charge of the sellin' end of the business."

"Mr. Klessinger!" Gertie exclaimed. "Why—I never!" She was very much surprised. This was the very last sort of chance for which she had been looking in her affairs, and it rather knocked her off her feet for the moment.

"Maybe you never did, but—you're goin' to now, Gertie." Joey beamed. "I been watchin' you, Gertie. You ain't just a wax figure for showin' off clothes, you ain't. You got somethin' in your head. *Nebich* you can sell clothes in Chicago, so well as in N'Yark. You can build up this here business an' help me sell it out again at a profit, maybe. This here young man will stay on after I buy him out, an' you can sort of keep an eye on him also, Gertie, an' see he does what is right. It is a swell chance for a bright young woman. Well, Gertie, well?"

Gertie considered after she had got her breath. It was a chance, indeed. To get away—from everything—from this town, and Terry and Minnie, and their flat she was always avoiding—to change everything—step into a wholly new environment.

"I'll go," she decided, "of course. You want me to put this place back on its feet, and then you'll sell it?"

"Sure." Joey nodded. "I ain't intendin' to stay in the retail trade, you understand. *Aber*—I ain't expectin' to take a loss if I can get somebody I can trust to help me out."

"I'll do it. Oh—Mr. Klessinger, I'll do it!" Gertie stood up and took a rather deep and somewhat unsteady breath. She was a trifle flushed.

"Good," said Joey. "I thought you would. So then you will go next week, an'—I'll write this young businesser you're coming."

"All right," Gertie agreed. "And you won't be sorry. Oh—Mr. Klessinger!" All at once she choked and bent down and kissed him on the bald spot, just as she had done months before.

Joey grinned. "That tickled, Gertie," he said. "But—it was a nice sort of tickle. Maybe I shouldn't send you to Chicago after all — maybe I should keep you in N'Yark if you're going to act like that."

For the first time in a long time Gertie Bain laughed.

After that time passed. It is a way time has. Gertie went to Chicago. She took charge of the sales force of Arthur Goelet's defunct Smart Clothes Shop. First she cleaned it out, and then she filled it up. She injected "pep" into its personnel and into Arthur himself. She found him considerably depressed, as he might be under the conditions, but he appeared to find mitigating circumstances in the situation after he and Gertie had met.

Time, you see, was still on the job.

To tell the truth, Gertie didn't pay much attention to Arthur, however, right at first. She was too busy—too much centered on her job of unscrambling an egg and thereby saving Joey's liability out of Goelet's wreck. But she liked him well enough, and after it began to be apparent that business was picking up, there came a time when a somewhat speculative light began to dwell at intervals in her eyes. It was inspired by the recollection of Klessinger's remark, that after the Chicago business was back on its feet, he meant to sell it out. More

and more Gertie began to consider the advisability of buying it herself, provided she could induce Joey to let her pay for it out of the profits, as she thought she could.

Those profits were not to be disregarded at the end of the first year. But oddly enough Goelet was almost morose about it.

"I always knew the business was here," he said.

"The trouble was you didn't go after it right," Miss Bain declared.

"I can see that—now," Mr. Goelet sighed.

Gertie eyed him. His florid face was a trifle flushed, and as he met her glance, he blinked and ran his fingers through a mop of almost tawny hair.

"See here," she said, "I'm thinking of buying the shop myself. Mr. Klessinger wants to sell it, and—I'd rather use your name, of course. Are you game to make it a partnership, Mr. Goelet?"

"I am. I'm willing to make it a partnership for life. Gertie—why *don't* you use my name if you want to? I've been wanting to ask you to do it, but—I haven't had the nerve. You let me give you my name and you use it all you want to." Arthur grew still more red in the face, and rather short of breath.

"Why—Arthur!" Miss Bain exclaimed—and—young Goelet not having as yet developed a bald spot, she kissed him on the mouth.

They sat down and wrote a letter to Joey.

And Joey replied:

DEAR GERTIE:

Sure you can buy the shop. I been hoping you would. Artie Goelet is a nice young fellow. I knew his father. Good luck.

The second year showed a bigger profit than the first. Gertie and Arthur's flat was furnished in genuine walnut instead of imitation, and the bedroom rug was the color of roses. But Gertie was still on the job.

She was on it one day some two and a half years after she had left New York, when the door opened and a somewhat washed-out appearing blond woman came in to apply for work in the alteration department. There was something vaguely familiar about her to Gertie, but she didn't exactly place her.

Not so the newcomer. Her weary, china-blue eyes widened the moment she confronted Mrs. Goelet, and she gasped a startled recognition:

"You—my Gawd!"

Gertie puckered her forehead. "I seem to have seen you somewhere, my girl," she began.

And the other cut her short. "D'ye mean you don't make me? Why—I was Minnie Andrews. I—"

"Oh, yes." Gertie nodded. "I do remember you now. But—what are you doing in Chicago?"

"I'm huntin' work to keep myself an' my baby—though if I'd knowed you was Mme. Goelet I wouldn't have come in here, of course."

Gertie nodded again. Into her eyes there crept a far-away look. They narrowed. "No—I suppose not. I've been married for over a year now. My husband and I own this place. But what's the matter? Is Terry sick or something?"

"That bum!" Minnie sniffed. "I don't know and I don't care." She glanced about her and suddenly went on: "Some people sure do have the luck. I've had a fierce time, myself. We hadn't been married six months before he was lampin' every swell-lookin' jane he seen. An' I wouldn't stand for that, of course. We fought like cats and dogs, an' then he up an' leaves me flat, just before my baby was born, an' I ain't seen or heard from him since—damn him."

"Terry left you and the baby?"

"Sure," Minnie said. And then her whole expression altered, softened, grew momentarily less tense. "But—say, Gert—she's awful cute. I ain't sorry I got her—on the level. She's—a sort of reason to keep on goin'."

"And you want work?"

"Want it? I got to have it. I want to keep her with me. I don't want to farm her out in a 'sylum or somethin'. Honest to Gawd, Gert, if you could see her—"

"Well—" All at once Gertrude Goelet appeared to make up her mind. "I've an

idea Arthur and I can give you employment if you need it."

"*You* can?" Terry Sullivan's wife questioned in a somewhat strident voice. "You mean you will—you'll give me work, after—after what I done? Honest, Gert—you're white clear through. You got a good heart—an'—I'll—I'll make it up to you somehow."

"Don't." Gertrude Goelet stayed her.

All at once the changes time had brought about struck her, and struck her hard. Minnie had indulged in a somewhat similar protestation on an occasion in the past—just before she took Terry Sullivan off her hands. In that Minnie had literally saved her from a fate that might otherwise well have been hers. Thanks to her she had made a lucky escape, was a happy wife, with a successful business, a duck of a home, and a husband who adored her. She laughed. "You don't need to worry about that. It's all in the way you look at it, of course: but—considering what you've told me, the way it looks to me, I already owe you a lot."

"Well—I'll be darned!" An expression of startled comprehension writhed its way across Minnie's face.

"And," said Gertie, smiling, "I always try to pay my debts. Come on back to the work-room and we'll see if you can tell a left sleeve from a right."

Had she been possessed of a working knowledge of Latin, she might have added: "*Tempus omnia revelat*"—time reveals, makes all things plain.

As a matter of fact, it does.

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THE SWEET GIRL GRADUATE

SHE has the knowledge that girls get in college,
Finds everything in the books;
Lovely to gaze upon, she looks amaze upon
Me, when I ask if she cooks.

She is the boss of me as to philosophy;
Hegel she thinks is immense,
And yet this she-scholar will spend a whole dollar
For goods that are worth thirty cents!

Bacteriology, Greek, and psychology
She can recite without hitch;
But it is actual matter-o'-factual
Truth, that she can't sew a stitch!

She would just dote upon having a vote upon
Questions of civic finance;
Yet, what she best can do, yes, and with zest can do,
Is to play tennis and dance.

Were she not charming, I'd think most alarming
A learning so largely ideal;
But some one will marry her, and he will carry her
Into the realm of the real.

Then college theory straightway will flee, or he
Is for a man an apology;
And all her learning to solid use turning
Will make good *(perhaps)* every "ology"!

George Jay Smith.

My Lady of the Nile

by H. M. Egbert

PRECEDING CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RETOLD

WHILE traveling up the Nile, Ross, an American, became acquainted with Professor S. Tobias Jonas, an elderly instructor in an American Jewish theological college, but at heart an adventurer, who was in Egypt to search for the sacred seven-branched candlestick of the Jews, which from certain inscriptions he thought to have been taken to Egypt for safe-keeping after the destruction of the temple by the Romans. Jonas was accompanied by Arminius, a villainous guide; and aboard the boat was Mme. Natalie Caraman, the beautiful English mistress of a Russian adventurer, Dolgouroffski, known as the "King Maker," who had faded into obscurity after the death of Menelek, Emperor of Abyssinia. Ross saved the life of an Arab traveler when Mme. Caraman, disguised, tried to assassinate him. Later this man escaped from the boat.

On reaching Khartum, Professor Jonas disappeared, and while searching for him Ross met a white girl, apparently an escaped slave, who asked his help and said that she had missed the way she should have taken to meet "Ras Abouna." Later she was dragged into a house, and Ross, following, saw Mme. Caraman beating a mute with a whip; he also found Professor Jonas, who had been taken to the house by Arminius, who told him that it was a hotel. Together they escaped, but could not rescue the girl. Later Ross learned that the house was occupied by the High Priest Amos; and suspected that Mme. Caraman was engaged in a plot to obtain some information in connection with treasure from Professor Jonas. Ross joined with Jonas in an expedition to find the seven-branched candlestick, and they took passage up the Blue Nile to Bahr-el-Azrek.

On the boat were a couple supposed to be a sheik and his bride, but when the bride tried to kill him, Ross discovered that she was Lillith, the girl he had tried to help, who had been forced to the act. After a fight he and Jonas and the girl escaped from the boat and were rescued by the traveler whose life Ross had saved, who was Ras Abouna, a prince of Abyssinia, who had led the revolt against Menelek. They started for Thoth. When Ross spoke to Lillith of love, and of restoring her to her people, she repeated an old oath and said: "This is mine until I have avenged my father's murder."

Near a pass in the mountains they were attacked by black warriors led by Mme. Caraman, and all but Abouna—who had gone for help—captured. Ross was left to die by torture, but was rescued by a deaf and dumb man, who guided him to St. Michael's Sanctuary, where he heard Mme. Caraman successfully tempt Dolgouroffski—who was living a hermit life—to again set foot on the path of ambition.

As they left the sanctuary they were attacked, but Dolgouroffski and Mme. Caraman escaped. The attacking troops were led by Ras Abouna.

CHAPTER XV.

LORD OF LORDS.

HE placed his hand across his lips in salutation. "I am Ras Abouna," he answered. "Because I have lived long in exile, surrounded by spies and enemies, the habit of concealment was upon me, and I could not break it, even with you.

"Now I can speak. I am truly Ras Abouna, and heir to the throne of Judah, which you call Abyssinia.

"I am the lawful heir, for my father was the first-born son of King John. He was slain by Menelek in battle. I fought for

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what was mine. My little army, fighting against ten times its number, led by that old jackal whom they called the Lion of Thoth, clove its way through them into the mountains.

"I was treacherously betrayed by the jackal's mate, the foreign woman. I was tortured in prison. I escaped her. Now fortune has joined the issues again, and this time I win or die.

"I have come back," he continued, throwing up his arms with a gesture so instinct with majesty that I looked at him, as astounded at the transformation of the Abyssinians who had gathered about me. "I have three hundred of my followers here, and thousands more are waiting for my call.

"I seek the throne that is mine, but first I seek the city of Thoth and what lies hidden in Thoth, for the secret is now to be laid bare, according to an old prophecy, and truly it has been said that he who holds the secret of what lies in Thoth holds sway over Judah.

"Here is the nest of that traitor Amos and his black priests, who guard the sacred treasures. Now it is his intention to deliver them to the jackal, who has broken sanctuary. And therefore it is my intention to demand a parley with him, and force him to deliver them to me.

"And as for the Jackal of Thoth, whether this sanctuary be made by God or devil, I swear to tear him from it and hang him in Adis Ababa for his crimes against this land."

"You know why I have come here, O Ras?" I asked.

"Aye," he answered. "Have no fear for the old man, your friend. But as for the maiden, finding her, you may well wish that you had never come upon so perilous an undertaking. But how did you escape from Dar Fok—for I learned the manner of the death that was planned for you?" he continued.

Thereupon I told him of the tongueless man, and how I had seen him in Amos's house in Khartum, when Natalie drove him out with the lash. He listened in apparent indifference, but I fancied he was more interested than he was willing to acknowledge, and, when I had finished, I asked him if he knew who the man was.

"Aye, my friend, I have heard of him," he answered. "One of those touched by God, and therefore feared by the Bedouin and unmolested. There are many such in these deserts."

"And why does he hate Dolgouroffski?" I asked.

Ras Abouna's face darkened. "The old jackal has tortured many men in his day," he replied. "Come, my friend, ride back with me to my camp, for at noon I intend to approach Amos upon a mission of embassy."

One of the Abyssinians brought me the mount of one of the two dead men, which was only slightly injured. The other, which had been fearfully gashed across the throat, was put out of its suffering, and, carrying the bodies of the slain, we rode back to Abouna's encampment.

It was a well-armed little force that he had mustered. In addition to our cavalry troop, there were two hundred trained infantry, some with breastplates, and all wearing twenty-five or thirty yards of thick cotton material wound about the body, and calculated to stop the strongest spear-thrust.

Some carried spears, and all had swords, and the little round Abyssinian shield. Most of them were as fair as Ras Abouna himself, being, in fact, of the dominant race and tried legionaries, who had fought under their leader in former wars.

The remaining soldiers were of little value, consisting of a miscellany of fuzzy-haired Somalis, armed with long spears, and nearly naked, and Gallas, savages famous for their habit of cutting their steaks from the living animal, a process which I was fortunate enough not to see. They were the camp-followers and guardians.

A square tent with a pennon flying, located in the midst of the black goatskin tents of the warriors, showed me Abouna's headquarters. We dismounted before it, and he made me enter, and, after a meal had been served, to which I did ample justice, he told me of his plans.

There were already some half-dozen candidates in the field, princelings of Shoa,

Tigre, and Amhara, and in the confused state of the internal politics of Abyssinia it was only too probable that the adventurer Dolgouroffski, by his own prestige, would succeed in seizing the seat of government at Adis Ababa and making the attempt to dislodge him difficult.

It was therefore Abouna's intention to demand that the castle of Thoth be turned over to him, when, with the aid of Professor Jonas, he would possess himself of the treasures and royal insignia, which would unite the whole country under him.

"And further," he added, looking at me with a shrewd smile, "since I have no wife, it is my purpose to wed the maiden Lillith, whom they call Queen of Sheba; for, apart from the political advantage of this step, I found her very fair in the desert. Did not you, O my friend?"

The revelation that Lillith was herself none other than the mysterious queen, was half-forgotten in the revulsion of feeling that his words occasioned in me. And yet, to do myself justice, I believe this was less on my own account than on hers. For to restore Lillith to her own people had become more in my eyes, a stronger hope, than making her mine.

Ras Abouna, who had been reading my face, laughed, and clapped his hand on my shoulder.

"When princes choose their brides, others must step aside," he said, not boastfully, but with perfect sincerity. "I know that you desire this maiden. Nevertheless, think how many more there are in your own country, and the loss will be forgotten in the honors that shall be yours when I am emperor in Adis Ababa."

He dismissed the subject. I could see he did not calculate on any permanent resentment on my part, and sat chatting on the subject of his hopes and ambitions for an hour longer. Then, excusing himself, he left me to my meditations, while he went to issue orders to his forces.

My meditations were not pleasant ones. Yet, with the immediate hope of meeting Lillith and the professor, I managed to dismiss fears for the future. In the middle of them a servant entered bearing robes and a curious contrivance with the hilt of a sword, resembling a huge watch-spring, coiled.

"Gifts from the Negus Negasti, lord," said the servant, salaaming as he withdrew.

Ras Abouna had lost no time in assuming the title of Emperor of Abyssinia—literally, Lord of Lords!

The point of the spring was held in a catch. I unlocked it, wondering what it was. Instantly, with a clear, bell-like note, it straightened into a slender, tapering sword, of exquisite workmanship, flexible, supple, and yet tempered, as I could see, to the hardiness of a diamond.

Marveling at it, I put on the *callis* and the long body-roll of cotton, slung the sword by its rings and strap beneath my arm, in the Abyssinian fashion, and covered myself last with a splendid *quarry* of yellow silk, edged with some white fur like ermine. There was no hat, for the Christian goes bareheaded, and my hair, grown somewhat long, tempered the fierce heat of the Abyssinian sun.

I had just finished robing when Abouna came into the tent.

"Did my humble gifts please you?" he asked, smiling. "Truly, you look born to play the part."

I thanked him warmly and expressed my admiration, particularly of the sword.

"Aye," he answered gravely, "it is of ancient workmanship, and has been worn by many an *affa negus* before you throughout the centuries."

It was then that I caught his meaning. The robes, the sword, were the insignia of the Chief Justice, known as the *affa negus*, or "Breath of the Emperor." Ras Abouna considered that my acceptance of the gifts had bound me to his cause.

"Come, friend," he added, "for time passes, and we must be in Thoth by late afternoon, either by the grace of Amos or without it."

We went outside the tent. Abouna's little force, except the camp-followers, who were left in charge of the tents, was already marshalled, in full array, and carrying their bags of *teff* flour and dried antelope meat over their shoulders.

We mounted, rode to the head of the

troop that awaited us, and set off past the church and up the steep handle. Looking down as I rode, I could see the glint of black, stagnant water, an immense distance down the rim of the bowl. Before me the *amba's* polished sides rose, even more smooth and flawless than they appeared on the preceding night. The conical mountain now resembled a huge egg in an egg-cup, and nothing but volcanic action could have created it.

As we neared the summit of the crest Abouna halted his men, and ordered them to aline, to be prepared for any sudden assault by a force concealed beyond. There was a moment of suspense; then the crest was surmounted, and we found ourselves looking down a gentle slope toward a drawbridge that spanned the gulf, and led into a path winding within the very heart of the mountain.

But the drawbridge was down, and the gate raised and held back by heavy hempen cables. As we approached it a strange procession advanced out of the depths beyond.

It consisted of five black priests, all attired in long robes of the same color. The foremost held a large white flag, which he waved solicitously before us.

Ras Abouna gave the command, and we trotted down the incline, forming column before the bridge. The leading priest advanced and spoke in Amharic. Abouna listened, nodded, and turned to me.

"He says Thoth is a sanctuary, and unguarded," he remarked. "The High Priest Amos welcomes us. Well, we shall see!"

Crossing the bridge, we left a picket of half a dozen men there and, dismounting, followed the priests within the mountain. They took down flaming pine torches from the walls, and led the way, lighting the gloom, while we walked warily, our reins in the left hand, our swords, unsheathed, in the right.

The cavernous ways through which we passed seemed carved out of the solid rock. Great stalactites hung from the roof, which was high overhead, and the path wound like the labyrinth of a maze. At intervals we saw other passages to right and left.

Presently I realized that we were lost within the mountain. I whispered to Abouna, who nodded.

"I should have posted guards at the crossways," he acknowledged. "However, we must go on. These men will hardly play their lives against our own."

At a short command from him, the old priests were forced to link their hands each within the bridle reins of one of our leading troop. They offered no protest at this.

The path wound round and round, once or twice, I suspected, doubling upon itself. In the light of the flares I saw that Ras Abouna's face had grown very thoughtful. And I think it was pride, rather than policy, which forbade him to demand that we be guided back. I began to be conscious of a faint smell of sulfur, or naphtha.

At last, when it seemed that the labyrinth would never end, there came the gleam of daylight ahead. It brightened, the cavern fell away, disclosing the most amazing scene that one could have imagined.

We emerged into a vast hollow within the heart of the *amba*, whose towering sides surrounded it in an almost perfect circle. Again it was evident that this was of volcanic origin; this was, in fact, the crater itself, the subsidence of the glowing, molten mass of lava hardening into the smooth surface of a lake. But on this fertile lava soil, along which ran a rivulet, bordered with date-palms, a fairy garden grew.

The yellow spheres of ripening oranges and lemons gleamed through the dark-green leaves, scented with luxurious blossoms. Red figs and mulberries lay everywhere beneath their trees, upon the velvety sward. Vast borders of jasmine, eglantine, and flowering pomegranates ran in a tangle surpassing any gardener's art. And in the center rose a splendid palace.

No wonder that, emerging out of the tunnel, dusty and blinking at the sunlight, we stopped in amazement.

I saw Abouna cross himself. "This is no work of human hands," he whispered. "This is the Land of Sorcery, of which I have heard whispers, though no living man has penetrated those labyrinths and returned. May we be not as they!

"This is the magic temple of the accursed Falashas, who are neither Jews nor

Christians, nor honest Moslems either. They are the ancient gods of this land whom these black folks worship, those who inhabit the mountains and bring plague and devastation upon all."

With a simultaneous gesture the five old men extinguished their torches. Suddenly, out of the distance, shrilled the music of *ambiltas*, the Abyssinian pipes, but sweet and soft as any pipes of Pan. And then, advancing through the glades, barefooted, dressed in long robes of white, with garlands in their hair, came a bevy of maidens.

They were as black as the priests themselves, yet not negroid, though the Falasha had a strong negroid admixture. Their straight black hair was bound at the neck with colored ribands, and flowed down their backs. their bodies swayed in rhythmic unison to their pipes, and, tripping before us, they led the way toward the palace.

The building was of the porous lava, giving it a soft, gray color and an effect of indescribable lightness; it seemed like a fairy structure, floating among the intense green of the trees, and yet it must have been rooted deep in the solid rock. For the massive pile spread fanwise in all directions from a great central dome, capable of housing as many persons as one of our mammoth hotels.

I perceived, too, that, though the ground had seemed level, there was actually a gentle dip toward the center, and the central hall of the palace stood in the exact center of the circular lake of lava stone.

Before the palace stood a single pillar, perhaps fifty feet in height, shaped like an obelisk.

I looked spellbound at the beauty of Amos's habitation, and somehow I, too, had the same sense of evil as Abouna, and, though she was so near, Lillith seemed infinitely far away.

The trees fell away some distance before the palace entrance, which consisted of a series of seven broad, wide steps, and a platform in front of two great swinging doors of precious wood. Halting at the foot of the steps, Abouna ordered off a detail to take the horses to drink at the rivulet, and graze upon a stretch of level meadow, and, gathering the rest of his body-guard into files, strode on beside me toward the entrance doors, in the wake of the priests and priestesses.

These latter, preceding us, filled the air with the soft music of their pipes. The moment that the doors, closing behind us, cut off the hard sunlight, we seemed plunged into profound darkness.

Then a curtain of heavy wool was drawn aside, and we saw that we were upon the threshold of the temple, which was just discernible as a vast vault of gloom, save for the heart of it, where a strange nether illumination lit the faces of the few about the altar. There was the sense of a multitude within the temple, but it was impossible to discern how many of them there were, or to see anything but a chiaroscuro of shifting forms and patterns.

We stopped, and I saw Abouna run his left hand along the rings of his sword-strap. But, if treachery was meditated, there were no present signs of it. I began to see more clearly the altar and the figures about it, and I became conscious once more of the naphtha odor, more strong than in the labyrinth.

In the center of the vast place was a great throne, set high atop a flight of circular stairs, and between the legs of some enormous monster of stone, whose leering face grinned at us from the very vault of the roof. At the foot of these stairs was another throne, about which the priests and priestesses were grouped.

On this sat the High Priest Amos, wearing his breastplate, with the gems flashing through the gloom. Now green, now blue, now ruby, now gold, now violet, and now a prismatic blend of color, they flashed, twinkling, scintillating, till his breast seemed fringed with lambent flames. The cascade of white beard tumbled about his throat, and he neither turned his head nor stirred in his place as we entered.

At his feet, among the priests, stood another old man, wearing long robes of white. It was Professor Jonas.

As he approached the throne and halted a few feet away he looked at me, but made no sign of recognition. But I had no eyes for him. For, in the great throne under

the belly of the monster, robed all in white, with a gold circlet about her forehead, was Lillith.

CHAPTER XVI.

A PROPHECY.

AND she, too, looked at me vacantly, and there was no recognition in her eyes. But I soon perceived that they were fixed so that the eyes seemed to regard us all and yet saw none, as the eyes in a picture.

Thus we stood, and not a word of welcome was spoken until Ras Abouna placed his hand across his lips and addressed Amos.

"O all-seeing one, as they call you," he began, "if you are also all-hearing, you know why we have come here."

"Aye, I know why you have come here, Ras Abouna," answered the high priest in monotonous accents.

He did not stir as the mechanical voice rumbled from his lips. Rather to my astonishment, I found myself able to follow the Geez in which the conversation was conducted—largely because Geez, Aramic, and Arabic, which last I understood well, have a common origin.

"So many men, and but one motive," continued Amos, as if a very tired old man was speaking. "One has the lust of gold, one of women, but all of dominion. These things are shadows that pass away.

"Nevertheless, because I knew your desire, I had you conducted hither, O great Ras who would be called Negus of Judah. Moreover, I know your suspicions."

"Aye, high priest," said Abouna eagerly. "Surely, had they not been well founded, I had not come to invade your sanctuary!"

"They are baseless, Abouna. Ever since Sheba went unto Solomon this sanctuary has been for those who hold themselves aloof from worldly things."

"Yet it has been told me that you plan to deliver the sacred treasures to mine enemies, O high priest," said Abouna. "And, as you know, I am the lawful heir to this Empire of Judah."

At this a scornful mocking broke out from somewhere in the darkness about the throne. Ras Abouna scowled angrily; I tried to discover whence it came, but could see nothing.

"I am an old man, Ras Abouna, and past the age of judgment. I desire nothing on earth. The treasures are in God's keeping. Who has found them since they were sealed by the craft of Solomon?"

Ras Abouna turned toward Professor Jonas. "Here is one who can find them," he said fiercely. "Play with me no longer, O all-seeing, for assuredly my memories of exile are bitter ones."

As he spoke he ran his hand along the sword-rings under his arm again, and his face quivered at the thoughts that coursed through his mind.

"Bring me no threats, Abouna," said the old man in mild rebuke. "No blood may lawfully be shed within this sanctuary of Thoth, else would a hundred thousand swords leap from their scabbards at my command.

"Therefore was the labyrinth made, that violent men should never profane the treasures of Judah. As for this old, wise man, I know nothing of him, save that he sought sanctuary at my gates, together with the Holy Sheba, whom evil emissaries had lured away."

Ras Abouna strode forward and raised his arms.

"Play with me no longer, all-seeing," he said fiercely. "Hear my words! These treasures must be mine, or I will pull down this palace about your ears, and take your priests for slaves, and your maidens for my warriors, and blot out the memory of your foul witchcraft from the land!

"For well we know that it is neither the God of the Christians, nor of the Yehudin, nor of Mahmoud, to whom you pray, but the evil jinn of fire who raised up this paradise of fire for you. And if, as you say, the site of the treasures is indeed not known to you, then place this old, wise man at my disposal, that he may discover them."

For a few moments the inscrutable eyes of the black priest met Abouna's in silent match. Then Amos bowed his head.

"If indeed you are the lawful ruler of

this land," he quavered, "and would bring God's curse upon you, seek the treasures in your own way!"

At the words a shout of ringing triumph was raised by the men-at-arms behind us. Abouna smiled in triumph.

"Assuredly I do not fear the curses of your god," he answered. "Be it so, then. To-morrow, with the aid of this wise man, we shall seek the treasures, and, having found them, trouble you no more."

"Aye, and to-day, being the last of *pagman*, before the opening of the Maskarran month, we have prepared a feast," answered the high priest. "And we have made places for you at our banquet, knowing that you would come."

"So be it, all-seeing; but know you how we depart?" asked Abouna.

"That shall be shown," returned Amos, rising slowly out of his throne.

The old, black figure was awesome in its dignity, in the strange setting. I was sure now that there was a multitude of spectators in the darkness. I seemed to feel their hate burn in me. I saw that a certain superstitious dread had descended on Abouna, for all the bravado of his voice.

The high priest turned toward the throne on which Lillith was seated. I noticed that she had not stirred a muscle since we entered, but sat as if in some cataleptic trance.

Slowly the old man raised his hands above his head and extended his arms toward her.

"O holy queen," he chanted, "Sheba, spouse of Solomon of Judah, Sheba the undying, keeper of the treasures, thou hast heard the question of the great Ras Abouna, Lord of Kaffa, who hath come hither to learn of thee, and to take that which thou guardest and must restore only to him who hath laid on him the restoration of Zion.

"How shall he depart? Answer him, by the prophecy of her who never sleepeth, but liveth with thee incarnate!"

And the voice that came from Lillith's throat in answer filled me with awful fear. For it was the voice of a very aged woman, piping and thin with years and yet sweet and plain and clear.

I have seen the phenomena of "possession" and "speaking with tongues" at spiritualistic séances, and I believe, as most investigators do, that, though the interpretation may be faulty, there is a genuine residue of fact beneath the frequent fraud. And I knew that these modern phenomena of our civilized races are as old as time, and common among the Abyssinians, as among nearly all primitive races.

It was not the weirdness of the voice within the gloom of the great temple that made me shiver, nor yet the sight of Lillith, entranced and rigid there under the control of the old black magician.

It was the tones of the voice, the personality that seemed to emanate from the woman I loved, for it was the heart of all the evil in that place of devilish beauty. Lillith stood up, stiff as a marble statue, one hand upon an arm of the throne, one hand groping in the air toward me. That hand seemed the only part of her that was alive, as if herself was concentrated in it, and the rest of her body in the grip of the evil thing that spoke from her throat.

"We have heard," she shrilled. "We have heard, and we answer not only the great Ras Abouna of Kaffa, but all others who seek the treasures of Sheba. For many have come here in all the times that have passed since Sheba went unto Solomon, and sought, and found not, and their bones strew the haunted ways."

Almost the very words that Professor Jonas had quoted to me from the Talmud!

"They have sought and never found," she shrilled, "for it was the curse laid upon them that their quest should produce, not gold, nor jewels, but only envy and strife and bloodshed, until the day of Zion's liberation dawneth.

"Thus, then, we prophesy. We answer Benjamin, the great Ras of Tigre. For he shall seek and never find. And we answer Amalek, Ras of Amhara. He shall neither seek nor find. And we answer Mangashe, the Ras of Shoa and the high Kaffan lands—"

I saw Abouna start and quiver, and strain his eyes upon the speaker.

"The Ras Mangashe shall find not what he seeks, but what he doth not seek," the

voice went on in bitter mockery. "And we also answer Abouna, the great Ras of Kaffa, for he shall find and seek, and, what he seeks, that he shall find."

A heavy sigh broke from Abouna's lips, and I saw the sweat was streaming down his face.

"Aye, and as for these lesser ones who seek, they too shall find, yet not as Ras Abouna findeth!" shrilled the girl from the high throne. "They shall find those who came upon this quest before them, and they shall learn of them. They shall depart accursed, because they would rob Sheba's sanctuary."

And she sank back into her throne. At that moment the stench of the naphtha seemed to fill the temple. The priestesses ran up the steps of the throne and raised the girl to her feet. I saw them holding her as she lay rigid in their arms, her own outstretched, her body rigid.

Up rose old Amos. "O Ras Abouna, you have sought and learned," he said. "Surely the prophecy was pleasing to you? Now, therefore, will you not put aside all thoughts of violence and bloodshed, and feast with us and our company, and afterward take possession of what is yours?"

Abouna swung toward him. "A play for children, this prophecy of yours, Amos!" he cried. "Think you to entrap or turn me from my purpose by such play-acting?? Why, I have seen better mimics playing for travelers on the Adis Ababa road!

"And yet, I think, your player forgot her prompting, for surely her prophecy was pleasing. Now, since I have Christian men who fear neither you nor your devils, lay aside your own thoughts of treachery, put away your feast, and conduct me to the treasures immediately."

"Aye?" answered Amos, with devilish scorn. And he said no further word, but swept his arm with a swift gesture across the hall. And suddenly, from great windows on either side of the building, heavy curtains were drawn aside. And I saw that the temple was packed with bands of armed, silent men, drawn up in companies, facing us all about and straining like hounds upon a leash toward us.

The flood of light stunned me for the moment, and the whole picture was tensely dramatic in its suspense, which dissolved, breaking the tableau into a thousand pieces as the armed multitude clapped hands upon their swords and surged down on us, baying and uttering ferocious war-cries.

With an answering shout Abouna's men formed about us, drew their own blades, and resolved themselves into an impenetrable phalanx, facing four-square. One moment the oncoming forces seemed to hesitate; the next they were beating against our barrier of swords, and blade clashed upon shield and struck fire from blade.

But before a mortal wound had been inflicted a great shout went up, and from the ranks facing Abouna there sprang forth a keen, lithe warrior, with a fierce, hawk-like face, a gold circlet on his head, buckler on arm, and sword in hand.

"Back!" he shouted to his followers. "Surely it may not be said that Ras Amalek needed more men than Ras Abouna's to overcome him. Come, fight with me, O traitor and impostor, and spare your men from slaughter!" he added to Abouna. "If you be he whom you claim to be, and not the impostor whom you are declared to be, remember how I unhorsed you on Axum's field, that day of Menelek's battle, when, with the Lion of Thoth to lead us, we drove your poor sheep along the mountain roads. Do you remember me?"

Ras Abouna strode forward to the front line of his men. "Aye, I remember you," he answered, "who pledged yourself to fight for me, King John's son and your lawful lord, and turned traitor upon the field of battle. Aye, I remember you, Amalek the traitor!"

Each word of his enemy seemed to lash Abouna to the heart. He trembled, quivered, snorted like a whipped steed as he faced his old enemy within the temple. The memories that seemed to bind him to the past, as Dolgouroffski and the tongueless man, must have been bitter and remorseless.

"Aye, Ras Amalek, traitor of Shoa," he shouted, "truly the priestess prophesied of you that you shall neither seek nor find. Thus I answer you!"

He swept his men aside, and, as Ras

Amalek rushed at him with his sword raised high above the left shoulder to cut him down, he flung his left arm upward, received a blow that clove the metal as if it had been wood, and, with a mighty stroke, shore Ras Amalek's head clean from the trunk.

The head, still wearing the ironic and contemptuous sneer, rolled to the floor. The headless trunk tottered and fell forward, the fingers which held the sword-hilt still quivering.

The Shoans raised a shout of terror and recoiled. And, like a coiled spring, our phalanx leaned toward them, ready to unloose itself.

But the clash never came. For as the retreating Shoans became mingled among another body of troops that menaced us from one flank, I heard a cry, and a tall chief with a short black beard strode forward alone, looked into Abouna's face, and suddenly cast down his sword and clasped him in his arms.

"My brother," he cried, "do you not know Mangashe, Ras of Kaffa, who fought beside you in the wars against Menelek, and was ever your true servant? I hold your kingdom at your disposal, ruling it in your name; yet at the first I thought you an impostor, for all men said that you had died."

With a great cry Abouna let his sword fall and returned his brother's embrace. And at this Mangashe's followers, who numbered almost as many as ours, swung about and alined themselves among our men, while the rest drew back, scowling and threatening, and recognizing that they were no match for our united army.

From his throne Amos watched the strange scene—kin recognizing kin, and friends old friends, half mad with the joy of the meeting, for Abouna's followers had led a hunted life for many years far from their own; while the other parties stood back with scowling faces, handling their two-edged swords.

Amos looked on with expressionless face, and yet I understood what had occurred. These were the rival princelings of Abyssinia, who had come to Thoth, perhaps on the preceding day on the same quest, perhaps at Amos's invitation; in either case to fall upon Abouna's forces, and so put one competitor out of the way. Had the brothers not met, it would have gone hard with us.

Abouna turned to him. "This blood that has profaned your sanctuary is of your shedding O high priest!" he cried, shaking his sword.

Amos flung up his hands in deprecation. "I am one among many; I am a lamb among wolves!" he cried. "I know nothing of bloodshed. I am a holy man. Let there be peace among you.

"Take your treasures, you who can find them, and go your ways. To-night let there be the Maskarram love-feast here! Until then, take your solace in the gardens without. But it is my wish that there be no more slaying!"

The rival leaders whispered to their followers. For a few moments it seemed doubtful what would happen. Then the bands, watching one another narrowly, began to disperse toward the entrance. Outside, they formed into ranks, while slowly Ras Amalek's Amharans, chanting a dirge and striking their swords upon their shields in slow refrain, carried their dead leader's body into the center of the stretch of green sward.

Branches were quickly torn from resinous pine trees that grew upon the lower slopes of the rocky wall, dead boughs were gathered, and the structure of a great funeral pyre was built.

Meanwhile two warriors, with a bow-drill, were kindling fire in a heap of pith and wood shavings. When all was in readiness, the body of the fallen leader was placed upon the structure, his sword in his hand, and the casqued head against the shoulders. Slowly the smoke curled upward.

The Amharans sang their requiem, the rest watching in silence, as if by customary truce, until the leaping flames ascended, the pyre crumbled, and the fire died out in a dull glow. A new leader began to move among them, talking in low tones; it was evident that Ras Amalek's death would be washed out in the blood of many, and only the occasion was awaited. The sullen war-

riors hardly stirred, and the sun sank lower toward the wall of rock that fringed the gardens.

CHAPTER XVII.

ARMINIUS.

ALL the while this weird scene was being enacted I had stood within the entrance to the temple. I watched Lillith being led down from her throne. Her face was bloodless, and from her automatic movements I thought that she was still entranced, but her eyes, lighting on mine, shot forth a glance of recognition, and so malignant, so full of hate, that I was crushed by it. I stepped quickly aside, and she passed me, escorted by her attendant priestesses, and entered an apartment behind a hanging curtain in the rear of the temple.

I was so downcast that the scene lost its reality. I was no longer even sure of the past. I half fancied that our adventures, even my meeting with Professor Jonas, was a mocking dream, born of my sufferings in Dar Fok Pass. And then, as I watched the old man, I saw him make an almost imperceptible gesture to me. —

Amos had left the temple, and the professor was lingering in the vicinity of the great colossus above the thrones. I went toward him through the thinning throng, and he led the way behind the altar into a small room, which looked, from the garments hanging on the walls, to be a robing-room for the priests. When we were alone he shut the door quickly.

"Thank God you are safe, Ross!" he said eagerly. "Amos doesn't know that yet, nor did he recognize you for a white man in those robes of yours. I've got a few minutes to tell you what I know."

"They've treated me well here, and, because I felt sure you couldn't have died—you remember what I told you at Dar Fok?—I smoothed your path by showing Amos the inscription from the base of the Wall of Wailing in Jerusalem, and he thinks I'm with him."

"He hadn't it, then?" I asked.

"He had it, Ross, but he could not translate it. The priests had made up a translation for him. But it was all wrong. You see, Assyriology is a modern science, and nobody could translate those arrow characters until about fifty years ago. However, I've not been able to locate the second part of it.

"Well," he continued, "during my three days here, by feigning ignorance of Geez, and only a passing acquaintance with Amharic, I've learned a good deal. Amos and the Caraman woman hatched a plot in Khartum to put all the rival chiefs out of the way—probably on the very night when we blundered into the house there.

"The leading Rases were summoned here to advance their claims. It was believed that they would fall upon each other and mutually destroy each other's power. Then Dolgouroffski and the Caraman woman would have a clear field for their enterprise.

"When Ras Abouna took the field—well, he was merely an incident. The more Amos gets into his trap the merrier. But when Ras Mangashe recognized his brother and joined forces with him, it gave the old devil a shock. I don't know what he's planning now, but we must be wary.

"Now, I haven't been here long, but I've used my wits, and I've learned a good deal. In fact, the sage Tobit was confronted with much the same situation in the palace of the demon queen Astarte at Baalbek.

"This place is an old volcano. The throne in the temple is in the exact center of the volcanic uprush. Probably the first devil who built Thoth discovered that the gas, which is forced out of the seething rocks beneath, becomes sometimes ignited and sometimes goes out, for they have a way of illuminating the temple with it, which I haven't found out.

"There must be a tiny cleft beneath the throne, through which the gas filters. But—you've heard of the Delphic Oracle?"

"You mean—"

"You remember how the Greeks and Romans, and all the ancient world, for the matter of that, used to send emissaries to consult the oracle at Delphi in time of national danger? It wasn't a fake. It con-

sisted of a priestess who became possessed by the god, according to popular belief, when she sat upon her tripod over a certain place from which a gaseous emanation rose. Well, this is the same thing. That girl, Lillith, was hypnotized by Amos, but she was first rendered unconscious by the influence of the gas—not wholly so, but enough to make her responsive to his suggestions."

With that I recalled Lillith's words: "The smoke of the pit takes all memory away." And I vowed that I would see her dead before me rather than forced to play that rôle again.

"That's why the priests choose their 'Sheba' from among captives, and always a girl of tender years. Do you see, Ross? They first instil the legend into the childish mind, until it takes firm hold. Then she is ripe for the perturbation of their devilish sway over the superstitious minds of the natives. You know what that idol in the temple is?" he continued, lowering his voice involuntarily.

"No."

"Moloch!"

"The god of human sacrifices?"

"Yes. But let us not speculate on what is done there, Ross," he answered. "These are the gods for which Solomon turned aside from the true worship. They are the ancient devils of the Phœnicians. The whole place is a nightmare of evil. And we must get that girl out of this hell—and the treasures too, if it can be done," he ended shrewdly.

"There is little time for delay, for Amos will put into execution whatever schemes he has in mind at the earliest moment. Arminius is here. I have played up to him—"

And as he spoke the door opened, and Arminius entered, clothed in the robes of one of the priests, and approached us, smiling, a veritable *maitre d'hotel*, oily, obsequious, unctuous, and all humility and confidences.

"I saw you in the temple, Mr. Ross," he began. "You didn't see me? Perhaps you didn't recognize me like this." He pointed to his robes and grinned. "But I saw you come in here with the professor.

"Now we'll talk business. I know how you got away from Dar Fok, and I want you to understand I hadn't anything to do with that affair. I lost my temper and kicked you, because of the trick you played me in Khartum. I'm sorry—and we'll call it square.

"We've got to. You'll agree that this is no place for three civilized men like us. Lord, I never dreamed what Caraman was letting me in for! We've got to forget the past and put our cards on the table.

"I'm a professional dragoman. I don't care who becomes Emperor of Abyssinia. I don't care whether it's Abouna, or whether he has his head sliced off.

"I got in with the Caraman woman in Cairo. I had a little hold over her for something that happened in the past, and I worked it. Who wouldn't have done? And she promised me good pay to bring the professor to Thoth.

"I yielded. You see, I thought you were just a crazy loon, professor, and I made it a bargain that you weren't to come to no harm. Then you butted in, Mr. Ross, and upset things considerably."

He licked his thick lips and grinned, quite unashamed, into my face, as if he had explained everything.

"Well," he continued, "when I got here and found the thing was true, you might have knocked me down with a feather. The Caraman woman's party was chased by Abouna's men. We had just time to make this place, and I was mighty glad not to be cut up by those dirty Abyssinians

"Caraman didn't come; she had another hand to play. And I was damn glad to be rid of her. You can imagine, Mr. Ross, I don't fancy this business one bit. I ain't stuck on Mrs. Caraman, neither. I want what's in it. She hasn't paid me. I want what's coming, and I want to get home to Cairo.

"Now, here's what I'm driving at. Old Amos thinks the professor here can find his treasures for him. He's planning some dirty business, just as he planned to trap Abouna here, but the professor's safe enough, and there's nothing against you. And they all know me.

"Professor Jonas here has got some sort of clue, and we think the crazy girl has got

one, too. Between us all we can puzzle the thing out. We're three white men, Mr. Ross, and we'll stand in together.

"The professor and I are agreed that to-night, when the crowd's drunk, we'll capture the crazy queen and make her come with us. We want you, too, because you're handy in trouble.

"Am I right or wrong, professor?" he concluded, looking at Jonas, his head a little on one side, his little eyes surveying him behind the ridge of his great nose.

"That's about the size of it, Ross," said Professor Jonas. "We came here to get the treasures and the candlestick, and we mustn't be sidetracked. We've got to take advantage of this situation and not get mixed up in it. We've got our own hand to play, as they've got theirs, and we don't care what happens to that girl, or your Abyssinian friend either."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FEAST.

I STARED at the old man in consternation. Was he speaking his feelings? Had I entirely misconceived Professor Jonas's character? It was true that he had never appeared to me in the light of a model of chivalry. Professor Jonas was merely an unpractical dreamer, with an extraordinary plucky streak in his nature, but then again he had all the impulses of a born adventurer. Still, there was no reason why he should take kindly to my infatuation for Lillith. Even in my indignation I could see a certain soundness in his attitude.

"I'm with you for the treasures, professor," I answered, "but Lillith comes first, and I won't play false with Abouna. He saved our lives, remember."

"You saved his on board the steamer," he returned. "That evens it."

"Yes—if love and friendship are purchasable and can be weighed," I retorted. "I won't go back on him. And the girl is more to us than the treasures. A human soul is heavier than gold in God's scales, professor."

I had got thus far when I saw Professor Jonas looking at me with a significant expression. Of a sudden I understood. He had told me he was playing up to Arminius. I had forgotten that in my anger. I saw Arminius scowling at me.

The professor saw that I understood, and hastened to make peace. "He's with us," he said to the Levantine. "Of course, we'll do what we can for the girl, and we won't play false with Abouna. But—the treasures first—eh, Mr. Arminius?"

"You're right, professor," answered Arminius, clapping him on the back. "I reckon our friend here understands. That is settled, then. I'll go with you, Mr. Ross."

He edged toward the door, and we went out through the temple together. On the way Arminius halted for a moment.

"We can count on you, Mr. Ross, eh?" he asked, scowling at me under his heavy eyebrows.

I nodded, though it brought a lump into my throat to do it. So he left me at the temple doors. The sun had set; it was growing dark with all the swiftness of the low latitudes, and the pyre was glowing somberly. I went to where Ras Abouna stood with his brother. He beckoned to me.

"I have told my brother of you, and pledged your loyalty," he said. "Listen, now, for we have made our plans, and we must act more quickly than our enemies. To-night, at the feast, we drink but little, and yet enough to disarm suspicion. When all are drunk, and I give the signal, we shall fall upon our enemies and put them to the sword, being careful that neither Amos nor the old, wise man, your friend, nor the women, be injured. For, with their aid, we shall make ourselves masters of Thoth and its treasures. But let that be no care of yours, my *afia negus*—only sit on my right hand at the banquet and watch warily!"

As he spoke the doors of the temple, which had been closed, were opened. The priestesses appeared, their *ambiltas* to their lips.

Inside I saw that the great hall was aglow with a white pillar of flame that leaped from Lillith's throne.

So startling was the scene that friends and foes forgot their quarrels and their unions, and ran toward the temples, all mingled together, and jostling and shouting like schoolboys. But outside the door their leaders sprang before them and began to assemble them.

Meanwhile, Abouna and Mangashe, forming their men in ranks, pushed through the Amharans and Tigreans, and our hosts moved down the hall, beating a measured clanging with their swords upon their shields.

Tables were set all down the great temple, with benches before them. At the head of the longest, almost opposite the leaping pillar of fire, were three places, with brass dishes and drinking-horns mounted on silver stands.

The central place was a throne—a device of Amos's to stir up a quarrel, doubtless. Abouna seated himself in it, with Mangashe upon his left, and signified to me to sit on his right hand. Our men, following, began to cast down their shields, and to unstrap their armor, keeping their swords under their arms, however, as Ras Benjamin and the new Amharan leader, Sebastie, led their followers up the hall.

The two chiefs strode toward us, their faces black as thunder, while their men surged and pressed forward ominously behind them. Ras Benjamin scowled at Abouna.

"Who hath crowned thee emperor, that thou shouldst sit in the seat of the overlord?" he demanded fiercely. "Am I a dog, that I should suffer this humiliation from one who was but now a hunted fox in the mountains?"

"Nay, have you not warriors, equal in number to mine and Mangashe's?" answered Abouna in bitter mockery. "Forget not that Amalek of Amhara was brave and of renown—nevertheless, he neither sought nor found."

Ras Benjamin clapped his hand upon his sword-hilt with a furious gesture, and, with a shout, our warriors sprang to their feet, seizing their shields and brandishing their swords. But Abouna never stirred from where he sat, within easy thrust of Benjamin's sword; and, after an instant's hesitation, Ras Benjamin swung on his heel and stalked away to another table, followed by his Tigreans, while Sebastie and the Amhara men did likewise.

The scene of that feast burned itself in fire upon my brain. For on his throne, presiding, yet never changing posture nor regarding any one, sat Amos, like an old statue of an old, black god, his wrinkled, carven face lit by the fire. It roared forth from Lillith's empty seat, a tongue of whitest flame, smokeless, rising and falling like a fountain, and making the whole interior of the temple a glare of light, intensifying a hundredfold the blackness of the shadows.

Those shadows played in pantomimicry upon the walls, like figures on a Greek frieze, warriors gesticulating, challenging each other, drinking, hacking the great barons of beef and camel meat served by the priestesses. And over all was the ringing of shields, the ever rising uproar, and the shouting, and the brooding, growing sense of innumerable meditated treacheries, all gathered up and dominated by the black, silent form on Amos's throne. It was hard to guess how many dreams of rule were born that night, how many schemes were planned, how many hopes were destined to perish.

In the midst of the tumult I was aware that some one was at my side, twitching at my sleeve. I looked up, to see Arminius, wearing a white burnoose. He leaned toward me.

"Are you about ready, Mr. Ross?" he whispered. "We're going to try what I spoke to you about in a little while. These ape-men will be killing each other in half an hour; slip out behind the altar, and we'll be waiting for you.

"We know where the mad queen sleeps, and there's only two women guarding her, and an old black fellow. There'll never be a chance like this again. We can soon settle them."

He licked his thick lips in delight of battle—the battle that suited him: two girls and an old man.

I nodded. I had not the least intention of abandoning Abouna, unless Lillith was in imminent danger; but I thought Profes-

sor Jonas had already prepared to answer Mr. Arminius in the right way, and I was following the lead that the professor had given me.

I believed that I could best serve our interests by remaining faithful to the man who had saved my life and brought me to my destination, at least for the present. And I was sure Lillith knew nothing of the treasures, and that Arminius's kidnaping plan concealed something behind it, and that he was playing a lone hand.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE MOONLIGHT.

THE tumult increased continually. Huge horns of *mesu,* honeymead, were carried from table to table by the priestesses, and the warriors, filling their own from these, and draining them, flung the dregs into one another's faces, with shouts of laughter.

A dozen fights began and subsided. The air of tension grew. Only about Abouna was comparative order, for we all watched and waited for the signal which could not be long delayed. Already our men were furtively buckling their armor and reaching for their shields.

The priestesses, having served the wine, mingled among the soldiers, jesting and drinking with them; yet I saw that they were inciting them against one another, and I knew this was a part of Amos's plan. Everything was part of the same far-flung design, and carried out beneath the watchful eyes of the black, brooding figure upon the throne.

Surely Abouna would give the signal now! For already men were slashing at each other in mock combat that needed little to become earnest. But, just as I saw Abouna bend and whisper into Mangashe's ear, our enemies took the initiative, and robbed us of ours.

For Ras Benjamin, a giant with gold bands over his hairy arms, together with Sebastie, rose and staggered down the hall toward us, with some of their men, and they halted in front of Abouna.

"If you be truly the Ras Abouna, John's son," cried Ras Sebastie, "why should blood flow to prove it? Prove yourself, and we will obey you. Show your old strength and skill, known to us all. For more than one warrior in the land of Judah can cleave a man's head from his shoulders, but there is only one who can hurl his spear over the obelisk before the palace."

"Aye," cried Ras Benjamin, "if you be truly Ras Abouna, prove yourself before you prove your right to the overlordship of Judah!"

Ras Abouna looked calmly at them, and stilled the murmuring of his men with a gesture. "That I can do," he answered. "But surely you, Sebastie, will join me in this contest, for if your arm has the strength of your tongue, which you inherited from your mother, that famous shrew, none can overcome you. And you, O Ras Benjamin, whose father I pierced through the back in battle, will you not act with me in this bloodless play?"

He mocked and taunted them in this wise, and, to my surprise, they answered with great meekness.

"Surely, O Ras Abouna, there need be no strife of words between us," said Ras Benjamin. "For, if you prove yourself by this test, known to all of old, none will oppose your claims. Therefore do you and your brother lead out your warriors, and we will do the same, wearing swords, but leaving our shields and armor within the temple, so that there may arise no suspicion of treachery."

I was sure that some trap was planned. I looked in warning at Abouna, but he was too disdainful to be suspicious.

"So be it," he answered. And, calling their warriors, who rose reeling from their places, the bands went out of the temple, leaving their shields and armor at their places by the tables.

I would have backed our men against the Tigreans and Amharans, even had both parties been sober; as it was, I could see no chance of treachery, though my suspicions would not be allayed. And, glancing at the black figure in the throne, I saw a look on its face that sent them leaping up again.

A ring was quickly formed about the obelisk. Ras Mangashe drew up his men on the side nearest the palace. On their right were the Tigreans, opposite him ours, opposite the Tigreans the men of Amhara.

When the parties were marshalled in their places, Ras Benjamin, as challenger, stepped out of the ranks and took his stand near the edge of the sward, planted his feet, and swung his arm backward.

The long Abyssinian war-spear rose into the air, as if about to top the column, but struck some dozen feet beneath the summit, snapped against the stone, and fell to the ground.

Amid mocking taunts from Abouna's and Mangashe's men, and angry cries from the followers of the rival chiefs, the Amhara leader took his stance. This time the spear struck the edge of the obelisk, a score of feet beneath the finial, and, glancing aside, fell clattering to the temple steps.

Then, when Abouna took his place, the storm of cheering from the Kaffa men was hushed to an intense expectation. He flung off his *quarry*, and stood robed only in the padded cotton sheathing about his flanks and loins. Every muscle on his body, which was like a carven statue, seemed to stand out.

Slowly he raised his arm. The rippling muscles passed over it like a wave as he flung the spear upward.

It rose until it seemed no larger than an an arrow overhead, sailing majestically through the still air, sped true six feet above the finial, and dropped. Thunderous shouts broke forth from our men as Abouna stooped for his *quarry*.

Suddenly from behind the column came groaning, shouts, tumults, and a confused stampede. I saw a group clustering about a figure on the ground. We ran toward it.

Ras Mangashe lay dead, his brother's spear transfixing his body to the earth, through the heart.

And in that awful moment I remembered Lillith's prophecy: "He shall find not what he seeks, but what he doth not seek."

With a wild outburst of grief Abouna rushed forward and threw himself upon the corpse. He tugged out the spear, but there followed no gush of blood. Ras Mangashe had been killed instantly by the falling missile.

Abouna raised the body in his arms and looked solemnly into the lifeless face, while Mangashe's followers, who had set up a loud wail, drew back, muttering among themselves. In a moment Abouna's forces were unsupported.

Abouna leaped to his feet. "Hear me, ye men of Kaffa, and all of you. This ill comes from the sorcery of this accursed place!" he cried. "Come with me, O my brother! Thou and I shall do what we have already planned this night; yet first, if I have contrived this, or wronged thee in any way since we stood at our mother's knee together, let those lips of thine condemn me!"

It was the old challenge of the involuntary homicide, the test ordained by immemorial custom. The Kaffa men gathered around, looking with superstitious expectation into the face of their dead leader. Abouna placed his brother's body quietly upon the ground again.

"Henceforth I reign alone in Judah!" he cried, taking up his sword. "Who is on my side now to make an end of the witchcraft of Amos, and to destroy this hell of the old fire-gods who have brought this evil upon us?"

Ras Benjamin strode out from the alining ranks behind him. "Thou has spoken, O fratricide!" he cried. "But God hath abhorred thee. Aye, God hath judged thee! Thou, who hast made plans for empire, look now to their fulfilment!"

And, with a swift gesture, he swept his silken *quarry* aside, disclosing himself in complete mail, while simultaneously his followers, as if this had been a preconcerted signal, cast down their robes, and showed themselves in breastplates, with their shields on their arms.

The plot was thus unveiled. If possible, peaceably, and by unmasking him whom they believed an impostor; otherwise by this treachery Ras Benjamin had planned to end Abouna's claims forever.

Grasping their swords, and yelling madly, the Tigre and Amhara men flung themselves against our own, who, taken by surprise, had nothing but their swords.

We were, furthermore, outnumbered by two to one, for Mangashe's men had drawn away, sullen and irresolute, and by no means disposed to fight the battle of even an involuntary fratricide. Our plight was desperate. Yet, at Abouna's ringing command, the Kaffans leaped together to meet the onset.

And then I was in the thick of it, at Abouna's side. I think it was my breast-padding that saved me, for afterward I found it ripped and rent in a dozen places, and my body was livid with great bruises from the sword-points.

Side by side we clove our passage toward the temple, I seeing nothing clearly, and yet intensely conscious of the savage faces, rolling eyes, mad with hate, and great bodies half hidden behind breastplates of gleaming armor. Behind us the column of Abouna's men pressed forward.

And the spirit of an old viking seemed to take possession of Abouna as the Tigreans and the Amhara men pent us in, with Mangashe's holding sullenly aloof. Foam flecked his lips, and, dripping with blood, he leaped into their midst alone, striking terrific blows that shore through their armor as if it had been paper, and forcing his way toward Ras Benjamin, cursing and taunting him.

Benjamin glared at him, while the sweat dripped down his face, and his huge, hairy hands wielded his great sword irresolutely. Then he turned away; and at that neither the Tigre nor the Amhara men had further stomach for the fight. With yells our men surged onward, and we gained the temple steps.

Then I became aware that the fire of Lillith's throne had gone out. The interior of the temple was almost in complete darkness, being illumined only by the rays of the moon, that straggled through the high windows.

It was bright enough to show me that the great wooden doors were half a foot in thickness, and strongly bound with iron, with grooves for heavy bolts, and bolts with heads as large as a child's. Only artillery or rams could force them.

So, as our baying adversaries encircled the steps below, I tugged at one of the doors, and some of our men, understanding, aided me; so we got them closed, and shot the bolts home just as the Tigreans, under Ras Benjamin, now mad with fury at his cowardice, flung themselves against the barrier from without.

The stout doors held them like steel. Abouna took command, ordered his men to secure shields and armor, and posted guards at the windows. I thought it was his intention to sally out again as soon as his warriors were ready.

But at that moment I saw Professor Jonas at my side. He shouted to me and pointed toward the rear of the temple. I followed him, fear hammering in my heart. We ran past the great idol, and into the robing-room. Beyond another door we came upon Amos's harem.

This consisted of a series of small chambers, stocked with all the furnishings of Oriental palaces. There was Parisian furniture, there were grand pianos, brought, Heaven knows with what labor, through the labyrinth. There were mechanical toys—a golden rooster chanted the hour at us; there were phonographs, gewgaws indescribable, oleographs and fine paintings, Manchester cloth and priceless rugs.

We ran through a whole series of plunge-bath rooms, fed by a running spring. The place was lit by hanging oil lamps, but there was no sign of a living soul, though I could almost feel the evil personalities of those who had just left them.

At the end of the bath-rooms was a heavy door. Professor Jonas held up his hand to halt me, and, going softly up, struck twice on the panel.

A slot flew open. He placed his face against the orifice and whispered. Slowly the door began to open, not upon hinges, but turning, as if upon a central pivot. We flung our weight against it.

The force that controlled it seemed to be mechanical, yet governed by mind, for the movement stopped, and the door began to turn backward—then suddenly gave way before us.

The room beyond it was unlit, save by the reflection from the one by which we had entered. I saw a hundred scampering forms, priestesses, and old black priests.

We ran forward. Next moment we recoiled from our reflections in a sheet of steel-hard plate glass. And now I began to discern that the walls were polygonal, and a continuous sheet of crystal lined them, reflecting us from fifty points of view. There might have been one priest and one woman within the room, or a score of each. The fleeing forms mocked us and cursed us.

Then came a creeping shadow trailing out from some hidden angle—an aged man with a cascade of white beard, and a girl with rigid limbs and white face and closed eyes, that moved beside him like a sleep-walker. Lillith and Amos!

And, behind them, the slinking form of Arminius!

It was but a moment's flash, for, with it, the door by which we had entered closed. Yet, as the darkness enveloped us, there came the faintest glimpse of moonlight opposite me, where had seemed to be only the mirrors on the walls, quick and elusive as the flash of a closing camera shutter.

With it the *snap-snap-snap* of an automatic. I felt the wind fan my cheek. We hurled ourselves forward.

Then, whether by accident or luck, I found the egress. As I stumbled against an angle of the mirror, I must have touched the spring inadvertently, for a piece of the wall revolved upon a central axis, showing a doorway beyond, and moonlight.

At that instant I had the instinct to look back, and lowered my head as a knife flashed over my shoulder.

I caught the outstretched hand and twisted it. A girl fell, cursing, upon the floor, and another, and an old priest, each dropping one of the ugly Abyssinian knives. The professor had passed me. The three, without stooping for their weapons, leaped to their feet and ran like hares into the looming darkness of a tunnel in the rock beyond.

I followed. They disappeared to the right; but from the left I heard a girl cry faintly. I saw Professor Jonas at my side. A panting race, the impact of bodies—and somehow I had Lillith in my arms, and the professor was sitting on Amos's head, while the old man struggled and cursed and whimpered; and beyond I had a final glimpse of Arminius, scurrying away.

Whether his proposal had been sincere, whether he had read my thoughts, whether he yielded to the temptation to play a lone hand at the last moment, I never knew.

Nor could I think then, for Lillith fought in my arms like a fury, and there was one of the daggers in her hands that cut my fingers as I wrestled to take it from her. She did not know me, but she was no longer entranced, and I think she took me for Arminius.

I called her by her name, telling her mine. No change came over her face, and I had the horrible impression that I held an image moved by springs, for her struggles had all the horrible mechanism of an automaton.

Then suddenly her whole body collapsed, and she lay, a dead weight, in my arms.

I raised her and carried her back into the moonlight. Near me I could hear water trickling, and I found a little spring in the rock wall, and some metal vessel. I filled it and bathed her hands and face. She opened her eyes, they rested on mine; she knew me. She put her arms up weakly, and I put my own about her.

CHAPTER XX.

"HE MUST DIE AT MY HANDS!"

"MY lord, I dreamed that you were with me," she murmured.

"Yes, Lillith, never to part," I answered.

"Where are we, lord? Surely not in Dar Fok?" She looked about her in bewilderment. "I have awakened often out of a nightmare, to find myself in such a place," she whispered, shuddering, "and always there was Amos or one of the women with me. Hold me tighter, my lord, that I may know you are surely with me, and that it is no dream."

I held her, and gave her water to drink, and presently I saw that full consciousness was returning.

"Lillith," I said, "do you remember all? Our meeting? Our separation?"

"Yes, lord. But then there comes"—

she shuddered again—"the smoke and smell of the flaming pit."

"It shall never return, Lillith. We hold Amos, the high priest, here, and all the wickedness of Thoth is ended."

But I sighed inwardly as I spoke, for I dared hardly hope that we could ever win free to the outer world again.

"Lillith," I said, "you told me once that some day you would tell me who you are, and how you came to be a captive here. And I remember your words, 'When the old fourfold oath ceases to bind; when North comes unto South and is united to her; when the riddle devised by Solomon is solved.' That oath is broken."

"That cannot be, lord, until the old prophecy is fulfilled, and Thoth falls into the flaming pit, to be consumed there."

I listened in dismay. Did Amos still hold her will, even though he was our captive. "And the rest, Lillith?" I asked.

"My lord, when the secret of the treasures is disclosed, then, if Thoth be fallen, I may speak to you."

"Who placed this oath upon you?"

"It was the oath I swore to those who would have killed my father."

"But they killed him; therefore that oath binds no longer."

A confused look came upon her face. "I was a child then," she answered. "I do not remember clearly."

And yet I had the instinct that she was concealing something from me.

"Listen, now, Lillith," I said. "We shall soon make our way from here—you and I, and comrades whom you remember; he who is my friend, the wise old man with the white beard. And he whom you went forth to seek—the Ras Abouna."

She started and trembled, as if the name brought back memories of dread to her. "Aye, my lord," she whispered. "It was for my dead father's sake that I would have delivered Thoth unto Abouna, knowing that Amos hated him. But that was when, for many days, the smoke had ceased to rise out of the pit, and I remembered what I had long forgotten."

"Then, Lillith," I said, "can you guide us from Thoth? Or perchance you have the clue to the treasure-chamber?"

"I can do neither, lord, for even the all-seeing Amos cannot find the treasures, though he ever seeks them."

"He has a clue."

"There is a clue, and there was a copy which I stole when I escaped from Thoth, and gave to you in Dar Fok. You have it, lord, yet it could never be interpreted."

And suddenly I bethought me of the piece of silk that Lillith had placed within my belt in Dar Fok Pass. The knowledge of it had always been latent in my memory, but the rush of events had kept me from the immediate thought of it. I pulled up my belt, which I wore next to my skin, from beneath the cotton sheathing, and opened it.

The English sovereigns were untouched, but the piece of folded silk was gone.

I looked from the empty pocket of the belt to Lillith in consternation. I had never taken off the belt; nor could it have been removed from me in sleep without my knowledge.

It must have been stolen by the tongueless man, while I lay unconscious. I raised my eyes to meet Lillith's.

"It has been stolen from me," I said.

"Stolen?" she asked.

"By a mad wanderer, whose tongue is gone, and whose wrists are marked with white rings of flesh. Have you knowledge of such a one?"

"Yes, I have seen him, lord," she whispered. "For, as I told you, I could not read the clue, and there is none can, save that the priests know a way out of the labyrinth from tradition, besides that other one which runs to the gateway.

"Now, when I fled from Thoth I plunged blindly into these tunnels in my terror, running on and on and on, without a purpose in my heart, save to escape from Amos. And then, when I had run for hours through the darkness, and had fallen unconscious, and awaited death, one met me and picked me up in his arms, and carried me into the sunlight. And I awoke and saw such a man tending me in a cave among the mountains. And it was he who told me that we were on our way to seek the great Ras Abouna, who would avenge my father's wrongs and mine."

"And then, Lillith?"

"I feared him, lord, and I fled from the cave secretly, while he was gone hunting, and went to seek this Ras Abouna alone. But I took the road to Khartum, and already the all-seeing one awaited me there. And the rest is known to my lord."

I took her hands in mine. "Call me not 'lord,' Lillith," I said.

"What, then?"

"Your lover, Lillith, who is to be your husband."

"Of what use, my dear lord?" she answered, sighing. "For that can never be, since Thoth has stood here since the beginnings of time, and the oath holds me."

"It shall be, Lillith," I answered fervently, and I took her in my arms and pressed my lips to hers. I swore that it should be, and, as I vowed this, I heard a chuckling near me, and, looking up, saw Amos, his face horribly convulsed and his eyes full of malignant mirth.

Lillith started away with a little scream of fear. The old man sidled toward her and mumbled something in her ear, causing her to cry out in terror. Then, as I started forward, the guards came up and dragged him away.

And now, looking about me, I saw that I was standing in a little open place in the rear of the palace, with rock tunnels running out of it in several directions into the darkness. At the same moment Professor Jonas and Abouna came toward me out of the building.

"Thank God, the first part of our work has been carried through successfully, Ross," said the professor, wiping the sweat from his face. "I'm not much of a conspirator, and sometimes I almost think I haven't a very practical understanding of life.

"But we've done it. We've got the girl, and we've got Amos, though the women and priests have escaped us. We've sent out scouts, and they report that our enemies have withdrawn behind the groves, and so there's a breathing-spell. And Abouna here and I have talked things over.

"He's going to attack, and he thinks we've got our enemies at our mercy, unless Mangashe's men join them, and they're debating by themselves what course to pursue. It's two to one, but Abouna's men are veterans.

"Now we've decided that you shall take this girl through the tunnel, compelling Amos to guide you. Andros, Abouna's lieutenant, will accompany you and hurry to gather reenforcements, which are only two days' journey away, awaiting the summons. And you'll start immediately."

I looked at Lillith, and the temptation beset me sorely. But I couldn't go. I told them so. "You shall go, professor," I said.

"I, Ross?" he cried indignantly. "What do you mean?"

"You're the most valuable member of our expedition, professor. And it's your expedition. You've got the candlestick to consider."

"Fiddlesticks!" he returned angrily. "Take the girl and go, Ross."

We fought it out, and I could no more budge him than he could budge me. Abouna watched our argument grimly, seeming to understand the gist of it. Presently he spoke a few words.

"Abouna suggests that Andros shall take the girl," he said. "But it's your duty, Ross. However—"

Abouna called to one of the guards and despatched him for Andros. Then he turned to me.

"O my *affa negus*," he said suavely, "do you not know that she who is to reign with me in Adis Ababa should fitly be entrusted to your care? However, since you will not, my captain of the guard shall take the maiden."

His words struck a chill to my heart, for somehow I had forgotten what he had said to me of his designs to marry Lillith. I stood looking at him in perplexity, almost resolved to challenge his decision there and then. But Abouna had given the order to bring forward Amos, and, before any rash words leaped to my lips Amos was being led forward, snarling like a vicious old mongrel, his black face awry with hatred and fear.

One of the soldiers prodded him with his sword, and the old man leaped into the air, chattering in terror. When his eyes fell upon Abouna, in his armor, and carry-

ing shield and sword, he must have thought that his last hour was come, for he rolled his eyes convulsively, and beads of sweat came out upon his parchment cheeks.

"Hark, now!" said Professor Jonas. "Thoth has fallen, and your iniquities are at an end forever, and your life forfeited, unless the emperor show you mercy."

"I am a merciful man," Amos stammered. "I know nothing of bloodshed. It is abhorred in Thoth. This place is sanctuary for the oppressed of all races."

"Possibly," replied the professor dryly. "Yet, if it is to be sanctuary for you, certain tasks are laid upon you. First, you shall guide this maiden and Andros"—who now appeared—"from the labyrinth, not by the main gateway that leads to St. Michael's sanctuary, but by that other path which doubtless exists, for there was never a fox but had two entrances to its earth. And afterward, at the proper time, you shall conduct us to the treasure-chamber of Judah."

Amos tittered like a cracked bell. "Many have sought the treasure-chamber in past years, but none has found it," he answered.

"And many have died in seeking it," said Professor Jonas gravely, "and also those who guided them. You hold the clue."

"It is a lie. There is no clue," he snarled.

"Nevertheless, if you would live, you shall produce it when it is required of you. But now, as touching the guidance of this lady—perhaps, being so old, you would prefer to die, for life ceases to have much savor to old men like you and me. Is it not so?"

"Nay, life is still sweet to me, lord," babbled Amos in terror. "I will do as you demand, for now I see that Thoth has truly fallen, and I do not want to die. I knew the egress, yea, and can discover the secret of the treasures. I will guide this maiden and the warrior here, and afterward will show you the way to the treasures."

"So be it," answered Abouna, who had been listening gravely to the conversation.

I turned to Lillith as the guards appeared with pine flares. "Are you ready to go, dear?" I asked in English.

I caught an almost imperceptible glance between the girl and Amos. Then, to my consternation, she replied:

"No, my lord, I will not go."

And, as I looked at her in amazement, she continued:

"The oath that I swore holds me. I cannot go."

"But you broke that oath, if it existed, when you fled from Thoth," I returned.

"I will not go," she answered.

And that proved to be the end of it. Whether she was still, in a measure, under the influence of Amos's power, conveyed in that menacing look, or whether she feared to violate her oath, she would not go, nor could we persuade her. At last Abouna interposed.

"The maiden's judgment is sound," he said. "Perhaps she is safer here than wandering upon the desert, for surely the victory is mine. Let it be as I have spoken," he continued to Andros.

The Abyssinian and one of the guards, carrying a pine flare, disappeared into the tunnel, with Amos between them. I waited till the light was gone and the distant echo of their footsteps had died away. Then I saw that I was alone with Lillith and the professor.

He looked at the girl, tightened his lips, and shook his head; he was plainly disconcerted at this new turn of affairs. Suddenly Lillith raised her eyes to mine.

"If I did wrong," she said, "leave me and go, you and the old wise man here; for you are not of Abyssinia, and there is no reason why you should endanger your lives. And, as for me, one short moon ago I was unknown to you, and as nothing. Forget me, then, and leave me."

"Why would you not go, Lillith?" I asked.

"Nay, my lord, do not ask me—"

"If I be your lord, Lillith, I command you."

She seemed to straighten herself, and her eyes flashed fire into mine. "I will speak truth, then," she replied. "Amos, the all-seeing, whispered to me that by his arts he had divined that he whom men call the Lion of Thoth has left sanctuary, and is at hand with his army, to seize Thoth and

make me his bride, to reign with him in Adis Ababa.

"Now, since it was this old Lion that slew my father, and since my father left no son, he must die at my hands, as I would once have slain you, believing that you had aided him. It is this holds me, more than my oath, and for this I must await him."

I was aghast at her disclosure of the bloody code that bound her. Professor Jonas raised his eyes and fixed mine for a full half-minute thoughtfully. Then he shook his white head.

"Let us go back, Ross," he said. "This is getting beyond me. And I can't think of any precedents for such a case. If only I hadn't lost my Talmud on that damn river-boat!"

(To be concluded NEXT WEEK.)

As a Man Thinks

by Artemus Calloway

SNAPPY LASSITER, first baseman for the Terrors, snatched the square pink envelope from the hand of Runt Magee, bat-boy, and ground the offending missive into the earth with his heel.

"Pink letters and pleasant thoughts!" ranted Snappy. "That's a fine mess to feed to a baseball team that's got a record as a bunch of fighters. Lemme tell you something, Runt, the next time that saphead Malcolm Watford tells you to bring me one of them things, you tell him to chase himself."

Runt Magee grinned. "Swell chance of me doin' that—and him the manager."

Snappy Lassiter choked. "Mike Donovan's the manager of this team, and—"

"And he's in the hospital with a busted leg," supplied Runt. "Malcolm's dad is the owner of the Terrors, and he says Malcolm's the manager while Mike's laid up. Me—I do what the manager says."

Runt gazed thoughtfully at the maltreated pink missive which Snappy disgustedly kicked to one side. Being comparatively young in years and old in the service of the Terrors, Runt felt entitled to express his opinion on all occasions. With his almost perpetual grin further distorting his far-from-handsome face the bat-boy spoke:

"If I was you I'd quit kickin' about Malcolm and his pleasant thought stuff. You can think about somethin' else while the boob's spielin'—and you don't have to read them pink letters."

Snappy swore. "And I'm not going to read 'em!"

Runt chuckled as Snappy stalked away. "All right," the bat-boy muttered. "Me—I ain't so particular about what I read. I already looked at all the funny sheets anyhow."

It required but a second for Runt to retrieve Malcolm Watford's original idea of putting joy into the soul of a disgruntled ball-player. And then with painful effort the boy read:

LET NO UNPLEASANT THOUGHT MAR YOUR DAY.

The great poet Longfellow said, "Let the dead past bury its dead." Forget the error

of yesterday—cast aside the petty trifles which cause you to do the things you should not do. Think pleasant thoughts—do pleasant things. Be pleasant.

Runt dropped the typewritten slip to the ground and shook his head slowly.

"It's a good thing," he muttered, "that Snappy *didn't* read that. After that error he made yesterday, if he'd 'a' read this, callin' his attention to it, somebody'd come mighty near bein' murdered, and I think his name is Malcolm Watford."

The other players were in equally as unpleasant frame of mind as Snappy Lassiter. Each one had received a typewritten pink slip enclosed in a pink envelope, and each slip, in addition to the appeal for pleasant thoughts, contained reference to some particular fault or weakness of the recipient.

Bat-Breaker Lawrence, one of the hardest-fighting, warmest-tempered men that ever played in a bush league, was rapidly approaching a state not unlike hydrophobia over the note handed him by the batboy. Bat-Breaker's note read:

PLEASANT THOUGHTS BEGET PLEASANT DEEDS.

Thought is parent of the act. Your thoughts control your actions and your actions influence others. A beast can fight. Man should be above the beast. Let your thoughts soar upward like the tuneful meadow lark and let your voice sound as music in the ears of your mates. Pleasant thoughts bring harmony.

"Harmony!" yelled Bat-Breaker. "Harmony hell! How can there be harmony when that ass is around stirring up something all the time? Of course I bawled Gantt out yesterday. He had it comin' to him. He'll say so himself if he's got any sense—"

"If who's got any sense?" Marvin Gantt, for two years catcher for the Terrors, advanced belligerently, the light of battle shining in his eyes.

Snappy Lassiter was the peacemaker. He opened peace negotiations by placing himself between his two teammates. Something in his tone caused both men to hesitate.

"You fellows cut out that stuff!" commanded Snappy. "Bat-Breaker threw wild, of course, but—"

"Who threw wild?" yelled Bat-Breaker.

"You did," said Snappy calmly. "You threw wild, but Gantt could have got it if—"

"I could have got it if—" screamed Gantt. "You're dead right there's an 'if'! A big if! And I'm not going to stand—"

Snappy smiled tolerantly. "We've all got to stand a lot, Marvin. I get peeved myself, sometimes. That fellow's pleasant thought stuff nearly runs me crazy. We were bad enough off without having him fastened onto us to mess things up; but we would have got through somehow—"

"You bet we would!" interrupted Gantt. "Mike wanted you to manage the team. You could have managed it, too, Snappy—"

"Maybe!" snorted Bat-Breaker. "I ain't sayin' *you* ain't all right, Snappy; but with a bunch of nuts like there is on this team—"

"And I could name one of the nuts right now!" shouted Gantt, glaring at Bat-Breaker Lawrence.

Bat-Breaker raised a huge, hairy arm on one end of which was fastened a terrible hand. "You go right along with your naming—you insignificant—"

"Forget it!" Snappy's voice betrayed his impatience. "You fellows are making fools of yourselves. Here we are—a team that was leading the league a week ago, now one game behind Wildview — which isn't natural — it isn't right. We've got the strongest team in this Lord-forgotten league. And we've got to show that we've got it. We've got exactly one week to get down to business and back in the lead. This is Wednesday — next Wednesday is Malcolm's birthday, and if we are in the lead Tuesday night, and win Wednesday's game, we get the bonus—"

"A bonus for winning a game on that simp's birthday," growled Bat-Breaker. "I'd rather give somebody a bonus for breaking his darn fool head. Whoever's fond enough of that lump of nothin' to give a bonus because it's his birthday is a fool."

Snappy grinned. "I agree with you

fully and completely. But old man Watford thinks more of his son than we do. And it's him that's givin' the bonus. He's got the money to do it with. He's the owner of a factory here, which is the biggest in this part of the country. And he owns the Terrors. Besides, we need the money. Mike needs his—"

Gantt nodded. "You bet he does. And we've got to get it for him."

Snappy was absolutely correct when he elucidated regarding Mike Donovan's need for certain little disks manufactured solely by a gentleman with long, straggling whiskers and striped pants. Mike was traveling an up-hill road—a road bristling with bumps and rough places—a road which held no sympathy for broken legs.

Donovan was a fair ball-player—not a star, or even a big league possibility—just a pretty good short-stop for such a team as the Terrors. But Mike's real value to the team lay in his ability to manage the bunch of likable, and at the same time scrappy bush-leaguers on the Terrors' pay-roll. When Mike assumed charge the year before it was about mid-season, and the team was defying all effort to oust it from cellar position. Under his guidance the former laughing-stock of the league finished in third place, and the citizens of Glendon—home of the Terrors—had never fully recovered from the shock.

This feat clinched Donovan's job as manager. Old man Watford—Glendon's big business man and owner of the Terrors—wanted a winning team, and in Donovan he believed he had the man who could give it to him.

This suited the team and it suited Donovan. It pleased the team because every man on it liked Donovan—it tickled Donovan because he needed the money. He was putting himself through college preparatory to practising law, and playing ball during the summer months was about the best way he knew to amass the necessary funds.

The illness of Mike's younger brother during the past year had cut into the manager's savings. The Donovans were several rungs below the limousine class in the matter of wealth, and Mike was being continually called upon to help out in emergencies.

Every man on the team knew of Donovan's need for money, and realized that he could use to good advantage every penny of his share of the bonus money offered by old man Watford, provided the team should be leading the league by the night of August 7—and win the game on August 8.

The club owner had made no offer of bonus money for winning the pennant. "That," said he, "will take care of itself. You boys are going to win the pennant. But this is my way of celebrating my boy's birthday—I want to celebrate it right."

But few of the boys had known Watford's son when this offer was made, and those who did know him had seen but little of the son and heir during the past few years. Malcolm had been away at college most of the time since the organization of the Terrors, and when he finished college had gone traveling.

The 1st of July the team's real troubles began. Always scrappy, but ordinarily on fairly good terms with each other, every member of the team, with the exception of the player-manager, became possessed of an ingrowing grouch. It started when the team lost three games in succession—a double-header and a single. Each man placed the blame on some other team member. Then came a poker game which nearly ended in a free-for-all knock-down-and-drag-out. From that time forward wordy warfare progressed rapidly, and Mike Donovan had his hands full holding the team together.

Mike, however, knew his men. He knew just how to appeal to the best that was in them, and it looked as if he might pull the team through with flying colors.

On July 15 Malcolm reached home. That was the day Mike broke his leg. The accident occurred when Mike made a possible two-base hit and was sliding for second.

This calamity put Mike in the hospital and the team without a manager. Donovan wanted Snappy Lassiter to manage the team during his enforced absence, feeling that the lively first-baseman was the one man on the nine who might save the situa-

tion. The other fellows liked Snappy. He was thoroughly alive. Full of pep. A fighter when fighting was necessary, but after all a fairly level-headed chap.

But old man Watford had a different idea. His son Malcolm should manage the team. Right then Malcolm was in bad with the Terrors. Every man on the team *knew* that Malcolm was the hoodoo that caused Mike to break his leg!

Malcolm had played ball—a little while—on the scrub team in college. From that time forward he had possessed no ambition to be a player, but was positive that he was the greatest manager that ever breathed.

Watford was fair enough regarding Mike Donovan. Malcolm would draw no salary; this would continue to go to Mike, and Mike would share in the bonus just the same as if he were playing.

The boys had no kick to make regarding this phase of the situation. But they didn't want Malcolm as manager. They wouldn't have him as manager.

And then—Edith Lane took a hand. Edith was stenographer in old man Watford's office, and it was generally understood that she and Mike Donovan would be married whenever Donovan should be firmly established as a lawyer.

If the boys hadn't been so fond of Mike it is more than likely they would have been jealous. As it was, they simply bestowed upon Edith their silent worship, and were glad that Mike was the man to win her.

Edith was a pretty little brunette—raven hair—big, sparkling eyes—a smile that no man could withstand. She told the boys that they must overcome their dislike for Malcolm—and fight to win. Like children caught at some mischief, they agreed.

Malcolm was not a player-manager; he was a disorganizing manager. It didn't take him long to discover that the team to a man was nursing a grouch, and this sort of thing was pie for the son of the club owner. What he didn't know about human nature, according to his belief, no one need try to learn. He quickly divined the weakness of each man and sought to overcome that weakness by a process of his own. Pleasant thinking, according to Malcolm, was the antidote for all human ills. It never occurred to him that once left alone the boys might develop some pleasant thoughts on their own account. He was the original pleasant thought artist of the world, and every one must be pleasant according to his formula.

Once each day Malcolm called the boys together and read a chapter from a little book which he always carried. This book was entitled "Pleasant Thoughts." When he struck an unusually stubborn subject, as in the case of Bat-Breaker Lawrence, Malcolm had certain pages of this book typewritten and turned over to the victim—usually accompanied by a wordy explanation from the Pleasant Thinker. And each morning there was delivered to the players a pink envelope bearing a special pleasant-thought message for the day.

Malcolm's person was as immaculate as his thoughts. A little above medium height and much below medium thickness and breadth, he made up for any deficiencies that his vanity allowed him to believe might exist by appearing upon any and all occasions faultlessly attired. He never became excited. He never displayed the slightest hint of anger. He was simply the kind of man calculated to drive a bunch of boys like those making up the Terrors to the bughouse.

Three days after Malcolm assumed charge of the team the boys were confronted with a new source for worry. Edith Lane, who had been typing Malcolm's pleasant thoughts, appeared to have fallen for the new manager!

This was hard to believe, but there was nothing else for the wild-eyed Terrors to do. They knew what they knew. There was no telling what a girl would do. All of them had experience enough with the gentler sex to know that. Didn't she allow Malcolm to hang around her nearly all the time? Certainly she did. Didn't she appear to enjoy his asinine remarks? Again—certainly.

This was a heart-breaker. Mike in the hospital—helpless—unable to put up a fight. And this bunch of nothing trying to cop his girl. And succeeding!

They were disappointed in Edith. They

expected better things of her. Each Terror shook his head and swore softly to himself that he'd have Malcolm's life blood for this treachery. After which he'd tell Edith what he thought of her and never look at another woman as long as he lived.

Any girl who could forget Mike Donovan for such a thing as Malcolm must certainly be lacking in the upper story. Handsome—well—er—no, Mike wasn't exactly handsome, but he was no scarecrow—likable Mike, to be treated like this.

Old man Watford's baseball club was just about as pleasant to associate with as a hornet's nest. Just let somebody start something! The Terrors might not be as great in numbers as the hornets, but they easily outclassed the warlike insects when it came to bottled wrath and a strong sense of imposition.

And so matters went from day to day. The players hating Malcolm—hating themselves, each other—everybody. Only their devotion to Mike, and the knowledge that he was getting a raw deal, held them together. They were determined, much as they disliked Malcolm, to get that bonus money—so that Mike might share.

August 5 the Terrors again wriggled into the lead. Not because of exceptionally good playing, but because of poor playing on the part of their opponents. Had there been a real team in the remaining five clubs making up the league, the Terrors under existing circumstances wouldn't have had a chance. But it was, ordinarily, by far the best team in the league, and there were times when it couldn't lose if any one wanted it to. And there were enough such occasions to keep Malcolm's pleasant thinkers near the top.

On August 6 the Terrors lost, tying with Wildview. August 7 the Terrors won and Wildview lost, putting the Terrors again in the lead and the bonus ready to go in the players' pockets if they won on the eighth Malcolm's birthday.

Snappy Lassiter went to his room that night in a bad frame of mind. Snappy knew that he had made a foolish play in the afternoon game—a play which almost lost the game for the Terrors. And he didn't feel any better when he found a pink envelope under his door, the contents of which read:

COME, GENTLE SLUMBER, AND MAKE PLEASANT MY THOUGHTS.

A hot temper and an excitable disposition are terrible things. I will cast these evils aside and lose myself in pleasant thought. On the morrow I will awaken and trip blithely to the ball park where I will strive with all the strength within me to be pleasant. Thus shall we win the way.

"The low-down skunk!" frothed Snappy. "I know what he means—the contemptible toad! He thinks I got mad to-day when that bunch was guyin' me for that play. 'Course I got mad! Who wouldn't?"

Snappy wasn't the only Terror to receive a pleasant thought message that night. They all got 'em. And each message hit a sore spot. Never was man more hated than Malcolm as each player glared at what he had drawn in the shape of the manager's latest effort. How could they win next day's game and get the bonus money with that fool thrusting such stuff as this upon them? Men had been murdered for less.

The boys had stood just about all of Malcolm and his pleasant thoughts they could. Since the day he assumed management of the team he had barked pleasant thoughts at them from the side-lines—he had preached pleasant thoughts before and after practise—he had administered pleasant thoughts in every conceivable manner. The boys were on fire with resentment.

Their nerves were near the snapping point—there was too much at stake to have this nuisance torturing them with his fool ideas at this time.

An indignation meeting was held that night in the room occupied by Snappy Lassiter and Marvin Gantt. The number of orators was twelve. There were twelve players on the team.

"I'm in favor," said Bat-Breaker Lawrence, "of runnin' the pest out of town—"

"That's a fine idea!" sneered Gantt. "You know what 'd happen to us if we did anything to old Watford's pet."

Bat-Breaker glared. "That's enough from you," he snapped. "I ain't forgot—"

"Well, forget it now," begged Snappy.

"You boys haven't done anything lately except remember unpleasant things."

Snappy's face was set, his tone firm, even—tense—as he continued. "Boys," said he, "we've got to win to-morrow! Mike must have his share of the bonus! The boy needs it! You all know what it means to him. He's lost his girl—that's trouble enough. We can't let him think we laid down on him. We've got to quit scrapping among ourselves like a bunch of kids."

Red Nicholson, third-baseman, rose to his feet. "Of course we want to win, Snappy. But how in the name of common sense can we do it with that pest out there calling attention to our every fault and spieling his pleasant thought stuff? I tell you, I believe that if I get another one of them blasted pink envelopes I'll go raving mad. I dream about the beastly things at night. I think of them all day—"

"Same here!" came from different parts of the room.

"And the simp's up at Lane's right now trying to marry Mike's girl," chimed in Eddie Reid, the Terror's right-fielder.

With much language of an inflammable nature the boys agreed that this was true. And the more they agreed on this the further away seemed their chance of winning the morrow's game. Private grievances were dug up. Two or three fist fights were narrowly averted. The meeting closed something after the manner of a stray dog convention.

II.

SPECTATORS at the Malcolm-birthday ball-game nearly fell off their seats when the Terrors trotted out on the field, their faces wreathed in smiles, beseeching their manager, whose countenance resembled a thunder-cloud, to take a grip on himself and think pleasant thoughts.

Everybody in Glendon knew that this game was in celebration of Malcolm's birthday, just as everybody in that little town knew that they were seeing the players smile for the first time in weeks.

The players were doing more than smile. They were laughing—free, hearty, joyous laughter—a reminder of the old days when Mike Donovan was at the helm.

And Malcolm? He had for days begged his players to be pleasant, and now, never at any time had a one of them nursed such a grouch as the manager carried. Malcolm even swore! And every time Malcolm swore the boys yelled and begged him to think pleasant thoughts.

Exasperated beyond human endurance, Malcolm whirled on Marvin Gantt. "Another remark and we'll mix!" he yelled.

Gantt smiled. "Stop, Malcolm, old boy, and think. Raise your eyes to the beautiful skies and think pleasant thoughts!"

"You go to hell!" screamed Malcolm. "You fellows aren't out here to be comedians. You're here to play ball."

They had him going. And he went. Malcolm ranted and raved. The game was well worth witnessing. The Oakdale team joined the Terrors in pleading that Malcolm be pleasant. The grand stand took it up. The bleachers invented new words to express their appreciation.

The game was warm. Both teams fought to win. But the Terrors for the first time in weeks were not fighting among themselves. They were playing as one man. And they won. Score three to one.

III.

LATE that evening Snappy Lassiter read for the twenty-fifth time a small pink slip which had come to him just before the game in one of Malcolm's pink pleasant-thought envelopes and which he promised himself to keep forever. It read:

Boys:

Malcolm will hardly send you any pleasant thoughts to-day, so I will. I know exactly how all of you feel toward him and I've been doing everything in my power to show him, by gentle means, what a fool he is, so the team will have a chance. He is hopeless, so I've adopted different tactics.

I've just told him in plain language what a boob he is and he's thoroughly mad for the first time in his life. Keep him that way and win the game.

You boys stop scrapping with each other. Make things warm for Malcolm if you want to. Give him pleasant thoughts. Mike and I are betting on you. We're thinking pleasant thoughts about you.

EDITH LANE.

The Fairest Flower

by John Charles Beecham

Author of "The Argus Pheasant," "Koyala the Beautiful," "A Daughter of Borneo," etc.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE WIND CAVE.

LAKI SADAHANA WORUNG rapidly recovered from the effects of Borgeson's blow and his fall. The old man possessed the remarkable vigor of the savage who has lived cleanly in the mountain air, and soon began to display an agility astonishing for one of his years. Erskine and Kantoor had difficulty in keeping up with him.

"Hadn't you better suggest that we go a little slower?" Bruce finally inquired of the orchid hunter.

"We have no time to lose, *mynheer*," Kantoor panted. "The man's friends will probably have found him by this time, and be in pursuit."

"How large a party have they?" Erskine asked. The orchid-hunter translated his question.

Laki Sadahana took a *tebuku*, or string, from his pouch. He rapidly placed six knots on one end, and eight on the other. Then he showed the string to his interlocutor with a brief explanation.

"Six Malays and eight Dyaks," Kantoor interpreted. "The Dyaks are of the Seribas clan, who are good fighters."

"Have they rifles?" Erskine inquired.

"He says five of the Malays have rifles, but they are not very good," Kantoor announced after the customary exchange. "Their chief, Serif Massar, and the white man, 'Borg-saam,' have good rifles."

"Borg-saam — probably Borgeson," Erskine commented. "He looked like a Scandinavian."

"We're not so badly off after all," Bruce observed gaily. "We have one good rifle, which is as many as they've got."

"A Malay with a breech-loader in a country like this isn't to be despised," Erskine declared gloomily. "Those beggars handle their antiquated weapons pretty well."

He turned to Kantoor.

"How much farther is it to this refuge he speaks of?" he inquired. Kantoor put the question.

"About a half-hour's journey," the orchid-hunter eventually announced. "It is a cave, known as the *Lobong Angin*, or Wind Cave." Supplementing Laki Sadahana's explanation, he said:

"We'll probably find it inhabited by swifts, and the floor covered with the deposits of centuries." He turned once more to the witch-doctor.

"What is the white man doing here?" he inquired. "What does he seek?"

"He seeks the nests of the birds that the men with yellow faces eat," Laki Sadahana explained.

"Are there not such nests in the Wind Cave?"

"There are, but the opening is very small, and few know of it," Laki Sadahana declared. "No Dyak will enter it because of the spirits. Yet the *hantu token* have always been kind to me, who serve them."

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 30.

Kantoor interpreted their colloquy.

"Borgeson and his Malays are not apt to be frightened away by spirits," Erskine observed troubledly.

"We must chance it," Kantoor replied. "It is the safest refuge he knows of, unless we return to the jungle, which isn't to be thought of."

Leaving the trail, the witch-doctor led them through chasms and rough protuberances of cliff in a course that trended steadily upward. Presently he stopped at the edge of a sharp precipice that dropped sheer down a distance of four or five hundred feet. Catching hold of a bush he lowered himself to a ledge about five feet below the rim of the sheer cliff. The next moment he popped out if sight like a jack-rabbit.

Bruce rubbed his eyes. "If I hadn't seen it I could not have believed it," he exclaimed jubilantly. "It will take a clever hound to follow us there."

Rambuta followed. She shyly urged the "*tuan*" to go first, but Bruce was smilingly firm. He held her hands as she dropped down the ledge. Her face lifted to his for an instant as her feet touched the rock and a flush of color transfused it. Bruce came perilously near succumbing to the temptation to kiss the cherry-red lips, so close to his. Only the presence of the others restrained him. Probably she saw what was in his mind, for she dropped swiftly and disappeared behind a scarp of rock.

Kantoor was next, then Erskine. Bruce made a long survey of the back trail before going down. There was nothing to indicate a human presence. Lowering himself to the ledge, he perceived a small opening in the side of the cliff, just large enough to admit a man's body. A few feet beyond it widened and deepened rapidly. Stooping low, he ran to the end of the passage, which opened on a huge vault.

The roof towered high above them, and was peopled with innumerable birds that swirled in a noisy cloud, disturbed by their entrance. The walls were of gray limestone. It was murky within, for the only light came from the passage whereby they had entered, and a narrow crack, or fissure in the rock high above.

Bruce considered the military possibilities of the cave with a critical air.

"I don't like the looks of this," he vouchsafed to Erskine. "They might trap us here and starve us to death."

"The priest says there is another passage opening on the opposite side of the mountain," Erskine replied.

"Good. We can always escape. But how about the cleft above? It looks to me as though there were three entrances to be watched."

"That opens under a broad ledge of rock, in a deep chasm, the priest told us," Erskine explained. "All we have to do is to watch the passage by which we entered. A man lying in there could see any one stepping down to the ledge and pick him off before he could enter. This is really quite a fortress."

"How about fire?" Bruce inquired.

"Fire and smoke are the only foes we have to fear," Erskine replied gravely. "If it comes to that we'll have to pass through the mountain. But I haven't the slightest expectation of their finding us here."

"I'll take the first watch," Bruce announced. "That will leave you and Mynheer Kantoor free to make us all comfortable."

It was tiresome and unpleasant, lying on the rock floor of the passage, strewn with the droppings of untold generations of swifts. At times the ammonia odor was almost overpowering. Were it not for the girl, Bruce thought, it would be preferable to face Borgeson and his crew in the open, and settle the issue. But she must not be exposed to further danger. He wriggled uncomfortable and eased his aching limbs.

The murmur of their voices reached him. At times he heard the clear, silvery tinkle of the girl's voice, eagerly interrupting. He had not known the Kayan language could be so melodious. The natives themselves spoke it in a flat monotone that made it difficult to distinguish their meaning, even when one had acquired the essential phrases.

His thoughts reverted to Rambuta. The girl was a beauty, he acknowledged admiringly. She was as white as he himself; her perfect features had not a single Malay or

Dyak characteristic. There could be no question of her Caucasian origin. What a sensation she would cause at Palm Beach or Newport, he reflected, and smiled.

"Now don't get notions, Bruce Westfield," he admonished himself. "You can make provision to have the girl educated, if you like, but let her stay on this side of the water. What would mother and Janet say?"

He chuckled at their consternation should he present her.

The murmur of voices continued. Bruce looked back enviously. He recollected that Kantoor had said that a mystery involved the girl. Probably the witch-doctor was explaining it now. Wasn't it nearly time for his watch to end? A burning curiosity to hear her story possessed him. To himself he said, however, that he was eager to confound Erskine, who had twitted him about his wood-nymph.

After what seemed an interminable interval he heard a scuffling in the passage back of him, and turning, saw Kantoor approach.

"Have you heard anything, *mynheer?*" the little orchid-hunter whispered hoarsely with a tragic air as he neared.

Bruce smiled. "Nothing, Mynheer Kantoor," he replied. "That is, except your chatter below."

"We have had a bit of lunch," the Dutchman explained. "Eggs, and rice that Laki Sadahana had stored here. He is a very provident man, the *manang*. At least we shall not starve."

"Is there water?" Bruce inquired.

"There is a spring farther back," Kantoor replied. "But they are waiting for you, *mynheer*."

Bruce needed no further urging. He crawled back along the passage and rejoined the others. Rambuta welcomed him back with a shy smile that hid the thumpings in her bosom. In her eyes he had assumed the dimensions of a demigod since the fight with Borgeson. The trader had heretofore seemed to her to be the most terrible and irresistible of men, since every human being she knew cringed before him.

Luncheon over, Erskine and Bruce sat apart.

"Did you learn anything concerning her origin?" was Westfield's first question.

"Not much," the lawyer replied briefly. "The witch-doctor says she is a Karen-child, whatever that is. It seems that they attribute any lightness of color that may occur among them to a reversion to their early ancestors, who emigrated here from the Hindu Koosh ages ago."

"I don't believe it," Bruce declared vehemently. "There's not a trace of Dyak in her face. Dress her in American clothes and place her in a New York drawing-room, and you wouldn't be able to tell her apart from any of the girls of our best families. Except that she has more beauty than the average," he amended.

"I have thought so myself," Erskine declared. He looked at the girl with a curious, fixed intentness. There were lines of strain in his face; the terrible experiences of the past few weeks had apparently worn his nervous system to a fine edge.

Bruce followed his gaze. A pleased, winsome look gathered on his features as he studied the fine, delicate profile, her dark eyes sparkling animatedly as she conversed with Laki Sadahana, her cherry-red lips widening into a smile as brilliant as the bloom of the flame-of-the-forest tree, and her slender fingers curving gracefully as she pushed back stray strands of glorious brown hair that rippled down her shoulders in joyous abandon.

Rambuta glanced in their direction. She started and flushed as she noted their intent gaze, and then she flashed a radiant smile on Bruce. Erskine stole a look at his protégé — noted his eager eyes, and frowned. His gaze reverted thoughtfully to the girl.

"No, she's not a Dyak," he murmured. "I wonder—she can't be more than sixteen." His lips met tightly, as if in pain.

"Ten or fifteen years ago there were pirates along these shores," Bruce observed, his thoughts running in parallel lines with the lawyer's. "They wouldn't think much of looting a vessel in those days and killing all on board. They might have taken her in that way."

He did not notice the spasm of pain that crossed Erskine's face.

"I suppose so," the latter agreed in a hoarse, strained voice. "It's getting close here, isn't it? The ammonia smell is quite sickening. I hope we sha'n't have to stay here long."

"We're agreed on that!" Bruce exclaimed earnestly. "I thought to myself awhile ago, when I was lying in the passage, that if it wasn't for the girl we might make a break for it."

"The *manang* suggests that we stay for a day or two," Erskine observed. "He proposed to leave after nightfall and go to one of the Kayan villages about a day's journey away to summon help."

"I'd vote that we go with him, if it wasn't for Rambuta," Bruce declared. "But we mustn't expose her to any further risk; the country is too open. In the jungle she would be safe." His eyes twinkled merrily. "I ought to have my revenge for the chaffing you gave me about my wood-nymph, uncle. Isn't she all I said of her and more?"

"I should say your imagination didn't do her justice," the lawyer responded dryly.

Bruce stole another covert glance at the girl. She was looking at him, and smiled back delightedly. Presently he turned to Erskine with a pucker in his brow.

"Somehow she reminds me of some one," he said. "Some one I know very well. It's the oddest thing! But I can't exactly identify the resemblance. Have you noticed anything of the sort?"

Erskine choked.

"Don't!" he cried hoarsely, and started to rise. At that instant the sharp cry of a rifle sounded in the passage.

"They're here," Bruce shouted, leaping to his feet in mingled relief and exultation. "Now we can finish the matter."

CHAPTER XX.

THE TRADER'S STRATAGEM.

BRUCE scrambled up the passage until he joined Kantoor. The little Dutchman's eyes were sparkling brightly and his lips were set in a firm, hard line.

"God forgive me, but I have killed a man," he said in a hoarse whisper as Bruce crawled alongside of him. "He was standing on the ledge there, and I was going to shoot him in the legs when he bent down suddenly and got my ball between the eyes." He shuddered.

"Was it one of that scoundrel's crew?" Bruce asked.

"Ja, *mynheer,* I heard his voice," Kantoor assured.

"Then don't worry about God forgiving you," Bruce returned lightly. "The devil has had all that crowd marked as his own for a long time."

"We are in the presence of death, *mynheer,*" Kantoor rebuked sternly. "'Slay not; vengeance is mine, I will repay,' saith the Lord."

"Let me have your gun," Bruce rejoined quietly. He had momentarily forgotten the little Dutchman's deep religious nature.

Erskine crawled up to join them.

"Do you need any help?" he asked.

"One of us can hold this place," Bruce rejoined. "Some one ought to watch the other end of the cave, for it's possible that they may know it has two openings. Then the third man should maintain liaison between us."

"Let me take your revolver, *mynheer,*" Kantoor requested in a low voice of Westfield. "I will watch the other end of the cave."

"Possibly, in view of the fact that you'd rather not shoot a man, we'd better let Mr. Erskine take it," Bruce ventured.

"The sword of Joab was not defiled until he soiled it in the blood of Abner, the son of Ner, and Amasa, the son of Jether," Kantoor rejoined gravely. "It is permitted man to defend himself against the doers of iniquity."

"As you wish, *mynheer,*" Bruce responded, giving him the weapon. He realized the inner battle the little man had fought and won. There was rare stuff in the orchid-hunter, he acknowledged admiringly, the stern conviction and courage that made Cromwell's Ironsides.

Kantoor crept away. Bruce and Erskine, concealing themselves in an abrasion, awaited the next move of the enemy. They heard a low-voiced consultation above, the words of which were indistinguishable.

Then the muzzle of a rifle was suddenly thrust into the passage and a brown hand pulled the trigger. The ball shot past them into the open vault. The colony of swifts within set up a shrill clamor, and scores of them swept by them in a frightened flight for the open air.

"I'll discourage that sort of a thing," Bruce whispered grimly, sighting along the rifle he had taken from Borgeson.

"Let them shoot," Erskine rejoined warningly, pulling him away. "They're only wasting ammunition, and they possibly may be none too well provided. When they find they're accomplishing nothing they may become more rash and we can deal with them more effectually."

Bruce saw the logic of the argument. They lay behind the rock while shot after shot rang startlingly through the cavern and the alarmed swifts poured steadily out of the funnel.

Presently the figure of a Malay appeared at the farther end. He leaped into the opening and flattened himself against the wall. His fierce, ugly visage turned in their direction, striving to pierce the gloom. Perceiving them, he uttered a triumphant yell and raised his rifle. The next moment Bruce's weapon spoke and he spun forward, lying face down in the cleft.

A howl of rage rose above. Bruce distinguished the voice of the trader, rising above the clamor, in a very torrent of abuse and profanity. He was trying to drive the Dyaks and Malays forward in a concerted rush, to overcome by weight of numbers, knowing that those who went first would inevitably be shot down, but hoping to prevail at the end. They sullenly refused. Bruce heard a voice in Malay respectfully addressing Borgeson as the clamor finally ceased, and the trader's angry response.

"We ought to have Kantoor here," he observed to Erskine.

"I think he's telling the white man that the men refuse to risk their lives in such a reckless venture, and suggesting another plan," Erskine responded quietly. "I caught a word here and there, not enough to learn what he suggests, however."

Whatever the Malay's suggestion was, it prevailed. Bruce heard another torrent of profanity, roared in a bull-like voice that sent the Dyaks and Malays scurrying. He could hear the patter of their footsteps on the rocks.

Something touched his feet; reached up to his knees. He turned swiftly. The girl, Rambuta, crouched at his feet, her eyes staring wildly in terror. At every fresh outburst from above she trembled like a battered aspen-tree.

"*Tuan?*" she gasped faintly, pleadingly, drawing nearer to him.

"This is no place for you, Rambuta," he started to say, with a peremptory motion indicating that she must return to the security of the cave; but a second look into her face restrained him. She was apparently in a very panic of fear at the sound of the trader's voice, and felt safe only so long as she was near him. A glow of pleasurable exultation filled him. He thrilled at the thought that some human creature felt such extreme dependence on him.

"Hadn't she better go back?" Erskine observed.

"She's too badly frightened," Bruce responded. "That brute must have been a very devil to her. I only hope I can lay hands on him again."

He ground his teeth in a burst of passion and hatred for the big, sneering bully above, who hid behind his cringing slaves.

An hour passed without a resumption of the attack. Rambuta crouched behind them, one hand resting confidingly on Bruce's ankle. Sheltered by that stalwart form, she knew she need not fear. Her thoughts reverted to the terrible battle in which he had crushed and beaten down the man who claimed her, and she thrilled once more at his prowess and the power behind his blows.

"*Tuan,*" she murmured caressingly. "Thou hast been good to me, mighty *tuan.*"

The words were unintelligible to Bruce, but he could not mistake her meaning. He leaned back and patted her hand. Her eyes met his in girlish adoration and worship. He thrilled with pride and turned resolutely back to his task of watching the circle of light ahead.

The light was suddenly shut off. A bun-

dle of brush-wood and *alang-alang*, the long-leafed grass of the wilderness, had been dropped down before it. A long pole reached down and thrust it in, clogging the entrance completely. More brushwood followed.

"They're going to smoke us out!" Erskine exclaimed. "I was afraid of this."

A flame leaped through the grasses. Wisps of smoke began curling in their direction.

"We can't do any more good here," Erskine declared. "We'd better get out of this."

They crawled down the passage. Behind them followed a rolling column of smoke that spiralled to the roof of the vault. Once more the birds resumed their shrill protest. Their wild flight caused the smoke to scatter and settle lower.

Erskine looked speculatively up at the ceiling.

"We'd better call Mynheer Kantoor and hold a council of war," he suggested. "It won't be long before they find that cleft above and close it, if it's humanly possible."

The little orchid-hunter joined them. He, too, had noticed the smoke, which was rapidly filling the cave. As he neared he began to question Laki Sadahana.

"It's fully a half-hour's journey through the passage to the other side of the mountain," he announced. "Laki Sadahana says we will have to hurry or we'll be overcome by smoke. There is a strong draft through there from this side, and it's already carrying smoke down. I think we had better start at once."

A shower of limestone fragments, birds-nests, and other débris fell around them. Looking up they barely discerned through the thick haze a log lying across the cleft in the roof.

"Ha! They've found our chimney," Erskine exclaimed. "They'll have it closed soon. The sooner we leave the better."

They picked up their weapons and hurried forward, the witch-doctor taking the lead. He constantly urged them to make haste. Rambuta walked between Erskine and Bruce, timidly touching his arm from time to time. But when he gallantly offered it to her she shrank back and shook her head in timorous refusal.

"You're an odd bunch of contradictions, like all your sex," he mused humorously. "I can't quite make you out."

The passage was rough, and at times so low that they were forced to crawl. At first the smoke was light, occasioning them small discomfort. But presently it became heavier. The Dyaks were evidently successful in their effort to close the vent.

The white men began to cough. Rambuta and Laki Sadahana, accustomed to the illy ventilated Dyak houses, were able to endure the acrid fumes longer, but after a time they, too, found their lungs filling.

"Faster!" the witch-doctor urged.

They passed a depression in the rock where a pool of water had gathered. On Erskine's suggestion they dampened their kerchiefs and fastened them over their faces. Laki Sadahana paused with ill-concealed impatience.

"We must hurry or *Asap*, which is the breath of the flame, will overcome us," he croaked warningly.

"Go on," Erskine assented.

The smoke was now so thick that it was impossible to see one another. Bruce, who was closing up the rear, stumbled along uncertainly over the rough floor, several times barely saving himself from falling. He knew only in the vaguest sort of way that the girl clung closely to him, supporting his tottering footsteps now and then. He offered her his kerchief, but she refused it.

The smoke smarted and reddened their eye-balls. It was a thick fog of biting fumes, an enveloping blanket that wrapped them in its thick folds and cut off their breath. It whirled and swirled about them, thicker each moment, a fiend that clawed at their eyes, smarted their lacerated hands and faces, obstructed their air passages, and thrust its red-hot digits into their bursting lungs. That is a quality of thick smoke. Water brings a roaring in the ears, a momentary strangling sensation, a medley of fantastic visions, and then a sweet oblivion. Many gases do the same. But smoke is a personal enemy, that inflicts a maximum of excruciating torture upon its helpless victim before it overcomes him.

Bruce began to lose all sense of direction. He knew vaguely that somewhere in the whirling murk before him the others were still pressing on. Dimly he heard Erskine calling him, and habit led him to answer.

He scarcely recognized his own voice, it was so hoarse and thin. He wondered how much farther they had to go. Odd calculations on the number of paces before them, the increasing thickness of the smoke, and the limit of human endurance mingled in inextricable confusion in his brain. He thought of the girl and reached toward her. She grasped his arm.

The world flared scarlet. Out of the murk a burst of flame came and sucked him within its enveloping folds. He stumbled, fell. Then he knew no more.

When consciousness returned he found himself staring into a dome of azure blue. To the left the tall escarpment of Mount Kini Balu rose serenely, cloud-mantled. A thin ribbon of water ran beside him, tumbling among the rocks like a playful child, and losing itself finally in the tree-growth below.

Rambuta's face leaned over him. A glorious smile chased away the look of anxious concern that had gathered him. She rose with an excited cry, of which he understood only the word "*tuan,*" now grown so melodious to his ears.

They clustered around him.

"Feeling better?" Erskine inquired solicitously.

Bruce breathed deeply and expelled the accumulation of smoke fumes from his congested lungs. His chest ached, and throbbing pains ran through his forehead, but to these he gave no thought. It was good to be in the blessed, free mountain air again and breathe the pure atmosphere floating down the gray slopes of Kini Balu.

"Fit as a fiddle," he declared cheerily, sitting up. "Are we all here?"

"Every one of us," Erskine assured. "You dropped less than a hundred feet from the entrance. It was this little girl who carried you out."

He patted Rambuta's shoulder. She smiled happily at her *tuan*.

"She's more than evened the score between us," Bruce declared gratefully, offering his hand. Rambuta took it shyly, wondering at this pleasant custom of the white man. Bruce paused, at a loss how to express himself.

"Tell her I'm grateful, will you, Mynheer Kantoor?" he requested. "First thing I'm going to do, when we get a little time together, is to learn enough Malay to teach you English, my dear."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE KAYANS RESCUE.

REACTION expresses itself in contraries. The taciturn individual becomes talkative, the garrulous preserves a stricken silence when a strain is removed. This is the elasticity of human nature, which alone enables man to endure the vicissitudes to which his body and his mind are so frequently subject. No other creature could survive the terrific buffetings of fate which so many of the human species are called upon to endure, not once, but many times in their span of existence. Thus it was a supreme mercy that made man alone, of all creatures, a rational being, and gave to others a lesser sensitiveness and capacity for pain.

Bruce was the average well-bred American, a good companion, but uninclined to loquacity. Many of his friends, indeed, deemed him reserved. He carried himself with a quiet dignity, and oftentimes his smile and a quiet, pleased light in his eyes expressed more than his lips. Yet he had found a normal and healthy enjoyment in life as he quietly joined in the various amusements of his selected coterie of intimates and was universally liked.

In the wilderness his former taciturnity had gradually sloughed from him. He became more cheery and familiar. This was more or less due to the fact that Erskine, who had been the life of jolly little dinners at the club and was often said to be younger in heart than many of the young men about town with whom he associated, developed a tendency toward gloominess and long silences. Bruce secretly felt that his uncle had burdened himself with an un-

warranted responsibility for his welfare, due to the fact that the latter had suggested the journey. He feared that Erskine was fretting over the situation they found themselves, and was wearing out his nerves with anxiety. For this reason he felt it his duty to disseminate cheer and divert the lawyer's thoughts.

No sense of duty, however, nor artificial cheerfulness was responsible for his conduct the next few minutes. Releasing Rambuta's hand he turned to Kantoor and asked:

"Are we quite safe, *mynheer?*"

"For the present, yes, *mynheer,*" the orchid-hunter gravely acknowledged.

"Then to the devil with care," Bruce gaily rollicked. Throwing his head back he sang lustily, in a rich barytone, the chorus:

> For it's always fair weather,
> When good fellows get together--

Rambuta clapped her hands joyfully at the close. She turned to Kantoor with an earnest plea, her brown eyes sparkling animatedly. Thrusting her slender fingers inside her *slendang* she produced a Dyak harp, made of bamboo, an instrument popular with the women of Borneo, and signified that she would play.—

"She wants you to sing again, *mynheer,*" Kantoor explained. "But that is unwise. We are not so far away from our enemies but that they may hear us and guess our escape."

"How far?" Bruce demanded matter-of-factly.

"Not more than a half mile, as nearly as I can estimate from what Laki Sadahana tells me. But they will have to pass through the same tunnel we passed through. Deep chasms and precipices obstruct the road over the ridge, and render it wholly impassable. That gives us a long lead if we start now, for they will have to wait until the smoke clears away before they can enter."

"Where are we going?" Bruce demanded.

"There is a Kayan village about a day's journey distant, Laki Sadahana says. The village is strong, with about two hundred spears. Laki Sadahana assures us that we will find protection there."

"I hate to leave this country without making another try for orchids," Bruce said gloomily. "It will take thirty days before we can get up another party to penetrate the interior. I'm afraid time will be running rather short to enable me to make good on my bet with Jimmie Allemann."

"There's no chance of our doing anything until we have made ourselves strong enough to cope with this man Borgeson," Erskine pointed out quietly. "You must remember we have already left the orchid country behind; it lies on the other side of the watershed. Besides," he added significantly, "there's another consideration. We must bring this young lady to a place of safety."

Bruce's face cleared.

"Of course," he agreed. "It was thoughtless of me." He flushed, and glanced at Rambuta. She repaid him with an adoring stare. It was the schoolgirl type of adoration, Bruce knew; the tribute of innocence to the hero of the hour. He flushed again, conscious of his deficiencies.

"You are going to be mightily disappointed some day, young lady, when you know more about me," was the thought that formed in his brain.

Unconsciously, however, he squared his shoulders and resolved to measure up to her esteem.

"We might as well be going, then," he declared, with affected unconcern. Erskine, who had noted the byplay, smiled, and then looked thoughtfully at the girl.

Rambuta, looking up presently, caught his glance. It held the puzzled stare of the searcher—of one who is vainly seeking to tear away the cobwebs from a forgotten recess in the chamber of memory. The look, and the puzzled frown that accompanied it, startled her. She pressed closer to Laki Sadahana, twining her arm within his. Erskine quickly diverted his glance, and the odd expression of pain once more flitted across his face.

"I wonder—" he murmured, and gazed silently into the rose-tinted masses of fleece cushioning on Kini Balu. But they told him nothing.

They had not gone far when night fell, and they were forced to camp. Camp was pitched in a recess between two ridges of rock. A tiny fire was built under a canopy of leaves, that it might not betray them to their enemies.

"A halt just at this time is awkward," Erskine commented. "The cave will be clear of smoke by to-morrow morning, and they'll soon discover we're not in it. They'll follow us hotfoot, for that man Borgeson isn't the type that gives up easily. Besides, he'll be rabid with desire to even up for the thrashing you gave him, Bruce. We must start at the first sign of light to-morrow."

He asked Kantoor to communicate this decision to Laki Sadahana. The witch-doctor nodded an emphatic assent.

"He says that by noon we will reach a more heavily wooded country," Kantoor announced. "Rambuta will stay behind then and give us warning of the approach of our enemies."

"No, she sha'n't," Bruce emphatically negatived. "I'll act as rear-guard myself."

Laki Sadahana grinned when this was communicated to him. His reply caused a smile to appear on Kantoor's features.

"The *manang* says that you are strong and brave, but that in the jungle you are an old man who walks with a stick," he translated. "I am sure, *mynheer,* that his suggestion is a wise one. The good Lord has endowed the child with a marvelous strength in her arms, and the agility of a monkey. We should be foolish not to make use of her powers. Remember how she laughed at us and kept out of our sight when we were in the forest."

Bruce could not but concede the wisdom of the suggestion. He mentally resolved, however, to lag behind the others as far as he dared and give Rambuta such protection as his rifle could afford.

As they descended the slopes of the Tohen Batu, the great watershed, their progress became appreciably slower. The country took on a varied aspect, huge outcroppings of rock interspersing with deep ravines. Vegetation took a foothold in every crack and crevice of the rocks, which a plentiful erosion, due to heavy tropical rains, and the contributions of wind and birds filled up almost as rapidly as they appeared.

Kantoor was the only one of the three white men at all at home in such country, and even he confessed that he found the descent laborious. Several water-courses also retarded them, for it took time to find a safe crossing, the streams being largely a succession of deep pools and swift rapids, where a fall on the slippery rocks threatened death.

Laki Sadahana surprised them all by his vigor. He constantly urged them to make haste, and looked back anxiously from every coign of vantage from which they were able to observe the back trail.

"Our enemies are slothful or they would have overtaken us by now," he confessed to Kantoor. "The men of the Seribas clan who are with them are swift travelers, for they live in a hilly country such as this. We could go faster were it not for your companions. The young warrior is swift enough, but the old buffalo staggers like a cow that has just mothered."

There was truth in his observation on Erskine. The lawyer was rapidly nearing the end of his powers. Starvation and fever had weakened him, and he lacked the recuperative powers of the junglebred Dutchman and his youthful companion. He found the utmost difficulty in maintaining the pace Rambuta and Laki Sadahana set through the rough, broken country, and was unfeignedly glad when they halted at noon.

"Will you be able to make it, uncle?" Bruce asked anxiously.

Erskine smiled wanly.

"I think so, my boy," he replied. "If I can't, go on and leave me. I'll crawl into the bush somewhere and hide until you get back with the Kayans."

"And leave you to the mercy of that brute?" Bruce exclaimed indignantly. "I should say not. Mynheer Kantoor and I will make shift to carry you in some way."

"That would be utter foolishness, Bruce," the lawyer returned quietly. "We would almost certainly be overtaken then, provided our enemies are following us, as I have no doubt they are. If they should

find me, small harm will be done. They have no grudge against me, and I think even Borgeson would hesitate to kill a white man. He'll know he can't trust his slaves not to repeat the story."

"We won't argue the question," Bruce returned obstinately. "But we'll either all reach the Kayan village, or none of us will get there."

The noon rest was brief. Laki Sadahana, who, by virtue of his knowledge of the country, had assumed a tacit leadership, permitted them only a few brief mouthfuls of the boiled rice he had prepared in the cave and carried with him, and then he set out again on the steady, tiresome pace that was beginning to tell so on the white men. After an hour Erskine faltered.

"I guess I'm done for," he said faintly, when Bruce leaped toward him with a cry.

"Throw your arms over my shoulders while I get a good grip on you," Bruce directed, removing his rifle to his left hand.

"Go on," the lawyer commanded energetically. "I can take care of myself."

"Not without you," Bruce declared stubbornly.

"Let me help, *mynheer,*" a quiet voice spoke at his side. It was the orchid-hunter. "Laki Sadahana can carry our guns, while we cradle Mynheer Erskine between us. I will show you."

He crossed hands, and bade Bruce do the same. Then he directed Erskine to place an arm over each of their shoulders. The lawyer protested, but Kantoor silenced him with the statement:

"*Mynheer,* you must do as I say or we shall all perish."

It was Bruce who first faltered under the added strain.

"Let us rest just a minute or two," he suggested after they had gone about a fourth of a mile. Kantoor nodded assent. He was saving his breath.

Laki Sadahana, who had been scanning the treetops in their wake, suddenly started.

"Rambuta comes," he exclaimed in a low voice. His keen eyes immediately scanned the forest to ascertain the possibilities for defense. Not far away lay the huge bole of a fallen kenari-tree. He urged them thither.

"They come," Rambuta fluttered breathlessly as she swung down a huge creeper into their midst.

Laki Sadahana received the news with a cool nod of his head. In his younger days, before he had become celebrated as a *manang,* he had participated in many a raid. Somewhere, in a hidden corner of his hermitage, there hung a row of knotted human heads. But of these he never spoke, even to the old men who visited him.

"Haste thou, my daughter, and summon the Kayans of the Meribong," he said. "Thou wilt find them not more than an hour's journey distant. Not far ahead there is a great river. Follow its course down-stream till you come to the village of the Meribong. Tell them it is Laki Sadahana who calls."

"But the young *tuan?*" she cried in fearful anxiety.

"He is a warrior; his place is here," Laki Sadahana replied. "Haste now, Karen-child."

Bruce had listened to the dialogue without understanding it.

"Where is she going?" he demanded when he saw her spring into the trees.

"To get help," Kantoor replied laconically. "Now, *mynheer,* if you will be so good as to hide yourself behind this piece of timber. They may be here any moment."

They lay in breathless silence. Laki Sadahana's jungle-trained eyes and Kantoor's scanned the forest.

There was a rustling of leaves ahead. A Dyak skimmed swiftly along the plainly marked trail. Behind him swung two Malays, armed with rifles of an antiquated pattern. Their fierce eyes glittered venomously.

They reached the spot where Rambuta had rejoined her friends. The Dyak's skilled eyes quickly read the story—Erskine dropped by the men who were carrying him, and the rush into the brush for shelter. His eyes roamed over the jungle, coal-black, luminous.

"*Ah-doe! Ah-doe!*" he shrieked, shrilling, lifting a pointed finger.

Bruce's rifle cracked. One of the Malays dropped his rifle and clapped his hand

to his breast. He gazed at them with an expression of pained amazement that rapidly glazed, stepped a pace forward, and plunged down. The other Malay and the Dyak guide promptly plunged into the protecting cover of the brush.

"Good judgment, Bruce," Erskine commended in a whisper. "You got the man with the gun. Watch, now, and don't let them recover it."

Far back in the forest glades they heard Borgeson's voice shouting orders to his slaves. Then silence fell again, broken only by a rustling in the brush. Suddenly two guns spoke almost simultaneously. Two leaden slugs buried themselves spitefully into the soft timber of the fallen tree.

Bruce peered cautiously through the screen of leaves he had made for himself. He was unable to detect an alien presence. A moment later Laki Sadahana pulled his sleeve and pointed silently to a low shrub, stirring slightly. Looking carefully, Bruce presently discerned a thatch of black hair. He pointed his rifle quickly and fired. There was no further stirring in that bush, but they were forced to take cover under the storm of bullets that swept in their direction.

Among the crashing discharges Bruce presently detected an alien note. It was the staccato challenge of a magazine rifle. A moment later a bullet neatly flecked a leaf from his screen and passed just beneath his chin. He quickly moved away from the dangerous spot.

"That devil's got a rifle and my range," he murmured to Erskine in response to the latter's whispered question. "If I can only locate him now."

Another Malay exposed himself. They were crawling nearer. But Bruce paid no attention to them. He was resolved to get the man with the rifle. The latter was their most dangerous foe, he perceived: with him gone the others would soon be put to rout. Through Kantoor he asked Laki Sadahana's assistance in locating Borgeson.

A Dyak so far forgot himself as to crawl into the open. It was his last adventure. Kantoor accounted for him, using up the last shot in Bruce's automatic.

Laki Sadahana presently crawled near them.

"There is no white man here," he reported through Kantoor. "The white man must be farther back."

A bullet from the rifle grazed Kantoor's head. He pitched forward, but recovered instantly. A blue crease ran above his right ear.

"Are you hurt?" Bruce inquired anxiously. The little orchid-hunter ignored the question.

"He is in the tree, there, above us, *mynheer*," he cried excitedly, pointing into the lower branches of a tall mahogany. Bruce saw a rifle pointed in their direction, held in a tanned, hairy hand that enveloped barrel and stock with the grip of a gorilla. Whipping his own weapon to his shoulder, he fired. The rifle clattered down, and a fearful oath sounded from the tree. They could hear blood pattering on the leaf-mold below, though the trader kept himself hidden.

"Hurrah!" Bruce cried. "We've got them now!"

His triumph was shot-lived. A gun sounded to their right, and Erskine dropped, uttering a low groan.

"Uncle!" Bruce cried. "Are you hurt?"

"Only in the shoulder," Erskine responded. "Look out, boy, they're flanking us."

It was true. One of the Malays had circled about the log and was taking them in the rear. Their position had become untenable.

Laki Sadahana poured a rapid torrent of Dyak at Kantoor, pointing to the jungle ahead.

"He says we must fall back," Kantoor explained. "There's a river ahead. If we can cross it ahead of these devils we can make a stand there."

"But Mynheer Erskine is wounded," Bruce cried agonizedly.

The gun ahead again cracked. The heavy leaden slug barely missed Bruce, burying itself in the log. At the same moment a poisoned dart dropped over their shelter.

"Hurry!" Laki Sadahana urged.

Bruce caught up Erskine. The strength

of ten men suddenly filled him, he felt a voiceless fury welling through him at the scoundrel who assailed them with savages when beaten in fair fight. He dashed through the woods, pulling the lawyer along, his breath coming in great gasps.

A Malay dashed into the path ahead of him, uttering a triumphant shout. He raised his rifle, but the charge it held was never fired. Uttering a berserker roar of rage, Bruce dropped Erskine and leaped on the brown man with clubbed rifle. The Malay sought to evade the blow by lifting his own gun, but his feeble defense was swept aside as though it were straw. The stock crashed on his cranium, crushing the skull, and broke off. Bruce threw the useless weapon away and picked up Erskine again.

He scarcely remembered what followed. His lungs, nigh to bursting, his eyes starting from their sockets, his blood traveling a furious course through his veins and his head throbbing madly, he plunged through bush and bracken toward the stream. He did not know that Kantoor, valiantly maintaining a rearguard, intimidated the onrushing natives with the empty automatic, a weapon they had fortunately been taught to respect. Prodigal of ammunition, they had wasted their last shot, and had outstripped the bearers who were to provide them anew. But they dared not close.

The river stretched before them. From bank to bank it was a good forty yards. Pandanus and water hyacinth grew rankly along both shores, and in the middle a swift current flowed, clear and strong, predicating unfordable depths. Bruce uttered a moan of despair.

The Malays and Dyaks edged in. Kantoor had made his bluff with the pistol once too often, and they guessed the white man's plight. Another minute and it would be all over, Bruce thought. He looked around for a fallen limb, or aught that could serve him as a weapon.

Around the bend below them a long canoe suddenly shot. Laki Sadahana uttered a shout of joy. Behind it came another, then a third, a fourth, and a fifth. All were ***bankongs,*** war praus, long, slim, keelless craft, with crocodile-headed prows, and they were loaded to the rail with Kayan warriors armed to the teeth. Many of them had guns.

The *bankongs* swung shoreward. Kayan warriors leaped out into the mud and dashed ashore. The Malays and Seribas did not wait. They had no stomach for further fighting. Silent as ghosts they plunged into the protecting screen of jungle, hoping to elude their eager foes. The Kayans followed as swiftly and silently as they, bloodhounds on the trail.

Laki Sadahana approached them with a gaudily tattooed warrior. He was a full six feet in height, dressed in the bright-colored head-dress and chawat that the Dyak loves so well, and carried a long and heavy spear. Laki Sadahana introduced him as Kaya Meribong, head of the tribe. He gravely took their hands in greeting, to show that he was accustomed to the ways of the white man.

"They are *kutu* (lice)," he declared grandiloquently, in response to a question from Kantoor. "My warriors will sweep them off the earth. The white man they will bring to the village, that he may be sent to Brunei, and judged according to the white man's law."

Rambuta stole up shyly behind him. She had come in one of the war-boats.

"This makes the second time you've saved my life, little girl," he said to her in English. "You're heaping up obligations for me."

Whereat she smiled and dimpled in perfect understanding. What need for words when her *tuan's* eyes told her he was glad.

Erskine's wound was treated by Laki Sadahana. The war-boats brought the necessary caustics to cleanse and heal the wounds of any who might be hurt, and none was more skilled in their ministration than the old witch-doctor of Kini Balu.

The Kayans began to filter back from the jungle. Several of them had gory heads hanging to their belts. Bruce sickened at the sight. Afterward Kantoor told him that he had counted twelve.

Two prisoners were brought in, Borgeson and his lieutenant, Serif Massar. The latter's *hadji-tulband* had protected him,

for the Kayans recognized it as the insignia of a man of more than ordinary importance. Borgeson was nursing a sore hand, for Bruce's bullet had gone through the palm. He carried himself with his customary truculence, however. Serif Massar was the bland, impassive Malay, who feared no death, but only dishonor—the dishonor of doing those things his religion forbade him.

"What will be done with the prisoners?" Bruce asked Kantoor.

"They will be taken to the village," Kantoor answered. "From there, I presume, they will be transported down-river to Brunei to stand trial. Kaya Meribong is an advanced Dyak, who knows the weight of the white man's hand and covets the friendship of those in power."

CHAPTER XXII.

KAYA MERIBONG'S JUSTICE.

THAT evening Bruce Westfield and his companions experienced a characteristic Dyak welcome. The strident beating of a Chinese gong, struck heavily at intervals by a wooden mallet, announced their coming to the villagers. One of the warriors had been sent in advance to communicate the gladsome tidings of the almost bloodless victory. The women and children trooped out to meet them, and it was quite a triumphal procession, headed by Kaya Meribong and the warriors who had taken heads, that finally entered the clearing where the *pangah*, or long-house, stood.

The house was similar to the one they had visited earlier, Bruce noticed, with the single exception that it was larger. Kaya Meribong proudly informed them, through Kantoor, that it was a village of forty-nine doors; in other words, included that number of families. Bruce noticed with amusement that the Dyaks had picked the muddiest spot they could find for their dwelling. The foundation was composed of long rows of bamboo poles, driven to resistance.

There was only one floor, raised about eight feet above ground. In the mud below pigs wallowed to their heart's content, and chickens roosted forlornly on cross-pieces bound with rattan.

In separate pens, carefully cleaned and tended, Bruce saw several gamecocks, the apparent pride of the village. A dozen Dyak warriors eagerly offered to show them these battle-scarred veterans of the cocking main, and were highly pleased at the polite enconiums Kantoor offered in behalf of himself and his associates.

Kaya Meribong escorted his guests into the long-house with stately ceremony, and bade them be seated before the fire in the center of the dwelling, where Dyak girls had spread newly made rattan mats in their honor. Other girls brought jars of *tuak* and rice wine, and cups.

A stalwart Dyak, who had distinguished himself in the recent fray by taking a head, took one of the cups and a little wine, and squatted in the center of the circle, which by this time included all the people of the village. The more prominent were in the inner fringe, close behind the white guests and Laki Sadahana and his daughter, and the descendants of slaves on the outer periphery.

Bruce took particular interest in the costume of this warrior, the blue chawat, with its red, white, and green-striped border, the beaded necklace of cowry-shells, alternating with silver dollars, the bracelets and kneelets of silver and brass, highly polished, and the elaborate head-dress surmounted with a circle of hornbill feathers.

The Dyak began singing in a low monotone.

"What is he saying?" Bruce whispered of Kantoor.

"Hush!" the latter replied. "Do not smile or frown, and listen attentively. He is voicing the welcome of the village and their joy that they came in time to rescue us."

The singer finally paused for lack of breath. "*Ara Wi Wi Ara,*" the villagers chorused. When they had ceased the singer took up his song again. At intervals, to enable him to accumulate new ideas, the villagers chorused "*Ara Wi Wi Ara.*"

At length, after what seemed to Bruce an interminable interval, the singer lifted

his cup and pressed it to Kantoor's lips. The Dutchman, by reason of his being the spokesman, was assumed to be the leader of the expedition by the Dyaks. Kantoor drank gravely and passed the cup to Erskine, who reclined on a rude couch beside them. Erskine's lips barely touched the beverage, and then he passed the cup to Westfield.

Bruce sipped the liquor tentatively. It was extremely sour, like some French wines, and rather flat and insipid. Bruce doubted whether the alcoholic content was any larger than that of American beer.

"Must take a Dyak a long time to get drunk on that stuff," was his inner comment.

After the cup had been passed to Laki Sadahana and Rambuta, and had gone the rounds, amid much shouting and hilarity, a prudent girl stepped outside and wasted two cups of good *tuak* by throwing it to the pigs as a libation to any *hantu token* who might be hovering in the vicinity.

Another Dyak then began a recitation. Others followed. Bruce stirred restlessly.

"When is this going to end?" he whispered to Kantoor.

The Dutchman frowned as a warning for silence. Such interruptions, he afterward explained, were offensive to the Dyaks, who feared that the spirits might be displeased.

Presently the supper hour neared. The quintet of guests looked forward to it with lively anticipation. Their fare had been meager the past twenty-four hours. Kaya Meribong served a bountiful dinner—rice cooked in individual packages wrapped in leaves, roast duck, roast pig, turtle eggs, monkey-tail soup, bananas, jak fruit, custard apples, and durian.

To sample all these viands taxed the white men's gastronomic ability, yet custom required it, as Kantoor informed them in a low voice. Somehow they managed to acquit themselves creditably in the ordeal. Erskine, by reason of his wound, was fortunate enough to be excused.

After supper came dances and music. These continued to a late hour at night. At the urging of Laki Sadahana, Rambuta consented to dance the head dance, but only after the prisoners had been removed. The mere recollection of her last previous performance at Tama Kwayang's village, with Borgeson looking on, caused her to flush with shame.

Bruce watched her marvelous execution of the intricate steps of the dance with astonishment and admiration. Her grace, her agility, and her beauty held him spellbound. She was his wood-nymph, his sprite of the forest. Were it not for the dark circle of faces surrounding him, he told himself, he might readily fancy himself in some Keatsian glade. At the conclusion of the dance he drew a long breath and turned to Erskine.

"That was the most astonishingly beautiful thing I have ever seen," he declared enthusiastically. "What a sensation she would create in New York."

Erskine glanced at him keenly.

"Would you care to see her on the stage?" he asked quietly.

"Never!" Bruce declared emphatically. His face expressed his horror at the thought. "Why, she's only a child."

Erskine smiled with quiet satisfaction.

"Yes, she's only a child," he agreed. "We must not forget that."

There was a gentle significance in his voice that caused Bruce to look at him queerly.

Engrossed in conversation with Erskine, Bruce failed to notice the earnest, searching glance that Rambuta directed at him the moment she concluded the mad whirl of her dance. He would not have known what had provoked it if he had. But presently he worked his way through the knot of warriors and women surrounding her and spoke to her. She looked up, startled. Her features held the half-afraid look of the child whom cruel experience has taught to distrust. But it quickly disappeared as he expressed his frank and honest admiration at her performance.

"My *tuan* is not like the other *tuan*," she whispered to herself in a transport of happiness as she went to her quarters a little later. During the long night watches, while she lay awake and listened to the droning of the night wind among the lofty forest tops, she repeated the words:

"My *tuan* is not like the other *tuan*."

The next morning Borgesen and Serif Massar were summoned before Kaya Meribong for a hearing. Laki Sadahana acted as accuser. No more was necessary, for the influence of the hermit of Kini Balu was paramount. The Dyaks of Meribong knew no greater *manang* than he.

Laki Sadahana made the accusation in measured tones. He related all that had transpired since Borgeson first approached his hermitage. The accusation was made in the Malay tongue, in order that the white man and his lieutenant might have no difficulty in understanding. When he had concluded, Kaya Meribong asked Borgeson if he had anything to say.

"All I've got to say is that I'm a British subject," he returned with his customary arrogance and truculence. "If anything happens to me or to Serif Massar here, my friends will see to it that a company of soldiers comes here and hangs whoever is responsible."

The veins on Erskine's forehead stood out when the trader's reply was made known to him. But Kaya Meribong executed quick justice.

"The customs of the *orang blanda* are known to the Meribong Kayans," he returned solemnly. "Thou shalt have what thou asks. A guard of my Kayans shall take thee and thy accusers down the river that thou mayest stand before the white judge, thou and thy sub-chief. But not until the third moon from now is full, because there has been a pestilence on the river, and it is *malan*. Until that time ye shall remain bound here."

"Good!" Erskine exclaimed when Kaya Meribong's decision was communicated to him. "He has 'appealed unto Cæsar; unto Cæsar he shall go.' But I doubt if the scoundrel is a British subject, as he claims."

The lawyer in Erskine found huge satisfaction in the kjai's justice. His satisfaction, however, was short-lived. Kantoor approached, shaking his head gloomily.

"I know not what we shall do, my friend, if the kjai's saying be true," he declared. "If Borgeson cannot be brought down-river because it has become *malan*, or taboo, it stands to reason that they will not permit us to go, either. I shall inquire of Laki Sadahana."

The witch-doctor confirmed the ill news. A party of white men, he stated, had appeared on the river a few months before. One of them had succumbed to the smallpox. Several natives had become infected and had carried the contagion with them to three or four villages along the stream. Thanks to *obat*, medicines received from the whites at Brunei, the scourge had been arrested, but feeling still ran high against white men, and no *orang blanda* would be permitted to travel up or down stream until the omens became more favorable.

"Can't we hold a reading of the omens?" Bruce suggested, when the situation was communicated to him. He was even more upset than the others by the news.

Laki Sadahana smiled. "You forget, *tuan*," he said, "that there are several villages through whose *negri* we must pass. Each village has its own witch-doctor who reads the omens. One of them is sure to find unfavorable signs in the pig's liver that he is called upon to read, particularly since we have no presents to distribute. Then we would be held at that village until the omens changed. It is far better to remain here, where the plague has not been, than to go to the afflicted places."

"Laki Sadahana is right," Erskine agreed. "We are up against it. We will have to stay here and enjoy the kjai's hospitality for the next three months."

"I'll lose my bet without a doubt," Bruce exclaimed in chagrin. Yet his disappointment did not appear to be keen. His glance strayed toward Rambuta, crushing rice with the other Dyak girls on the veranda of the long-house.

"There is still a chance, *mynheer*," Kantoor declared. "I have a suggestion. The stream is closed against white men, but not against natives. Could we not send a Kayan or two down with a letter to the American consul at Sarawak and explain our predicament? We have our letters of credit. With those he could buy whatever we need and send them to us. The names of Erskine and Westfield are sufficient guarantee."

"Splendid, *mynheer!* A capital idea!" Bruce exclaimed enthusiastically. "You've saved the day! Now if we can only arrange with our good host for the use of some of his Kayans, everything will be lovely!"

"I will do that," Kantoor promised.

"Then I'll write a letter to the consul at once. The sooner they go the better."

Four Kayans set out that very day, in a large prau. They were given an enthusiastic farewell, for the white men had promised rich presents of tobacco and beads when they returned with their freight. Kaya Meribong estimated that the trip down-river, the wait for the arrival of the goods from Sarawak, and the return up-stream would take about a month.

"That will give us two months' time to cross the Tohen Batu again, gather our orchids, and return," Mynheer Kantoor pointed out. "If we are successful in our search early, we might save time by striking southward through Kotei and thus accomplish what no white man has ever done before: cross Borneo from side to side through the thickest jungle.

"In the mean time I'll have an opportunity to teach our pretty little ward English," Bruce thought. "Her mouth looks as thought she could conjugate the verb 'love' most attractively."

CHAPTER XXIII.

WOUNDS THAT CANNOT HEAL.

ON the third morning thereafter a wild alarm of the village gong awoke Bruce from his beauty sleep. He dressed hurriedly and rushed out to ascertain the cause of the disturbance. He found a circle of Dyaks talking and gesticulating wildly about the cubicle where Borgeson and Massar had been interned. Of the two prisoners there was no sign whatever.

A few questions disclosed what had happened. The white man and his lieutenant had in some manner loosed their bonds. Probably the rattan had stretched, giving them play for their fingers, and patience had accomplished the rest. One of the tambangans was gone, too, showing plainly the course they had taken.

A *bankong* was quickly loaded with Kayan warriors and sent in pursuit. The braves returned late that night with a crestfallen air, and empty-handed. Borgeson, knowing that he would be followed, had covered his trail with the skill of a native. He and Serif Massar had portaged from stream to stream in the well-watered country until they finally emerged into another *negri*, where pursuit dared not follow without securing permission. The rimboe had swallowed them up.

Erskine suggested sending word to the British authorities at Ambong, in order that the two might be apprehended when they reached the coast.

"Not that I think it will do much good," the lawyer observed, "because ten to one Borgeson will have slipped through their fingers before the net can be drawn tight enough to hold him. He knows the country, and he knows the coast. Such scoundrels always have friends who are adept at evading the law. However, we ought to take the chance."

The messenger was despatched, bearing a lengthy letter from Erskine, which Bruce also signed. The name of Westfield carried weight in every corner of the globe where white men lived.

Erskine recovered rapidly from his wound. It was little more than a flesh wound, and Laki Sadahana proved a master physician. Erskine had many valuable suggestions, however, from other self-appointed doctors, one of whom sagely counseled that he chew betel and expectorate the juice on the wound. It was a sure cure, he argued, because it satisfied the *hantu token*, who had no teeth nor gums wherewith to chew their own betel.

The days passed swiftly and romantically for Bruce. In the morning he botanized with Kantoor, while Rambuta assisted the village girls in their tasks of winnowing, husking, and grinding rice, weaving mats of rattan, and stringing beads. The work looked heavy to Bruce, particularly that of grinding the rice in a rude dugout trough in which it was pounded with a heavy pole, a mortar and pestle effect similar to that

used by savages in so many portions of the world. He noticed, however, that the girls seemed to be happy in their work, and realized that he would demean himself immeasurably in the Kayans' esteem if he offered to take her place.

After lunch came the hour for siesta, when the equatorial sun rode high and the stifling air lay heavy on the valley. But shortly after four o'clock the monsoon began to blow, cooling the flats, and then he and Rambuta scampered over the fields of *paddi* toward the near-by timber line. There, ensconsed between the buttresses of a huge tapang, they studied languages—he Dyak and Malay, and she English. Sometimes she whisked into the treetops and brought back orchids. Many a rare blossom she plucked and gave him, but not the flower he sought.

Rambuta's progress astonished Bruce. At times he almost suspected that the girl was mocking him, and that she had acquired a previous knowledge of the language which she was concealing for some reason or another. But a look at her frank, eager eyes, avid for information, dispelled such illusions. Eventually he perceived that her brain was a fertile field lain fallow till now, and wholly uncluttered with the trash which the average child in a civilized community accumulates before reaching adolescence. His own progress was slower, but at the end of two weeks they were able to converse together with reasonable facility.

Erskine watched these daily excursions with a troubled brow. He said nothing to Bruce, however, although the latter perceived his concern. Erskine, in fact, was growing moodier day by day. He became more and more addicted to long periods of silence, in which he gazed steadily north toward the invisible seacoast, as though a longing for home obsessed him which he was unable to shake off. Bruce chaffed him about it on one occasion, striving to induce greater cheer. But the lawyer shook his head.

"It's not home I'm thinking about, Bruce," he said. "It's something else. Some day I'll tell you. But not now."

He spent much time, too, observing Rambuta, staring at her in a strained, half-eager fashion, in which the puzzled look which Bruce had noted before frequently occurred; the look of one who is searching to find something he is half doubtful exists. Bruce called Kantoor's attention to it. The little Dutchman caught his arm and pulled him aside.

"Mynheer Bruce, there are sorrows in some lives that are like raw wounds, which will not heal," he said gravely. "To touch them only increases the pain. I trust you will say nothing, but go your own way. You have known Mynheer Erskine nearly all your life, you say. I tell you that you do not know half the nobility of that man."

Bruce spent a thoughtful hour in the jungle that morning. He pondered on the mystery and wondered how it concerned Rambuta. Could it be that the girl brought up recollections that cut his friend to the quick? Erskine had lived in the East; had he married a child of the forest like Rambuta and lost her? He had never married since coming to New York fifteen years before. Women pronounced him an incorrigible bachelor, but he had never mentioned aught concerning his past life.

A few days later Erskine encountered them as they were strolling back from the woods. Rambuta was carolling blithely an air that Bruce had taught her—a folk-song whose liquid melody carries a thrill to American hearts wherever they may be found:

> Way down upon the Swanee River,
> Far, far away—

Erskine stopped short, lifted a startled hand to his breast, and staggered. His face was white as the bark of a birch. Catching Rambuta roughly by the arm, he asked:

"Where did you learn that, girl? Quick, tell me!"

Rambuta shrank from him in alarm. Bruce came to her rescue.

"You're frightening her, uncle," he warned sharply. "What is it you wish to know?"

"Forgive me," Erskine apologized huskily, pulling himself together. "Ask her where she learned that song."

"I taught her."

"Oh!" It was more than an exclamation of disappointment; it was the sob of a heart-broken man. Erskine's shoulders sagged and his head drooped. He turned wearily away.

Bruce sprang toward him.

"What is it, uncle?" he cried in warm sympathy. "Is there anything I can do?"

Erskine shook his head.

"No, my boy; no," he negatived sadly. "I thought for a moment—that air—her voice sounded like some one I knew, years ago."

Rambuta stole forward timidly. She placed a timorous hand on his sleeve, murmuring in her newly acquired English:

"*Tuan*, I—am—sor-ree."

Sobs shook Erskine. He sank to the ground and buried his head on his breast. Rambuta nestled down beside him, warming his body with hers. At intervals she murmured in deep sympathy:

"I am sor-ree, *tuan*."

Bruce walked away. There was nothing he could do, he perceived, except to respect the privacy of deep grief.

Nothing was said about the incident when Erskine returned to camp. But Bruce noticed the next day that the lawyer no longer avoided Rambuta. A few days later he learned that he had a schoolmate; Erskine, too, was brushing up on his almost forgotten Malay. Sometimes he neglected his lesson to stare long and thoughtfully at the girl. But Bruce felt no stirrings of jealousy. Eventually, he felt, Erskine would admit him into his confidence.

Days passed thus. Eventually the boatmen they had despatched to Brunei for supplies returned. Their requisition had been honored, and two heavily laden craft landed below the long-house. A plentiful distribution of presents followed, and the white men became more popular than ever in the village. The messenger to the British authorities also returned with the intelligence that Borgeson had boarded a coaster for Sarawak the day before his arrival at Ambong. He brought assurance from the governor at Ambong that the trader would surely be apprehended.

But Erskine knew better. Borgeson would not blindly flounder into the net spread for him by Raja Brooke. He called a council of war.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

THE COLLEGE STAR

HIS name appears on all the lists
  Of those who vied in sports;
He shook a pair of wicked fists;
  He starred on tennis-courts;
His inshoot was a thing of dread
  To each opposing batter;
Professors thought him light of head,
  But—do professors matter?

At basketball he caged the sphere
  With superhuman art;
He vaulted high and fast and clear;
  And sped like any dart
On cinder paths until he won;
  His fame is common knowledge.
His learning may be underdone,
  But—rah, rah, rah for college!

Elias Lieberman.

Jason, Son of Jason

by J. U. Giesy

Author of "Mimi," "Palos of the Dog Star Pack," etc.

(Sequel to "The Mouthpiece of Zitu")

CHAPTER XXI.

HELMOR PLANS.

TEN days, at most twelve, before Helmor's spurious sign should be cut on a lying stone. And then one would bear it down to that dungeon where Naia waited a promised rescue, and with it as authority demand the child. And after that. Croft sickened as he left Ptah's chamber—sickened at the thought of what might have happened save for Maia's listening ear as she lay on the straw inside the door of the dungeon—Naia's mention of the words the blue girl had overheard to him.

But—suddenly he stiffened. In ten days a great deal might be done. Helmor might be warned as he had said to Naia—or—the rescue might actually be performed.

Helmor might be warned as before in a dream—yet to make plain to the Zollarian monarch all by which he was threatened, it would need to be an elaborate dream indeed. And to speed the blimps to Berla would necessitate a start with crews but illy trained. And even were Helmor warned, how much would it avail, when his mind was matched against that of Kalamita, unless he might be induced to act directly against her, unless she and Bandhor and Panthor were arrested and confined. And could such a warning as Croft was able to give inspire the man on Zollaria's throne to such a move—or if it did so, would it not precipitate internal troubles in Berla, perhaps as fatal to Croft's own purpose as Kalamita's schemes? Torn on the horns of such a dilemma, his spirit writhed.

In the end he made his way back to the palace and into Helmor's chamber. The man would be asleep, he fancied, but once he had gained his apartments he met with a surprise. Far from asleep, Zollaria's emperor sat in consultation with Gazar, the soothsayer he had summoned to him the night of his first dream of danger, and a man Croft had once defeated on a bloody field, and learned later to know by sight at the end of the first Zollarian war as Helmon, Helmor's son.

Helmor's face was dark with illy suppressed rage, blended with something like consternation, to judge from his words. "Thou sayest that Panthor, my cousin, entered the house of Bel, upon their heels. What makest thou of it, Gazar? Speak thou who for years have been to me eyes and ears."

So that was it. Soothsayer Gazar might be, but he evidently combined the work of espionage with his other vocation, as it now appeared. Croft gave him full attention as he began speaking slowly.

"Helmor knows the claim his cousin makes for his house in Zollarian affairs. Were Bandhor to support him it were ill

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

indeed. And Bandhor is the brother of Kalamita—whose power would appear to have made drunk her spirit as her beauty had made drunk the hearts of men. Also there is the matter of the Tamarizian's child."

"Bandhor, Kalamita, Panthor—'tis a pretty trio, my father," Helmon said. "The woman grants her favor lightly where her interest is involved—and Panthor is a man and ambitious—even as Ptah is a man, though a priest. Also has she a debt of hate to be repaid against this Mouthpiece of Zitu—whom I love not myself. Lies anything definite against them, O Gazar?"

"Nay"—the old man shook his head—"naught as yet save what one may suspect—"

"Then"—Helmor leaned toward him to speak in lowered tones—"what would Gazar advise?"

"Look to the woman and the child. To me it is known that Bandhor has been among his guard. Let it be changed from sun to sun, O Helmor, neither captained by or including the same men twice. So it appears to me he shall be safe for the present, unless some unforeseen happening transpire. Let Panthor be watched closely by trusted men—watch for a meeting between any two or all of the four we have mentioned to-night, again."

"It is well." Helmor leaned back in his seat. "See to it, Helmon, that the guard be changed. Distribute also a largess to the palace guard—announce additional pay to the soldiery in Berla of twenty mina, for the Zitran, and afterward as much. Gazar—have me these others watched. By Bel, our cousin may find it requires more to cast Helmor from his throne than the schemes of a woman and a priest."

"Zitu." Croft breathed the word in his spirit. Helmor of Zollaria was far from asleep indeed. More than that, now that he was awake he was well served. Panthor would seek an engraver of stones inside the next day or two, at latest, and Panthor would be watched. Helmor had more than one pair of eyes.

Croft's confidence returned. After all, Kalamita and Ptah were not the only ones in Berla who were playing the game of statecraft, it would seem—and each day Naia and Jason would be watched by a fresh guard. More than that, additional pay would in a measure see the morale of the city's garrison restored. Once more as at the noon hour on the day before, Croft found himself swiftly uplifted as on invisible wings, his spirit filled with thankfulness to Zitu—the Father of all Life—with a voiceless pæan of praise, for his everlasting justice, the inscrutability of his ways.

In such a mood he returned again to Naia, and told her what had occurred—watched her astral fires pale and quicken, as side by side they bent above the child.

"By Ga and Azil," he swore, "we shall not lose him. I go now to return in the flesh to Berla, by Zitu's aid inside Panthor's limit of days."

"Zitu go with you and return again with you, beloved," said Naia of Aphur, with the fire of her womanhood, her motherhood, in her purple eyes.

Back, back to Himyra, sped the spirit of Jason Croft. It crept into the form on the couch of molded copper and opened its eyes. It urged it up atingle with the knowledge it brought and all it involved. It sent it seeking an attendant, to bid the guardsman find the apartment of Robur and rouse him from his slumbers and summon him to the Mouthpiece of Zitu's chamber at once.

And when Aphur's governor appeared with sleep driven swiftly from him, Croft told him all he had seen and heard.

"Wherefore," he made an ending, "we go north from Himyra in three suns."

"Three?" Robur stared. "But, by Zitu, Jason, think you their crews may learn so quickly to control them?"

Croft nodded. "They are eager. In the morn I explain to them that there comes a need of haste. On the fourth day we go north with such as are able to follow. The rest may remain. Also, we take six of the airplanes with us."

"Aye," Robur said—"yet can they fly not to such a distance. Short of Berla must they descend for fuel."

"At Scira, at Niera," Croft told him, giving the routing of the planes as well as an answer. "Send in my name a message

to Scira—that with morn a swift galley depart for Niera, bidding Mazhur send a quantity of the fuel north along the highway to within a day's march of the northern border of the state. In these things, Rob, lies my reason for calling you to me. Much must be arranged ere we start." Long before this night he had planned each step of the journey in his mind, and he was ready now that the time for the actual work approached.

"Aye." A look of steely purpose crept into Robur's eyes. "As ever, Jason, my friend, you are ready. The message shall be sent without delay." He rose.

"We will take with us the man who sends it, also," said Croft. "Let it be understood. Once we are over Berla it will be needful that there be one who shall understand the signals of the flash-lights I have made, since according to my plans I shall land a plane in the square before Helmor's palace."

Robur's eyes widened swiftly. "*Thou* wilt land a plane before his palace!" he exclaimed.

"Aye," Croft answered, smiling slightly. "Who else? Think you I shall trust the final mission to another? Wherefore I shall require a man on one of the blimps, to read any such message as I may give."

The glances of the two men continued to hold for a breathless moment, and then Robur said with feeling: "By Zitu—thou art a brave man, Jason, yet I sense not your plan in this. They will but fall upon thee—"

"Nay." Croft shook his head. "Nay, Rob—and you think so, you sense not my plan indeed. Ere I make a landing before the palace of Helmor, a part—a small part of Berla—but one adjoining the space about the palace, shall be ablaze. In the light of that conflagration shall Jason of Tamarizia descend—and call upon Helmor for the surrender of the ones he holds to ransom, under penalty of seeing the remainder of Berla destroyed. Think you he will long falter, or seek to injure my person? Nay, he will make the better choice."

For it was so he had planned it in the instant he gazed on the vast expanse of pavement fronting the palace, this same night when he had hung above it in spirit only. Then he had pictured it backed by a roaring wall of unquenchable fire, in the leaping radiance of which the flare of the fire urns faded, by the light of which Helmor of Zollaria might cast his eyes up and behold the menace floating above him and all Berla, against the sky.

And so he told himself now once more as well as Robur, the thing would be accomplished. In the light of that ruddy illumination he would descend to demand a parley with Helmor in person. It was so he would regain his wife and son—that Naia of Aphur—and Jason, Son of Jason, would be rewon. The fire of his determination, of his completed plan, blazed back at Robur with the light of a mighty purpose—a thing conceived in weary weeks of ceaseless thought and labor—a thing not to be any longer changed or swerved from its course.

Before that light Aphur's governor paled slightly and set his lips.

"Aye," he said a trifle gruffly because of his blended emotions, "now I understand thee, Jason. But it would take Zitu's Mouthpiece to undertake it in such fashion. And what does Robur of Aphur to aid the success of the venture?"

Once more Croft smiled. He laid a hand on his companion's shoulder. "He watches from the sky for any message I shall flash with the signal-lamp I shall carry—which, being interpreted to him by the man of the message tower, he shall see translated instantly into deeds. So shall he safeguard Jason's life—perhaps."

"Perhaps, aye," said Robur. "So be it. I shall send the message as Zitu's Mouthpiece directs. As for the rest, I like it not."

Turning, he stalked from the room with a gloomy face.

To himself Croft admitted perforce that his plan was in the nature of a somewhat desperate chance. Yet he believed that he had read the Zollarian spirit aright—felt assured that he was predicating Helmor's actions correctly, when the final issue should be his to face, that he had erected his counter move on a firm foundation of

human nature—was counting not overmuch on the mental attitude to be induced by the menace of a fiery dissolution rained down upon defenseless heads out of space.

Robur returning with the assurance that he had despatched a messenger with his orders, found him no whit less firm in his resolution, and they discussed all details attendant on the departure of the blimps through the further course of the night.

Morn ushered in three days of well-nigh ceaseless toil, of practise with the giant aircraft by day—of an overhauling of them, a correcting of minor faults by night, of consultations with the fliers in which every step of the expedition was explained to them by Croft—of a grooming and testing of the six planes that were to accompany the monster dirigibles north.

Mutlos of Cathur sent back word the first day that the galley for Niera had put forth. That same night Croft and Robur visited the wireless tower, and Croft demonstrated his signaling flash.

The man, trained to receiving and sending, read the code with little trouble, transcribing more than one message correctly and then flashing them back to Croft. Then seating himself again at his key he sent word to Zitra that the expedition was about to set forth.

There followed two more straining days wherein Croft gave it out that only four blimps would be taken, and those manned by the crews that showed the greatest aptitude in their work. Four he had decided would be enough for the venture, and at dawn on the morning of the fourth day they rose like monstrous glistening bubbles above Himyra's walls, and pointed their blunt noses north.

Three days to Niera, to reach which the swiftest galley took five. So he had planned it. And at Niera he would descend. Long before he had taken the necessary steps for that—sending what apparatus he would require to the capital of Mazhur—that it might be ready for any need.

The night before had seen the airplanes depart for Scira on the first leg of their flight. From there they would go to Niera, and there the entire expedition would once more meet.

Three days, he thought, as he watched Himyra drop away beneath him with the gaping, cheering crowds, that had gathered to see the blimps depart. Three days and four were seven. A day at Niera, to overhaul any weakness that might have developed in the flight across the Central Sea, a half day to the northern borders of Mazhur, the last jump, before the final hop off for the planes. And from there to Berla—four hundred miles or a trifle over. He allowed eight hours for that.

Higher and higher soared the blimps. A strong wind raged about them, bucking the roaring kick of the propellers. Higher yet, he gave command. Higher and still higher, seeking a favorable current, higher and higher, until it was found—then north—north—where once more as always the lodestone of Naia of Aphur's being drew him—north and north. He was going north at last!

The thought fired him. There was no sense of motion. Even as in the astral body, it was as though he himself stood silent and all beneath him moved. Overhead the monster gas-bag glinted like a thing of silver under the Sirian ray. Below him lay the no longer yellow ribbon of the Na, framed in the green band of the irrigated lands.

To the north the Central Sea showed sparkling in the morning sunshine. And beyond the Central Sea was Mazhur—and beyond Mazhur—Naia—Naia and Jason, Son of Jason—captive in a hostile land. And Naia's hair was golden—as golden as the sunshine that glinted now on his flashing armor—and her eyes were as blue as the blue stones upon his breast, marking out in flawless outline the Cross of Life Eternal—the Cross Ansata—and Azil's wide-stretched wings.

A wonderful, a mighty, a vast exaltation of the spirit seized him. He was going to her, borne swiftly out across the Central Sea on a favoring wind, as though Zitu himself had filled the lungs of his Omnipotent purpose, and were wafting him on his mission of salvation with a strong, beneficent blast.

Purposely he had placed the wireless operator aboard the blimp under command of

Rob. That night they exchanged signals —flashing message and answer between them, as the tireless engines roared. The moons of Palos rose and turned the Central Sea to indigo and silver—glinted on the monster racing-bags. Far down their shadows raced across the tossing waves beneath them, like the shadows of weird clouds.

Far off—a blot on the glinting waters a galley showed. Croft found himself wondering just what emotions the sight of the four huge aircraft might cause aboard. At least he was sure the moons of Palos—those moons by whose light he had first held Naia of Aphur in his arms and kissed her —had never before beheld a similar sight. For a long time after he had ceased signaling to Robur's blimp he sat brooding, staring off across the moon-burnished surface of the waters which showed on every side.

And then, wrapping himself in a robe, since the night was chill at that elevation, he laid himself down and after a time, to all appearances, he slept.

In reality, he came to earth as he had come the night on which he had decided on the step upon which he had now set forth. He came and roused me and told me all that had occurred on Palos during the intervening months since we had spoken together last.

And the thing fired me, woke in me an intense desire, so that as he paused I cried: "Croft, let me be present—let me see the end of the thing at least."

He smiled. "Man," he said, "I knew you'd say that, and the thing will be at night, three, four, five—six nights after this. Listen for my call then, Murray, and after that—you'll have to shift for yourself."

I nodded. "Just the same, I'll stick pretty close to you," I declared.

"You can do it in the shape you'll be in," he retorted, smiling. "On the last hop off from just south of Helmor's country, I'll be aboard a plane. Rob knows his work, and he'll captain the blimps. They'll slip over Berla after dark and light up the buildings fronting the palace square. There is a bit of country outside the city, I'll make just about dusk and land. From there when I see the light of the fire, I'll simply zoom up over the walls and alight in front of Helmor's doors—or that's the way I've got it planned. So you see it's lucky you're going to be capable of speedy motion, Murray, if you expect to go along."

"But see here," I objected, "won't it be pretty risky coming down outside the city like that?"

He shook his head. "You haven't quite learned Palos yet, Murray. I'll hit a tract of uninhabited country, of course. If I were a Zollarian, I could pull the same stunt in the desert outside Himyra's walls. Now, do you understand?"

I said I did, and he left me. And that is the way in which I came to witness the ending of the duel between Zollaria and Tamarizia, but more particularly between Kalamita and Jason, the Mouthpiece of Zitu, I shall endeavor to describe.

Of what intervened during the next five days I know of course only by hearsay. Briefly, Croft made Niera on time, and came down. The airplanes—five of them, that is—arrived. The other had come to grief and been compelled to remain behind. He did not wait for it, but pressed on. The final stopping-place was reached.

Croft, to Robur's horror, made use of a parachute with which he had equipped each ship and dropped safely to the ground. Robur sailed into the north, and Croft, waiting until the planes had filled their fuel-tanks for the final stage of the journey, rose to follow just after the noontide hour of prayer. Afterward he told me that the thing held a strange significance for him at the time. There was a prayer in his heart as the plane soared up swiftly—a prayer for success and the safety of those he loved —and he knew that, back in Himyra, Gaya was praying in a similar fashion for Robur, for Naia and Jason, and himself. And he knew that, even if in less definite fashion, the same prayer was in the heart of the nation whose manhood drove the blimps before him—one of whose daring sons controlled the rising plane on which he rode.

The hour of prayer. Eight hours he

had allowed himself to cover the last four hundred miles. If nothing went wrong he would come in sight of Berla about dusk—and he would keep the blimps in sight, of course. One hour, two, three passed with the steady drone of the motur in his ears—four, five, six. Another, and the blimps paused and began a majestic circling. Berla was in sight from their greater elevation, and twilight was falling. Across it he winked his signal—and was answered by a responsive flash. The plane fled on, swerving to one side to find the spot where it should lie waiting. Like a great bat swooping, it sank and went skimming across the darkening landscape, seeking a place to alight. In the end it grounded far out beyond the now shadowy outlines of Berla's walls.

Croft leaned back in his seat. Briefly he spoke to his pilot and seemed to rest, sagging inside his supporting straps. But as aboard the blimp that first night his spirit sought the chamber beneath Helmor's palace—found Naia and Jason on the couch together watching the blue girl of Mazzer, who once more was weaving patterns out of straws. Naia of Aphur—and Jason, Son of Jason—on this night of all nights—safe!

Croft opened his eyes and lifted his body more stiffly in its seat. "Zitu—I thank thee," he whispered, raising his face to the now night-darkened heavens, and then—he sent the call for which I was listening on earth.

CHAPTER XXII.

BERLA.

BERLA of Zollaria. It lay there, huge, dark, slumberous, safe; secure as the night, pall wrapped it in all seeming, undisturbed by any alarm of danger—unapproached by any force of foes. For what could harm Helmor's city, behind its darkly outlined walls? Four hundred miles of mountain, plain, and desert lay between it and the Tamarizian border—and as yet, save for the sending of a delegation to parley, Tamarizia had not moved. Dark, silent, it lay, save for where on either side of one of its many gates, the fire urns flared.

And yet on the darkened terrain beyond them crouched the squat, wide-winged shape of the Tamarizian plane, with its two men, watching, watching. And somewhere—high above it rode the blimps, of which there was no sign. Yet they were there, and the plane was squatted, watching—and, they were things that swifter than any method known to Zollaria's craft—swifter than the swiftest racing gnuppas—could cross mountain and desert and plain.

Then suddenly—without sound, so high they rode—from out of the blue-black void of the heavens—there showed a winking light. Ruddy it was as a falling star—as it glowed briefly and vanished like a fading spark. And yet seeing it one knew that under cover of the darkness, before the moons of Palos wheeling up like racers of the night revealed them, the blimps were stealing in.

Once more the ruddy pin-point winked, twice, thrice, and vanished, and as it faded for the last time it was answered by Croft himself from the plane. Briefly his torch glowed and was extinguished and the spot in the heavens did not appear again. Only Jason spoke to the flier: "Be ready, Avron."

And the man replied, "Aye, lord," climbed into the pit of the fuselage, and began strapping himself in place.

Croft followed suit. The two men sat staring out toward the walls of Berla, where the fire urns still made flickering flares against the gates.

And that was all. Save for their breathing, the whisper of the night wind round them, there was no sound. Silent as death itself was the blimps' approach, and as unsuspected, until presently an arc of silver appeared above the eastern horizon, and up shot the first of the twin Palosian moons.

Its upflung rays fell on a wondrous sight. They struck against the giant dirigibles, turning them into slowly drifting things of silver—huge, unbelievable, weird as the moonlight struck upon them, like monstrous dream shapes—unthinkable bubbles wafted forward on some unsensed breeze. So they

must have burst upon the startled sight of Berla's people, first, soaring high above the city, circling as though in search of some definite spot, before they paused, appeared to hover for an instant, and began settling down.

"Zitu!" Avron whispered tensely under his breath.

"Aye," said Zitu's Mouthpiece as though in answer. "Watch ye now, Avron—watch."

Down, down sank those mighty glistening shapes from the Palosian skies—down, down until at length without seeming cause they checked their descent, and hung gently swaying, until a strange red brilliance leaped up high over Berla's walls.

"Go now—in Zitu's name," Croft spoke to his pilot.

The motur roared—the huge plane quivered, seemed to shake off the lethargy of its waiting, trundled forward, gained headway, tilted, and rose.

Up, up in a reaching slant, Avron drove it toward the growing radiance before it. And then, like a kite striking home upon its prey, it swept above Berla's ramparts and plunged down beneath the moon and flame-illumined gas-bags, toward the leaping fires.

They leaped, they blazed, those fires spreading in a ruddy band of destruction before Helmor's palace. They smoked. The wind of night caught that smoke and swept it off across the city in twisting, writhing streamers and billows, like the tatters of a trailing shroud. For an instant it half veiled the racing plane, and Avron coughed. Then the machine burst through it and swam above the square already beginning to fill with a running, shouting, wildly gesticulating mob, beyond which on the steps of the palace itself showed a body of the palace guard.

The fire struck off ruddy flashes from their massed cuirasses and helmets, pricked out the livid color of their saffron plumes. A captain lifted a sword and pointed toward the hovering gas-bags with a glinting blade. The roof of a house crashed down roaring in a fiery dissolution, casting up a myriad of sparks against the smoke pall of the major conflagration, from which a sickly, unsteady light was filling all the square, casting flickering shadows over the jostling mass of the panic-stricken crowd.

Above that scene the airplane swam with a chattering motur. The milling masses heard it and lifted their faces toward it in a fresh alarm. It turned. It circled back.

"Down," Croft spoke to Avron. "Land me before the guard."

Avron nodded, worked with his controls briefly. The plane tilted, circled again at a lower level—and suddenly with deadened engine volplaned with the steady-winged swoop of a hawk toward the wide expanse of pavement, to trundle forward and pause.

Before it the guard shifted uneasily, eying its slowing advance with widened eyes and paling faces, a slight backward movement of their ranks.

Not so the captain, however.

"By Bel—he has given one of them into our hands at least. Upon them!" he roared, and drew his sword to lead them in an overpowering charge.

"Hold!" Croft rose in his place and faced the quick, forward surge of the guardsmen. "Naught has Bel given thee, captain. Wherefore spare thy praises. By design are we come among thee—for speech with Helmor. Put up thy sword."

The firelight glinted on him as he left the plane and sprang lightly to the ground. It shone on his burnished harness, it struck upon his azure plumes. It pricked out the design of the Cross Ansata and the wide-spread wings of Azil on his cuirass. And suddenly the captain lowered the point of his weapon in a startled recognition.

"Thou?" he stammered.

"Aye," said Jason gruffly. "I, Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu—to hold speech with Helmor, as thou hast already heard, I, Jason of Tamarizia—the one man who may save Berla from destruction—by whose order what remains once that fire has burned itself to embers—may be spared. Go say as much to Helmor, and say also that I wait a meeting with him—here."

Followed a tense moment, in which quite plainly the Zollarian debated his course, turning his glance from Croft to the slowly swinging menace of the moonlighted blimps above him—those glinting shapes so

remote, so detached in their cold, almost frost-rimmed seeming—and yet as the man before him said the cause of the ravening flames in whose light that man appeared.

And as though sensing his thought, Tamarizia's Mouthpiece spoke again:

"Think not that save by my order any part of Berla will be spared—neither thou, nor Helmor, nor any of her people. That ye behold done here may be done elsewhere, Zollarian captain."

"By Bel—" The captain sheathed his sword. Seemingly the situation was too much for him to handle unaided. "Restrain the people," he directed a lieutenant. "Hold him securely and in safety until I have seen this carried to Helmor's ears."

The lieutenant saluted. Turning, the captain ran flashing up the stairs. His subordinates growled a command. The guardsmen advanced, split, moved off right and left, formed a cordon about the plane and Jason, facing outward toward the crowds in the square with leveled spears.

Time passed. Jason of Tamarizia stood motionless with folded arms. The people of Berla pressed up to the very spearpoints, shrieking and mouthing. The conflagration roared.

And then the palace doors opened. Helmor and Helmon appeared. Slowly and without any sign of undue haste they descended the steps until nearly at the foot they paused.

The Zollarian monarch and Tamarizia's strong man stared into one another's eyes, and Helmor caught a body-filling breath.

"So," he said, "it *is* thou. Word I had of thy presence, yet hardly it seemed thou hadst dared."

Not a line of Jason's set expression altered as he replied: "Wherein Helmor had right. Naught have I dared indeed. If Helmor doubts it, let him use his eyes. Let him gaze on yonder fire, and lift his vision to the skies. There may he behold the cause in those engines with which I have come upon him, by which Berla shall ere morning lie in ashes, save I and I only give the word that it be spared. Wherefore I dare naught in standing thus before him, to offer him the safety of himself and people. What would it profit Helmor to bid his guardsmen seize me, and thereby lose his one remaining chance of safety? Has he any means with which he may combat them—any cover beneath which he shall lie safe from a rain of unquenchable fire?"

Helmor hesitated in his answer—hesitated even as those who know that they are lost. And indeed he must have known it in that instant as he lifted his eyes to the heavens and beheld there the unbelievable creations brought against him too remote for any resistance within his power to reach them, yet near enough to bring swift death upon himself and his people, as witnessed by the blazing wall of the city, at the foot of the palace square. And in that bitter moment of realization Helmor of Zollaria's spirit must have writhed.

Now was humiliation come upon him—upon him who had sought to bring it upon others in his time. Staggered by the appalling swiftness of it, he found no words with which to meet the situation. And as he lowered his glance and forced it back to that of the man before him, Croft spoke again:

"Nor Berla alone, O Helmor. These things be not of my seeking, nor of Tamarizia's design. Yet if I return not scatheless from this meeting, not only Berla but all Zollaria as well shall burn. If I return not safely that begun this night shall certainly continue, and Tamarizia shall hurl her total strength against a treacherous nation which seeks by unlawful methods to further her ends. And in that day Zollaria as a nation shall go down in a red ruin, from which she shall not rise.

"We sought not war, O Helmor, nor aught save only peace. Twice have you loosed your strength against us—and twice has it proved vain. Yet again you planned our undoing—and this third time you struck not as a man against men, but against the innocent, the weak and helpless—seeking through them to win what had been failed of through force of arms. Helmor of Zollaria struck not at the strength but at the heart of a man as he hoped to Zollaria's and his own profit. But now must he face strength again.

"Yet even so we come not in war against thee or thy nation, save as in so far as it be needful to prove resistance vain. War we make not against the defenseless, the weak, nor wish to—and we hold it a thing for sorrow, were the helpless, the innocent, to perish for Helmor's or another's sin. Wherefore we come before thee and offer thee peace, O Helmor—a peace which Helmor needs but say the word to win."

"Thy price? Name the ransom of Berla, Mouthpiece of Zitu." Suddenly Helmor appeared to find his tongue. His voice rose hoarsely. "By Bel, I would not see my people burn."

"Helmor knowest," Croft said slowly, "I but require of thee my own. Let Naia of Aphur and the blue girl, her attendant, and Jason, Son of Jason, be brought forth and placed unharmed aboard the machine Helmor sees before him."

"And afterward?" Croft's utterly controlled demeanor, the mildness of his demands, seemed in a way to disturb Zollaria's monarch, appeared to excite the suspicion of some hidden trap in his mind.

"Nay, nothing," the Mouthpiece of Zitu returned. "Have I not said that I come not in vengeance upon thee? Hark ye, Helmor, I am not driven by any such intent as that of the woman who having led thee into this position now plans to cast thee from a throne. Yet, if ye yield not, by Zitu, whose Mouthpiece men name me—thy throne itself and all it stands for shall be destroyed."

Helmor started. Croft's intimate knowledge of a plot against his tenure of his power, seemed to shake him well-nigh as deeply as all else. He stood silent, once more lost to all seeming in a gloomy consideration, into which broke the rising voices of the crowd. For they too had heard from their places outside the ring of threatening spears in the hands of the guardsmen, and now they cried to him: "O Helmor—yield to him—grant him his demands nor seek to resist him, O Helmor. Let not Berla be destroyed!"

Those cries beat into his ears a very surge of plaint and entreaty. And hearing Helmor threw up his head and turned to Croft:

"This is the sum of your requirement, Mouthpiece of Zitu, which being granted, shall lead to nothing else?"

"Aye, by Zitu, on the word of Jason," Croft assented quickly, making the words both agreement to Helmor's query and an oath.

"O Helmor—" Once more the plea of a panic-stricken people.

For a moment Zollaria's ruler gazed out across their terror-whitened faces. And then he yielded, lifting a hand and upflung arm to calm them. "Peace. Helmor bows to thy wishes in this matter. Go, Helmon, son of Helmor, thyself bring forth the women and the child."

"O Helmor. Hail Helmor! All praise to Helmor by whom we are preserved!" In swift transition from plaint to plaudits once more came the voice of the crowd. "Helmor the Wise One—the guardian of his people! O Helmor! Aye, aye, Helmor—give them to him!"

They surged forward, lifting their hands in acclaiming gestures as Helmon turned and began to mount the steps.

He had won, won! For an instant as the Zollarian prince climbed upward, Croft found himself unnerved. He had won the desperate venture. A few moments, a few heart beatings only, and he would look into Naia of Aphur's eyes, might rest his hand, if so he wished, upon the crown of her golden hair, winning like even to another Jason, that golden fleece of his desire. The thought pleased him and he smiled, and turned his glance toward Avron, staring down unmoved, as it seemed, in all the tumult from his place in the fuselage.

A few moments—aye, a few moments. He faced back to Helmor standing with gloomy visage, and let his gaze run past him and up the flight of steps behind him. A few moments and he would lift Naia and Jason, Son of Jason, into the pit of the plane behind Avron and rise with them free of Berla's prisoning walls.

And then he stiffened. Helmon emerged from the palace, and with him, Naia of Aphur, and Maia walking beside her, and about them some half-dozen members of the guard.

And now no longer was Croft the Mouthpiece of Zitu, but the father and husband

as he watched the approaching party begin the descent of the stairs, noting the slender lines of Naia's figure, the deathlike pallor of her, straining his eyes for a first glimpse of the child. A moment—a single moment his leaping heart told him, and they would be reunited—one moment only remained of the dreary waiting. Naia of Aphur was coming toward him—nay, flying toward him.

For, suddenly, without any warning, she was free of Maia's supporting figure, clear of the guardsmen, past Helmor and speeding swiftly in the firelight down the steps.

Croft opened wide his arms.

And then she was against him, lifting to his bended face twin eyes so filled with maddening horror that they struck fresh terror to his spirit, beating upon the cross the wings of Azil of his cuirass with tight-clenched, desperate hands, panting rather than speaking, into his startled ears the cry of a mother's frenzy.

"Gone, Jason—gone. They have taken him from me. In the name of Zitu, hasten to Bel's temple and save him. They have gone to sacrifice our son!"

Gone! For a heart's beat the soul of Jason Croft gave ground. Gone. This, then, was the end of his scheming, his months of weary labor. With success in his grasp he was beaten.

"God!" he cried, not knowing in the shock of the moment that he spoke in English, and releasing the grip of his arms about her body, he seized her by the arms. His fingers bit into the white, white flesh upon them. "But—he lay safe with thee when darkness fell, beloved."

"Aye, aye!" she nodded in desperate affirmation. "Scarce had Gor gone when Helmon came to release us—"

"Gor!" Croft bent straining eyes upon her.

"Aye—Gor—creature of Kalamita. He it was who tore him from me, after he had slain the captain of the guard—saying it was done by Helmor's order. O Ga and Azil, canst not understand? To the Temple of Bel and save him or else let Berla be destroyed."

"Aye, if he dies, by Zitu." Croft swept her within the circle of a single arm, close pressed against his side, and turned to Helmor.

"Thou hearest, Zollaria, what answer have ye to words of Gor?"

And in that moment when the balances trembled with the issue of life and death for himself, his people, his nation, as well as for the other actors in that tight-gripped scene, of every blended human emotion, Helmor more than any time in Croft's knowledge of him, proved his right to reign. One quick pace he came toward the Mouthpiece of Zitu, and the half-fainting woman he supported, and paused with hand on sword and flashing eyes.

"Nay, by Bel," he answered strongly. "Not by word of Helmor was this thing come to pass, but by the trickery of another, because of a plot against me, of which it would seem from his own words, Jason knows. Helmon, my son"—he turned briefly to the crown prince standing pallid and shaken before this fresh turn of events—"what know you of this matter?"

And Helmon answered quickly. "Naia of Aphur speaks truth. Gor slew the captain who denied him entrance to the chamber, and cowed the guardsmen with his mighty strength—saying he took the child by thy orders, O my father; wherein as thou knoweth he lied."

"Aye," Helmor's features darkened. "Yet sought to take advantage of the present instance to accomplish the interests of his mistress. By Bel, I swear it. Let Tamarizia say if he believes."

Deep in his troubled soul Croft knew that he did. The thing was well in keeping with the methods Kalamita would almost certainly have employed. Beaten until the moment of the city's panic in her efforts to gain possession of the son of the man she hated, with a hatred defying reason—it would have been like her once the air craft hovered above Berla to recall Helmor's words that the child should be given to Bel in the event that Tamarizia refused the Zollarian demands or made any hostile move.

She might well have sent Gor on his mission, trusting to the excitement to gain him access to the palace, to Helmor's former words to overcome any refusal of his de-

mands on the part of the guard. Such things passed swiftly through his brain as the crowd again took up its clamor: "To the temple, O Helmor—to the temple. Death to Gor who has undone us! Seek and slay him!"

Jason Croft inclined his azure-crested helm. "Aye, Helmor," he accepted, "Jason believes. This were the work of Kalamita, not another. Wherefore—"

"To the temple!" Naia of Aphur screamed. "In Zitu's name, waste no more words about it!"

"To the temple—to the temple!" The words became a beating surf of sound on the lips of the people. "To the temple quickly, O Helmor!"

Helmor acted. "Ho, guardsmen, attend me! To the Temple of Bel!" he roared.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TEMPLE OF BEL.

TO the Temple of Bel! To that ebon dark structure, where in its mighty enclosure crouched the figure of the unclean god. It was the one chance—the one remaining hope of a full success in his venture, and Jason knew it.

"To Avron—up and remain with him," he cried to Naia.

"Nay, Jason—nay, my beloved," she denied him, gasping. "With thee. Keep me in this at thy side."

"Come, then." He tightened the arm about her yielding waist and crushed her to him. There was scanty time to argue. Already the guard were forming—massing a wall of their bodies about them. And there was a thing that demanded his attention. Swiftly he drew his signal-lamp and pointed it to the skies.

"To the Temple of Bel! Descend above it!" He sent a message with a hand that, despite his stern control, was not wholly steady. "To the Temple of Bel," he repeated, and lowered his eyes to find Helmor's eyes upon him.

"I but signed the air-ships to follow us to the temple," he voiced an explanation, lest the man misunderstand him, and found himself wondering if the huge craft would be able to identify and find it—decided there was naught he could do to aid them, that the carrying out of the order lay wholly in the hands of Robur.

And Helmor seemed to understand, though he made no answer, speaking instead to Helmon. "Remain and guard the machine. Let no one approach it."

"To the temple!" Once more the voice of the crowd—a seething mass now of jostling, pressing bodies—of white faces and lifted arms in the flickering light of the firelight.

Helmor answered the rising ululation, "Aye, to the temple. Forward, guard!"

Croft lifted Naia of Aphur, holding her terror-shaken figure before him, cradling it in his arms against his metaled breast. Side by side he went forward with Helmor as the guard advanced across the square, breaking a pathway through the mass of the people with their spears. Slowly at first, and then with a quickened rhythm beat their feet. Their moving mass gathered momentum as their captain lifted his voice and called a rising cadence. The light of the blazing buildings shone sharp upon the spear-heads—shimmered and flashed on their glinting harness as they charged toward the shadowy mouth of a street.

To the temple—the temple! The thud and clank of their feet, striking in a measured rhythm, seemed to beat the words into Jason's ears. To the temple—the temple! Naia of Aphur was praying. As he raced inside the cordon of other racing bodies Croft caught the whisper of her pale lips beneath his own set, straining face.

"Ga—Azil—Ga, eternal mother—Azil—angel of life—have mercy—spread thy wings in shelter above him—"

They reached the street and plunged among its shadows, pounding with a dull reverberation of many feet along it. To the temple—the temple. The walls of its banking structures gave back the echo of that ceaseless rhythm. He glanced at Helmor. Set of lip and narrow-eyed, his features distorted by the rage that burned within him, the realization of this latest menace come upon him, the haste that had made him cast aside all dignity of station, and sent him thus on foot in a last endeavor

to offset it, the Zollarian ran with a steady, unfaltering stride.

"Zitu—father of all life—"

Croft tensed his muscles, pressing the yielding form of Naia closer to his pounding heart. Save for her whispers, the clank and thud of the charging body of men, their heavy breathing, there was no sound in all the night. Behind them Berla was burning, with a lessening glare. Here only the moonlight cut in silver bands and purple shadows as they raced. He glanced up toward the azure heavens. His sweat-misted eyes beheld a drifting shape—huge, too regular of outline for a cloud—the glistening, glinting envelope of a Blimp.

"They follow us, beloved—Robur follows." He spoke in muffled tones to Naia—and found her purple eyes lifted darkly to his face.

Out of one street and into another raced the straining Zollarian guard, and along it, and into another, and through that into a second monstrous square.

The Temple of Bel! Croft knew it—recognized it, felt his spirit once more falter as he sensed its dark mass lighted by some interior radiance that shone redly between the mighty pillars, pricking out each massive column in an inky blackness—the light of Bel's lighted fire!

Croft sensed its meaning—that Ptah had done his part and ignited the sacrificial flame in the body of the monstrous god, lifted his eyes from the fire-etched line of the pillars and found smoke curling in writhing streamers above the temple façade, lifted his soul in a prayer that Robur would also see it, mark it a beacon to guide his searching, and ran on toward the serried flight of steps before him, reached them and began to climb.

Up, up, he made his way with Helmor and the now panting guard. Up, up—and what sight of horror would that radiance between the ebon pillars reveal when they reached the top?

He sickened before the question, found himself straining still ever upward, made dizzy by his anguished thought.

"Ga and Azil—Zitu—father of life—have mercy—"

Suddenly he lifted his arms and shifted the body of Naia, turning it more wholly toward him, as though thereby to hide from her eyes the light of the temple fires.

Up, up—the last step at last. And there, among the pillars supporting the mighty colonnade, Helmor's party paused. Before and below them, the vast pit with its rows of surrounding steps, whereon a multitude might find seats—the idol in its center showed. Men—such as Croft had seen on the occasion of Kalamita's visit to the Priest of Bel, were working about the god. Smoke and flame curled from its flaring nostrils, as they fed its inward fires—and its hands, extended flatly, palm up, before its obscene belly shone redly—they glowed. Heated to a dull incandescent, they waited the sacrifice.

So much Croft saw in a single glance, and found his spirit lighten, even as Naia struggled to her feet and gazed upon the scene before her—cried out and covered her eyes.

"Forward." He spoke to Helmor. "Bid the guard surround the idol—seize the men who attend it and hold them, while we make search for the child."

For there was time—time yet to accomplish all his purpose. Bel's glowing hands were waiting, but not yet had the sacrifice been placed within them, and deadly purpose wakening swiftly once more in the mind of Jason, drove out his former fears. Enough he knew of Bel's worship to know that no sacrifice were acceptable to him, unless placed in the hands of the god.

And Helmor seemed to comprehend both his intent and the situation fully. He addressed the captain of the sweating guardsmen. "Take a portion of your men—surround the image. Let none approach it." Then as the officer, saluting, turned to fulfil his orders, he drew back, with face gone livid, and faltered. "Stay! Nay, now, by Bel, I dare not. The sacrifice approaches. Behold!"

Lifting a shaken arm he pointed. Croft followed the direction of his hand and starting eyes. He turned his baffled glance to the other end of the mighty enclosure, where at the head of the farther tier of steps a processional appeared.

Ptah! He saw him, naked in all his

wonderful animal strength save for a scarlet leathern apron about his bulging loins and a head-dress of ebon plumes, and the glint of metal sandals and casings of metal on his feet and monstrous calves. And behind him a body of lesser priests.

So much only he saw at first, and then, as Ptah and his satellites descended the upper tier of steps, Kalamita, in all the unveiled beauty of her physical form, appeared. Kalamita! Woman of flesh and fleshy beauty—Priestess of Adita. Her perfect body shone in the light of the sacrificial fires, an iridescent thing of tinted flesh and jewels, and behind her Bandhor and Panthor.

They descended a single step—and behind them came Gor in his banded cuirass of copper, on which the light struck dully, bearing the sacrifice.

Jason, Son of Jason—he lay upon an ebon-colored cushion, and even as Croft's agonized eyes beheld him he lifted little upflung hands and arms.

"Ga—and Azil," cried Naia of Aphur in an anguish of recognition.

Croft whirled on Helmor. "Forward. There remains yet time to save him!" he roared.

"Nay, Mouthpiece of Zitu, I dare not." At the end Helmor balked the issue. Lifelong superstition proved stronger than all other considerations. "Helmor nor any man may seek to keep from Bel what is consecrated to him."

"Ga—" The prayer of a mother to the Mother Eternal.

The thing was a matter of a few moments. Then Croft cast his glance upward to the skies.

A monstrous, glistening oblong hung there, slowly turning. He lowered his gaze and swept it across the floor of the mighty pit, and from that to Ptah and those behind them. And then his voice lashed back at Zollaria's monarch. "Does Helmor fear then the fire of Bel—more than Tamarizia's fires?"

And Helmor answered. "Helmor, Tamarizian, performs not a sacrilege against his god. In his hands be it."

"Then let Helmor behold!" Croft took the only chance remaining. Swiftly he darted down some half-dozen tiers of steps and lifted his signaling-torch to the skies.

"Set fire to the pit of the temple."

Once, twice, he flashed that message, even though after the first swift sending, the Blimp began sinking down. And then as it hovered lower and lower, bulking ever more hugely, he turned and climbed back with limbs that shook beneath him, to Naia's side.

For that was the thought born of his desperate need as Helmor weakened in his purpose—to flood the level space between Ptah and the idol with a mass of impassable flame—to check him, hold him from the presence of his god with fire, since he might not do it with men.

Lower and lower sank the air-ship. Like a mighty cover settling down above the open enclosure, it seemed. And as Croft slipped an arm about the swaying form of Naia of Aphur, it paused.

Paused, too, Ptah and his fellow priests. They had caught sight of Croft on the steps beyond the idol—marked the upflung posture of his arm. Their eyes had leaped above it and fallen on the glistening shape descending, as it seemed, upon their heads. Perhaps consternation seized them—perhaps they waited merely to grasp its presence. But at all events they paused with lifted faces.

And as they stood—the floor of the pit about the idol, beyond it farther and farther, burst into widening lines of flame. Swiftly those lines stretched out, spreading, spreading across the sunken level, as the monstrous shape above it poured down its fiery rain. In it the image of Bel glowed yet more hotly, became a thing of a myriad licking, darting, fiery tongues. The men who had stoked the fires within it vanished, writhing, caught beyond any hope of rescue in the open.

And whether consternation had first seized the minds of Ptah and his party, it seized them now. They turned to draw back before the deadly menace of the sea of fire before them. Too late—its ever-widening circle swung its arc against them. Ptah—Priest of Bel, shrieked once in mortal anguish, and went down.

On the steps of Bel's Temple—on their

way to Bel's idol—he and his fellows sank in a horrid dissolution, with a grotesquely terrible twitching of tortured bodies, a tossing of arms and limbs. They fell and, driven by their own contortions, dropped one by one from step to step among the lapping flames.

Above them stood Kalamita—Priestess of Adita—stood as one wholly bereft of motion, until suddenly she shrieked in a voice that rang from end to end of the temple, turned to flee, and shrieked again, and fell forward, beating at her body—and Gor, casting aside the child on its ebon cushion, leaped down and caught her writhing figure in his arms.

"Enough—enough!" Croft flashed the signal upward, and started running off between the pillars to reach the further tier of steps from whence still rang the screams of Kalamita. And as he ran he drew his sword, and went on clutching it in a tightly gripping hand.

"After him! Seize Bandhor, Panthor, and the woman. Hold them! Preserve the child!" Helmor roused from the fear that had held him impotent in the presence of Zollaria's now discredited god.

The guard leaped to obey the order. Croft heard the pound of their feet behind him and ran on.

A hundred feet, two, three. The fires below him, having naught to feed them, were burning themselves out. He reached the tier of steps down which Ptah and his fellows had gone to their death. Bandhor and Panthor stood there, and Gor—his mistress's screams now sunk to moanings—her once lovely body marked by angry scars where the spattering liquid-fire had sprayed from the lower steps and struck her, yet held a white, jeweled shape against his mighty breast.

Toward them, still with his naked sword in his hand, he made his way. Behind him came Helmor's guard. And yet—as he advanced, oddly enough Croft gave little attention to them. His eyes seemed centered beyond all other purpose, on the shape of the ebon cushion Gor had cast from him ere he leaped to Kalamita's aid—that cushion beside which wholly now unheeded, lay the form of Jason, Son of Jason—his child.

Then as he stooped to raise him in hands that trembled, the guard flung themselves toward the two men.

"Back," Bandhor suddenly thundered. "Back, men of Zollaria! It is thy commander speaking."

And Helmor, bursting through the faltering soldiery, answered, "Nay, not so, Bandhor, thou traitor, any longer—not thou or Panthor, but Helmor rules still in Berla. Seize him—and lead him to the palace, there to stand trial with Panthor for his treason."

Again the guard surged forward, closing about Bandhor and Helmor's cousin, and Croft found a slender form hurled swiftly against him, white hands clinging to him—the purple eyes of Naia of Aphur, lighted with the wild, sweet fires of fulfilled yearning, lifted to him across the body of the child.

His heart too surcharged for words, he smiled upon her and laid Jason, Son of Jason, in her arms.

With the sound of a caught-in sob, a gesture hungry in its passion, she gathered him to her, bent her face above him, rocking him gently with a swaying of her slender figure as one groping baby hand crept up and dug itself into the soft substance of her breast. Turning with him to the blue girl of Mazzar whom Croft now sensed for the first time as having followed from the palace — dogging faithfully her mistress's footsteps to the last.

Ga, the Mother—the Virgin—the Madonna, bending in tender brooding above the infant—pressing it in loving rapture against the greater bulk of the form that had given it birth.

From that sight Croft turned away his misted eyes to find those of Kalamita fixed in a stare of well-nigh insane hatred on him.

She had struggled free from Gor, and, despite the pain of her burns, which in their blindly, upflung cause, had spared not even the once beautiful mask of her face, was standing there before him. And as their glances met her tightly held lips parted.

"Thou—thou," she mouthed; "thou Mouthpiece of Zitu—thou man of ice and fire—thou wrecker of the plans of Kalamita

—thou man like not to any man before thee —by all the fiends of the foul pit of the underworld I curse thee—may they torture thy spirit—and that of her, I have kept for Zitrans from thee, and bring sickness and loathsome disease on the child—may its flesh rot and its bones grow hollow like blasted reeds—thou ravisher of beauty—may Adita cause thy mate to shrivel quickly—may she cease to please thee, and yet cling to thee—denying thee the pleasure she herself no longer gives. May Bel visit his wrath upon thee for the sacrilege thou hast shown him. I, Kalamita—"

"Peace." The captain of the guard laid hold upon her. "Thy pleasure with this woman, O Helmor?"

And Helmor eying her, answered, "Nay —nothing. That she who has turned the minds of men with her beauty should stand thus now before them, were punishment indeed. Release her—let her go her ways."

"Thy fault—thou Mouthpiece. The curse of Kalamita on thee!" Once more she wheeled on Jason.

"Nay—curse no more," he told her. "Once thou didst challenge Adita to blast thy fairness and thou didst not accomplish thy ends against me. And now it is in my mind that thy fickle goddess has taken thee at thy word."

"Aye, peace!" said Helmor. "Get thee to thy palace, woman."

For a moment Kalamita drew herself up before him, and then, flinging clenched hands above her tawny head in an impotent gesture, she turned to Gor standing stolidly waiting, and leaning her weight against him, went with him into the night.

CHAPTER XXIV.

PEACE.

AND that is all, as Croft would say, I suppose—since when he described Naia's winning to me at the time of the Mazzerian War he brought his narrative to a close with their marriage, until I demanded that the end of the war itself be told.

So now one may fancy that to him the real ending of the matter would have been in that moment when he stood there with Helmor, and Naia, standing with Jason, Son of Jason, held fast against her breast, and Maia, the blue girl of Mazzer, at her side, and knew that Helmor had no longer any thought save to see him depart with them in safety, that he and his city might also know themselves safe.

But to my mind there is more to the story —not so much of an individual nature, as applying to the future of the Palosian life.

For, to the ears of my spirit, which had witnessed all the crowded events of that night, came Helmor's voice addressing Jason:

"How now, Mouthpiece of Zita—what else?"

And Jason answered. "Naught, O Helmor, save that we return to the machine before the palace, and depart in peace, unless by Helmor's wish."

"What mean you by Helmor's wish?" There was no sign of understanding in the Zollarian monarch's intonation or the now somber lines of his face, as the last rays of the fire in the vast pit of Bel's Temple struck upon it.

Again Croft answered slowly: "Naia of Aphur, wife of Jason, and Jason, Son of Jason, were seized for a purpose, which Helmor knows—and the end is—this."

For a moment he paused and swept an arm about the mighty interior of the temple—embracing all—the still-smoking figure of the idol—the bodies of Ptah and his fellow priests, now lying charred and blackened below him on the serried steps.

And then as Helmor made no response or comment on that scene of sudden death and desolation, he resumed. "Yet have I said that I came not in vengeance against thee, nor in war, nor for any reason save only to regain my own. Wherefore, I say again to Helmor now that the purpose he had in mind may be served equally in a different fashion—and that he say the word he may gain in peace what he might not obtain by either treachery or war—and I say to him also that this night's work has preserved not only Naia of Aphur and Jason, Son of Jason, to me, but to Helmor also, his throne."

And now Helmor spoke, nodding quickly. "Aye—Helmor does not overlook it. Speak, Mouthpiece of Zitu—how may these things you hint at be done?"

Having fully caught his attention, Croft went on: "Let Zollaria and Tamarizia make a pact of peace between them, pledging themselves without reservation, to sheathe the sword from this hour, nor draw it one against the other again. Let Helmor subscribe to this, and Helmon, Helmor's son. Let him proclaim the establishment of schools, the education of his people. Let him seek for his nation strength through the growth of knowledge, rather than the strength of arms— "

Once more he paused and again Helmor nodded. His face lighted swiftly as he caught Croft's meaning.

"Aye, by Bel," he said. "It is thy knowledge, Mouthpiece of Zitu, has made Tamarizia strong."

"And not Tamarizia only, but Zollaria also," said Jason, "if Helmor sets his seal to such a bond."

"By Bel," Helmor exclaimed as all the suggestion embraced burst suddenly upon him. "Come then to the palace. Let us speak of this more fully. Delay thy departure as guests of Helmor and his people till morn."

"Aye." Croft assented without hesitation, his stern face strangely exalted by the thought that out of this night of warring purpose and emotion, peace between age-old foemen might be born.

Back then they made their way through the streets along which they had rushed so short a time in so vastly different a fashion to regain the square before the palace—where only the light of the fire-urns now served to show Avron, still sitting at his station in the pit of his machine.

And there Croft, lifting his signaling-flash, sent a final message to the mighty shapes still circling over the city. "Remain until the morning. Watch for the plane at dawn."

Robur's answering flash winked promptly back at him redly, and bidding Helmon join them, they entered the palace, through which Jason had flitted in the astral presence so many times.

Yet different now indeed was the situation, as Helmor summoned slave-girls to attend on Naia, provide for her every comfort, and left her with Croft for the moment and he drew her into his arms.

For a long, long moment he held her, sensing, her nearness—her dearness—the truth that now again once more not only in spirit but in body was she his own.

"Beloved!" he whispered, and crushed her to him.

"Beloved!" she whispered in return, and threw back her golden head to lift her purple eyes to him, fired with the glorious light of her glorious womanhood.

So for a long moment and then she spoke again. "And thou canst accomplish thy purpose, beloved—were it not well worth suffering, indeed? Thinkest thou Helmor is taken with the notion?"

"Aye," said Jason, and paused as he recalled Gaya's words that out of his bereavement, his agony of spirit would come not only peace to his soul, but a possible peace between the nations—and found himself undecided, but his own thought of such a peace as he had offered Helmor had been first inspired by a woman's attempt to give him encouragement in a troubled hour of need.

"Zitu grant it." Naia nestled against him. "Go then and arrange it. I shall pray for thy success upon my knees."

Croft left her then, and rejoined Helmor and his son. To that same apartment in which Jason had inspired his dream of warning against Kalamita, the Zollarian monarch led them, and there they took up the matter of a treaty between their nations, at the point where they had laid it down.

Thereafter while the hours passed, Helmor's expression altered; his eyes grew darkly, flashing, the deeply graven lines in his somber visage relaxed as Croft expounded the advantages to be gained in a friendly intercourse between his own and Helmor's people, suggested with what must have seemed to the two Zollarians closeted with him, an inspired mental vision, the terms of the international coalition, he proposed—teachers from Tamarizia to instruct the Zollarian workmen—the establishment

of telegraphic communication—a readjustment of trade relations—the extension north of Croft's interrupted scheme for a system of electrically operated railroads—the opening of shops and schools.

Until at last Helmor, rising in no small excitement, sent Helmon to summon a scribe, and demanded the immediate drawing-up of a provisional bond, which Jason should take with him in the morning for ratification at Zitra; and began a restless pacing to and fro as the scribe set to work upon it, holding his heavy hands clasped together behind his back as he paced and turned.

It was a strange night for Helmor of Zollaria, as he must have thought, wherein Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu—the man who had thrice baffled his purpose, sat with him in his own apartment, and rather than crushing him wholly now in his final defeat—placed the objects of his seeking in his hands—a strange night indeed whereon he owed not only his own throne to his singular foeman—but the promise of a greater future to his nation than ever in all his scheming he had dreamed.

And then—the scribe had finished his labors. Helmor strode to the table, removed his signet from his finger and affixed its seal to the agreement. Through the windows of the apartment a faint gray light was stealing—the harbinger of dawn.

He replaced his signet, extended his hand to Jason. Across the promise of a newer dawn for their people Helmor of Zollaria and the Mouthpiece of Zitu struck palms.

And in the light of that double dawn, the fullness of that double peace, Jason and Naia of Aphur; Mais, the blue girl of Mazzer, and Jason, Son of Jason, went down to the waiting machine, between twin rows of Zollarian guardsmen, accompanied by Helmor himself, and Helmon, Helmor's son.

Croft helped the women aboard and passed up the child. Cased in his suit and helmet of leather, Avron took his place in the machine. Then ere he followed, Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu, turned to look into Helmor's face.

"Hail Helmor—and farewell and thou, Helmon, son of Helmor," he said.

"Hail Mouthpiece of Zitu—and Naia of Aphur—and farewell," they replied.

Croft lifted his eyes to where the giant bags of the Blimps hung in a circle, silver now no longer, but gilded in the rays of the rising sun. He climbed aboard and gave the word to Avron. The motur roared.

Up, up shot the plane, leaving Helmor and Helmon and the soldiery to mark its swift ascent Up, up it mounted over Berla, until the sunlight caught it also, turning its wheeling vanes like the greater shapes above them to gold. Up, up—the city fell away beneath it as it swung in an ever-widening circle, beneath the mighty ships that all night had waited for its rising.

And suddenly as it turned and pointed south and fled away like a strong-winged homing-pigeon, Naia of Aphur lifted her voice.

Clear, strong, true, and perfect as a golden bell, it mounted in a pæan of thanksgiving.

"Hail, Zitu — father of all life — and thanks from a grateful heart. Hail, Azil—giver of life—who poured life into the mold of life—from which I was born. Thanks be to thee for the life that is mine—this life—I hold from thee—to be mine own. Blessings—my blessings upon thee, Ga—that I am a woman—my thanks for the tears with which, womanlike, I have washed your feet—not knowing that so I washed out also sorrow—preparing thereby my heart as a flask for the mellow wine of life from which now joy is drunk. Hail to thee—merciful to all thy daughters who have been and ever shall be—to thee my thanks."

So sang Naia of Aphur, and I recognized the song—as one of which Croft had told me—as one she had sung on another occasion when she bore him back from the camp of the Mazzerian army under Bandhor—as a chant—a prayer, used by Tamarizian women for one who had lain at the very door of death, and returned.

Here then I think is the logical end of the story—with the great plane driven south by Avron, and behind him, Maia, the blue girl of Mazzer, and Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu, and Naia of Aphur singing—with Jason, Son of Jason, held safe in her cradling arms.

(The end.)

A Knight for a Night

by Howard P. Rockey

"I DON'T mind helping you out for one evening, Harvey," Tilliston said, "but I came down to this tiny tropical town with the idea of resting up, because I was fed up with social activities and worn out with business. All I crave on earth just now is to relax and think of nothing but the scent of palm-trees and ponder upon the preening of poll parrots. My one desire is to indulge in a siesta that will last for weeks."

Tilliston and Harvey Boynton were seated in the *patio* of the charming little Hotel de Cadiz, which faces the water-front at Ventinio. It was a picturesque old town with a crumbling coquina fortress and a scattering of little white-walled, red-roofed warehouses and latticed *haciendas*. The lazy yet prosperous community nestled peacefully beneath the tall blue-green mountain which rose sharply from the tranquil waters of the Caribbean to the cool snows which capped its pinnacle. This dream of a hotel had as yet been discovered only by the élite, and the usual throng of tourists and violators of the Eighteenth Amendment were conspicuous by their absence. Hence Ventinio was a bright place to rest and do as one jolly well pleased. That was why Tilliston had come there.

Now, Boynton lifted his glass and sipped its contents.

"I realize that you toddled down here to get rid of the jazz and accumulate some of the snooze," he admitted sympathetically, "but from all I can hear, you won't find Mrs. Dayton Millner overly annoying or at all difficult to look upon. I've never seen her, but unless photography has descended or ascended to lying lengths of which I've never dreamed, she is quite pulchritudinous and most interesting. Aside from all of which, you'll be doing me the biggest kind of favor if you'll take her under your manly wing for a few hours this evening."

Dick Tilliston sighed. "I'm usually the goat," he bewailed. "Even in my rest period, I suppose I must act as substitute for an active business man with an important engagement. Just because you have promised to dine, and I suppose bribe, some important old bewhiskered *generalissimo* of a decadent yet charming little country, I must act as host to the wife of—who the deuce is the lady the wife of, anyway?"

"She isn't the wife of anybody—just now," Boynton explained.

"Grass widow?" queried Tilliston, somewhat perturbed, and with visions of peroxide, paint, and powder flitting through his brain.

"No—sod," Boynton reassured him. "You see, the lady *was*, until recently, the young and charming *esposa* of the cunning,

old, and lately deceased vice-president of my firm. He left her more oodles of dollars than a shad roe has eggs. Her very own luxurious steam-yacht is lying offshore, where the little red and green and yellow lights that suggest floating drug-stores are bobbing up and down on the harbor waters."

"Can't you send some sort of message, saying you're ill, or in jail—or something?" Tilliston asked, in a final vain effort to be rid of the obligation. The last thing he desired in the world was to have dinner with a good-looking, marriageable, wealthy widow.

"No can do!" Boynton said promptly. "She still owns the stock of the old V. P.—and has its voting power in her diamond-clustered little fingers. If I should prove discourteous, I might get discharged."

"Why not stick around and marry her?" suggested Tilliston.

"Not a Chinaman's chance!" snapped Boynton. "I'm going to carve out a fortune down in this flea-bitten country, and then return to the States and commit matrimony with a brown-haired siren who dispenses tickets at a motion-picture theater in Brooklyn. A man who marries for money earns it, and I prefer to earn my money buying nitrates. Then I can marry for no reason at all, or not at all, just as I darned please."

He arose and looked at his watch. "I'll tell 'em out at the desk to let you know when she asks for me. Just toddle out and tell her I am all tied up in a conference; take her to dinner, give her a glimpse of the moonlight, and put her aboard her launch when she's ready to go out to the yacht. I understand she's sailing in the morning, so I won't see her again—and you won't have to, either. *Do* try to be sociable, though, and make a good impression for me."

"Sweet job!" growled Tilliston. "I just naturally hanker after the task of being agreeable to a woman another man can't afford to offend and yet ducks because he's afraid she'll propose to him, or something of the sort!" But Boynton was gone beyond recall.

Tilliston lit a cigarette and finished his drink. With a sigh he stretched out his long legs and, closing his eyes, dreamed momentarily of the big copper-mine he had been running in Nevada for the past two years.

He had put it over, and it had been a stupendous task; but his resulting endeavors to spend his earnings during a Chicago winter season had proved as disastrous to his health as the grind of the many weary months of work at the mine had been beneficial. Now he had slipped away, contemplating complete effacement of himself, and a long, lingering loaf. "And this fool woman has to come around and rob me of a soft, sleepy night, when I might be dozing and smoking on the balcony upstairs, winking at the stars with a care-free heart!"

His reverie was interrupted by an écru bell-boy in a gold-laced uniform of white duck. "Mrs. Dayton Millner is in the lounge, sir," the attendant said in perfect English.

Tilliston arose and surveyed himself in a mirror on the wall of the open-air café. He gave a little twist to his black bow tie, and made sure that his thin silk dinner-suit was properly adjusted. Then, tossing away his cigarette, he walked briskly toward the lounge, and almost gasped in astonishment as he looked upon one of the most charming, petite creatures he had observed in many a day.

"Mrs. Millner?" he asked, almost eagerly, as he gazed into two mischievous gray-green eyes. The touch of a soft, daintily manicured hand assured him that the vision was none other, and Tilliston wondered why Boynton had been so eager to run away. It could only be because he had merely seen her photograph and had never looked into those wonderful eyes with their long, silken lashes.

"They told me that Mr. Boynton had been called away unexpectedly and that he had left a message with you," she said in a low, well-modulated voice.

"Er—yes," stammered Tilliston, conscious of a shapely foot that peered from beneath the long mandarin coat she wore. "You see, Boynton is all tied up with some terribly important affair of the company's—your husband's—that is I mean—"

Mrs. Millner smiled at his embarrassment. "So he asked you to be a martyr and take me to dinner?" she interrupted, a sparkle in her eyes.

"I wouldn't say martyr's the word!" Tilliston protested. "*Will* you dine with me?"

"I'll be delighted," she agreed. "And do take me to some quaint place full of local color. The yacht only dropped anchor this morning, and we must be on our way again to-morrow, for I am to be a guest at the Drayton-Marshall house-party at Palm Beach next Thursday. So I want to get an accurate close-up of picturesque Ventinio in the few hours that remain to me."

"I know just the place," Tilliston told her with growing enthusiasm. "It's called the Cantina Ninguno, a romantic little spot that might be somewhere in medieval Spain from its quaintness."

"How splendid!" enthused Mrs. Millner, as he led her through the lobby and called a waiting *volante*.

The drive in the soft tropical night was delightful. The slow-moving vehicle took them through narrow, crooked streets, thronged with dark-eyed *señoritas* and their lovers; loud-crying vendors of flowers and fruits and sweetmeats; giant ranchers from the interior, wrapped in their picturesque blankets, and a sprinkling of soldiers of the Ventinian army.

Mrs. Millner seemed spellbound at the picturesque novelty of the scene, and now as they rode out along the smooth coquina road which followed the sea to the south both were silent amid the spell of the soft moonlight illumining the dark waters.

The drive was through a veritable forest of flowers and tropical verdure, and after some twenty minutes they came upon a quaint, low-lying structure that must have been erected by the earliest settlers. It was of crumbling stone, built about a courtyard flanked with balconies which gave a view of the ocean and afforded little nooks where charmingly intimate parties might be held. But Tilliston frowned upon these bowers, and asked for a table on the broad lawn which stretched down toward the rocky shore. Here they were seated beneath a little grove of palms, the snowy linen and sparkling service illumined only by quaint candles thrust into antique sconces.

Hidden away somewhere, a native orchestra played soft, dreamy music on guitars and an accordeon, and in a space surrounded by tables couples were dancing with all the languid fire of Spanish rhythm in their steps. Mrs. Millner had thrown aside her elaborate coat, and now Tilliston was conscious of a stunning evening gown which charmingly revealed the pink loveliness of her shapely arms and shoulders. He gave the order, and then they danced together. Rapidly Tilliston was beginning to realize that he had a most charming partner.

"It all seems like a dream," Mrs. Millner whispered as they swayed to the enticing air. "Let's forget that we're living in nineteen twenty-one, and play that we're folk of old Spain in the days of knights and fair ladies!"

Tilliston laughed into her glorious eyes. "All right," he agreed. "We'll imagine we dwell in fairy-land, and instead of talking about ourselves we'll act the rôles of our imagination. In other words, we'll be just a couple of care-free, irresponsible kids without a trouble in the world. To-night I'll be a knight instead of a business man!"

She nestled closer to him, and as her hair swept his cheek a little thrill passed through his body. She seemed the most utterly charming creature he had ever known —so soft, so fragile, so dainty. It was a dangerous game they had agreed upon, for tropical moons and Ventinian music play strange romantic tricks.

The dance finished, they were at the table again, and Ninguno, the proprietor, in his picturesque native dress, was himself opening the wine—a rare old vintage that had been in his cobwebby cellars for more years than Tilliston could remember. As he sipped his glass and stared entranced at his companion he suddenly became aware of an uneasy feeling.

Almost instinctively his glance wandered to the balconies above, and in one secluded bower he observed a gray-haired, swarthy Ventinian in evening-clothes, dining with a

young and handsome army officer. The soldier's uniform was resplendent with gold lace and medals, and his manner and his features bespoke the arrogant, vain braggart.

He could not have been more than twenty-five, and his figure was slender, yet suggestive of strength. Tilliston's eyes met the dark ones of the officer, and his blood boiled. The Ventinian had been staring at Mrs. Millner with a look that enraged her companion, and as Tilliston's expression plainly showed his anger the soldier turned away his gaze and a few moments later left the balcony with his older friend.

Mrs. Millner had noticed the exchange of glances, and smiled happily at Tilliston. "So I have *really* a knight errant with me! How delicious! I feel just like the princess who has been stared at by the ogre!"

Tilliston chuckled indulgently. "It may be true that a cat may look at a king, but it isn't permitted that ogres ogle a queen," he told her. "And if said ogre resumes his little pastime it may become necessary for me to upset our little romance and descend to the actuality of punching him in the nose."

"Oh, please don't!" protested Mrs. Millner. "That would spoil everything."

A moment later they were dancing again. As they whirled to the soft music, Tilliston again became conscious of the Ventinian officer; and this time Mrs. Millner flushed under the man's ardent gaze. The officer and his gray-haired companion were standing close by the wall of the little inn, and as Tilliston and his companion floated by, Tilliston caught a Spanish phrase that overturned his temper. Mrs. Millner did not understand the tongue and was consequently amazed when Tilliston ceased dancing abruptly, pushed her a little from him and, swinging about like a flash planted his fist squarely into the countenance of the Ventinian.

The man went down in a heap and instantly the place was in an uproar.

Tilliston found himself roughly seized by old Ninguno and half a dozen waiters. The elder Ventinian aided the prostrate man to his feet, and all about them diners were talking excitedly. The music ceased, and a throng of excited men and women crowded about the group. Wiping the blood from his mouth, the officer glared at Tilliston.

"*Cavronne!*" he exclaimed furiously. "*Carracho pindeco!* Spawn of a scorpion, I'll run you through for this!" He reached for his sword, but Ninguno put a restraining hand upon his arm, and the blade did not come from its scabbard.

"Have a care of the police," he warned. "Not a brawl here, *señor!*"

Mrs. Millner stepped close to Tilliston and slipped her shapely arm through his. "Oh, don't, don't!" she begged. "I was not serious. You must not—"

"The swine hides behind a bit of lace!" sneered the officer contemptuously, and the elder Ventinian leered unpleasantly at Mrs. Millner, who flushed furiously and clung all the closer to Tilliston. With one arm about her slender waist, he shot out his right arm again, and once more the officer went crumbling to the ground.

Then he hastily drew a card from his wallet and handed it to the soldier's companion. "If he regains consciousness in time to meet me again to-night, or early in the morning, I'll give him a further trouncing," Tilliston said furiously. "You'll find me at the Hotel de Cadiz."

Holding Mrs. Millner close to his side, he strode through the crowd, which gave way instantly in fear of a blow from his powerful fist. In the *volante* he summoned from the stand before the inn, Mrs. Millner cuddled close to his side. She was crying softly, and her hand closed over his. Tilliston slipped his arm about her, and held her close, as he might have soothed a frightened child.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I suppose I shouldn't have made a scene, but I couldn't resist the temptation to give that cad the trouncing he deserved."

"I am afraid it will mean trouble for you," she rejoined anxiously. "They are hot-blooded, these Ventinians—and they still fight duels."

"If *he* does, it won't be a duel, but a murder!" Tilliston said grimly.

"But promise me—no matter what happens—you won't fight him!" she begged. "I could not bear to think of your being

injured because of me! Let us go away and forget it. You have been splendid, and I can ask no more from my brave knight errant."

"The fairy story is finished," Tilliston laughed. "That punch brought me back to nineteen twenty-one, and if our gold-laced friend wants more satisfaction he will find me waiting at the hotel."

They were down at the steamship landing now, and as they stepped from the *volante* the officer in charge of Mrs. Millner's yacht stood up and touched his cap respectfully.

"I suppose it wouldn't be proper for me to ask you to be my guest for the night on the yacht," she said doubtfully, "but *do* promise me that you will be careful and come out to me in the morning."

Tilliston promised, as he held her soft, warm hand in his, and as he looked into her anxious eyes he felt a wild desire to crush her in his arms. But he only sighed, bade her a very formal farewell, and lifted her into the launch. Then, before the little craft started away from the wharf, he turned on his heel and strode along the path which follows the sea.

He was in no mood to go back to the hotel just yet. He wanted to walk and think a bit before returning to receive the visit of his antagonist's seconds. That there would be such a call he had no doubt. He was not afraid of this man, but the whole situation annoyed him. To oblige Boynton he had taken this charming creature to dinner. Through a fool trick of fate he had embroiled himself in an unpleasant encounter, and now his vacation rest was practically certain to be interrupted by an engagement with swords or pistols.

With swords Tilliston would be at a distinct disadvantage; but few men were his equal with a revolver. The men on the ranch had said that Tilliston could shoot a flea off a coyote's back without injuring the animal.

But he had not gone a hundred yards along the dark, winding path when he felt himself seized from behind, and a heavy blow on his head made the stars and the moonlight swim.

It was daylight when he awoke and looked about curiously. From a little round window came a cool breath of salty air, and the gentle swaying of his couch told him he must be aboard a ship. The pain in his head was not great, and he climbed slowly from the berth in which he had been lying.

Just what had happened he did not know, but he had a shrewd suspicion, and, finding the cabin door unlocked, went out on deck to confirm it. A sailor saluted as he appeared, and inquired as to his wishes. "Mrs. Millner gave instructions that your every need be filled," the man said respectfully.

"Mrs. Millner!" exclaimed Tilliston. Then, as he looked over the rail and saw land nowhere in sight, he demanded to know where they were.

"Mrs. Millner issued orders to set sail the moment you were brought aboard," the sailor told him. "We weighed anchor at eleven o'clock, and we are now some five miles out to sea—"

"But, damn it!" Tilliston protested; "I'll be the laughing-stock of Ventinio! They'll say I ran away because I was afraid to meet that swashbuckling, ogling toy soldier in gold lace! Tell the captain to turn about and make port at once."

"I'm sorry, sir," the sailor said. "But that's against orders."

"Then you mean that I am a prisoner?" Tilliston demanded angrily; and the man nodded.

Furiously he paced the deck, lighting a cigarette and smoking it nervously. The thing was outrageous! This woman was nothing but a romantic meddler. Whatever had been her motive in having him waylaid and brought ashore, she had made a monkey of him. Perhaps even now the cables would be clicking a newspaper story to the States. It would look nice in print! A pretty tale about an American who had engaged in a broil in a *cantina* and then run away aboard the yacht of a rich and pretty widow! Tilliston could imagine the sensation it would make in New York and Chicago.

But even as he was mapping out his course he heard a footstep behind him,

and, turning, looked into the saucy eyes of Mrs. Millner. She was clad in a downy sport-coat, and her glorious hair blew rebelliously in the stiff morning breeze.

"Good morning, prisoner," she said with a mischievous smile.

"Good morning, kidnaper," Tilliston returned, very much out of humor. "You must realize that you have placed me in an impossible position," he went on. "Please be reasonable and tell the captain to turn back. I cannot quarrel with *you*. Since you are a woman, I cannot assert my rights—"

"And punch me in the nose?" she suggested with a merry little laugh.

"It would be a crime to mar its shapeliness," Tilliston said, "even if I were brute enough to strike you. Besides, your crew would promptly murder me. But I'm going back to Ventinio and meet that young jackanapes! If you won't give the necessary order, I shall take a life-preserver, jump overboard, and swim for it—"

"If you try, I shall have you put in irons," she informed him. "Now, be reasonable, and come in with me to breakfast. We can talk it over together." He shook his head, but she put a pleading hand upon his arm. "Please," she begged, "try to forgive me. I simply couldn't rest with the thought that you might be going to your death because of me—and all over nothing that really matters. That was why I had the launch turn back and had you followed by some of the crew."

But Tilliston was obdurate. With a sigh and a wan little smile, she went into the salon, where coffee and toast awaited, and Tilliston made his way forward to where the first mate was standing close by the rail.

"Now, look here, old chap," Tilliston said to him quietly, "let me tell you about this thing, and then do as any sane man would. She's a headstrong, foolish woman, and I'm helpless in her hands. But if you'll put into Ventinio before nightfall I'll give a thousand dollars to every member of the crew—"

"Are you trying to bribe me?" demanded the mate angrily.

"If you look at it that way," Tilliston admitted, "but if I am not in Ventinio to-night I shall have Mrs. Millner and every member of the yacht's crew arrested on the charge of abduction the moment we *do* reach shore."

"But to disobey her orders would be mutiny. She could have us jugged for it, according to the laws of the sea," the mate reminded him.

"Then your chances of going to jail are pretty good on *two* scores. If she doesn't put you there, *I* will. Think it over."

Noontime came, and luncheon was served beneath an awning on the after-deck. A Japanese steward brought Mrs. Millner's compliments to Tilliston, and begged him to join her. Frankly he didn't want to, but there was no use acting like a naughty child, so he took his seat opposite her.

She proved a delightful hostess. Neither of them made reference to the situation which had brought them together, and Tilliston talked of his work on the ranch while Mrs. Millner told him of her life at Newport, Palm Beach, abroad, and New York. Tilliston found himself growing interested in her, and it was obvious that she was more than interested in the tall, athletic man opposite—still incongruously clad in the silk dinner-suit he had worn the night before.

The meal over, she withdrew to her cabin, and, sauntering along the deck, Tilliston encountered the mate, who said:

"It's all right. I've spoken to the captain, and he agrees that it isn't fair to hold you out here. Of course, we're relying on you to keep us out of trouble, but she'll be furious."

"Don't worry," Tilliston assured him. "I'll take care of that. If she prosecutes you for mutiny, I'll counter with my abduction charge. She won't relish that. Meanwhile, can you get a wireless message to Harvey Boynton at the Hotel de Cadiz?" The mate nodded. "Then tell him what time we'll arrive, and see that this precious swaggering army officer learns that I'm coming after him!"

He was with Mrs. Millner beneath the awning, lazing in a wicker deck-chair, when the mate approached and handed Tilliston a sheet of yellow paper. Mrs. Millner

glanced up in surprise, and a look of suspicion crossed her pretty features. Asking her pardon, Tilliston hastily scanned the message. It was Boynton's reply.

> Have announced your return, but you're too late. I stopped stories of your running away by telling what a crack shot you are. Captain Alfredo Alvarez beat it into the mountains at daybreak. He's scared stiff.

Tilliston smiled, and the mate's eyes glittered appreciatively as Tilliston handed the message to Mrs. Millner.

"I don't understand," she said as she looked at the writing. "We are headed for Florida, not Ventinio—"

"Beg pardon, madam," said the mate; "we will reach Ventinio about seven this evening. The captain changed the course four hours ago."

With flashing eyes and tense little muscles, Mrs. Millner arose, and her dainty pump stamped angrily upon the deck. "Who *dared* to give this order aboard my own yacht?" she cried out. "I will have you jailed when we reach port—it's piracy—mutiny on the high seas—"

"And I'm going to have you arrested for kidnaping me," Tilliston broke in calmly.

She looked at him for a moment in astonishment, and the mate disappeared. Tilliston felt a little sorry as he saw the tears gather in her eyes.

"Please don't be angry with me," she urged. "I didn't mean to make you ridiculous. I only wanted to prevent your being injured on my account—and—and—oh, I'm *so* lonely, in spite of all my money!"

She made a charmingly miserable little picture as she stood there looking up at Tilliston, as though the world held not an ounce of happiness for her. He wanted to put his arms about her and tell her not to cry—and then suddenly something dawned upon him. In a play or a story-book, this would be his cue to ask her to marry him. That was it—she *wanted* him to propose! And the hero of any well-regulated story would have jumped at the chance. He would have instantly posed for a close-up and a long, lingering kiss!

Tilliston would have done so himself, if he hadn't been a husband—also a father.

White Heather Weather

by John Frederick

Author of "Luck," "Cross-Roads," etc.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SAMSON TAKES A TOKEN.

ONCE outside the tavern, Samson Integrity did not spare the spur. He rode with a red heel, bending far over the horn of his saddle. The wine had shut from his mind all except one purpose—to humble and crush the girl so that she should never rise again—to reveal her so that all men could know her.

He thought as he rode of those clear blue eyes and the lies which they veiled. And he thought of his long days of torture. He had not slept, for the face of Kate Malvern rose before him. It had glimmered between him and the wine-glass. It had appeared to him and frozen his lips in the midst of

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the jest. It was to him what fire is to the martyr. And he felt that could he once repay her for the suffering she had inflicted, he would be free from invisible chains which bound him to the thought of her; freed from an invisible fire—the memory of her beauty.

It was not hard to reach old Fortesque at the hotel of York. Had he come dapper and scented, the shrewd old man might have guessed too much, but mud was splashed here and there on Samson's long cloak, and he panted from the vigor of his ride—the very picture of a time-pressed courier.

Old Fortesque turned the note from Buckingham over and over. Then he glanced at Samson.

"You have ridden far?" he asked.

"The distance between heaven and hell," answered Samson.

"H-m!" murmured Fortesque. "Well, you look honest, friend, and you come from one who has often aided me. Yet it is hard to come to speech with these maids of honor. They are watched as the hawk watches the heron."

"I doubt it not," said Samson hurriedly, "but this is a matter of life and death."

"Can you not trust me with the message?"

"No lips but mine may repeat it."

"So, so! Then follow after me. The garden is empty—I was in it not ten minutes past. I shall take you there, and then do my best to bring the lady down to you."

He led the way here and there through the great house until they went down a broad flight of stone steps and passed through a door into the garden. It was small, filling hardly more than an angle of the building, and fenced on the other side by a low wall.

"If I fail to bring her," said Fortesque, "tell him who sent you, that I did my best."

Samson bowed.

"And as for leaving, when you have communicated your message—"

"Take no care of that. One leap will carry me to the top of yonder wall."

"Alack!" muttered Fortesque. "These youth! These youth! Pray God that no harm comes of this!"

He hobbled off, shaking his bearded head slowly from side to side.

How long he waited, Samson Integrity had no means of telling, for the minutes dragged heavily. He walked for a time up and down one of the paths, until he remembered that a moving figure might attract unwelcome attention. So he stood, at length, under the deepest corner of the slant shadows to which the moon gave not a glimmer of light.

And at last she came. A door groaned faintly and clicked shut; a light step sounded on the flagging of the path. She came slowly, peering from side to side. She was wrapped in a thin mantle which floated about her—silver stuff, on which the moonlight played until she seemed to be drifting toward him in a cloud of mist. She pushed back the mantle from her head in order that she might see yet more clearly, and there he saw her by that same moon which had showed her to him often before.

She had not changed. The curve of throat and cheek were as faultless as ever; and her face shone, as of old, with a singular transparency that struck him to his heart. He stepped out and took his hat in his hand; so she saw him at last.

He had made sure that she would start and cry out when she faced him, and for that reason he moved back between her and the door from which she had entered the garden; she should hear him for at least one moment before she broke away. But she did not start to move. She stood a little straighter; her head tilted somewhat—otherwise there was not a change in her.

She was close now—aye, perilously close—and a great weakness swept over Samson. He knew now that it was not the temptation of the wager which had driven him here, but that hunger which burned ceaselessly in him—the wild passion to see her. So slender and so straight, a skin so glowing, and so dark and deep an eye—only a fool could doubt her purity! But then he caught the hint of a scent of white heather blossoms. Somewhere in the garden, or just beyond, they grew, and their perfume stole slowly and faintly upon the small wind. It roused Samson as the clangor of steel on steel alarms the warrior.

She was false—utterly false and fickle and untrue—and the cruel, subtle, cold heart beat in her, framing lies to entrap him even then. A mad impulse seized him to catch her in a great embrace and crush the life from her in one motion. The impulse passed and left him cold from head to foot, and master of himself.

"I am sent for on a business of great import," said the girl calmly, "and I wonder which of thy masters has sent thee, Samson Northam. Is it the keen Buckingham, or my handsome Lord of Monmouth?"

Aye, she was marvelously calm. Yet her hands were gripping hard at her sides, only half concealed by the folds of the misty, shining mantle. No wonder, thought Samson. Once before I bore her away. How can she tell now for what reason I am come?

"No," he answered, "it was the wish of a fool that sent me here."

"It was folly to come, then," said the girl coldly, "but since I am here, tell me briefly the message, and from whom it comes."

"It comes from Samson Northam," he answered, "and it is a brief message indeed, if you will listen to it."

Her voice altered a little. It seemed as if she truly feared for the first time.

"It comes from you? My time is very short, sir, but the town has heard so much of me through you, that I should be glad to hear something in person."

"This is that brief message," he said, and he lowered his deep, strong voice to a murmur. "Kate, will you forgive me for all that I have done?"

To put all to the touch at once, thought Samson, and test her. If she is moved, then I know that she is damned forever, for what honest woman could ever forgive me? And he watched her narrowly. It seemed to him that she wavered when she heard him—certainly her eyes widened suddenly and her lips parted a little.

"Forgiveness—from me?" she breathed. "Oh, Samson, have you seen the truth at last?"

Samson Integrity bowed his head—for fear she should see the sudden convulsion of his face, and he thought inwardly—the thought running like cold poison through his blood: "Devil, shrewd, false, cunning devil!"

He mastered himself and, sinking upon his knee, he raised his face and looked up at her.

Truly she was changed now. He saw, even in that pale light, how the color flooded her cheeks—how her breast trembled with the beating of her heart. She pressed a slender hand against her bosom as if to control the wild pulse.

"She is mad with her triumph," thought Samson. "She has deceived all others; I alone saw through her. And now she sees me, also, come like a poor stupid sheep back to the fold to worship her again as I worshiped her before. Damnation!"

But he said aloud, giving a deep tremor to his voice: "I cannot hope for what I ask. But I have come to show you my penitence on my knee—Kate—and that knee has never bowed so low to any mortal thing except my king!"

How she smiled! Aye, she was transformed. And her parted lips seemed to drink a wine of surpassing delight!

"I know it—I know your pride!" she whispered. "And, oh, I tremble when I think of you debasing yourself before me. Stand up, Samson; stand up. I—I am afraid when I see you kneeling there before me!"

"Ah, consummate, lying fiend!" spoke Samson to his inner heart. "She would that the whole world could see. Aye, for that matter she may have her spies posted at the windows to watch. She is acting a part, and she will boast of her skill afterward!"

He rose, and stood with head bowed.

"I cannot face you, Kate," he said. "Shame overcomes me. I have so foully misjudged you!"

"Do not speak of it!" she murmured, and she made a little gesture toward him, palm up. "Only tell me, Samson, what God-given chance taught you the truth?"

"I will tell you. I sat, even now, in a tavern surrounded by wine and the sound of drunken voices. And none drank more or laughed louder than I. The haze of tobacco tangled everywhere until it seemed

the natural essence of the air. The wine beat in my temples—the lewd jests rang through my mind—and then—from an open window—a gust of the pure air of the night entered and struck my face. It blew away the smoke. And I closed my eyes and breathed deeply of it. Ah, Kate, it carried the breath of the white heather blossoms and I saw only one picture—do you know what it was?"

He looked closely up at her. But her eyes were closed; she smiled, she seemed in spirit to have flown back to the scene he was describing.

"I dare not guess," she whispered. "Tell me!"

"The loveliest thing I have ever seen!" he went on. "It was you, as you stood in the court at Jerry-on-the-Hill when the wind blew your vizard and the white, pure moon shone upon your face. There was magic in that breath of white heather blossoms. Ah, Kate, I suddenly knew that no matter what I might have seen or heard, you are true, you are pure as you are beautiful!"

Her eyes opened—slowly—and there was a light behind them.

"Was this all the proof you needed?" she whispered.

"All!" he echoed.

She stepped a little closer, and he caught the scent of a strange perfume which drowned the fragrance of the heather. So had she come from the palace—and of this odor how many men had breathed that night? And how many had seen the same light conjured up into her eyes? Oh, beautiful, treacherous Kate!

"Samson, I have prayed on my knees, many a night that you would see the truth, but I never dared truly to hope it. All my actions showed so black against me. Will you hear me explain them?"

"More lies?" thought Samson, setting his teeth. "More cunning, smooth lies?"

"No, no!" he cried. "The doubt is dead. I know you, Kate!"

She shrank back.

"You seem fierce and strange all at once. What has happened so suddenly, Samson?"

"Because I love you fiercely, Kate—even as I tried to make myself believe that I hated you. There has been a hunger in me and I have tried to drown it with wine. I have been harkening all these lonely days for the sound of your voice—speak to me again, Kate—say anything—any foolish thing, so that I may hear your voice!"

Her hands slipped into his—tender, fragile, one pressure would crush and ruin them utterly!

"I love you, Samson," she said. "I have always loved you!"

He swept her into his arms, held her breathlessly close. And over her head he smiled with agony into the moonlit prospect of the garden. So lovely beyond speech—so damned and black with sin. Her heart he felt beating against him—alas! It was only the cold sense of triumph and successful trickery that quickened it. But even in his supreme anguish he felt a spark of admiration for the supreme triumph of her acting. She was great even in her deceit.

He could not endure it long. He would lose control and place murderous hands upon her.

"And when can I see you—for a long time—so that we can talk and understand, Kate?"

"Whenever you will. I would go with you now, to the end of the world!"

"My dear, my dear! Why have we deceived one another?"

"For that first deceit of mine I have suffered tortures, Samson. I have not spent a single quiet night. There has been a burden on my heart all the day. But I am mad to stay here. I am waited for. We shall be suspected, and then everything is ruined! Farewell—a little while!"

She slipped away from him and ran a pace toward the door. Yet she paused, she wavered, she came swiftly back to him.

"I fear to leave you, Samson. It is all so strange and dreamlike here in the moonlight in the garden. When the morning comes, how shall I know it has not all been a vision in sleep?"

"Give me a token, Kate. Some small thing—that locket around your throat!"

She laughed joyously, lightly, and held it out to him, chain and all.

"Why have I forgotten?" she said. "In

deed, it is the best that I could give. There is a story about it I shall tell you some time. It's a miniature of me, Samson, and I promised him who painted it that I should never part with it except to the man I love truly and forever."

He raised it to his lips.

When he stood erect again she had fled to the door and stood like a brilliant cloud with one hand upon the knob.

"To-morrow, Samson. I shall wait for you. Morning or noon or evening, I shall be waiting."

And so she was gone—as if the wind had blown the mist away.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE BREATH OF HEATHER.

BUT Samson Integrity stood for a long time staring down at the open miniature which lay in his hand. The heavy-handed Sir Edward had indeed lifted the veil. He had painted the soul of a woman, rather than her face. And it was such a soul as Samson had dreamed of after he saw Kate in the courtyard. Well, it did not prove that such a soul was hers. Nay, it only meant that two men might see the same vision. The truth?

Samson Integrity raised his head and laughed softly and bitterly. God, how clever she was; and what devil had taught her that artless, childish smile?

He turned at length from the garden, climbed the low wall without difficulty, and reached his tethered horse. But he rode back toward the tavern at not a third of the speed with which he had spurred in the opposite direction. For his heart was heavy, and he went with head bowed.

Once more in the tavern.

Either his head had cleared amazingly and he was out of sympathy with the revel, or the time of his departure had worked a marvelous change in the assembly. The clouds of smoke hung thicker and thicker, twisting in intricate and solid mazes around the heads of the boon companions. And down the table he saw wine-glasses overturned, and remnants of half-eaten food—a half-carved haunch here, and a wine-stained loaf yonder. The very servants reeled about on their errands with the bottles of wine, and as they staggered, trays of glasses clinked and chimed together.

But the faces of the drinkers! Gross, reddened, transformed! The thick, numb lips—the wild and glassy eyes—the hideous, braying laughter!

Samson paused and averted his head in infinite disgust. He stepped to a window and threw it wide, and then another.

That clatter was a sufficient announcement of his coming. Heads turned toward him, and then, as he walked toward his old place, wild yells of question. Monmouth rose, reeling where he stood, and called for silence. Buckingham also beat on the table and threatened with a brandished table-knife.

"Silence! Silence! He has returned. The errant Northam! Holla!"

The raised hunting call was picked up by twoscore voices and shook the very rafters—then a waiting hush. And Samson stood looking up and down the table. A blast of wind struck through the clouds of tobacco-smoke and rolled it away, dispersing it into thin mist. Then full upon his face breathed the cool, fresh air of night. As has been said, the tavern stood in the outskirts of the town, with open fields about it, and wandering over those fields the night wind had caught up the fragrance of the white heather—for this was early June and every hedge was in full bloom. So, as Samson stood with one hand in his pocket, closing over the miniature, the sweet breeze struck his face even as he had told Kate Malvern.

"The answer! The answer!" cried Buckingham. "The picture or the forfeit, Northam, damme!"

Samson's fingers slowly unclosed from around the miniature. The hand came out empty, and empty he showed it to the Bacchantes.

"Gentlemen," he said, standing very straight, and with that singular smile growing on his white face, "I confess to all ears that I have lost the wager!"

A tumult of voices broke out. And Samson sank into his chair.

"Why, God 'a' mercy, man!" cried Buck-

ingham. "Does the loss of a hundred go so hard with thee? Or are you sick, Northam?"

"Sick?" muttered Northam. "Aye, sick at heart, my lord."

"Wine will heal thee, lad. Upon my honor, it is the chief of all good cures. Drink deep. Holla, fool tapster, there! Wine for my friend Northam."

He turned back to Samson.

"But odds fish, man, I half expected thee to draw the miniature out of your pocket. To the very end, I confess, I trembled for fear. If you lose like this, Northam, what would you be like if you won? Well, here's your wine."

Samson drained the bumper.

"And another with me," broke in Sir Edward Crocker. "Another to show there's no ill-feeling, Northam, because you lost a wild man's wager."

"With all my heart," answered Samson, "and here's a toast that should go merrily down your throat. Confusion and short life to all such fools as thee and me, Sir Edward!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A MESSAGE FROM HER GRACE.

IT required a great breach of custom and propriety indeed to make people look askance in the merry days of the third Stuart; but on this morning at least one group was stricken with equal parts of surprise and curiosity, for a lady had come to the anteroom of Samson Integrity Northam. For he occupied, now, the largest suite in Master Lawrence's house, and, like any man of means and fashion, he kept a waiting-room where insistent visitors cooled their heels before seeing the master.

There were a full score of others crowded into the small apartment. There stood Master Beckett—that same tailor who first furnished forth Samson in suitable clothes. He was much improved since that first time. His own clothes might have graced the back of any buck of blood and money, and near him stood a servant carrying a bundle draped over one arm and watching Master Beckett obsequiously.

Truly, Beckett was become a man of means, yet there was a certain absent look about his eyes, as if he were conning over for the tenth time the speech which he would make to the young spendthrift. Perhaps in that bundle lay a new freak of fashion which would bring no other reward than laughter unless it were recommended by some known man. But if Samson Integrity stamped it with his approval—if he would wear it for even half a day—be sure that it would be noted and new orders flood into Master Beckett's shop. No wonder then that he looked so fixedly into the distance. He reckoned at once his speech and his fortune.

Neighboring him was a stalwart, low-browed fellow, glaring gloomily and contemptuously about him—no other than that same "Honest" Jack who once measured swords with Samson Integrity. What was he doing here? Well, a man of fashion must have his attendants and followers of all ranks. In a dense crowd, some one must go before and rub elbows with the throng and shout: "Make way, fools!" so that Samson might follow at cool leisure behind. And suppose there was haggling to be done with a waterman for a pair of oars down the Thames? Here, too, such a fierce eye as that of Honest Jack would be a comfortable aid to Samson Integrity.

And now Jack waited, returned from some mission of danger, perhaps, and ready for a reward or an upbraiding—it was impossible to tell which from his ever surly eye.

Yonder stood a lean man with straight, uncombed hair which jutted as much over his forehead as behind his ears. Tenpence to ha'penny he has not eaten this three days more than bread and water—stale bread, at that. Yet, he wraps himself close in his threadbare cloak and when he is jostled he meets the rudeness with a stare of bitter contempt. What makes him so proud? There peeks from beneath his elbow a roll of paper—aye, it is a poet! He has come with his ode or his eulogy, or more likely his keen satire. Why? Perhaps he has dedicated it to Master Samson Northam. Perhaps it is already published and unsold—a deadweight on the booksellers' shelves. But if he can win the ear of Northam, the

man may repeat some chosen couplet from it in the company of the great wits of London and refer to the source of his wit. In that case, the fortune of the poet will be made—for a month or more.

Terrible fellows, these poets. If they are coldly treated, they may go forth and thrust a man through with a single epigram. It behooves the great fashionables to treat them with some cordiality. Even Buckingham and Monmouth do not fly above the reach of such bitter winged shafts.

There are others in the anteroom as well. Too many to name—one is a horse-fancier—another carried a little case in both hands, with a rare trinket within—another is a poor politician waiting for a place—" and if Master Northam would drop a single syllable with my lord "—so all about the anteroom they wait—the hungry palm concealed, perhaps, but the hunger manifestly burning in their eyes. And they shall reap a harvest, for there was never a more contemptuously tolerant fellow than this same Samson Integrity. He will pay a man even to be rid of him. He will reward a jest even at his own expense.

Upon one central figure all these hungered eyes attend—it is a gray-haired, stately person. He has an air which would not shame the French ambassador. His clothes are as perfect as his manner. Is he some lord waiting an instant to call on his friend Northam? No, it is only Samson Integrity's man—Hugh Walters. No slight personage. If he is pleased his master is two-thirds won. So smiles and bows and pleasant words greet Hugh Walters as he glides elegantly through the room.

Suddenly the door flies open, and all eyes dart toward it. It is a woman! A woman come to the anteroom of Samson Integrity! Impossible to make her out. A great cloak wraps her from head to heel, and a great black vizard completely masks her face. Yet she is young—for the tiniest gloved hand holds the cloak together in the front, and the eyes behind the mask flash with the fire of youth. Young, and beautiful, no doubt.

Why has she come? Maddened by jealousy, perhaps, has she brought with her a flask of terrible acid utterly to destroy those ugly features whose very ugliness have " become the fashion," in the immortal words of clever Rochester? Or is she only the lady-in-waiting of some titled beauty who stops at home, trembling, white with shame and red with hope, as she awaits the results of her embassy?

Hugh Walters approached her. Whatever her station in life, she was amply equipped with assurance. She beckoned him to a corner where they were fairly isolated from the curious ears of the crowd.

" I must see Master Northam at once," she said in a guarded voice.

" In due time," bowed Hugh Walters. " Mr. Northam is not yet risen—and—"

" The lazy dog!" said this strange mask. " I have known him to be more industrious."

Hugh Walters rubbed his chin.

" If I may take your name—" he began.

" Are you Walters?" asked the mask sharply.

" I am. Do you know me?"

" I've heard your master speak of one Walters, but he described his man as a fellow of discretion."

" He honored me," said Walters, flushing.

" But I have no time to spare."

" As soon as he wakens—"

" Then I must go now—"

" Madam, I dare not wake him before he pleases. It would be worth my place to do so."

" It will be worth your place if you do not. But that is no concern of mine."

She turned away.

" What shall I do?" cried Walters, abruptly blocking her exit.

" Let me in to him, most wise Master Walters."

" You! Now!"

" And quickly."

" There is no other way," said poor Walters, wiping a wet forehead in his dismay. " Can you give me some inkling of your message?"

" Am I a fool? Open the door for me, sir. I have overstayed my time. Her grace shall know—"

The title was too much for Walters.

" Follow me," he said; " I'll chance it."

He led the way through the crowd and softly opened the inner door. Through it the vizard slipped and closed it against poor Walters's nose. Once inside, she glanced about to make sure that no other servant was in the room. Then she barred the door and threw back the hood of her cloak and removed the mask, revealing Sally Leigh.

When she pulled back the curtains of the four-posted bed she discovered Samson Integrity lying fully dressed, save that one shoe was off and his tunic and shirt unbuttoned at the throat. There he had flung himself on his return from the Sign of the Twisted Horn, and he had not stirred. One arm lay flung carelessly out beside him with something clasped in the hand. The other arm pillowed his head. He frowned as he slept, and the wine-flush still stained his face. Sally Leigh bent low over him, and then stood erect.

"Very drunk last night," she murmured critically. "And *that's* something new. The stanchest head in London, I'd say. Who the devil could have put him under? A relay of heavy drinkers. Yes, he must have been fairly afloat in wine!"

She sat upon the edge of the bed, still studying him. She continued in the same small whisper: "What is happening to you, Samson Integrity? More wine and less sleep from day to day. Thinner face, darker frown. And still, a brave front to the world— I'd give tuppence to know what's in your mind!"

A small glitter caught her eyes and she examined the thing which Samson Integrity held in the one hand. It seemed to be a locket of large size.

"So!" whispered Sally Leigh, with a start, and strove to loosen the fingers—but they tightened even in his sleep and held the locket secure.

"I have an idea," muttered Sally, canting her head shrewdly to one side, "that here is the clue to the mystery. But—oh, blind, blind! I cannot see you any more than you can see me."

Here she leaned as swiftly as a bird stoops to pick up a seed, and kissed Samson. At that he moved, sighed, and opened his eyes. At first they stared blankly, with a curious frown, up at her—as a man in delirium might stare. But presently he knew her and sat suddenly erect on the side of the bed.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE CRISIS.

"SALLY? Here?" he breathed. He stood up and looked at her as if in doubt. "Damme, girl, are you trying to throw your reputation away?"

"After you've worked so hard building it up? Sit down, foolish Samson. There lies the mask I came in. And the cloak finished my disguise. Besides, poor Walters thinks I'm a messenger from some duchess, and the fool is cudgeling his brain to find out which one. Sit down, Samson."

He obeyed, with a puzzled sigh, and leaned his forehead upon one hand.

"Your head rings, eh?" queried Sally. "Too much wine, Samson?"

"No," he muttered, "not wine enough. And my head's too clear."

"H-m!" And she watched him slide the locket under the pillow of the bed.

"What mad prank brought you here, Sally?"

"A crisis in the battle, Samson. We're at the end of the rope."

"The devil!"

"The very devil it is. We are almost undone."

"How? Where?"

"Where?" repeated Sally calmly, leaning back against the foot-post of the bed. "In the rooms of the queen—no less!"

"The queen!"

"Her sainted majesty, Catherine of Braganza and England. Ugly, isn't she, Samson? I don't wonder that Old Rowley has gone astray from such a face!"

"Sally, you vixen, out with your story! How did you come to the rooms of the queen? Gad, Sally, d'you mean that you've been formally presented?"

"The very same."

"On whose arm?"

"Who but that same silly, fat, pompous, delightful old fool, M. Carienne?"

"Why, Sally, this puts the stamp of the

royal recognition on you. You're made, and we've won the game, Sally. But what influence brought you there?"

"An irresistible one. Old Rowley's, Samson."

"What a blockhead I am! I might have known he'd see you again after that affair in the garden."

"Right. I knew it, too."

"But you didn't tell me?"

"I tried to warn you of it when Carienne came for me, but you weren't here. My message came back undelivered."

"So the battle's won!" He laughed and struck his hands together.

"And lost," she added, "or nearly lost."

"How's that?"

"All went well enough. I had on that plum-colored dress, and it was so heavy that it nearly tripped me when I made my curtsy. But I managed it well enough. The queen smiled on me at first, but when she had a clear view of me, and saw Old Rowley loitering about near by, the smile went out and her eye grew as hard as cut glass. Poor queen! Every pretty face is a stab at her heart!"

"And when a face is more than pretty, she spends a sleepless night over it."

"If she slept last night," murmured Sally contentedly, "my name is not Sally Leigh."

"But the catastrophe, Sally?"

"I said that all went well enough. It was the crowning moment of my life—so far. Oh, if you could have seen me, Samson. There is nothing like success for a woman. And when I glimpsed myself in the mirrors, I hardly knew my face. Every one felt me even at a distance. Smiles followed me—and stares."

"Aye," nodded Samson, "more than one poor girl wished you a thousand fathoms deep in the sea, no doubt!"

"If I were ugly as some," said Sally, "I'd cultivate tact at least. But they were stupid!"

"Nay, you'd never be without a weapon, Sally. But what happened?"

"In the midst of it, a buzz, and then a silence went around the room. I saw poor little Carienne making toward me through the crowd with a white, scared face.

"'*Mon Dieu!*' he moaned when he came to me. 'The devil is loosed. My wits whirl!'

"'You've been drinking brandy again,' said I. 'Go wrap an iced towel about your head, *monsieur,* and your wits will stand still again.'

"'Alas, *madame,*' he whispered. 'Look!'

"He pointed out a little bow-legged fellow who was in the very act of kneeling before the queen.

"'And who is that?'

"Carienne cupped his hands at my ears. 'M. Lettraile,' he said. 'And when I spoke to him, Lettraile says that he has never heard of such a Mme. Lettraile as you. In the name of God, *madame,* who are you?'"

"The devil!" groaned Samson. "Sally, you were lost!"

"I thought so," she answered, "and perhaps I am. Who could have thought there would be a real French name such as Lettraile? Carienne went on in a perfect panic: 'If you have taken a false name, think of me, *madame!* I shall be ruined, for it was I who introduced you here—oh, *le bon Dieu!* here of all places! I am ruined!'

"'You're foolish,' said I. 'Bring this Lettraile to me.'

"For I made up my mind to see this thing through. I was cold inside, but I managed a smile for Carienne, and it gave him an amazing lot of courage.

"'Thank God!' said he. 'All is not lost!'

"And in a moment he brought up M. Lettraile. I promise you that every eye in the room was on us. And the ladies were licking their lips—the cats! Ugly women have wicked eyes, Samson! And here came M. Lettraile, looking very stern, and full of fine speeches, about to tear the veil from an impostor Carienne presented him; all crowded close and kept their eyes on my face. I felt as if I were on a stage. Lettraile the Real bowed very low to Mme. Lettraile the Sham. I wished for one instant of weakness that I had had you, Samson, to brazen it out with your keen tongue—"

"Nay, Sally, I should have been crimson with mortification and shame—utterly at a loss! And you?"

"My wits came back. Lettraile, after his bow, looked keenly at me and cleared his throat. He began to frown, and then I gathered all my courage and gave him the sweetest smile I could manage. It seemed to stagger him. I saw him glance around in a rather baffled manner. Then: '*Madame,*' says he 'I have not had the honor of knowing another family of the name of Lettraile in France. No doubt, if we compare notes, we shall find that we are cousins?'

"'Gladly,' said I, and smiled again. 'You are from the great city?'

"'*Oui, madame,*' said he, and bowed again, 'from Bordeaux.'

"Of course I meant Paris, but the vain little Frenchman evidently thought more of Bordeaux than he did of Paris.

"'I have heard,' said I, 'that there are branches of the family in Bordeaux. It was a legend with us in Lyons. Perhaps you may have visited some of us there?'

"He was staggered again. He rubbed his forehead.

"'I grieve, *madame,*' said he 'that I have never been there. Yet if you could give me some of the names of your ancestry—'

"'Ah, yes,' said I; 'it is a proud line; I boast of it, *monsieur.*'

"And I looked about me and saw the ladies biting their lips with disappointment; and Old Rowley in the background looking thoughtful. 'Surely,' said I, 'you have heard of Philippe Louis Malveisgne Lettraile?'

"'Yes? Ah—to be sure!' said poor M. Lettraile, rolling his eyes. 'I believe I have!'

"'Of course. He, *monsieur,* was my father. And his father was the stanch old Burgundian, Pierre Malveisgne Lettraile. Malveisgne is a sort of family name, *monsieur.* And my great-grandfather was the famous Henri Malveisgne Lettraile—'

"'It all comes back to me,' said M. Lettraile, who, I suppose, began to fear that he should lose caste in London if he did not know such a long line of famous men.

"'I am glad,' said I, 'that you remember. We shall meet again, and speak still further, *monsieur,* but now—'

"I had made a signal to Carienne, and we moved away together, leaving Lettraile dumfounded behind us. Carienne, poor fool, was overwhelmed with mortification. I forgave him gracefully, and now he is my slave. But presently Old Rowley stopped us. Of course Carienne gave back for his majesty.

"'My dear,' says Charles, with a twinkle in those somber eyes of his, 'you are the cleverest wit in London.'

"'Of a commoner, your majesty,' said I, 'perhaps I am.'"

"Sally," broke in Samson, "you are divine."

"Almost the first pretty thing you've ever said to me," chuckled the girl.

"'There you hit again,' said his majesty. 'But mark me, *madame*—I watched your face when Carienne first came to you with the news of Lettraile.'

"I saw that I was lost; I determined to show my whole game to him.

"'I have no doubt,' said I, 'that I have been read like a book.'

"'At least,' said his majesty, 'it was a strange story I guessed at. What am I to think of it, *madame?*'

"'What any accomplished soldier thinks,' said I, 'when an enemy surrenders at discretion.'

"'Damme,' says Old Rowley, 'what a girl you are! Then it is true: you are not a Lettraile?'

"'Not in the least.'

"'This is grave,' said he, and frowned. 'You have been presented to the queen at my own request! *Madame,* you have abused my confidence!'

"'Sire,' said I, 'I have only fulfilled a wager.'

"'Ha?' said Charles, starting back.

"'For Mr. Samson Northam,' I ended.

"'The fiend fly away with him!' cried Old Rowley. 'Has the impudent hound dared— Damme, this must not out! Europe will ring with laughter.'

"'Not unless your majesty discovers me.'

"'But the news will out. This accursed Lettraile, once he has been baffled, will write back to France.'

"'It only needs to be aired about that

I am not Mme. Lettraile, indeed, but I am another *madame* whose true identity must not be hinted at for reasons of state.'

"'Name of God, *madame!*' said he. 'Are you to become a state mystery?'

"'For dread of Europe's laughter, sire,' said I. 'For your majesty's sake alone.'

"He looked at me for a long moment. I held my breath. Then the music began at the farther end of the room—half the company was waiting for his majesty to give the sign or set the example before they danced. I took my heart between my teeth.

"'Your majesty can set the seal of his approval upon me and raise me above chatter,' said I.

"'And how?'

"'By dancing with me now,' said I.

"Suddenly he burst out laughing.

"'Damme,' he said. 'You deserve a crown—not a mere title. *Madame*, may I have this great honor?'

"And he led me out!

"A buzz rose around us—I was dancing with my king! Ah, Samson!"

She paused, raising her head, and her eyes misted with brightness.

"'You could set London by the ears by telling the true story of this, *madame*,' said he.

"'Nay, sire,' said I, 'I shall keep the story to tell to my children.'

"And there were tears in my eyes while I spoke.

"'Odds fish!' muttered Old Rowley. 'I half forgive Northam for this prank. I do fairly believe from this moment that a woman may combine both wit and virtue. Damme!'

"And so we danced out the measure, and when Old Rowley left me, what a crowd besieged me! The king had talked with me, smiled on me, danced with me. My fortune was made! And even though Lettraile should receive a thousand despatches from France, he will never be altogether believed. Though France may not accept me, Old Rowley does, and that is enough. But, ah, Samson, what a king is ours! For all they say of him, a heart of gold!"

"At least," said Samson Integrity, "he has coined his affections often enough to the currency of the realm. Well, Sally, but what will come of it?"

CHAPTER XL.

WHITE HEATHER AGAIN.

SALLY considered the question a long moment.

"It will be a long play, with the dénouement always postponed. Perhaps finally the truth will out—even then we are not lost. There is hope."

"Particularly if we go abroad," pondered Samson.

She caught her breath, started to speak, and then caught her hand over her lips. Above that hand wide, incredulous eyes studied Samson Integrity.

"What do you mean, sir?" she asked in a changed voice.

"Why not, Sally? I leave England soon—why should we not go abroad together?"

"Leave England?"

"Yes. I detest it. The muggy London weather stifles me. Sally, we must be gone. Together?"

"But how should *we* go together?"

"Aye," said Samson, taken aback. "A little unconventional. But you will trust me, Sally, eh? We will go as brother and sister?"

Her face fell.

"What has happened that makes you hate England, Samson?"

"I will tell you everything—perhaps—and after a time. Meanwhile, I must dress for the day."

He arose and sauntered away from the bed.

"Are there many in the anteroom?" he queried, facing the door.

"A crowd," she answered, and as his back was turned she deftly slid her hand under the pillow and brought out the locket which he had clasped so tightly even while he slept. It snapped open, and Sally found herself staring down at the eyes of Kate Malvern.

The click of the opening locket made Samson turn, and he saw Sally's wide gaze and transformed face.

"Here!" called Samson. "What have you there? Ah, that? A silly trinket and a silly face, my dear!"

"If it is nothing," said Sally, looking gravely and studiously at him, "I'll keep it. For a curio."

She would have slipped the locket into her pocket in the cloak, but Samson arrested her with outstretched hand.

"You *do* wish it?" asked the girl, whiter than before.

"To remind me of two days of folly," said Samson.

But it is a clever man indeed whose smile can deceive a woman.

Sally Leigh sighed as she gave back the picture.

"Is it because of her that you leave England, Samson?"

"For a girl? Bah!"

"Samson, you love her!"

"It is false!" he said hoarsely. "I—I have too keen a sense of humor to love—her!"

"You love her," repeated Sally remorselessly, and yet every word she spoke was stabbing. With all her heart she was calling silently on him to deny it.

But Samson Integrity answered slowly: "It is true, Sally. I love her. The thought of her is never away from me. I know her for what she is—and yet I cannot keep myself away from her. But with the sea between us—perhaps—"

Perhaps it was a deep-hidden sense of chivalry which made Sally Leigh speak as she did thereafter. Perhaps it was merely because she knew with perfect conviction that she had lost Samson Integrity forever—aye, had never won him because of this face on the miniature.

She said: "Samson, you are the greatest fool in England."

"I know it," he answered, with a grisly attempt at lightness, "and so I am going to take myself out of England. Think of her—the common talk of London!"

"Do you know what that talk is?"

"All men do!"

"I tell you, Samson, I have heard her own sister maids of honor talk of her. They are sharp-tongued enough, God knows, and they kill a reputation with every other sentence, but they have no word against Katherine Malvern. I tell you, Samson, she is pure as snow!"

If a council of the wise men of the earth had made such a pronouncement to Samson he would have laughed them to scorn. But on one subject, man holds the verdict of a single woman higher than the councils of the wise. And Samson, with trembling lips, asked of Sally as a beggar pleads for a crust of bread: "In God's name, Sally, what do you know?"

"What any good woman knows of another good woman," said Sally, and dealt herself her death-wound.

"Is it possible?" cried Samson. "Then it would mean—oh, God—if she is pure—if she is sincere—it means that she is waiting for me now!"

"She probably is," said Sally carelessly, and, turning, she threw up the window, for a faintness was sweeping over her.

Samson caught her by the arm and turned her toward him.

"I am not a man, sir," said Sally coldly. "I pray you, do not wrestle with me!"

"But tell me again, Sally—Monmouth—the whole world knows how he brought her to London—"

"And was laughed at for his pains."

"But—it cannot be!"

"Ask Monmouth—ask the devil, for aught I care!" said Sally. "All you men are fools at heart!"

And she caught up cloak and mask and hurried from the room.

Not a minute behind her came Samson Integrity, and an instant later, as fast as fierce spurring could drive it, the fleetest nag in the stables of Master Godfrey Lawrence was bearing him toward Monmouth's lodgings.

He was known there. Aye, in the anteroom through which he strode they were even then repeating the witticisms he had hurled at Monmouth and Rochester the night before. Moreover, there was something in the face of Samson Integrity which discouraged opposition. His tunic was still unbuttoned at the throat—his cloak swept wildly behind him, dangling from one shoulder as he strode. And so he came to the

bedside where Monmouth yawned over his morning chocolate.

"Northam, upon my word!" exclaimed the duke. "And what in the devil's name has dragged you out of bed at this hour?"

"To ask a boon of your grace."

"Damme," muttered Monmouth, looking more closely and then sitting erect in bed. "What ails thee, Northam?"

"The boon, my lord!"

"Granted. God knows I owe thee somewhat for that matter of Blood's accursed stupid note. That score is still uncleared."

"Then, my lord, tell me in honor what passed between you and Katherine Malvern."

Monmouth frowned.

"By what right do you ask it, sir?"

"By the right of one who is about to ask her to be his wife."

Monmouth started again.

"Devil take me! Is that where the wind lies? Then go ask her with a clear conscience and an easy heart, lad!"

Samson Integrity sank into a chair, colorless, and then he cried: "Now God be praised!"

Monmouth, apparently touched, peered closely into Northam's face.

"And has it been this way always?" he queried. "Nay, I knew you were smitten at the first, but since then you've been storming her reputation like a very Russian. I'll tell you the tale, Northam. It's none to my credit—but let that go! God witness me, I would not blot such a lady's fair name.

"I brought her to London, lad, partly because she loathed the ruffian Harchester; partly because she trusted me; more than all, because her fool of a mother wished to see her daughter installed as Monmouth's mistress."

"Damnation!" groaned Samson.

"Nay, lad, do not fall on your sword before the battle's lost. I brought her here in high expectations. I thought her mind was one with her mother's. But when I had her here she would not harken to the first word of pleading. Nay, she was ice. And I have not seen her since. I should have spoken before—but all London knew I had brought her here, and all London would have laughed if it had known that I had lost my labor.

"A wretched shame constrained me from speaking the truth. But upon my honor, Northam, London shall hear the truth before night of this day. Besides, if there is anything—nay, the man is mad—"

For Samson, with one high-pitched, ringing cry, burst from the room.

It was late that same afternoon that Sally Leigh sat in her hall of reception by the window. The whole apartment stirred with noise of voices. A dozen men of fashion attended her, and more would come before dark. For many had seen her the night before dance with Old Rowley himself, and a thousand others knew the tale of that dancing. The repute of Mme. Lettraile was builded upon a foundation of adamant.

And she? If her heart was heavy, no man in London could have guessed it. Never was her smile gayer. Never were her eyes so recklessly inviting. The very grace of her gestures made the eyes of all beholders lighten. It was while faithful Carienne was placing a cushion behind her—at her request—that she raised a sudden finger for silence and canted her head to listen.

In the silence which obediently followed all the room heard, clearly, a ringing voice passing down the street:

> "Ride you high, ride you low,
> Ride you all together,
> There is no sweeter time, I know,
> Than the white heather weather!"

M. Carienne leaned from the window.

"It is that mad blade Northam," said the little Frenchman, "and—wonder of wonders!—he sits in his coach beside the Lady Katherine Malvern! London will hear of it!"

"And London will drink to it," said Sally Leigh. "What is more full of folly than two happy fools together, eh? Wine, Gregory. And have the music begin. Now, M. Carienne, if you will show me that new step, I shall dance with you. *Allons!*"

(The end.)